

An Ethics of Postcolonial Citizenship: Lessons from Reading Women Writing in India

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Abstract This essay addresses the question of how the ethical values of the post-colonial subject are classed and gendered. A certain kind of postcolonial citizen, enjoying the privileges of birth and position, expresses an attitude that is best described (if somewhat anachronistically) as *noblesse oblige*. I focus on the writings of a handful of post-Independence Indian women writers, in particular Shama Futehally's novel *Tara Lane* (1993), as exemplifying this attitude. My essay will draw upon discussions by Indian feminists which, in different genres and informed by different politics, have set the stage for this historical, autobiographical and conceptual inquiry. Reading Indian women's fiction and Indian feminist theory and politics together, I trace their disjunctures and overlaps, merging these into an ethico-political inquiry about women and citizenship.

Examining a small and selective body of recent writings by women in India I attempt an inquiry in this essay into how (or indeed, if) the ethical values of the postcolonial subject as *citizen* are classed and gendered. A certain kind of postcolonial citizen, enjoying the privileges of birth and position, expresses, I suggest, an attitude that is best described (if somewhat anachronistically) as *noblesse oblige*. This is an attitude of feudal paternalism towards those of lesser privilege, born out of feelings of responsibility (and sometimes guilt), which also informs the patriotism of a nation-building ruling class conscious of its destiny. My central focus is on Shama Futehally's small body of fiction, chiefly the novel *Tara Lane* (1993). I juxtapose *Tara Lane* with two other texts, one appearing earlier and one later, in part in order to locate it within what appears to me to be a historically paradigmatic moment, but also with the aim, more broadly, of tracking a development in the notion of *noblesse oblige* in post-Independence India towards a different kind of patriotism and civic responsibility. Like Futehally's novel, Rasheed Jahan's short story in Urdu, "Woh" ("That one", 1937) and Jasjit Mansingh's memoir about her daughter, *Oona, Mountain Wind* (2001), explore the condition of this constituency in terms of class, gender and citizenship, but with subtly varying emphases.

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Futehally's protagonist is female, the young girl or woman growing into realization of the limits of *noblesse oblige*, yet unable to free herself of it or to move into a sphere of active political participation in nation building. To merely describe Futehally's protagonists as upper-class Muslim women, in a litany of class-community-gender naming, is however insufficient for understanding the full implications of her fiction. If it is to be understood, rather, as a statement about postcolonial citizenship as I am interested in doing, then we are called upon to understand the historical context of a generation that Rushdie described as "midnight's children". The differences between their novels illuminate the different perspectives within the same small group (Bombay Muslim elite), heavily scored by the difference that gender makes. Exploring this difference-and-sameness will be one of the directions my paper will take.

One needs to go further to ask: what does it mean that *women* are viewed in a new-nation-building role – and are made at the same time repositories of a Jamesian "sensibility"?¹ Here my paper will draw upon discussions by Indian feminists which, in different genres and informed by different politics, have set the stage for this historical, autobiographical and conceptual inquiry. In their studies of the Jamesian heroine (Kumkum Sangari, 1999), the emergence of "women's writing" in modern India in terms of "writing the nation" (Susie Tharu and Lalitha, 1993), and the Indian women's movement in retrospect (Vina Mazumdar, 1999), contemporary Indian feminists have thrown light on these questions. I hope to read Indian women's fiction and Indian feminist theory and politics together in an attempt to trace their disjunctures and overlaps.

I am interested, above all, in merging these into an ethico-political inquiry about postcolonial citizenship: are these values of responsibility adequately described as liberalism? As a ruling class ideology is *noblesse oblige* merely inadequate and ineffectual, is it a ruse of power, or has it been instead our salvation in the midst of large-scale corruption and political anarchy? In a new nation is identity a question not only of being but of doing (something with one's identity)? How do female passivity, helplessness, exquisite sympathy, enduring privilege as loss, construct an islanded ethos of idealism in (a certain) fiction? What do they say about women and about the ethics of citizenship in India?

II.

Tara Lane (1993) like Futehally's (1992) short story "Portrait of a Childhood", is narrated in the first person by the protagonist, a child growing into young womanhood. In both these stories the setting is a house of great comfort and beauty belonging to an

affluent family. The daughter of the family, the narrator-protagonist, develops feelings of guilt and discomfort about her privileged life, especially at the periodic revelations of inequality and injustice in the social relations of masters and servants, employees or the lower classes generally, and at the changes that are slowly being wrought in these relations: these are the points of crisis in the narrative. *Tara Lane* however goes further than the baring of the protagonist's soul that the short story attempts, to pose the ethical and existential dilemmas of what I have termed *noblesse oblige*, but now freighted with the political urgency of new nationhood.

Tahera, the protagonist of the novel, grows up with her brother and sister in a cocoon of comfort in the house on Tara lane in an unnamed suburb of Bombay, taken care of by Ayah and a household of other servants, going on holidays to the seaside, reading English literature in college, happily acceding to an arranged marriage with a business associate's son, and duly producing an heir. The source of the Mushtaq family's wealth is not mystified: it is the factory that is located next to the house. The father however is a man of integrity and principle, and he runs his business in the tradition of his dead father from whom it is inherited. This smooth and normal course of events is punctuated by tremors of conflict – first the parting of Tahera's father and his brother over disagreements about the business, then the son's small conflicts with the father also over the latter's too-principled business ethics, unrest and strikes at the factory, and finally the new business methods of the son-in-law which are with difficulty checked and reversed by the head of the family in time. All this has its repercussions on domestic life, especially because it jeopardizes the family's comfortable standard of life. When the dishonest dealings that the son-in-law Rizwan enters into with the union are found out by the labour commissioner, the factory is ordered to be shut down and the workers as much as its owners are faced with crisis (though of course of different orders of magnitude). Tahera's mother has a breakdown. At this point her father succumbs to the pressure to bribe the labour official in order to resolve the factory crisis, whereupon things return to normal. The novel ends with a description of Tahera's new perception of the familiar family house on Tara lane: "It was exactly the picture of our childhood. A picture of perfect peace; only one little photographic chemical had now gone, so the picture was black instead of white" (174).

