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Patchwork Quilts, Trade Routes and Other (Inter-) Networks: Reflections on Literature and Globalization

John Thieme

A few years ago, travelling into the southern *ghats* region of India, I fantasized that I was going into a landscape that had more or less escaped the West's tentacles; despite repeated lessons in resisting essentialist constructions of cultures, I still harboured thoughts that I had crossed some kind of threshold and was entering an "authentic" world, largely untouched by outside forces. Disillusion, predictably, came swiftly, not only in evidence of the residual legacy of colonialism – Indianized "Anglican" churches; advertisements for English-language tuition – but also in the form of signs that globalization had penetrated even the most remote rural villages of the region, a majority of which boasted their own IDD booth. The most memorable image I brought away with me was that of a reputedly dumb boy, perhaps ten years old, imitating Michael Jackson's "moonwalk": a subaltern who apparently could not speak and yet had slipped, seemingly effortlessly, into mimicry of the pop culture beamed around the world by the global media networks. Perhaps there are populations in the famine-torn regions of the horn of Africa who exist outside the sway of global discourses, but then, if such peoples have so much as heard rumours of the international aid agencies, let alone become beneficiaries of their work, then their lives too have been touched by globalization.

Yet, simply to lump all the forms of transnational contact that characterize late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century life together as forms of globalization runs the risk of obscuring the multiplicity of ways in which the term is used, as well as occluding the local specifics of the social contexts in which it is deployed. "Globalization" has become one of those buzzwords, like "hybridity" and "post-colonialism," that occurs in so many contexts that one might be excused for thinking that, like earlier Western metanarratives, such as the Bible, it has come to mean all things to all peo-

ple. To take extreme examples: for some, like the recent Gothenburg protesters or the London Mayday rioters, it is the demonic power of the multi-nationals' McDonaldization of the world; for others it is the utopian promise of the apparently egalitarian access to information offered by the Internet, which *could* be the greatest levelling agent yet seen on the planet. Of course, such a binary opposition is too stark to carry much credence: those newly empowered by the Web may well be eating Big Macs as they log on; the London anti-capitalist "anarchists" reputedly co-ordinated their activities using mobile phones; and the dispossessed in the horn of Africa lack access to food for both body *and* mind. So arguably the supposed enfranchisement of globalization has simply altered the repertory of power players, both between and within countries, as the traditionally disempowered have in some cases been promoted to play leading roles, while others remain consigned to await a call to play walk-on parts. Continuing the dramatic metaphor, one might say that Godot has arrived for most of the inhabitants of Southeast Asia, but few in sub-Saharan Africa have been admitted into the realms of the information-elect. Similarly, within Western societies, where access to the new technology seems more evenly distributed, age, despite the phenomenon of "silver surfers," senior citizens with enough time on their hands to make the Web both a hobby and a source for finding bargains, has meant that comparatively few octogenarians and nonagenarians have become computer buffs. In short, there are new classes of "haves" and "have-nots"; social inclusion and exclusion are shaped by different factors in an era when the time-worn adage that "knowledge is power" assumes new urgency, as information vies with wealth as a source of empowerment.

This may seem to have comparatively little to do with literary studies, but I hope to demonstrate that recent decades have seen similar shifts in literary hegemonies, so that, while globalization is nothing new, its emergence as one of the dominant discourses of the contemporary world has redistributed power relations, particularly with regard to ways in which publishers, readers, critics, academics and, last but not least, writers conceive of the frameworks that shape writing and reading practices. Within academe these frameworks mainly relate to the canon and I will discuss this, but I should also like to cast the net wider and consider how globalization has affected literary production and consumption more generally. My main focus will be on the way in which a concentration on national literary traditions is being supplanted by an emphasis on international cross-currents.

One version of literary globalization constructs it as transnational writing as a force which has deconstructed former binaries such as that between

