

## Subjectivity as a Void in *The Impressionist* by Hari Kunzru

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### Abstract

*This article reads the central character of Hari Kunzru's debut novel as a traveller within a discursively defined universe of colonialism and argues that the hybridity that forms the texture of his identity is not perceived by him as liberating, but rather as a stigma that he tries to conceal. Further, the article reads *The Impressionist* through the theories of Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler, who have both addressed the ways in which subjectivity arises as an effect of cultural, ethnic and gender performances. Finally, the paper will try to answer the question of whether the multiplicity of selves experienced and/or performed by the novel's protagonist can or cannot land him in happiness and freedom.*

*Keywords: Kunzru, Bhabha, mimicry, Butler, performance, subjectivity*

Hari Kunzru's debut novel *The Impressionist* positions uncertainty, the unknown and non-identity as the initial conditions of its main character's journey through life. Very early on in the text the theme of subjectivity is foreshadowed by a rather sinister description of Ronald Forrester, an Englishman and the father of the novel's main character, riding aimlessly through the tree-less and desolate landscape of South India: "And so he rides through the ravines, a khaki-clad vacancy, dreaming of trees and waiting for something, anything, to fill him up" (Kunzru 3). That "something, anything" takes shape of a woman, the rich and spoilt Indian girl Amrita, who accidentally crosses Forrester's way during a particularly violent monsoon in 1903. The result of their encounter is the conception of Pran Nath, the main protagonist of *The Impressionist* and one of the most elusive and mysterious characters one can meet in the world of fiction – elusive and mysterious to the point of being an unanswerable

question even to himself. As Amrita watches Forrester being swept away by the torrential rain, “heading downstream” (16), the reader of *The Impressionist* cannot help the feeling that the unknown into which Forrester’s unconscious body is now flowing can only give rise to a life that will completely lack substance and will be just another vacancy to be filled with ‘something, anything.’

Indeed, it can be said about Pran Nath, the child of the watery intercourse between Amrita and Forrester, that his very being is nothing but a perpetual process of becoming in which the boundaries of the self constantly shift in response to where in the world Pran finds himself and what kind of socio-political reality he lives in. However, this does not make him a common opportunist who puts on masques in order to profit from the changing circumstances of his life. Pran’s masques are not just superficial façades behind which his coherent essence lies untouched. His masques form the very texture of his existence. As Maya Jaggi explains in her review of *The Impressionist*: “Pran blurs categories in a world obsessed by classification. As a chameleon with a talent for mimicry, he ... is also a ghost, a creature of surface.” It is never fully transparent to what extent Pran’s masquerading is a conscious, volitional activity. This ambiguity largely contributes to the disruptive appeal of Hari Kunzru’s debut novel. The critic James Procter writes that “[Pran] survives, precariously, as an endlessly drifting impressionist, a new breed of mimic man” (64). The word “survive” from Procter’s quote is particularly apt for *The Impressionist*, because Pran’s varied identities seldom bring him tangible benefit apart from the right to live at all. Throughout the novel Pran Nath, who was born into a distinguished Indian family in Agra, takes on so many identities that his original name and status cease to signify anything. The nameless camel-riding nomad from the last page of the novel is in no immediate relation to the spoilt child from Agra. The only link that exists between the two is a linear third-person narration.

As outlined above, the tale begins with Pran’s impure, interracial conception during a monsoon in 1903 and ends with a bleak image of an anonymous traveller on a pointless journey through the desert: “For now the journey is everything. He has no thoughts of arriving anywhere. Tonight he will sleep under the enormous bowl of the sky. Tomorrow he will travel on” (Kunzru 481). One can only speculate that had Hari Kunzru chosen a less linear mode of narration and imbued his novel with flashbacks and anticipations, it would have been utterly impossible for the reader to make any connections between the different personalities that Pran gradually adopts. It is only the linear narration that makes it clear that Pran Nath, Rukhsana, Pretty Bobby, Jonathan Bridgeman and the traveller are one and the same person.