It is not difficult to see, even from this bald summary, that the literary lineage of the novel is that of Austen, Eliot and James, the English novel's "great tradition".² I do not mean this to be an evaluative observation – *Tara Lane* is a shorter, slighter and far simpler work than these canonical English novels, for one thing –

but a pointer to the realist form it adheres to, which is also, let us note, one that permits the exploration of ethical dilemmas, creating in the world of fiction a kind of laboratory where such situations may be constructed. Its very departures from these models, for the most part in the form of reduced complexity and a self-conscious narrative transparency of intent, point to the difference that location makes. Thus while the house in *Tara Lane* may resemble Mansfield Park in its elegance and comfort and in its harmonious and civilized values and rituals, it is not the discreetly distant colony, the off-stage Antigua that provides the material basis of these as in Austen's novel; in newly decolonized space this source of the civilized amenities of life is instead a factory that is distressingly next door.

For the contemporary resonances of this novel in the realist tradition we must instead look to the seminal influence of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's premise that the post-Independence born Indian has a *destiny* that inexorably links him or her to the new nation's historical trajectory is carried over into Futehally's novel. If the connection between midnight's child and the Indian nation is mystified, perhaps necessarily, in Rushdie's work – for Saleem Sinai's agency is never made very clear in the novel, except at the end as a chronicler of the parallel stories of his life and the nation's history – in Futehally's novel the obligations of postcolonial citizenship are never in doubt. In this she hews closer to social realism than to magical realism. In both novels it goes without saying that this exemplary Indian should be a person of privilege; more intriguing is the fact that both are members of the Muslim minority community, especially so since there is no overt staking of patriotic claims on this ground. Both novels lend themselves to being read in terms of the "national allegory": in *Tara Lane* the division between the brothers hints at the Partition, the first rupture in the family's as in the nation's wholeness; the father's resemblance to Nehru in temperament, character and position is explicitly remarked upon; the changes that Emergency brings about, specifically through Sanjay Gandhi's interventions, are reflected in the son-in-law Rizwan's ruthless and unscrupulous new ways and in the demise of the old values represented by Nehru as by his contemporary, Mr. Mushtaq.

Despite these intermittent allegorical allusions however, Futehally largely builds her narrative structure upon *conflict* as in the traditional realist novel. While it may be historical pressures that corrode the incorruptible individual, and economic and social changes that erode the force of *noblesse oblige*, the conflict between principle and its defeat is staged in the novel primarily in the characters' personalities. *Tara Lane* also addresses the ways in

which gender inflects the concept and practice of citizenship in postcolonial India far more self-consciously than *Midnight's Children*. That Saleem Sinai's gender is integral to his identification with the nation is not in question, but, and perhaps for that very reason, the narrative simply *assumes* the maleness of nationality. *Tara Lane* asks not only how the concept of *noblesse oblige* translates in the postcolonial context, but also – and insistently – what it means that it is women who are the bearers of its ideology.

III.

Noblesse oblige is a French term, more correctly a sentence, which translates as “nobility is an obligation”. In our contemporary egalitarian times the matter of nobility, or more loosely privilege (the privileges of class and its attributes) comes with a set of readymade dilemmas. What must one do with one's privilege? The responses at the two extremes are: renounce it, or use it as a power to oppress others. Most bearers of privilege however would occupy some place in the middle between saint and tyrant, taking their privilege for granted and even seeking uncomplicatedly to further it, or rationalizing it as a well-deserved reward for “merit”. The ethical questions turn on how to use it with responsibility i.e. as *noblesse oblige*; and preferably, as in *Tara Lane*, also hold it with some degree of moral discomfort.

Most dictionaries offer a meaning of the term that approximates to “benevolent, honorable behavior considered to be the responsibility of persons of high birth or rank” (American Heritage), though Princeton University's WordNet also adds parenthetically that it is “often used ironically”. In actual usage it is regarded as an ineluctable class trait, an excess that goes beyond the codes of conduct or the rule book, an almost exaggerated sense of honour – and, typically, it described *gentlemanly* conduct. The OED gives its first English use in 1837, by F. A. Kemble, though clearly its origins are to be found in the feudal middle ages as a component of the ideology of lord-vassal relations. The affective but also contractual bonds that formed their alliance was based on *noblesse oblige* on the former's part and reciprocal loyalty on the latter's. It has continued to operate in this sense of aristocratic benevolence (as also of chivalry) within the English class system. (Nancy Mitford's book, *Noblesse Oblige*, 1956, is subtitled *An Inquiry into the identifiable characteristics of the English aristocracy*). I shall not belabour the provenance of the term further except to note that it travelled well into other, different contexts – into that of American philanthropy, for instance, and above all into the colony as a version of the civilizing mission.

