Overturning Colonial Indifference:

Female Desire and Sexuality in the Modern Postcolonial Novel

The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them but to be indifferent towards them, that’s the essence of inhumanity.

—George Bernard Shaw, *The Devil’s Disciple*

Haiti, Egypt, and India are three postcolonial nations whose news occasionally lands them on the front pages of Western media outlets. Haiti’s 2010 earthquake likely still comes to mind relatively easily among an English-speaking public—and the island nation continues to recover and reconstruct itself—but its postcolonial struggles, of course, by no means begin there. Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat has become a spokesperson for her motherland, and she had made an effort through her writing “to sustain international attention on the country’s continuing woes.”¹ Turning to India, we see a nation that seems to be handling one international publicity nightmare after the next, including cases that exemplify the widespread sexual violence against women.² In an interview following the horrific gang rape and eventual death of a young woman in New Delhi in December of 2012, Indian activist and writer Arundhati Roy observes that “violence against women—particularly rape—is a means of asserting power, particularly from the perspective of men who feel they lack power in other dimensions of their life. . . . There is ‘an anger and psychosis building up and women at the top, middle and the bottom are going to

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pay the price for it.’”[^3] Most recently, Egypt has seen great tumult and revolution during the
summer of 2013. Speaking to this crisis among the people, Egyptian author Ahdaf Soueif states,
“It’s an extraordinary moment, really, where everything—nothing is to be taken for granted—no
presidencies, no procedures, no constitutions, nothing. Everything has to be rethought again and
again and again.”[^4] This time of great change in Egypt takes a darker turn as women are sexually
assaulted at alarming rates in an effort to discourage them from participating in public activism.[^5]
Neither is Haiti immune from sexual violence against women—and a culture and judicial system
that is far from perfect in protecting victims and prosecuting offenders.[^6] Though news sources
decry such instances of violence against women, as Professor Jacqueline Bhabha explains on the
subject, “Popular outcries can be intense but short-lived, as we’ve seen with gun control efforts
in the U.S.”[^7] The case of these postcolonial nations reveals how women in particular suffer in
such times of crisis, while their stories and their voices disappear all too quickly. Dealing with
so-called “women’s rights issues” is commonly postponed while the greater work of postcolonial
nation-building takes priority.

Women writers in these nations, then, are particularly important voices. As the focus of
my dissertation, the writing of Danticat, Roy, and Soueif speaks to a Western audience but from
unique hybrid perspectives. We look to these women to interpret events in their motherlands, to
translate the complex happenings of their respective postcolonial nations for an English-speaking
audience. As women whose chosen careers offer them opportunities to travel across the globe, to

reach an international audience but still maintain ties to their home nations and cultures—to live in two worlds, as it were—they are, to draw from Danticat’s work, powerful, “dangerous” artists. They are writers but also emissaries, ambassadors, and activists. They are acclaimed and successful fiction writers, but all three write important non-fiction works that bring the crises, triumphs, and tragedies of their home nations into Western consciousness—with all that nuance and dignity as the citizens that they are. They give their finely crafted works of fiction that same nuance and dignity, and we see endlessly complicated postcolonial worlds, with all their cultural, historical, social, and political contexts, illuminated through the lives of their characters, especially the women whose voices—or voicelessness—shed light on how the case of gender further complicates a postcolonial experience. In that vein and in my dissertation, I will look specifically at three novels: Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*, and Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*.

*(Post)Colonial Indifference: An Introduction*

Within these three contemporary novels, the authors showcase a facet of postcolonial life that has not been given much consideration among postcolonial literary scholars—that is, *indifference*, as a product of and lingering symptom of initial colonial encounters. This indifference, to attempt a definition at the most general level, is not mere aloofness or disinterest but is characterized by an extremely dulled or flattened emotional state. Such indifference originated in the earliest encounters between the colonizer and the colonized as native peoples saw their customs, religious beliefs, languages, and traditional ways of life devalued and crushed by European ethnocentricity, by Christianity, and with physical violence—to a point from which they could never be recovered. As such, apathy, a fatalistic attitude to the affairs of life, and

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8 See *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (2011).
emotional distance become characteristic of experiences for colonized individuals across time and location.