Hari Kunzru’s adoption of the omniscient mode of narration probably saves the reader a lot of confusion and could therefore be considered a narrative strategy that runs against the author’s goal, which is to interrogate essentialist accounts of subjectivity and the universal validity of grand narratives, but this view would miss the point completely. The linear and coherent third-person narration actually punctuates the unbridgeable gap between Pran’s different (and sometimes downright contradictory) versions of himself. Kunzru could easily have let his novel fork into a fragmentary multiplicity of narratives told by voices belonging to Pran’s diverse

selves. Such a narrative strategy would certainly have assured the reader that a single narrative cannot accommodate for Pran's paradoxical situation in the colonial world, but it would utterly have failed to creatively imagine the ways in which a multiplicity of narratives is commonly shaped into a coherent whole. The omniscient narrative voice also reflects the ways in which Pran pieces together the chaotic fragments of his life. So it happens that a very conventional mode of narration encourages the reader to ask a very unconventional question: What is a person?

This question arises not only from the detailed accounts of Pran's different identities, but also from the amount of attention the novel dedicates to the relationship between unity and multiplicity, coherence and fragmentation. From the start, the novel drops cryptic hints at the complexity of this relationship, sometimes through verbal derivatives of Eastern mysticism: "Fire and water. Earth and air. Meditate on these oppositions and reconcile them. Collapse them in on themselves, send them spiralling down a tunnel of blackness to re-emerge whole, one with the all, mere aspects of the great unity of things whose name is God" (6). The novel's obsession with these abstract issues later sublimates into a more concrete interest in the process of identity-formation and the forces that participate in the creation/imagination of the self. Consequently, it is Kunzru's treatment of the self and its formation in the late-colonial environment – geographical, socio-political and cultural – that will be the focal point of this article.

Thinking of a single sentence that would define *The Impressionist* in a nutshell, it would probably have to be: Everything is in perpetual flux. The flood in which Pran's father Ronald Forrester impregnates Amrita and then dies, carried away by the violent torrents, is the underlying metaphor of the whole novel, in which everything, including rivers, dunes and people's identities, is in perpetual motion: "Now there is nothing but a torrent of white water rushing down a mountain, and the future is contained in that water, suspended in it like the tree trunks and thick red mud it has swept off the hillside" (12). Pran Nath is conceived during the flood, in a cave that his white father Ronald Forrester perceives as a post-mortal landscape, and his life resembles a flood, where whole worlds (physical and mental) are mercilessly swept away in an instant, only to be replaced by new ones, equally vulnerable and inconsistent. The astrological reading penned by a distinguished astrologer at the point of Pran's birth says it all:

The chart was strange and frightening. The stars had contorted themselves, wrung themselves into a frightening shape. Their pattern of influences had no equilibrium. It was skewed towards passion and change. To the astrologer this distribution looked impossible. Forces tugged in all directions, the malefic qualities of the moon and Saturn auguring transmutations of every kind. It was a shape-shifting chart. A chart full of lies. [...] Clusters of possibilities formed, then fell apart. (26)

There is indeed no recognizable pattern in the chaos of Pran's life; he is "ill-starred" (27) from the outset. This fact, however, makes him an intriguing fictional character who weds the tragic and comic aspects of life. The power of creation of his own

sexual, ethnic and cultural identities is never firmly in Pran's hands, but he somehow manages to survive in the continuously drifting world into which he was born. Hari Kunzru himself does not hesitate to relate Pran to the long-established tradition of the picaresque novel, as he states in a 2005 interview:

I was writing in a picaresque form very consciously, with books in mind like *Tom Jones*, *Candide*... The central character is very much this type of hero – an outsider with a skewed pair of eyes looking on a crazy world. And, like the heroes of picaresque novels, he is something of a blank state; he lacks an identity. So, the colour of the book doesn't come out of any psychological depth to his character, but rather as he moves from set-piece scene to set-piece scene as the pageantry of empire plays out all around him. (Aldama 12)