The logic of its application to postcolonial citizenship is curious but not far-fetched. The Indian post-independence ruling elites were widely viewed as epigones of the colonial ruling class, and were actually descended for the most part from the babus and boxwallahs produced by colonial rule (those in administration, business and the professions); their takeover of the mantle of superior beings who would guide the “natives” reproduced colonial *noblesse oblige*. But we can be less reductive than this. The patriotism that was carried over from the freedom struggle into independence viewed the nation-building project as requiring certain attributes or actions, all components of *noblesse oblige* in the traditional sense; such as a virtuous public life, social service, and sacrifice. Clearly this call could be addressed most persuasively to those who *did* have lives to lead in public and those who *did* possess the wherewithal for service and sacrifice: in other words, those with education and wealth in positions of influence or power, the putative new ruling class.³ The leadership of the (mostly male, but some prominently female) figures in the freedom movement and then in the new national government reinforced this ideology.⁴ Gandhi’s faith in trusteeship, which kept intact the Indian landlord and capitalist class, and Nehru’s authoritarian paternalism as Prime Minister, halted any radical redistribution of wealth or the overturning of social relations (caste or gender) that might have been envisaged in the dispensations of new nation statehood, despite the provisions of constitutional democracy and republicanism.⁵ What was hoped for nonetheless was that harmonious social and political relations would prevail if hegemonic groups ruled wisely, or that groups lower in the hierarchy (peasants, dalits, women) could somehow experience spontaneous, unopposed economic well-being without undue social change. Either of these would prevent extreme inequalities and injustices – as well as, of course, the social unrest that these would cause. This hope and its failure are by now a familiar story.

Tahera’s father, Mushtaq, completely lives up to the ideals of *noblesse oblige*. “The source of all good seemed to be so entirely my father. Mushtaq saab has put up tube-lights in the slum; Mushtaq saab has ordered that an extra tube-well be dug” (30). The industrialist who is also visionary, philanthropist and patriotic nation-builder – for example, a Jamshedji Tata – is a prominent figure in post-independent Indian mythology; it is this kind of figure that Mr. Mushtaq aspires to be. At other places in the novel Tahera explicitly sees him as a version of Nehru himself. But romantic and uplifting though this consciousness may be, the realization of her father’s sole responsibility for the welfare of so many people makes the young woman uneasy, intuiting already the limitations and dangers

of *noblesse oblige*. She reaches out, incoherently, for an alternative, some way of spreading the burden or placing the fulfillment of the people's needs on an institutional footing: "It would have been reassuring to learn that other people were capable of putting up lights; or rather that a whole lot of people did what they were supposed to do" (ibid). Inevitably Mushtaq's ideals fail under the pressure of changing circumstances in the new nation-state (corruption in politics and government, as well as a more militant trade union movement), and he is forced to resort to bribery to keep his factory going. That *noblesse oblige* is insufficient as well as anachronistic in modern capitalist relations is a realization brought home to him and his daughter painfully.

Tara Lane is not only a lament for the passing of an age however. For truth to tell it is not an age that has as yet passed, or not entirely. We hear often enough about the mixed nature of India's economy, its modes of production and social relations, and the co-existence of feudal and pre-feudal structures with modern capitalist ones, as aspects of its transition from colony to modern nation-state. This transition is well caught in *Tara Lane* in the swift generational changes that occur between the values of the father and those of his son and son-in-law (and even his younger brother). It is seen as well as in the contrasts and continuities between the positions of the factory workers and the household servants. The latter situation is explored for its potential and actual conflicts among the servants. Thus Tulsī the cleaning woman in the house has a son who works in the factory and is an active union member. *Her* (compulsory) loyalty is towards the family, while *his* (voluntary) commitment is to the union, and this difference produces conflict in their relationship during the agitations at the factory. Similarly Samuel's loyalty to the family as their personal driver necessarily involves his betrayal of his own class. The power and persistence of *noblesse oblige* are not underestimated: both real feudal loyalty and its dissimulation (as practiced by the opportunistic union leader Irshudullah) operate in favour of the family, for example in retaining Samuel's services for running secret and sensitive business errands, or in turning one worker against another.

Most importantly, the obverse of giving – the threat or the actual withholding and even taking away, of favours, gifts, livelihood itself – is a continuous and powerful weapon that the givers exercise against the recipients. This realization explains Tahera's hysterical outburst of giving to the servants. When her father finally succumbs to bribery, she resolves on compensation: "I will help them [the servants] . . . I wanted good actions to pour out of me, ferociously on all sides, as if a bottomless pit had been created

which could not be filled up with good whatever you did . . .” But she realizes with dismay that “as fast as I filled it up, the pit emptied itself” (173). The limits and costs of the ideology of *noblesse oblige* emerge from Tahera’s own experience of them rather than through any narrative denouement.

What we see in *Tara Lane* is therefore *noblesse oblige* as ethical imperative but also as hegemonic ploy. The voice of this ethical imperative coded as patriotism is Nehru’s, who makes an actual appearance in the novel.⁶ Tahera hears him address a vast crowd in Bombay at a time of famine; this is how she recalls the public meeting: “Pandit Nehru flung back his head to glance briefly at the sky and went on: ‘My brothers and sisters, this is a time of trial for all of us. My heart, like yours, is pierced by the suffering of our brothers. It is a time when we must not lose faith . . .’ And so it went on, the grave, beautiful voice becoming thunderous from time to time, seeking to address land and sky together . . . His words swelled in my mind like a wave: and *all* of us will stand as *one* . . .” (34). It is a message that is inspirational to the young Tahera. But the first-person narrator, now an adult only-too-intelligent woman, is not slow to see the cruel irony of the rhetoric of national unity and sacrifice that he offers a people suffering without water and food as he tells them to “be patient, and allow the government to help.” The comedy of the scene that follows this one, Tahera’s burning desire to follow Nehru’s injunctions to take collections for the cause, does not hide the painful ambivalence that this form of “social service” takes in her case. For Tahera goes round the neighbourhood in the family car, accompanied by her Ayah and sister beside her, collecting meagre amounts from the poor people living there for her tin box. What is important in this task is not of course the actual money that is collected, but what it costs *Tahera* in terms of embarrassment, discomfort and the consciousness of duty ill performed in carrying out the task. It is this shift to the question of moral-growth-as-gendered-consciousness in the scene of the nation that represents the most intriguing move in Futehally’s novel.