First, though, the indifference begins among a population of Europeans—both those who ventured into the colonies and those who stayed behind—whose deep-seated racism and beliefs in an indisputable God-given sovereignty allowed them to see the human beings whose civilizations they would decimate as less than human, less than they, darker than white, more barbaric. Ultimately, the indigenous peoples of the colonized regions were simply a non-entity in the colonizing game. Postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba explains how such attitudes originated in the very word *colonialism*; its official *Oxford English Dictionary* definition “avoids any reference to people other than the colonisers, people who might already have been living in those places where colonies were established” (1). The result is that the word—and, therefore, the act of colonizing—becomes blameless. Such a definition, Loomba asserts, “evacuates the word ‘colonialism’ of any implication of an encounter between peoples, or of conquest and domination” (1-2). Indifference to the lives of fellow humans runs deep in this definition. The history of European colonization since shows us that white skin, Western language, and the name of Christ became the tools of the ultimate exercise in rendering countless people, from the Caribbean and Africa to the Americas, India, and Southeast Asia, powerless, emasculated, and eventually apathetic to that new condition—just as those actors of colonial violence set sail from their home nations with indifference as their most valuable, insidious weapon of all.

As Loomba identifies, “Colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history” (2). This complexity is crucial to acknowledge in any postcolonial study, and I would be remiss in failing to recognize the
innumerable accounts of colonized persons and communities who did fight—with physical violence, with rhetoric, with art—as well as members of colonizing nations who were not indifferent, who simply did not buy into these colossal colonizing enterprises perpetuated by their homelands. Indeed, these gaps, as seen to varying degrees in the three novels at hand, are where my exploration finds its footing. As I work to establish a definition of and framework for postcolonial indifference, certain generalizations are necessary, namely, that so much indifference was perpetuated by the colonial machine, both within the actors and the acted-upon, that I find it compelling, important work to look at this phenomenon on an individual level, both to exemplify that larger indifference and to show deviation from it.

In her book *Lying on the Postcolonial Couch: The Idea of Indifference*, writer Rukmini Nair introduces us to the concept of indifference in relation to colonial encounters and describes it as “a bleach that proves infinitely effective when feelings are to be washed away or the colors of emotion drained” (xxv). This metaphor is helpful in conceptualizing how colonial indifference functions: where emotion once lived, nothing remains—only blankness, only lack. The lingering condition of postcolonial indifference, as Nair explains, is an inheritance, a colonial hangover in which the psychological residue of the initial indifference is passed from generation to generation. Indifference is self-perpetuating; as Nair continues, it is a “substance that postcolonial states are especially well equipped to manufacture” (xxv). Through my exploration of *The Farming of Bones*, *The God of Small Things*, and *The Map of Love*, I will extend Nair’s idea of indifference to a scholarly consideration of my chosen literary texts and show not only that such initial colonial indifference has an undeniable effect in the postcolonial world—indeed, that indifference is one of colonialism’s most powerful, insidious, and lasting legacies—but, more significantly, that these inheritors can break free. These novels will, essentially, create the
framework for examining indifference within postcolonial literary study, shaping a theory of postcolonial indifference.

**Desire, Sexuality, and the Novels**

Loomba’s postcolonial scholarship examines the role the female body has long played as a representation of conquered and colonized lands. These depictions portray a woman—and, by extension, her land and its original inhabitants—needing to be conquered and possessed, needing to have her primal, insatiable sexual desires controlled. We know such anxiety over female sexuality is a common theme in the art and written texts produced on the European continent before, during, and after the era of colonialism. This anxiety has by no means dissipated in modern times. As journalist Praveen Swami remarks regarding the crisis of sexual violence in India, it is “a situation where women’s bodies have become ‘the principal terrain on which male rage is venting itself,’ and the sexually independent woman in particular is perceived as an implicit threat and insult” (Le Quesne). Against this backdrop and through an exploration of the three novels, I intend to examine specifically how female expressions of sexuality—namely the acknowledgement, pursuit, and satisfaction of love and desire—serve, by varying degrees, as transgressions against the colonial force of indifference and its postcolonial legacy in the fictional worlds depicted.