The "set-piece scenes" Kunzru is talking about can all be read as variations on the topic of Empire. Pran was born in the early twentieth century, when the British Empire began to lose ground under its feet, but was still viewed as an essentially unshakable and everlasting institution, whose civilizing mission was still far from accomplished. The forces active in the machinery of colonialism, though, were worlds apart from the highest standards of morality and civilization that they supposedly upheld, and subjected the native populations to irreversible and often incomprehensible alterations of their lives and identities. Pran's multiple selves can thus be understood as insubstantial set pieces, shaped by forces far beyond his influence or understanding. All he can do is "suit the occasion" (Procter 64), but he does it perfectly:

The act of choosing a tie from the selection hanging inside his wardrobe door has a ritual quality to it. Spots or stripes. Who to be today. ... When he is talking to you, he seems to fall in with the rhythm of your voice. He will stand as you stand, making remarks that seem somehow tailored to your sense of humour. ... Bobby's [Pran's] capacity for mimicry helps in his work. He can reduce British Other Ranks to fits by imitating regional accents. ... Bobby deals in stereotypes, sharply drawn. (Kunzru 236, 37)

It is this "capacity for mimicry" that provides a direct link between Pran and the theoretical thought of Homi Bhabha, for whom the concept of mimicry presents the key to the fortress of the Empire. First, though, attention must be paid to Pran's journey towards utilization of this handy skill.

After the shocking discovery that he is actually a bastard child, born of a shameful interracial intercourse, Pran is expelled from his native house and forced to live among beggars in the street. The maid Anjali, who accompanied Amrita on her journey to her husband Amar Nath Razdan and who has known all along what passed between Amrita and Ronald Forrester on that journey, has finally broken the news. For Pran, a child used to the riches of an upper-caste household in Agra and

the devoted attention of his distinguished father and other family-members, maids, servants, teachers and envious neighbours, this new life of begging and starvation is obviously a bitter struggle.

As regards Pran's father Amar Nath Razdan (who, to Pran's woe, turns out to be his stepfather), his most haunting obsession in his otherwise very successful life is the fear of all kinds of pollution:

He is terrified of pollution. It is his main enemy, an adversary he battles daily through every aspect of his life. The maintenance of impermeable boundaries between himself and the world's filth has gradually come to take up most of his energy, time and love. (31)

When the city of Agra is afflicted by a plague epidemic, Amar Nath Razdan is mortally terrified by the shockingly identical colour of the faces of the dead of all races:

The first victim he sees is a street-dweller, laid out by the side of the road, surrounded by weeping relatives. The corpse's face is distorted, blue-black and swollen. Later, when ordinary systems of propriety have broken down, he sees a dying Englishwoman being carried out of one of the houses in the Civil Lines. Her face is the same blue-black colour, all distinction of race erased by the disease. The collapse of categories appals him almost as much as the fact of death itself. (33)

The fact of death is something that Amar Nath Razdan has to face soon afterwards, as he dies as one of the last victims of the epidemic. The sad truth that he learns just before his death is that there is no trace of his blood in the veins of his beloved son Pran Nath. After this, Pran is left altogether to himself, a motherless (his mother Amrita died at childbirth) and fatherless beggar-child, whose desperate banging on the doors of his native house meets with resolute silence.

From now on, Pran has to learn the hard way, and one of the first things he discovers is that his stepfather's obsession with clear-cut categories was but an ephemeral fad. The moment his fellow-beggar points him to "[his] own people" (44) becomes the turning point in Pran's life. Although his first encounter with the Anglo-Indian community of Agra ends with his head being smashed by a badminton racket in the hands of one of the members of the Agra Post and Telegraph Club, he realizes for the first time, though very dimly, that one's ethnic identity might only be a question of loyalty and convincing performance. This is what *The Impressionist* has to say about the "horrid blackie-whites" (Kunzru 46), reflecting in its tone the rather despondent mood in which little Pran momentarily finds himself:

The natives are devious, untrustworthy and prone to crime. Their lasciviousness is proverbial. What a contrast to Home, to the Northern rectitude of English ways and manners. They, the Anglo-Indian community, know where their loyalties lie. They know which side of themselves they favour. They wear their hats and read all they can of Home and avoid the sun like the plague, feeling pain with every production of melanin in their skin. (46-47)

The lesson Pran takes from his unfortunate encounter with the Anglo-Indians is that Englishness can be mimicked. But before he gets an opportunity to do that, he learns that gender boundaries are at least as loose as the ethnic ones.