Let us note that *noblesse oblige* is not itself a female attribute. In the nationalist avatar which it assumes here it is, on the contrary, distinctively that of the male, the father and the political leader. In appropriating it Tahera, like other women of her class and kind, claims the moral citizenship that is seemingly her male peers’ birthright – while at the same time inflecting it with the special burden of female-ness. “Burden” here, to underline the obvious, operates in the sense of both “content” and “difficulty”.⁷ It is this double burden that constitutes the crux of the gendered analysis that follows.

IV.

Of what importance or significance can the feelings of a child or young woman be, faced with the vast and stirring scene of action that a new nation represents? In the conventional nation-building story the answer is: of the utmost. The child is the future citizen who must be directly interpellated, not to say indoctrinated, precisely as Tahera is into the lessons of national service and sacrifice; and the script of the young woman as companionate wife and in due course mother (of the male child), who will uphold her husband's public role and provide him with the steadfast comforts and amenities of the domestic in the private sphere, is followed to the letter by Tahera in *Tara Lane*. But there is in addition an autonomous, not to say subversive, self that is developed in and through – indeed, in the very form of – this autobiographical fiction. How is it that women, traditionally separate and inferior, came to feel, not just the entitlements but the responsibilities of citizenship in India? The story of their participation in the freedom struggle and the emancipation this brought about, primarily in the form of the franchise but also – though mainly for middle class women – access to education and the professions, has been amply rehearsed before now.⁸

In her reflections on the women's movement, Vina Mazumdar has provided some insights into this situation for women of her generation, those who came of age at the time of independence who might be described as the first generation of contemporary Indian feminists. Their entry into careers, she writes, was viewed as a return for what "this poor country" had invested in their training as her father reminded her: in other words, as *noblesse oblige*. For her generation of women "the acceptance of gender equality in the Constitution had been the fulfilment of a dream", attended by feelings of "exhilaration" (343). It is easy to forget the novelty and magnitude of the achievement of equal citizenship, by means of which women would seemingly transcend the subordination of gender. But Mazumdar is quick to acknowledge the limits of this change: only women like herself from "progressive middle class families" knew or took advantage of Constitutional equality she admits; and the subsequent decades were to show that the fulfilment of the dream had led them to mistakenly abdicate their struggles in the immediate post-Independence decades, to fail to realize that the Constitution's guarantees were not the end but had to be the beginning point of women's struggles. (And we cannot help noting too that despite the newfound equality it is to her father's guidance she turns and his permission she seeks when she begins a job; the progressive male – in the roles of nationalist leader, social reformer, father, husband, teacher – is the indispensable figure

behind every successful Indian woman, a finding upheld by *Tara Lane* as well).

Feminist scholars have recently turned to the writings of women in these early years in order to discover the terms of this self-representation, its assertions, beliefs, contradictions and limits “in their own words.” Thus Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (1993) read Amrita Pritam’s poem addressed to Waris Shah with an acute interest in the poetic persona, the “I”, “female yet androgynous, whose lyric voice is saturated with national responsibility” (68). Writing (of) the nation in this way, that is, as an ideological unity, they discover, requires that the woman writer repress consciousness of her gendered difference (as well as differences of class, caste and community) and the troubling questions that these might pose. Thus even as such repression empowered her in one direction, it extracted a cost in another.

Tharu and Lalitha focus in particular on a short story by Rashid Jahan titled “Woh,” (“That one”) which is worth looking at again in the context of reading Futehally’s work.⁹ It is a brief narrative of a strange encounter – or rather a series of encounters – between two women. One of them is the narrator, a young, pretty, middle-class teacher, the other a poor woman whom she comes across in a clinic. The woman is horrific to look at: “. . . she had no nose. Two raw, gaping holes stood in its place. She had also lost one of her eyes” (119). The pharmacist tells her bitinglly that she is “rotting to death, that one, bit by bit” (the implied cause being the syphilis she has contracted, presumably as a sex-worker) (*ibid.*). Despite her revulsion, Safia, the narrator, brings herself to smile at the woman in a friendly way. The smile initiates a bizarre relationship. “Woh,” “that one” (who remains nameless), takes to visiting Safia daily at the school where she teaches, each time giving her a flower which Safia dutifully places in her hair. Her visits are resented by her colleagues at the school, but Safia is unable to bring herself to tell this unwanted friend to keep away. Things come to a head when the sweeper-woman in the school finally turns on her, beats her up, and calls her a whore. “That one” leaves sobbing with the parting words “Now you know everything,” (122), shattered at what she believes is the disclosure of her past/profession to the young woman she adores.

Priyamvada Gopal (2002) reads in Rashid Jahan’s work a complex questioning of the meaning of “modernity and its institutions” for the “gendered subaltern” (161). Under the pressures and possibilities of modernity as new kinds of public spaces are opened up for middle-class women in the new nation, putatively egalitarian relationships are initiated. Jahan, she argues, “repeatedly posits the . . . feminist question of women’s *responsibility* in relation to

the structuring of new spaces and communities" (162). If we take a certain Levinas (1963) meditation on the "Other" to be the implicit measure of Jahan's story, we will perceive the abyss of failure that she records in this despairing anecdote that is written in the register of irony. But at the level of the social realism that is the chosen form of this fiction, "Woh" also seriously explores the conditions of sisterhood (which, at least at an interpersonal level, a smile from one woman and a flower in return from the other are seemingly sufficient to maintain), as well as the depths of class prejudice that preserve hierarchy (including the troubling fact that the most overt hostility to the "other" is expressed by another woman of the working class).