colonizer and colonized (George 3) and certainly the new canon of “English” literary studies ranges far and wide, privileging writers such as Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood and J.M. Coetzee in a manner once reserved for Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. So one way of viewing the globalization of “English” literary studies is to see it simply as involving the internationalization of the canon and parallel frameworks that determine literary production, a movement which can only be commended and yet is not without demerits as well as merits. While it has destroyed the parochialism of a British- or, worse still, an English-centred model of “English studies” in favour of an inclusive approach that accords equal attention to anglophone writing from various parts of the globe, irrespective of its provenance, the new globalized canon has tended to favour a certain kind of “international” literature: writing particularly concerned with migration, diaspora and hybridity. At the start of the new millennium, writers such as Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Timothy Mo, Kazuo Ishiguro, Michael Ondaatje and Maxine Hong Kingston have become the cornerstones of a new canon, which promotes hybridity over situatedness. One might want to say, rightly so, given the excellence of their work and the representativeness of the migrant as a late twentieth-century and early twentieth-first-century protagonist, but the corollary is an approach that militates against the reading and discussion of writers who have “stayed put,” who have not come to the attention of international publishing houses and whose concerns minister less obviously to the globalized discourse of culture in transit. At its worst, the vogue for cross-cultural and extra-territorial transnational writing can be viewed as a form of literary tourism, which itself operates in *exclusive* ways, by privileging the nomadic dimensions of texts and thereby creating a comfortable interstitial site for the Western or Westernized global reader.

I will return to this subject briefly, but rather than succumb to the temptation of discussing the pros and cons of literary globalization at length – and as someone who has spent most of his career arguing for the expansion of the canon and the inclusion of writers around the world, I *do* finally think that the gains far outweigh the losses – I would like simply to accept the actuality of globalization and focus on *how* it is operating. So my endeavour is to suggest possible ways in which we may characterize literary globalization. To do this, I will endeavour to locate the internationalization of writing in relation to earlier national contexts for literary studies and culture more generally. Specifically, I hope to do two things: first, briefly to discuss aspects of the rise of national consciousness in relation to Benedict Anderson’s influential work on the subject, suggesting some possible implications of

Anderson's work for the rise of English studies; second, I will examine some of the metaphors that have been employed in North American multicultural contexts in the construction of non-essentialist national cultural paradigms.¹ In so doing, my aim is to assess the possible appropriateness of redeploying such paradigms in the narrativization of a global model for literary studies. As a way of bringing these issues together, I will look at work by the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, which suggest linkages between several of the areas I am discussing.

Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* demonstrates fairly convincingly that national consciousness, as understood in the modern world, was not only a cultural artefact produced at a particular moment in history from the complex intersection of a range of forces, but also, as a fairly recent arrival on the European scene in the late eighteenth century,² something of an anomaly in the longer history of Western culture. If we take the view that nationalism is currently being supplanted by globalization, as multinational and transnational economic forces appropriate the roles characteristically occupied by nation-states within the last two hundred years, then its period of hegemony seems particularly short-lived, even if it was a period that reshaped the map of the world in a hitherto unprecedented way, particularly as a result of imperialism. The time when Britons could proudly claim that a third of the map of the world was coloured pink is not so very far back, after all, and, as Said has argued fairly exhaustively, the imperialist ethic was promoted as much through culture as the exercise of political power. But how exactly did the study of English literature take shape, given that it was not a university subject until the mid-nineteenth century and that, if Anderson is right, nationalism in the sense in which we have come to understand it, is a formation that, *pace* texts such as *Henry V*, has a very recent provenance?

Clearly for Augustan authors such as Pope and Swift, English writing needed to take its place on the bookshelves alongside the Greek and Latin classics and so, far from having a discrete identity, it was part of an imagined community of Western literature. Earlier Shakespeare's use of southern European locations suggests a vision of the porousness of national identity

¹ During the SAUTE Conference in St Gallen in June 2001, my use of the term "paradigm" in this context was questioned and so perhaps it is necessary to point out that I am not intending it in the specialist linguistic sense, but in the second of the two ways identified in McArthur, ed.: "In general usage, a model or stereotype, as in the phrase *a paradigm case*, a typical specimen of something" (747).

² Anderson dates its emergence in "Creole" Hispanic American societies earlier (*Imagined Communities*, Chapter 3).

that allowed him to reinvent towns such as Athens, Venice and Verona with an unself-consciously proprietorial English inflection. On the evidence of *The Tempest*, where Milan is seen as a seaport, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which has a journey from Verona to Milan being undertaken by sea,³ it seems clear that he had little interest in the “real” geography of southern Europe,⁴ but nevertheless his “Europe” appears to be predicated on the sense of a commonality of belonging that makes him seem altogether more pro-European than many of the U.K.’s current politicians. Again, then, it can be argued that Shakespeare implicitly propounds an imagined pan-European community. If it is not exactly global, it is largely innocent of later, post-Enlightenment, attitudes towards the sovereignty of national frontiers.