As a child of the street, Pran can fall prey to all kinds of people; thus it happens that his next picaresque adventure is designed by a pair of eunuchs who keep him locked in a room for their nasty pleasures, suspended in constant intoxication in which his sense of the self, before it had a chance to take on a more solid pattern, melts irreversibly away:

Pran moving outwards from the centre, gathering momentum. Whoever might be in charge, it is certainly not him. 'Him', in fact, is fast becoming an issue. ... Nothing so coherent as a personality. Some kind of Being still happening in there, but nothing you could take hold of. ... You could think of it in cyclical terms. The endlessly repeated day of Brahman – before any act of creation the old world must be destroyed. Pran is now in pieces. A pile of Pran-rubble, ready for the next chance event to put it back together in a new order. (65)

This new order that forces itself onto the blankness that is Pran's consciousness is Rukhsana – Pran's new incarnation in which the boundaries between genders become very hazy indeed. In the Indian state of Fatehpur where he was sold, Pran finds himself under the command of the Khwaja-sara, the chief hijra of Fatehpur, a sexually ambiguous creature who claims that a mutability of sexes and selves is the precondition of absolute freedom. The lessons delivered by the Khwaja-sara teach Pran a lot more about the state of fluidity that constitutes his own life. However, while in Fatehpur, he also has a duty to perform – to play a "beautiful boy-girl" (87) for Major Privett-Clampe, the mighty and influential British Resident in Fatehpur. It is here that Pran, who is now called Rukhsana, gets some sense of the complexities and absurdities of the colonial situation, a sense that will gradually intensify and provide the backing for Pran's subsequent incarnations. Once again, he learns his political lessons the hard way. Hari Kunzru's satirical brilliance transpires in the passage that describes one of Major Privett-Clampe's night assaults on Pran:

His [Pran's] head has been pushed down into the dusty black bedclothes, so he cannot see the purple face of the man toiling behind him. He is aware, however, that the pounding is punctuated by the rhythm of buttock-slaps and regular full-throated hunting cries. As the Major's excitement mounts, "Tally-ho!" gives way to 'On! On! On!', and the bed groans with the effort of maintaining its structural integrity. Some may be tempted to view this as primarily a political situation. It is, after all, Pran's first direct contact with the machinery of imperial government. (98)

The abuse that Pran suffers at the hands of Major Privett-Clampe is depicted here as a quite transparent metaphor of the whole colonial situation. As a result of this abuse, Pran plunges even deeper into the ocean of selflessness and ambiguity from which still more of his mutable self-creations are to rise.

It would be a futile exercise to recount at this point the intricate paths and twists of Fate that lead Pran to his most desired incarnation – Jonathan Bridgeman, the ultimate English gentleman. Suffice it to say that he gradually learns more and more of colonial politics, and uses its inner contradictions for his own survival in the increasingly unstable world of contingent identities. His journey from Rukshana through Pretty Bobby to Jonathan Bridgeman is a truly picaresque affair in which British colonialism is illustrated as a farce, albeit a rather violent one (as Pran learns when passing through the ravaged Amritsar that has just felt the impact of the British rage).

As mentioned above, Pran's transformation into a rather too perfect English gentleman owes a great deal to his remarkable skill of mimicry. Pran mocks the whole colonial machinery by mimicking Englishness so accurately that his English sweetheart Astarte – a girl with a weakness for everything exotic – spurns him, because “you're the most English person I know” (417). Jonathan Bridgeman, Pran's masterpiece of self-fashioning, exists in a space between, described by Homi Bhabha as “an area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double” (Bhabha 86). What is also threatened by the impact of Pran's mimicry is the integrity of his English identity as such. Pran has overdone his Englishness so much that he seems too English even to the English themselves. When Astarte rejects him for this reason, Pran's Englishness starts crumbling:

When you have organized your life as a ladder (with, for example, something shining and white at the top, and sticky blackness at the bottom) there are consequences when someone kicks it away. Jonathan is in a state of collapse. ... This is what happens. This terrible blurring is what happens when boundaries are breached. Pigment leaks through the skin like ink through blotting paper. It becomes impossible to tell what is valuable and what is not. (417)

The effects that Pran's impersonations produce are politically subversive because they expose ethnic and cultural identities as mere sets of performances with no essence. As Bhabha puts it: “[Mimicry's] threat... comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’ in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no ‘itself’” (90). However, Pran hardly adopts a strategy to expose essences as performative. His only strategy is a survival strategy in a world obsessed with discriminatory identities. Pran, in other words, has no intentions of being a politically subversive element. Quite the contrary – as Jonathan Bridgeman, he turns into a most conventional English gentleman for whom interracial relationships and the Labour Party are anathema:

At the Union, his mouth dry, his fingers unconsciously fluttering around his tight collar, he stood up and began to speak about America, a speech which soon became about the West and then slid into the clash of colour and the tide of racial movement on the shores of humanity and whiteness whiteness whiteness until he realized what he was doing and sat down. (347)

This is a telling passage in the sense that it shows Pran as extremely uneasy about his English identity, which he knows to be just a painstakingly calibrated constellation of cultural performances and stereotypes. It clearly shows his survival politics to be the only strategy he has adopted. Last but not least, it shows that he lives on the verge of collapse, at a too short distance from destruction by the extremity with which he sticks to his Englishness. Interestingly though, what is really destroying him is colonial politics, the discourse of superior whiteness, to which his entire existence poses a threat. As James Procter writes in his review:

The novel seeks to evoke the anxieties and uncertainties of that historical period (the last days of the British Empire) through the neuroses of its characters, their obsession with order and hierarchy and their fear of impurity and contamination. ...The cross-dressing Pran who 'passes' for white and who is continuously reinventing himself to suit the occasion flies in the face of this carefully calibrated world. (Procter 63)

The central irony of the novel, an irony that is also a symptom of a deep racial trauma, is that even Pran, who easily crosses the lines of race, gender and class, finally – in his Jonathan Bridgeman impersonation – sticks to the hierarchical colonial system that his mimic skills hold up for ridicule. Even though he does so only in order to survive and secure his life in a relationship with a beautiful English girl, the irony of the whole situation is indeed politically subversive, probably even more subversive than if he were mocking the colonial mentality and its distribution around the globe for political reasons. The identity effects that Pran's mimicry produces indeed "fly in the face of this carefully calibrated world" because they undermine the viability of colonial politics and expose its weaknesses.

According to Homi Bhabha, mimicry poses a threat for the Empire, because it "conceals no presence or identity behind its mask" (88). *The Impressionist* explicitly makes this point soon after Pran's English world collapses under the impact of Astarte's rejection of him. Watching a nameless cabaret-actor, Pran (Jonathan) is deeply unsettled:

He cannot take his eyes away from the man. One after the other, characters appear. One with a deep baritone voice. Another with a little cap and a hectoring way of talking. Each lasts a few seconds, a minute. Each erases the last. The man becomes these other people so completely that nothing of his own is visible. A coldness starts to rise in Jonathan's gut, cutting through the vodka. He watches intently, praying that he is wrong, that he has missed something. There is no escaping it. In between each impression, just at the moment when one person falls away and the next has yet to take possession, the impressionist is completely blank. There is nothing there at all. (419)

What unsettles Jonathan about this mimic man is, of course, the fact that he is staging his own life. The blankness in between each impersonation is what he would

find should he lose this last masterpiece of his self-inventions – his neat Englishness. Yet again, for Homi Bhabha this blankness behind would constitute the most potent political weapon. The state of no essence and no self is what blows apart a political system obsessed with distinctive boundaries and essences. At the end of the day, even for Pran, it is this ultimate vacancy and blankness that enables him to invent his multiple selves. But to his horror, watching the mimic man in the cabaret, he realizes that he will never be able to really take roots in any of these selves.