Tharu and Lalitha however regard the "other woman" in this story (as also in other writings by women at this time) as a mere foil, "a figure cut to the measure of this *middle-class woman's* requirement, that is also," they remind us, "the requirement of the *nation*" (83, emphasis added). Thus even in the explicitly pedagogic narratives of the women writers of the Progressive Writers' movement, it is the moral education of the middle-class female protagonist in the context of nation-building, not the marginal figures whom they are ostensibly concerned about, that is the real subject of the stories. However that may be, their insight that this development constituted a "moral awakening to social responsibility, and therefore also to citizenship" (82–83) is a revealing one. To assume, as these radical women from the middle classes – educated, newly occupying the professions – did, that they *had* a social responsibility in nation-space, and that citizenship was a form of *agency* constituted by the acceptance of the responsibility – has significance for questions of gendered identity in India.

V.

The middle-class educated woman of privilege who came of age at the time of independence internalized therefore a certain novel idea of citizenship, in terms of equality with men, public service and patriotism. Though the women's texts of the time reveal that they went further, exploring the ethical dilemmas and social limits that they encountered in the notion of citizenship-as-responsibility, such an exploration was nonetheless predicated on their emergence into a public sphere which was constituted as nothing less than the space of the new nation.

For the post-Independence born woman, midnight's child, this does not however seem to have translated into the kind of sublime confidence about destiny that is a (male) Saleem Sinai's, or offered the clear-cut path to career and activism that women of an earlier

generation had followed. Instead what we track in *Tara Lane* is the growth of a *sensibility*, one developed by the nationalist pedagogies offered by fathers and father-figures, and supplemented by reading (English literature) – though not entirely explained by these influences, as I have said, for her questions and thoughts go beyond the directions or answers provided by them; and, crucially, a sensibility marked by powerlessness.

Sensibility without power: in her chapter on *Portrait of a Lady*, “Of Ladies, gentlemen and the short cut,” Kumkum Sangari (1999) has explored Henry James’s construction in his fiction of a “higher bourgeois consciousness” in terms of “femaleness” (29). James offers his disempowered and morally exquisite heroines, Isabel Archer (in *Portrait of a Lady*) and Milly Theale (in *Wings of the Dove*) as representatives of a femininity possessing exemplary value in the encounter between Europe and America in the *fin de siècle*. Futehally would appear to read her female protagonists’ similar sensibility in less grandly symbolic, indeed quite literal terms as socially-constructed female passivity. But we must pause to examine a puzzling aspect of this passivity and its valuation in Futehally’s novel.

For, *why* is Tahera helpless? Indian women of her generation and class (which are also mine), armed with a good college education and supplied with domestic support, do not necessarily make marriage or even motherhood a full-time preoccupation except as a deliberated choice or due to unusual constraints. But no such deliberation or constraint is presented to us in the novel – Tahera simply retreats into the married state. She does make a brief foray to find herself a job when the family fortunes seem to be threatened but gives up the attempt easily enough after the first discouragement. Nor are women of her kind necessarily as bound to the patriarchal authority of husband and society as Tahera shows herself to be. But perhaps even more than this issue (which is after all only one of judging the accuracy of the rendering of a social reality “out there”), there is the question – the second and ensuing one – of how we must interpret her own *angst* about her compromises, her selfishness and ultimate helplessness.

One kind of reader may well treat the protagonist’s prolonged introspection with impatience and dismiss it as hypocritical protest: the bottom line is, after all, money. But a more sympathetic reader is bound to admire Tahera’s capacity to feel not only the scruples she does but also the self-criticism that enhances her worth by adding to it the trait of self-knowledge. Neither kind of reader is likely to echo her self-condemnation, or do so in the same terms. In contrast to the world they live in where fine feelings have been so blunted as not to carry any value, Tahera and her father score points for feeling guilt

about their fall from the moral heights – and their capitulation also saves them from graceless self-righteousness. This reading is one produced, I repeat, against the grain; it is not offered as an uncovering of secret and devious authorial intention. Indeed there is no way one can read first person self-criticism in fiction along the grain, and therefore no way of writing it so as to prevent its recuperation otherwise. The consequence of this reading effect is nonetheless to install the female protagonist in a Jamesian avatar, as a finer, higher creature whose morally correct sentiments serve as an adequate alibi and substitute for correct action. There is more than a trace here of the “emancipatory promise of femaleness construed as a higher cultural form”, that Sangari warns against in such “portraits” of “ladies” (54). The danger is of displacing systemic analysis of the endemic problems of postcoloniality – corruption, power, class exploitation – in favour of the portrayal of the crises of conscience in the individual.

The privileging of the ethical as a praxis consists of course precisely in such displacements. Explaining political malaise as the failure of a person’s (citizen’s) behaviour is a way of assigning and accepting individual responsibility so that the system does not become an alibi. It is in viewing this as a typically female predicament that Futehally falls into two kinds of difficulties: the one of diagnosing Indian women’s passivity as a cultural trait, and the other of seeming to valorize it. Postcolonial citizenship would appear then to be divided along gendered lines: femaleness is identified with an obsolete order of *noblesse oblige*, helpless to resist the onslaughts of change; and a new masculinity is associated with the active agency of the national/public enterprise. The major consequence of dividing citizenship thus into distinct and separate gendered packages of female moral sensibility and male political power is that it condemns both women and ethical citizenship to the margins.