In Anderson’s view, the sea change that ushered in modern nationalism came about as a product of the convergence of the rise of capitalism, the new print technology and the fixity that this technology gave to vernacular languages, which eroded the power of Latin as a scribal *lingua franca*. Applying these factors in literary contexts and allowing for the time it took for changes in modes of communication and other forms of cultural exchange that began in the Renaissance to permeate people’s day-to-day lives, they suggest the groundwork was being laid for the birth of the novel, a genre whose rise coincides with Anderson’s dating of the emergence of nationalism as we know it. Moreover, the novel’s period of ascendancy roughly corresponds to the period of nationalism’s hegemony, if we take the view that, although the genre continues to flourish, as a print-based form it has lost ground to the new visual, audio and interactive media, at much the same time as nationalism has been replaced by transnational corporations and agencies.

My suggestion is, then, that the rise of a sense of the “Englishness” of English literature (and parallels could be drawn with other European literatures, though dates will vary and the prior establishment of the Académie Française to fix language usage suggests a slightly earlier chronology for France in particular) coincides with the rise of the novel as a middle-class alternative to the aristocratic line of neo-classicists such as Pope and Swift. Their work arguably belongs to a longer, more eclectic European tradition,

³ See *Tempest*, 1.2 144 and Kermode’s note to this line in the 2nd Arden edn.

⁴ *The Merchant of Venice* is a notable exception. The play’s Venice is no never-never land, but rather a fulcrum for the exploration of social changes occasioned by the contemporary mercantile culture; and something of this atmosphere informs the representation of the city in *Othello*.

albeit one that within its own day was frequently associated with partisan Tory interests. This sense of the “Englishness” of English literature was at its height among writers and readers in the nineteenth century, particularly in the late Victorian heyday of Empire. Where writing itself was concerned, it began to dissolve rapidly during the Modernist era – at a time when the development of the discipline of English literature as a university subject was solidifying.

As David Palmer has shown, English was originally introduced into the university curriculum at London University in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. More or less simultaneously with this, it made an appearance among the subjects studied at working men’s institutes, as a field that it was felt would have the utilitarian function of providing the masses with a moral education. As a university subject it appears to have surfaced at the “godless Institution” (quoted by Palmer 18) of University College, which was founded in 1828 and, convinced of the utilitarian benefits of language teaching, appointed a Professor of English *Language* and Literature, while its rival, King’s College, an institution founded by Anglican and Tory interests which opened three years later, adopted a less utilitarian approach in establishing a Chair of English Literature and History (Palmer 16-18). In their different ways, though, the two rivals both saw English as a means of disseminating a particular version of cultural history. Queen’s College, an offshoot of London’s King’s College, established for the education of women, also played an important part in the early shaping of English studies and in his introductory lecture there, no less a light than Charles Kingsley spoke of literature as a discipline that would equip women for *their* allotted role in life, while also referring to it as part of “the autobiography of a nation” (Palmer 39). So the emergence of the subject as a university discipline was again linked with a nationalist impulse, while also contributing to the more specific project of channelling the energies of intelligent women, in much the same way, if we are to believe the Marxist reading of nineteenth-century sport, as organized games became a means of directing the aspirations of both the middle classes and the emerging industrialized proletariat (James 160ff.). English, then, makes its academic *début* as a subject to be studied by women and mechanics. As Terry Eagleton puts it, it was “literally the poor man’s Classics” (27); and its “‘softening and humanizing’ effects” (27) also made it “a convenient sort of non-subject to palm off on the ladies” (28).

Battles in the culture wars of the late nineteenth century were fought over the relative merits of teaching English and classical literature, but in the early twentieth century Greek and Latin began to lose ground to the parvenu younger sister of English literature, which secured converts across gender and class lines. The curriculum still nodded towards the Classics – the classical background to English literature remained a London paper until the 1960s – but the basic parameters established for the study of literature were historically and nationally determined. The canon that emerged offered a supposedly definitive account of *English literary history*, creating an imagined community of academic readers, in which women characteristically had to interpellate themselves as men,⁵ working-class students had to resocialize themselves as middle-class and the linear development of both the literature and the language formed the cornerstone of study. In short, a national artefact was created, which, although it offered limited scope for internal debates, such as the challenge of Leavisism, constructed a very particular version of what English literature and language were. As an undergraduate in London in the 1960s, I took eight compulsory papers, which involved a historical progression through English literature and language from the Anglo-Saxon period to 1880. Even the one “modern” *option* I studied stopped in 1930. A safe historical distance was interposed between student and object of study and the paradigm that was followed was historically determined. So, although the writing one studied inevitably raised questions about spatial dislocation, translation and cultural connections, the model privileged temporal development; and the emphasis on the interaction of time and space, advanced by cultural theorists such as Michel Foucault and postmodern geographers such as Edward Soja would have been anathema.

