
EMERGING FROM SHADOWS: THE “UNHOMED” ANGLO-INDIAN OF 36 CHOWRINGHEE LANE

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Like many underrepresented and misrepresented minority groups, Anglo-Indians are understandably sensitive to the way they have been portrayed in literature and film. For as long as the Anglo-Indian people have existed, negative and stereotypical literary representations of them have proliferated. Some of these are well known in literary circles, such as Rudyard Kipling's hapless Michele d'Cruz in the story "His Chance in Life," to E.M. Forster's chauffeur in *A Passage to India*, "vexed by opposite currents in his blood" (26). Others have faded into relative oblivion with the passing of time, such as the early 20th century novels of Patricia Wentworth, Irene Burns, and Henry Bruce, who went so far as to say: "Possessing no advantage of birth, breeding or education, it is no surprise that [Anglo-Indians] should be found lacking in moral stamina. With the exception of their lissom bodies and dark flashing eyes, they have little else to their credit." (In Singh, 192) Even in non-fictional studies of the British in India, Anglo-Indians have been negatively characterized, as when Dennis Kincaid paints an over-the-top caricature of "Eurasians" in *British Social Life in India*. Most recently, the film *Cotton Mary* (Merchant & Ivory, 2000) unleashed a fury in the Anglo-Indian Community. One of its most outspoken critics, Anglo-Indian MP Beatrix D'Souza of Chennai, referred to it as a "terrible caricature of our community," a sentiment shared by Anglo-Indians the world over. MP D'Souza continued: "There have been earlier stereotype films showing us in poor light, such as . . . 36 Chowringhee Lane" (www.soc.culture.indian.kerala, 2000). Given the problematic history of Anglo-Indian literary representation, this sensitivity is completely understandable.

But is it fair to paint Arpana Sen's 1989 film the same brush? On the surface, 36

Chowringhee Lane may indeed appear to fall into the same trap as *A Calcutta Christmas*, or Barbara Crossette’s 1991 *New York Times* article which describes the Anglo-Indians as “the gentlefolk of India’s past.” Such characterizations tend to stereotype Anglo-Indians as little more than nostalgic senior citizens, out of touch with the present day and pining away for a pre-1947 world of big band music and vintage cars, as though they are living museum pieces, human vestiges of Empire. On the surface the protagonist of *36 Chowringhee Lane*, Violet Stoneham, would appear to be another such character. Like the subjects of *A Calcutta Christmas*, she is getting older, more nostalgic, and out of touch with the culture around her.

Yet when understood in its full depth and complexity, *36 Chowringhee Lane* emerges as a more complex portrayal of an Anglo-Indian sensibility than such a surface interpretation would suggest. To see only the stereotype at the surface is to miss Sen’s artistic vision. A deeper analysis reveals that under Sen’s sensitive direction, Violet Stoneham emerges as a tragic figure—betrayed and psychologically dislocated, yet with a strong and compelling voice and an unappreciated value. Violet provides an excellent example of Homi Bhabha’s “unhomed” post-colonial subject, a term suggesting both social and psychological dislocation. Moreover, Sen elevates Violet’s stature and inverts the colonial narrative of European male domination by identifying Violet with King Lear, betrayed after trusting the wrong people—though, unlike Lear, Violet clearly remains sane. By figuring the Anglo-Indian woman as both post-colonial subject and Shakespearean hero, this film offers a sharp commentary on the displacement of the Anglo-Indians in post-Independence India and suggests the Anglo-Indian sensibility has indeed been undervalued.

Homi Bhabha describes the “unhomely moment” as the state of being “un-homed,” which is not to say “homeless.” In Bhabha’s use of the term, the “unhomed” subject lives *somewhere* in the purely physical sense, yet figuratively occupies an intermediary space which makes it difficult for her to know where she belongs, socially and culturally. The “unhomed” subject dwells in a border zone, “as though in parenthesis” (9). Frequently, Bhabha points out, the “unhomely” subject is “dramatized through the figure of Woman,” because women so often occupy a

domestic space at the “paradoxical boundary between the private and public spheres.” The domestic sphere blurs the boundary between that which is personal, interior and psychological, and that which is public, exterior, and political:

Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy . . . that questions binary divisions. . . . [the] subject inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality. And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive ‘image’ at the crossroads of history and literature. (13)

The un-homed subject, then, is “strangely framed,” represented aesthetically through “twilight. . . a descent into night, an invasion of the shadow” (15). The shadowed image conveys an “unhomely” moment which relates “the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (11).

Twilight, shadow, a nebulous “space in between”: Such is the world of Violet Stoneham. Sen suggests Violet’s dislocation through strategic use of light and shadow and non-linear narrative technique. The film opens with Violet kneeling in a dark graveyard, leaving flowers at the tomb of her long-dead fiancé, a soldier in the British Army during the Second World War. Violet lives, alone and childless, with her cat, Sir Toby Belch (only one of many allusions to *King Lear*), in a dingy two-room flat brimming with memorabilia. She eats alone in darkness, bakes by candlelight, and attends a dimly lit Catholic church. Violet’s life consists of weekly visits to the cemetery; visits to her brother Eddie, who is deteriorating in a nursing home; letters from relatives who have emigrated from India; gossipy colleagues, inattentive students, and a deep love for Shakespeare. The action turns on Violet’s “friendship” with a young couple, Nandita (a former student) and her fiancé Samerish, who as it turns out are merely using Violet for their own ends. Like King Lear whom she is so fond of quoting, Violet has misplaced her trust and affections.