VI.

By the time Futehally comes to write her next novel *Reaching Bombay Central* (2002) nearly ten years later, the matter of women’s civic and nationalist agency takes a different turn in her address to it. Primarily this is an acknowledgement of the profound changes that have appeared in the nation beyond the Nehruvian years in which the earlier novel was set, changes that were inaugurated even as it was being written. No longer is this a society in which the self-representation of the old elites – as correct-English-speaking, urban, secular, well-mannered, incorruptible and patriotic – can prevail undisturbed. As yet they are not obsolete of course. In the

novel they are shown to remain prominent in the professional ruling coterie, especially the higher reaches of the bureaucracy (the IAS), and are well networked through old school contacts with others with influence such as newspaper editors; but they are beginning to be jostled by new aspirants to power. The changes are seen primarily in the access of the “Sangha” (the right-wing Hindu nationalist party, the BJP) to political power and the consequent demise of the “secularism” to which the dominant Congress party had officially subscribed. In Futehally’s first novel, as in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, the fact of the Muslim minority identity of the protagonists was made to count for very little in the social ordering, a perception reflected in the elision of all markers of communitarian difference in the characters, either through their expressed beliefs or their practices. In the best sense of the secularism practiced by the elites of the country, religion was not a publicly announced identity. By 2002 however, the BJP had been in power for nearly a decade, and the name “Jamal” that the central protagonists of *Reaching Bombay Central* bear is no longer an irrelevant matter in their destinies.

The narrative covers a 24-hour train journey from Delhi to Bombay by train. It takes Ayesha Jamal on a mission to save her husband from the consequences of his recent fall from grace at work. A devoted wife and mother of two, Ayesha has invested deeply in the life she has constructed for herself and her family, one of order, comfort and considerable complacency. This is now threatened as her husband Aarif, who is a middle-level civil servant in an influential ministry, is found out in a wrongful contract deal involving a fellow-Muslim, and is served a suspension order. Ayesha has to go to Bombay to petition her police commissioner uncle to use his influence to save her husband’s job, a mission fraught with embarrassment and difficulty. In alternating chapters Futehally describes the train journey which Ayesha shares with three other passengers in “C” compartment, and flashbacks to her family life.

Ayesha is an older Tahera. Not written in the first person, but fully focalized through Ayesha’s consciousness in the form of free indirect discourse, the authorial strategy allows greater irony towards Ayesha’s exquisite scruples and moral dilemmas. Faced with the kind of crisis that *Tara Lane* ends with, the Jamals are shown to be bent on survival at all costs. Futehally performs a difficult feat here between representing them as victims of communal persecution by obscurantist politicians and other opportunists, and as compromised beings themselves. Ayesha is older than Tahera, and she is subtly made to seem silly and over-protected though not incapable of taking action (of which the train journey is an important initiative).

The finest achievement of the novel is its social comedy, but of the kind that refuses easy class satire. The four occupants of the compartment are representative of the social diversity of contemporary India in terms of age, gender, language, region, background, profession, and attitude (though they are relatively homogeneous as to class as indicated by their occupation of shared space in the train, presumably a first-class compartment).¹⁰ It is the energy, enterprise, forthrightness and friendliness of the two young people, so different from her own diffidence that Ayesha registers most profoundly, even against the corruption that is incessantly present in politician and government official. The numerous others who invade the space of the train compartment, vendors, sweepers, conductors, beggars, give us a picture of the new India staging, as it were, “a thousand mutinies.” In this scenario of changed conditions, secularism is undoubtedly under threat. But it also seems inadequate in the form in which it had implicitly been acknowledged in the earlier book.¹¹ The happy ending is seen for what it is, the fortuitous resolution of individual predicament – but not, necessarily, of national salvation.

Futehally's novels and stories repeatedly turn to the paradigmatic encounter between two women across the chasm of class that Rashid Jahan explored so memorably in terms of the question of the “Other” in “Woh”. While Futehally owes something also to the social comedy and satire of such well-known stories as Katherine Mansfield's “A Cup of Tea” (in which charity is shown to have no chance at all against gendered sexual antagonism), she is too profoundly perplexed and concerned about such relations for irony to be the operative mode of the narrative. While Jahan explores the political conditions of possibility of egalitarianism and the terms of mutual recognition, Futehally identifies *responsibility* as the essentially ethical answer to social divisions. For both writers civility is at the heart of national reform and reconstruction.

Given the social milieu of Futehally's fiction, it is mistress and maidservant that most typically represent the cross-class relationship, giving *noblesse oblige* full play.¹² But in some of her later fiction she represents the more complex dynamics of the self seeking to know the other, attempts filled with questions of power, powerlessness, ignorance, fear and betrayal. Both the short story “The Interview” (1994) and *Reaching Bombay Central*, for instance, feature the female protagonist encountering women who are survivors of communal riots. No longer is it only the inequalities of wealth and privilege that one must learn how to resolve interpersonally but the violence, loss, suffering and pain that lie in the experience of the other. In “The Interview” Sunita, a journalist, is acutely conscious of the false position she is placed in as her professional curiosity and

her implied promises of help contaminate her genuine empathy for the victims she rounds up for interviews.