This, of course, provided the trigger for the culture wars of the late 1960s and the 1970s, which took particularly virulent form in the United States, where the canonical importance of “Dead White Males,” both English and American, was challenged by many of the members of a generation that was keenly aware of the disjunction between the literature it was reading and the society in which it was living. Space precludes my examining the shaping of the American canon in the way that I have discussed what happened in England. Suffice it to say that a nationalist impulse, which had roots in both the Puritan and Frontier traditions that had been central to the shaping of a

⁵ Eagleton points out that Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, the first Professor of English at Cambridge, characteristically began his lectures with the word “Gentlemen,” though the majority of his audience was female (28); and, of course, the use of the male pronoun to refer to the reader remained the norm until just a generation ago.

sense of American consciousness in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, had instated a canon of primarily male American authors – Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Twain, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner – to stand alongside the “greats” of English literature. Suddenly, though, the academy was faced with a situation in which the right of such authors to represent Americanness, not to mention the relevance of studying writers such as Spenser and Milton, was fiercely disputed. Although such conflicts were by no means exclusive to America, it is perhaps no coincidence that a discipline that had institutionalized a nationalist/historicist model became a particular flashpoint for acrimonious debates there, given Uncle Sam’s highly developed sense of a unifying national consciousness on the one hand and the hybrid, multicultural nature of the population on the other. So the constitution of the literary canon could be seen to raise issues that had a bearing on the nature and the future direction of American society.

This is why I have chosen to focus on North American cultural paradigms as prisms for considering *how* globalization may be seen as operating. At the risk of suggesting that America is the world in microcosm – and I do not for one moment mean to suggest this, though clearly the view that globalization can be equated with coca-colonization promotes such a belief – I should like to suggest that a comparison of three influential North American paradigms offers a useful optic through which to view globalization. The paradigms in question are the melting pot, the mosaic and the patchwork quilt. The first has, of course, been particularly associated with the shaping of American identity. Popularized by an English Jewish author, Israel Zangwill,⁶ who used it, in the title of a 1908 play, to refer to the experience of migrating to America, it is a phrase that has come to epitomize the American ideal of assimilation, the promise that all migrants can share in the American Dream, by virtue of reforging their identity in the New World crucible. The success of Jewish actors and directors in Hollywood and the American media more generally attests to the viability of this possibility for Zangwill’s own ethnic group: the all-American Doris Day was née Doris Kappelhoff; Tony Curtis was born Bernard Schwarz; Bob Dylan was originally Robert Zimmerman. One could go on. However, whether the melting pot ideal has worked equally well for other groups is, of course, open to question – and

⁶ Zangwill did not, however, coin the phrase. In the middle of the nineteenth century Emerson had used “smelting pt” [sic] in his *Journals* and Theodore Poesche and Charles Goepp described America as “the crucible in which European, Asiatic, and African nationalities and peculiarities are smelted into unity.” Earlier de Crèvecoeur had put forward the idea that individuals “melted” together to create a new American. German immigrants appear to have used the term “Schmelztiegel” (“melting pot”) from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.

beyond the scope of this paper. My purpose is simply to advance it as one way in which cross-cultural transformation can be seen to operate: as a process of assimilation. The melting pot offers a model in which the "original" identity of the subject (and "originary" versions of migrant identity are at best crudely reductive, given the hybrid, translated condition of diasporic relocation) is cremated, so that the subject can be reincarnated as a born-again American. This suggests an irresistible nationalist discourse, which erodes traces of "other" subjectivities, but in doing so arguably offers individuals access to democratic opportunities that would otherwise usually be denied them. It has become an increasingly dated model of American identity, but nevertheless it held sway for most of the twentieth century. Applying it to globalization, it suggests a discursive universe in which individual identities are subsumed in a collective, now supra-national, crucible that offers access, equality and opportunity to everyone. If one is inclined to be cynical and to suggest that such inclusivity is capitalist-driven and American-dominated, one needs to remember that globalization, and its most obvious, albeit virtual, manifestation, the Internet, are many-headed beasts. Wanting to trace the provenance of the popularization of the phrase "melting pot" took me seconds through the Web, although going further and spending minutes on the subject also led to the discovery of a claim that Israel Zangwill was an ardent Zionist, who "advocated the ethnic cleansing of Arabs from Palestine" ("Maguire"). *Perhaps* this suggests that a quick look at the melting pot suggests inclusivity, but closer scrutiny suggests the opposite. Certainly it demonstrates that, on one level, the global medium of the Internet operates through scattered traces of information that represent contradictory positions on a topic that could be seen to have a self-referential relevance to its own identity.