Trying hard to inconspicuously fit into the fast-changing circumstances that engulf him, “Pran survives by becoming a space for others’ projections, a performative surface,” says Bharat Tandon in his review of *The Impressionist*. There is indeed no depth to Pran’s many personalities; they are all but fragile bundles of performative acts. Borrowing Bharat Tandon’s imagery, we could say that Pran’s body functions merely as a screen on which various cultural stereotypes are projected and which he subsequently acts out. Having filled the clothes of the real Jonathan Bridgeman, Pran/Jonathan creates his English self by tipping his hat to passers-by, systematizing his daily routine and “sleeping under the hand-coloured image of George V, resisting the temptation to pray to it, to ask the jutting tinted beard to point him on the path to selfhood” (300). Inventing all of his many selves in the same way – based on a conscious performance of stereotypes – Pran cannot live otherwise than as a depthless spectre: “Bobby is a ghost, haunting thresholds, pools of electric light. He hovers at the limit of perception, materializing in his collar and tie like someone only semi-real, ethereal enough to trust with your secrets, safe in the knowledge that he would melt in the direct sunlight” (237).

It is the unpleasant secret of his birth, unacceptable by both poles of the colonial axis, by the rulers and the ruled alike, that sends Pran rolling on his bizarre journey through life. It is the world obsessed with essences and hierarchies that determines Pran’s existence in a permanent state of becoming without a single moment of pure being. Thus it is the oppressive colonial discourse that paradoxically liberates Pran from rigid conceptions of subjectivity or ethnicity. Pran, however, does not feel liberated at all and would prefer to settle down in a solid and immutable selfhood. For him the knowledge that identity is performative is by no means liberating, because he has been forced to it by stifling colonial politics that would not accept any kind of pollution, contamination or blurring of boundaries. Nor does he feel particularly enthralled when he is lectured on the numerous possibilities of his boy-girl Rukshana incarnation:

You may think you are singular. You may think you are incapable of change. But we are all as mutable as the air! Release yourself, release your body and you can be a myriad! An army! There are no names for it, Rukshana. Names are just the foolishness of language, which is a bigger kind of foolishness than most. Why try to stop a river? Why try to freeze a cloud? (82)

The lecturer is Kwaja-sara, who even contemplates castration for Pran in order to rid him of “the tyranny of your sex” and “open the door to an infinity of bodies, a

wonderful infinity of sexes” (82). The words of Kwaja-sara can easily be read as a different version of the following statement by Judith Butler:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (192–93)

Pran actually takes Kwaja-sara’s (and indirectly, Butler’s) words to heart and suffuses his subsequent existence with endless mutability as he changes from one person to another with river-like ease. His permanently selfless state of mind, the terrifying vacancy that he beholds during the revealing cabaret performance, is another confirmation of Butler’s contemplations:

Gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalised; ‘the internal’ is a surface of signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a ‘ground’ will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration. . . . The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional discontinuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this ‘ground’. (192)

Pran’s life is also exposed as a long series of performances by the following passage from the novel, revealing his Englishness as a narrative performance:

The point is to tell them a story. Any story will do, so long as it is English. Or rather about *being* English. Hello, my name is Walker, Peter Walker. John Johnson. Clive Smith. David Best but call me Bestie. Everybody does. I work for a petroleum company. A rubber company. The school board. A department store. I’m here visiting my cousin. An old school friend. And you? The thing is, they believe him. They hear an accent and see a face and a set of clothes, and put them together into a person. (Kunzru 245)

But once again, Pran’s knowledge of the performative character of all grounds, a knowledge that he craftily uses for his self-inventions and fooling of others, is not experienced by him as liberating. In this sense, he denies all that has been written by Butler and Bhabha, or pronounced by the Kwaja-sara. The only goal Pran has in mind is to create a substantial English self in order to live comfortably. It is of no consequence to the elusive hero of *The Impressionist* that this would mean complying with the hierarchical system he has been mocking all along by the very manner of his climbing up the social ladder.