The novel represents the encounter differently. When Ayesha gets down briefly at a small station where the train stops she is surrounded by a horde of beggar women whom she is not able to get rid of in the usual way with a suitable donation. At this point she is rescued by the stationmaster who drives them off. She is torn between giving them money and obeying his instructions not to encourage them, and finally yields to his authority. It is only then that she learns that the women are refugees from a nearby camp, victims of “small riots” that didn’t make the national news. That the women are not the usual beggars that Ayesha knows how to handle “generously, or even in a lordly way” (83), is the key revelation. How will she deal with poor women whose demands are spoken with “harshness”, whose faces are “pitiless”? The unspoken fear that the attack provokes in her is subtly conveyed. The stationmaster bewails the problem: “For a month or so they gave no trouble. Now they have started to behave like this” (85). An impasse of this kind, the inevitable result of ignorance but also of the unknowable as such, can only be marked by silence. In the novel there is no further comment on or reference to this episode, which is seemingly exorbitant to the narrative. The narrative’s movement returns to *reaching* Bombay Central, the journey and the process through which Ayesha learns of an India beyond the confines of her family and immediate social milieu. In a situation that reflects such bewilderment and loss of social assurance *noblesse oblige* can no longer have any meaning left to it.

In Futehally’s last work, the posthumously published and incomplete novel *Frontiers* (2006), *noblesse oblige* understood as the responsibility of a ruling class towards the “governed” undergoes strenuous rethinking. Based on an actual event in a Delhi cinema house that occurred in 1997 (which has come to be known simply as the “Uphaar cinema tragedy”) in which fifty-nine people perished and many hundreds were injured in a fire when an electrical transformer burst in the building’s basement, the novel embarks on nothing less than an examination of the entire system from top to bottom, tracing the elaborate network of human corruption, callousness and greed that culminated in the catastrophe. Here “responsibility” is at stake in the quite different sense of fixing blame and identifying the source of the crime, only to find that everyone is complexly implicated in what might be called a *systemic failure*. The timid observation that Tahera makes in *Tara Lane*, “It would have been reassuring to learn that . . . a whole lot of people did what they were supposed to do,” takes on a very different resonance in this novel, as we see a whole lot of people equally

failing to do what they were supposed to do. A host of fire safety precautions are ignored and hundreds of lives are affected as a consequence. Futehally's most ambitious work by far, *Frontiers* also marks a major shift in her understanding of a society – and nation – that has lost its way.

VII.

I turn in conclusion to an account of the life and work of a woman who belonged to a generation younger than Futehally's – a post-Nehruvian generation let us call it – but from the same social stratum, the professional urban upper class that constitutes in India a ruling class. Her life is memorialized in a book written by her mother following her early and tragic death at the age of 33 along with her three-year-old daughter, both of them of mushroom poisoning. Oona Sharma (nee Mansingh) was the founder of Aarohi, an environmental NGO she set up in the small village of Satoli in the Kumaon hills in the Himalayas along with her husband, a doctor. They had lived there for five years pursuing their work in "integrated rural development" (as it is called in the jargon). At the time of her death Oona was deeply involved in a variety of projects involving the hill people and their livelihoods which were just beginning to bear fruit.

The NGO movement is a critique of government. But it is not entirely autonomous either, dependant as it is on outside funding, on the local bureaucracy, and on government sanctions. It places the activist therefore in the position of mediator or "facilitator", as Oona puts it, someone who helps to translate the requirements of the village people into practical goals, by drawing on the state's resources if necessary. This alliance between the people and the erstwhile ruling class shifts their relationship on to new ground.

Jasjit Mansingh's book is in large part an account of her own spiritual quest to find meaning in the deaths of her daughter and granddaughter, but alongside this it is also a painstaking attempt to construct a memoir of Oona through her letters, other people's impressions of her and her activities in Aarohi. Oona is not in any way "typical" of her generation – as an individual she was clearly an exceptional young woman – but she was not alone in her aspiration to strike out on a path different from the majority with more conventional ambitions (lives abroad in the west, affluent corporate jobs, success in professional careers); she was one of a group of college friends who were "idealists," if one wants a handy term.¹³ What strikes us in reading Oona's letters is a steadiness of purpose and the conviction that her work lay in development among the rural poor, attended though they are with questioning and

profound reflexivity: "I know where I want to go, what work I am going to do and am looking forward to it. The people I will be with I get along fine with. I will have a chance to experiment with tree growing, and environment education, and eventually Vidya and I want to specialize in trees and forest management through local institutions," she wrote (289). At another time, to a friend: "We *have* to preserve ourselves because only when we *have* can we give; when we know we can tell; when we do others can follow. As you say, we cannot afford to fail. Each one of us must be crusaders for this giant blind nation which is blundering on" (305). Oona Mansingh wanted, she said, "just to do what needs to be done, and be non-pretentious about it," but she knew very well that it would involve nothing less than a "moral revolution" (315).

A sentence like the following is likely to appear hubristic: "I don't think there is much chance that we can save the Himalayas, but I'm going to spend my life trying" (323). What gives Oona such certainty and direction? Her declaration combines a practical knowledge of limitations with a conviction of what needs to be done, matched by determination. It might be taken as a reflection of what Gramsci memorably prescribed if one wishes to "transform" the present, a combination of "pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will" (Gramsci 1973, 175).¹⁴ In the interests of space I must summarize a speculative answer. Oona's attitude and approach represent the point we have reached with an ethics of postcolonial citizenship (one that is also gendered). Not unlike in the case of a Vina Mazumdar, there is the felt pressure of "payback" for the privileges of education and affluence. But there are differences in the attitude towards the nation, even if it is similarly proprietorial and loyal. It has moved away from the earlier certitudes of state-led development, shifting instead to the people at the grassroots and necessitates *going to* them;¹⁵ it is an investment that attends to the tangible problems of land, mountains, forests – the environment – rather than the abstraction of the "nation"; a pedagogy that eschews the interventions of so-called "social reform"; and a perspective that is bound up with *global* agendas (that are simultaneously *local*) that displace the national.