Flashbacks and dream scenes suggest Violet is dislocated, both socially and psychologically. The flashback depicts Violet interacting with her niece, Rose Marie, who is wearing a caste mark and preparing for her upcoming marriage to an Indian man. The next flashback shows a bitter, chain-smoking Rose Marie, whose

engagement has been broken because of difficulties with her fiancé's family. Rose Marie ends up marrying another Anglo-Indian and moving with him to Australia, telling her Aunt Violet as she abandons her: "Do you think I want to end up like you, sixty years old in a lonely old flat and then in an old people's home?"

Another compelling instance of "unhomeliness" appears in a surreal sequence in which Violet dreams of her deceased fiancé, Davey. Violet and Davey are running through an open field when Davey vanishes. Alarmed, Violet calls loudly and frantically: "Davey! Davey!" Her childhood home then appears in the shadows. She approaches and opens the door, but the house turns out to be simply a facade. Beyond the door lies nothing but the churning ocean and the howling wind. Violet walks to the beach, where a funeral service is taking place. Nandita and Samerish are in attendance, and we hear a slow, funereal organ version of Mendelssohn's Wedding March from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, played in a minor key. Violet is now wearing bridal attire, and above the funeral we hear a voice-over of wedding vows between Violet and Davey, who are again filmed in the shadows. Before the vows can be completed, however, machine guns fire; young Violet screams, and her veil is torn. All the characters vanish into darkness, leaving nothing but an image of shredded lace blown about by the blustering wind. Frequently the film is dark, or as hazy as an impressionistic painting. Often there is silence but for a single sound, such as birds chirping, church bells tolling, a baby crying, the howling of the wind, the whirring of a ceiling fan, the ticking of a clock.

Images of fog, darkness and mist continue in the film's sad denouement, when Violet arrives at Nandita and Samerish's home with a surprise Christmas cake, believing the couple to be out of town. As Violet arrives with her cake, she is shocked to find the couple has lied to her; rather than being out of town, the couple is hosting a large holiday party to which Violet has not been invited. Unseen by Nandita and Samerish, Violet stands alone in the darkness, looking through a frosty, obscured window. This is an emblematic "unhomely moment." What renders this scene such a sharp social commentary is that, while Bhabha conceives post-colonial "unhomeliness" as resulting from the actual physical displacement of diaspora, Violet has not gone anywhere; she is still in the land of her birth, the only home she has

ever known. (Her condition reflects the psychological and political dilemmas foisted upon the Anglo-Indians by the British colonialists, who taught them that their true home was England, a place they had never seen.) Thus, the consequences of colonialism's internalized hierarchies still echo, decades later. When the postcolonial subject is culturally marginal to the majority of others in geographical proximity, the result is the "unhomeliness" of which Bhabha speaks, even when the subject has physically remained in the same place. Displacement, then, can be experienced in the psyche, even of someone who has gone nowhere at all.

Violet, then, is "unhomed," psychologically and socially displaced by colonialism and its aftermath. Yet Sen also grants her heroic stature by identifying her with King Lear. When Violet realizes her friendship with the young Indian couple has been a sham, she reconsiders the invitation extended by her niece, Rose Marie, to move to Australia: "I never thought I would want to leave the land of my birth, but now. . . ." Violet then notices a lone dog nearby, and addresses him with the Shakespeare she still knows by heart:

Pray, do not mock me; I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less,
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
(King Lear, Act IV, Scene VII)

Violet concludes by addressing the dog with more of Lear's words:

Come, let's away to prison;
We two alone will sing like birds in the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness; so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too.
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon the mystery of things . . .
(King Lear, Act V, Scene III)

Followed by the dog, Violet vanishes into the shadows of the winter night. The film

concludes with a still shot of a dark and empty street.

As she muses “Who’s in, who’s out,” Violet in effect becomes a modern-day Lear, feminized and hybridized. Unlike Lear, however, Violet appears to remain sane—perhaps because she still has hope for the future, with the film suggesting she will leave India for Australia. Like Lear, Violet has trusted the wrong people, and paid for it. But unlike Lear, Violet is guilty of hubris but of its opposite, excessive humility. Unfortunately, the gramophone is not the only thing Violet fails to recognize as valuable; she fails to recognize her own worth as well, her own significance as “one of a very limited edition.” One frame depicts Violet’s “museum of records” on the floor after she has given her gramophone away, useless and silent without a machine capable of playing them; similarly, Violet’s own storehouse of knowledge and memories is inaccessible if she is rendered silent. 36 *Chowringhee Lane* makes an understated yet eloquent plea for Violet’s voice to be heard, that she be allowed to emerge from the shadows in which she dwells and take her rightful place in “the land of my birth,” the only home she has known.

Anglo-Indians are weary of repeated portrayals of themselves merely as dying relics of a bygone age. Clearly it is long past the time for literary and cinematic representations to show Anglo-Indians as multifaceted, significant, active social agents who are as interested in the present and future as they are in the past. The doddering, senile British lackey pining after the reign of King George VI is now as played out as earlier stereotypes of the “loose” Anglo-Indian woman, the bumbling civil servant, or the profligate gambling drunk. Still, sometimes representations which initially appear stereotypical turn out to be otherwise when analyzed in more depth. Arpana Sen turns the colonial paradigm of the conquering European male on its head, while simultaneously questioning post-Independence India’s treatment of its Anglo-Indian minority through an artistic depiction of psychological and social “un-homeliness.” While the deplorable *Cotton Mary* is another story altogether, 36 *Chowringhee Lane* cannot be fairly characterized in the same way. Unlike *Cotton Mary*, Sen’s film acknowledges Anglo-Indians as valuable, gives voice to their silence, and recognizes them both as post-colonial subjects and as heroes of Shakespearean stature.

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