It is only after his beloved Astarte rejects him for being too English that his dream of a solid and comfortable selfhood eventually falls apart. He calls the girl Star, and the confusing astrological chart predicting his unpredictable existence would certainly have featured Star as the star of doom. For it is through the relationship with Astarte that Pran/Jonathan becomes acquainted with his nemesis – Astarte’s father, Professor Chapel – a leading expert on the culture of the Fotse, “who live in a remote and inaccessible part of West Africa” (363). The fate of Jonathan Bridgeman, the Oxford undergraduate and the perfect English gentleman, is sealed at the instant Professor Chapel asks him to join his expedition to Fotseland. Already in the early stages of this ill-fated expedition, Pran/Jonathan feels that the carefully drawn borders of his English self are melting like sugar:

His boundaries have dissolved altogether and he is lost, or perhaps not so much lost as dispersed through the darkness, his turning world bereft of still points, radically uncertain about who or where he is, or even whether he has the right to call himself a he at all. (443)

This state of mind is obviously deeply unsettling for Pran, and marks the first stage of his rebirth into a nomad, a mode of existence that best suits the vacancy and blankness beyond his many selves. At one point during the expedition, Pran comes to a very clear understanding of his life as an endless process of becoming:

Becoming someone else is just a question of changing tailor and remembering to touch the bottom lip to the ridge of teeth above. Easy, except when that becoming is involuntary, when fingers lose their grip and the panic sets in that nothing will stop the slide. Then becoming is flight, running knowing that stopping will be worse because then the suspicion will surface again that there is *no one running*. No one running. No one stopping. No one there at all. (463)

Thus Pran re-experiences the existential horror of knowing (this time for certain) that behind the masks of his self-inventions, there is “no one there at all.” The total dissolution of Pran/Jonathan’s personality cannot be very far away.

In the hands of the Fotse healers, who are drawing the European spirit out of his body (while the Fotse warriors are eviscerating all other members of the expedition), Pran finally disintegrates into fragments:

He can feel the spirit begin to loosen its grip. Florid and rapacious, it tugs at his organs, destroying the integrity of his body and sending pieces of it flying in all direction, gobbets of flesh that stream away in bloody rivers. As he is pulled apart, the world is pulled apart with him and he screams again, because without anything to screen it reality is unbearable and he is an abyss, and the thing he thought was himself is plucked out and flung away, leaving only a nightmare, a monstrous disorder. (477)

This painful healing ritual can be read as Pran's initiation into a universe where terms like essence, substance or subjectivity no longer exist and signify nothing. Out of the "monstrous disorder" a nameless nomad is born, liberated from all ties to identity or territory:

His camel casts a jaundiced eye on him, and as he walks beside it he is careful to keep out of the way of its legs. Together they trudge up the gentle windward slopes of the dunes, sliding down each leeward face in an ankle-deep cascade of sand. (481)

The ending of the novel leaves open the question of whether Pran has finally found happiness and freedom in his nomadic existence. On one reading, he has. Free to roam the deterritorialized world, he is liberated from the colonial discourse that has enunciated his whole existence. Being a vacancy, a nobody, he is – for the first time in his life – himself. Yet the bleak tone of the last quotation, speaking of a jaundiced camel and endlessly rolling dunes, may be pointing to a quite different kind of vacancy – to the meaningless emptiness that awaits all who refuse to put down roots in one particular kind of subjectivity or who (as in Pran/Jonathan's case) are prevented by external circumstances from doing so.

As we have seen, *The Impressionist* is imbued with as many paradoxes and internal contradictions as the identity of its central character. Using the theories of Bhabha and Butler, this paper has tried to raise a question the novel itself – at least on first reading – seems to be completely quiet about: Can the notion of a decentred, free-floating and performative character of human subjectivity, celebrated by so much poststructuralist and postcolonial theory as a liberation from absolutist discourses, be – under certain circumstances – perceived as an unbearable burden? Even though whole passages of *The Impressionist* would seem to applaud the liberatory potential of groundless subjectivity, a more careful reading of the text will justify answering the question above with an emphatic Yes.

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