This essay has traced a tenuous line of continuity in texts by women in India from the time of (anticipated) independence, through the 1990s to the present that identifies their persistent concern with an ethics of citizenship. It is an ethics that in my view is specific to *postcolonial* nationalism. Citizenly self-fashioning and praxis in these texts is predominantly conditioned by the protagonists' class and gender (and intermittently, communal) identity while reflecting also, I have tried to suggest, changes in political realignments in the nation. The relationship between the nation

and the women I have invoked, both fictional and real, is produced by these specific conjunctures. But they are not offered as typologies of female citizenship – fiction and memoir notably insist on singularity – although there is no denying that a certain sense of agency has been able to interrogate female/feminine passivity in the contrast between a Tahera and an earlier Rashid Jahan or a later Oona.¹⁶ The privileged mode of the literary is best able to show how closely self and history are interwoven.

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Notes

¹ The reference to Henry James might appear anomalous in this context, but it reflects the Anglophone tradition within which (a small portion of) literary production in India takes place (and the corresponding critical work in that field). The typical Jamesian heroine belongs to an upper class stratum and represents youth, privilege, and a highly developed ethical sensibility – a mix of innocence, idealism and intelligent curiosity. As well, sexuality is a significant if repressed component of the tension and anxiety apparent in the portrayal of the “femaleness” of James’s heroines.

² Please see note 1 for an explanation of this literary lineage.

³ For narratives set in other postcolonial contexts that reflect a similar perspective, see, for example: Anthony Appiah, 1992; Sara Suleri (1991).

⁴ For example, in 1921, Sarojini Naidu (1996), poet, prominent Congress nationalist, and one of Gandhi’s closest associates, wrote in a letter to her young daughter: “Remember that you have to help India to be free and the children of tomorrow to be free-born citizens of a free land. Therefore if you’re true to your country’s need you must recognize the responsibility of your Indian womanhood. . . . [F]reedom is the heaviest bondage in one sense—since it entails duties, responsibilities and opportunities from which slaves are immune . . . *Noblesse oblige!* And the ampler the liberty the narrower the right to do as one pleases. You have in you all the seeds of true greatness: be great my little child . . . but always remembering that you are a symbol of India” (Naidu, 157).

⁵ See, for an elaboration of this point, Sunder Rajan (2008), “Refusing Benevolence: Gandhi, Nehru and the Ethics of Postcolonial Relations.”

⁶ The figure of Nehru is an influential one in the fictions of Rushdie and the post-*Midnight’s Children* novelists, but a full discussion of the shapes of his influence would take us far afield here.

⁷ I am indebted to Gayatri Spivak’s (1992) use of “burden” in these two senses, in “The Burden of English,” 275.

⁸ Two landmark texts in feminist scholarship in this area are Kumari Jayawardene (1986), *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, and Radha Kumar (1993), *The History of Doing*.

⁹ Rashid Jahan was a doctor and an activist in the Indian Progressive Writers’ Association. “Woh” was included in a collection of Jahan’s writings

published in 1937, *Aurat aur digar Afsane va Drame (Woman and other Stories and Plays)*. The English translation appears in Tharu and Lalitha, eds. *Woman Writing in India*.

¹⁰ The train is acknowledged as one of the significant egalitarian public spaces opened up by modernity. But train travel divides people on board by the gradations of “class” according to varying degrees of comfort and cost. (Gandhi’s experience in South Africa of being thrown out of a first-class compartment reserved for whites famously inaugurated his political radicalism). In *Tara Lane*, when on exceptional occasions Tahera has to travel third class on the suburban train to go to college, the experience is very different from her usual first class journeys. The point is that even so-called “public” spaces can be discriminatory, or at least subtly hierarchical.

¹¹ Jayashree, Ayesha’s young fellow-traveller, comments cynically that the new government’s “secularism” is only a political ploy. “Now we will hear nothing but secularism,” she predicts (152).

¹² See for example, “Sharada”, “The Birthday Party” and “The First Rains”, in *Frontiers*.

¹³ A teacher at the college described them as an “unusual group,” “idealists, but not in a motheaten way” (305). “Oona was an idealist . . . from the very core of her being” (440).

¹⁴ I hasten to add, lest I seem to be myself idealizing Oona’s youthful idealism, that the NGO-isation of various social movements (among them the women’s movement) is the cause of much political unease among progressives in South Asia. The NGO sector is itself beset with problems both organizational and ideological, amply reflected in Oona’s own doubts and anxieties. I have focused on self and subjectivity at the expense of “objective” evaluations of outcome. The question of failure is an interesting one however that hovers over the account of Oona’s environmental work.

¹⁵ In Fanon’s (1976) resonant call, “We must join (the people) . . . in that fluctuating movement which they are just giving a shape to, and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called into question. Let there be no mistake about it; it is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come; and it is there that our souls are crystallized and that our perceptions and our lives are transfused with light” (182–183). Fanon’s revolutionary sentiments can be adapted without too much violence to other postcolonial reconstructive projects I hope.

¹⁶ It is possible that in tracking the ways in which these privileged women understood and appropriated the codes of *noblesse oblige* through the decades – moving from a questionable passive liberalism to a more participatory, patriotic sense of civic responsibility – I have unwittingly created an evolutionary narrative of the female/feminist citizenship of a certain class of women. The corrective is to take into account the circumstances—anti-colonial nationalism, left progressivism, Nehruvian secularism, developmentalism, globalization and environmentalism—in which their subjectivities took shape.

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