But what are the implications for *literary* globalization? I think the melting pot model returns us to a situation in which international market forces become a primary determinant of what gets read, at least as far as traditional book publishing is concerned. It suggests that it is necessary to burn away local elements of identity in order to arise phoenix-like from the ashes, not as an all-American but as a citizen of the world; or, putting this in textual terms, to make a bonfire of regional or personal discursive specifics in order to speak a language (global English) and adhere to a set of conventions that are internationally recognizable. This may be over-simplifying, since cultural difference, particularly romantic or exotic difference, can be a significant part of the conventions: the tourist industries in Kerala and Kefalonia have been boosted by readers' desires to visit the *particular* locations

in which *The God of Small Things* and *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* are respectively set, but this in itself – and it is no comment on the quality of the novels themselves – is an appeal that in large part derives from the romantic fascination of alterity, marketed in an attractively packaged format.

Chinua Achebe's early novels of Ibo life might be said to represent an opposite pole, appearing as they originally did, a couple of generations back, in low-cost, cheap-paper editions, published by Heinemann in its African Writers Series, a series that was directed towards an African as well as an international readership. However, the real opposite pole is represented by writers whose work is never read internationally, because it is written in a minority language and/or deals with local themes that are not easily converted into international currency. Granted that no one is untouched by globalization, some writers appear to be more global than others; and the Heinemann African Writers Series offers an example of a significant shift in emphasis in an international publishing project. In the early 1980s, at a time when the hitherto lucrative Nigerian book market reputedly collapsed, the inexpensive paperback editions in which Achebe's early novels appeared, along with those of Ngugi, Buchi Emecheta, Ayi Kwei Armah and others, were replaced by "quality paperbacks." Prices trebled virtually overnight as the publishers decided to concentrate on non-African markets, leaving one doubting whether Achebe and the other writers mentioned would have become simultaneously available to African and international reading publics in the way they did, if they had been born into the next generation of African writers, which has been treated less kindly in global publishing markets.

Historically, of course, comparatively few publishers have been charitable institutions, but in the 1980s and 1990s, "consolidation" in the publishing industry saw many older firms swallowed up by the multinationals and this has exacerbated the extent to which literature has become a global marketable commodity. It has led, in Britain and the United States in particular, to the mass-market promotion of certain kinds of "serious" novels as best-sellers and to a greater emphasis on textbooks as opposed to "pure" academic monographs, with the consequence that it has become increasingly difficult for minority-interest creative writing and serious, non-student oriented academic texts to get published at all. The furore that surrounded the Ayatollah Khomeini's pronouncement of the *fatwa* against *The Satanic Verses* has eclipsed another controversy that surrounded the book when it first appeared. Viking's decision to promote it as a blockbuster, to market a "serious" novel in a manner previously reserved for more popular genres such as romantic fiction, allegedly giving Rushdie a seven-figure sterling

advance in the process, attracted a good deal of comment in the British broadsheets and their magazine supplements at the time of the novel's actual publication. So there is the irony that the reception of a text that was promoted as an international bestseller should have pointed up fissures in the one-world rhetoric of globalization in such a spectacular way. Unsurprisingly, the melting pot model of globalization clearly offered few attractions to Islamic revivalists.