As Arundhati Roy’s only novel, *The God of Small Things* (1998) has enjoyed the most critical attention of the three novels in the international literary community. While a number of scholars have considered the potential outward success of Roy’s novel—and the actions of the characters therein, especially Ammu—as political, they have not specifically explored Ammu’s

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10 See Ahmad and Bose.
desire as, indeed, a potentially political but also deeply personal act of transgression against the invisible yet powerful forces of indifference that she has internalized, indeed, inherited as a female postcolonial subject in India. The idea of transgressing or breaking appears in certain works of criticism, but these examine such concerns as twins Estha and Rahel breaking the incest taboo, Ammu’s inter-caste affair, and the author’s own transgression of traditional linguistic and narrative forms, rather than the audacity of the desirous acts themselves, which stand against an unacknowledged but ubiquitous postcolonial indifference. While the Untouchable Veutha’s outcast standing—or lack of standing—makes Ammu’s desirous transgressing all the more extreme, truly inconceivable, and ultimately intolerable, her daring to want, regardless of the ultimate end of her story, is the means by which she truly becomes a “suicide bomber,” as the novel identifies her, one who is willing to burn herself in the fire. And it is not a simple display of rebellion, an outward political act, that drives Ammu to Velutha. She wants to be with him, loves him even, and pursues the satisfaction of a deeply personal desire of her own choosing over the societal and familial forces that have taught her, from the very beginning, to want nothing.

Ammu’s transgressive affair with Velutha contradicts postcolonial indifference, specifically reconciling the fractured sexual and spiritual components of her personal postcolonial identity. Underlying Ammu’s desire to “touch the Untouchable” (Bose 64) is her desire to know both the abject, or that which we react to with horror and disgust, and the sacred, which converge in the character of Velutha (Fox 37). According to the work of Julia Kristeva, “[A]bjection marks the borders of the self; at the same time, it threatens the self with perpetual danger. . . . [T]he expelled abject haunts the subject as its inner constitutive boundary” (McClintock 71). Ammu crosses this boundary—of the socially acceptable and of the self—in

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11 See Almeida, Eldred, Oumhani, and Silkü.
her sexual relationship with Velutha. By crossing over into transgressive realms of sexuality, the novel’s characters are able to achieve a semblance of what Nair calls “recovery of wholeness,” even if for too brief a time. What they achieve may, in fact, seem limited, but, in the context of both their limited postcolonial worlds and the traditionally limited realms of human sexuality, their explorations are rather extraordinary, as I feel it is Roy’s intention to show.

As an Egyptian novelist writing in English, Ahdaf Soueif is uniquely situated to speak to a transnational community of readers and scholars. Indeed, *The Map of Love* (1999) is frequently examined in its context as a postcolonial novel. Scholars see the character of Omar in the contemporary portion of the novel as a deliberate representation of Edward Said, who is considered the father of postcolonial theory. The novel’s linguistic hybridity fascinates critics, as does its exclusive use of female voices amid violent, male-driven colonial/postcolonial worlds— one past and one present. *The Map of Love*, true to its title, is very much a romance, one that spans generations and continents through its unique narrative structure. However, *The Map of Love* also challenges the traditional British genre of the “national romance,” which frames the idea of a nation—and its imperialist pursuits—as a heterosexual romance. It remains to be examined just how the novel’s individual women specifically, by daring to want and by personally transgressing indifference, subvert that national romance through the pursuit of their own romances and their own desires.

In particular, upper-class, British-born Anna Winterbourne, who subverts colonial indifference in her early 20th-century romance with Egyptian nationalist Sharif, deserves to have scholarly attention turned toward her unique character. As a citizen of the colonizing nation, Anna not only casts off the indifference, the “apathy among the upwardly mobile middle classes”

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12 See Valassopoulos and King.
13 See Hassan, Malak, Davis, Darraj, El Naga, and Wynne.
14 See Davis.
(Nair xv) which she is expected to feel for the colonized nation and its people, but she also supports and aids Sharif in his work of pursuing Egyptian independence. This is a transgression for Sharif, too, falling in love with a British woman, but it is through Anna’s narrative voice that such breaking of indifference is revealed—and can be examined alongside the voices of other transgressive women.

Haitian-born author Edwidge Danticat’s 1998 historically based novel *The Farming of Bones* takes place in the Dominican Republic and Haiti; thus, it is often linked to Caribbean and Latin American literature, specifically through the theme of witnessing and the tradition of *testimonio*. Danticat explores Haiti’s collective traumatic memory of the Trujillo-era Parsley Massacre through the personal voice of narrator Amabelle. Amabelle’s own body is even discussed as testimony in itself. The simple fact of Amabelle’s existence—and her ability to give voice to those brutalized by the violent oppression of that time—draws attention as something transgressive. Among discussions of voice, witnessing, and telling, critics explore how the novel “breaks the silence” of that dark history, how Danticat takes on a “dangerous job” as its author, and how narrator Amabelle’s “hunger to tell” as a survivor of the violence is satiated by her unique form of testimony.

In the context of Amabelle’s Haitian subjectivity and her positioning as a postcolonial woman, she is doubly exiled. As a servant of a wealthy Dominican family, neither at home there nor in her nation of birth, she is expected to suspend her desires, allowing them to be

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15 See Caminero-Santangelo, Novak, and Rohrleitner.
16 See Clitandre and Shemak.
17 See Clitandre, Francis, Rader, Segura-Rico, and Wucker.
18 See Rohrleitner.
19 See Shea, “The Dangerous Job of Edwidge Danticat: An Interview” and “The Hunger to Tell: Edwidge Danticat and *The Farming of Bones*.”
20 Amabelle is literally a body in exile, that is, in “external exile as manifest in migration and geographical relocation,” as well as in “internalized exile” (Katrak 2).
subsumed within the patriarchy of the family. My focus is Amabelle’s relationship with her lover Sebastien, who appears either in reality or as a memory throughout her first-person narrative, as it has not yet been explored for its important role in breaking Amabelle’s state of numb indifference, allowing her a return to feeling, and opening her up to reconnect with lost and fragmented memories through a reconciliation of pain and joy. The desire that runs between them, particularly Amabelle’s allowing of herself to want something, breaks an unspoken agreement of postcolonial indifference and facilitates her reclaiming of those memories—the short, bold-print chapters throughout the novel. We see what may seem like a traumatized, nearly silenced ghost of a woman at the novel’s end, but her sexuality, the physical relationship, and the love she pursues with Sebastien nonetheless linger as her answer to the legacy of colonial indifference on the island of Hispanola. As an emissary of such powerful forces, Amabelle’s world asks her, “Are you numb?” Because of the love and desire between her and Sebastien that we see in the novel’s early pages, we know her answer, her small flag of resistance, would have to be, “Not always.”

**Conclusion**

Through these bodily expressions of sexuality, through allowing their physical desires to lift them out of the numbness and indifference with which they face their roles as colonial/postcolonial subjects, the female characters depicted in these three novels are able to reclaim buried, fragmented memories, to cast off the veils of apathy and ignorance, and, ultimately, to free themselves. Using postcolonial theory and postcolonial feminist critique to guide me through a consideration of these female voices and perspectives—which span different postcolonial regions and cultures—and the relationships these women enter into, I intend to
establish how such indifference functions—and how it can be overcome in the lives of individuals. The context of these novels, the specificity of Ammu’s, Anna’s, and Amabelle’s respective storyworlds, is of utmost importance to my discussion of their sexuality, but, by bringing them together, I hope to address the concern of postcolonial feminist scholars that connectedness—the global, the transnational, and the cross-cultural—also be recognized in light of postcolonial women’s experiences. In their worlds, limited as they are as women in patriarchal, classist, racist postcolonial societies, I see these characters as being no freer than when they are exploring sexuality in all its incarnations, possibilities, and taboos.
Works Cited