The mosaic paradigm has been used particularly in Canada, which pioneered multicultural policy initiatives in the early 1970s, first through federal and then through provincial legislation. In 1971, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau reasserted the country's commitment to *bilingualism*, while insisting that *biculturalism* – privileging the English and French strands in the Canadian heritage – was no longer sustainable in a demographically plural society. "Multiculturalism" is a term that clearly carries a range of connotations: it can refer to an actual situation of social pluralism, to an ideal to be worked towards and to public policy initiatives. Both the melting pot and the mosaic had earlier been used as metaphors for Canada's pluralism and both can also be seen as expressive of aspirations as well as empirical accounts of the social "reality" of the nation's demographic composition. Thirty years ago, the mosaic paradigm seemed to offer reassurance to minority ethnic groups, at a time when public discourse had appeared to be privileging the cultures of the majority English- and French-Canadian communities at their expense. It offers a model in which society is viewed as a complex construct of small pieces, each deserving to be valued in its own right, without needing to be subsumed in a larger national pattern that erodes ethnic and other forms of distinctiveness. Multicultural policies have been attacked, or mocked, by several more recent Canadian writers of Asian ancestry, among them Neil Bissoondath, Joy Kogawa and Rohinton Mistry,⁷ but as an ideal the mosaic paradigm appears to offer the opportunity to retain minority cultures within the overall national structure: each stone in a mosaic contributes to the overall design without being crushed to amalgamate with other parts of the fabric.

If one redeploys the mosaic metaphor in the context of globalization, the implications are fairly obvious. Reading globalization in this way, it becomes a complex composite of tiny pieces, in which the individual elements

⁷ See Bissoondath, Kogawa, and Mistry ("Squatter"); also Mukherjee (2-3) on Canada's hostility to visible minorities, as compared with what she sees as the more inclusive atmosphere to be found in the U.S.

are allowed to retain their distinctiveness without being thrown into a melting pot. However, this still predicates an ideal rather than an empirical reality, especially since cultures are not static, but always in process, and one of the charges levelled against Canadian multicultural policies has been that they privilege fixed, originary constructions of cultures, in which the "old country" is the object of nostalgic atavism. In short, the mosaic paradigm is anti-assimilationist and at its worst this can lead to ghettoization, as the smaller sections in the mosaic are relegated to the margins of the national design. Applying the model in a global context such as the Internet, one might say that it describes the situation in which small sites without commercial sponsorship co-exist alongside commercial giants such as Amazon and e-Bay, but receive comparatively few visitors. Applying it to literature and the economics of world publishing, it could be related to the fact that any book with an ISBN number is theoretically available, but small press books (such as those published by little-known West African presses) are often virtually unobtainable outside, and even within, the region where they are issued, unless they are promoted by international distribution networks. On the other hand, ghettoized small sites *are* still available on the Net and electronic publishing disseminates a broader amount of material than has been available at any time in human history.

The third paradigm I should like to consider, the patchwork quilt, might initially seem very similar to the mosaic, in that it suggests a composite comprised of small pieces, but it has a different provenance in that it has not traditionally been a national model for cultural identity. Its North American associations are with a distaff discourse. However, Elaine Showalter has argued that the patchwork has replaced the melting pot as the central metaphor of American cultural identity (quoted Rogerson 5). As such, it represents the emergence of a traditionally female paradigm of identity (Showalter 146ff.), as a collage of fragments that represents the need to adapt, make do, conserve and bond with other women (Showalter 148-50; Rogerson 5), as an alternative model for national identity, which disputes the homogenizing notion of uniformity implied in the melting pot model. Another aspect of contemporary patchwork has been the phenomenon of the AIDS quilt, which could also be seen to admit a marginalized group into the national discourse (Rogerson 5). From the point of view of literature, patchwork has provided the central organizing figure for a number of notable novels by women, among them Whitney Otto's *How to Make an American Quilt* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, in which each of the sections is headed by a particular quilt design and patchwork becomes a metaphor for both identity – par-

ticularly, but not exclusively, women's identity – and the composition of the novel itself, which on one level can be viewed as an album of different quilt designs. The novel's central revelation that the key to the mystery of whether its protagonist, the supposed murderess, Grace Marks, sometimes viewed as Canada's Lizzie Borden, is actually guilty lies in schizophrenia, her having temporarily assumed another identity, provides further striking evidence of the patchwork nature of identity that challenges the world-views of the various males who brand her as a hysteric.

The use of the trope of the patchwork quilt is not, however, confined to North America. It is also prominent in other literatures where the piecemeal, fragmentary composition of identity is foregrounded. Thus in India, in texts which propose a non-essentialist view of both personal and national identity, complementing this with textual structures that are a correlative of this, the patchwork is once again a central metaphor. Githa Hariharan describes her novels as patchwork quilts (20); and in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, where one of the characters imagines that "God is a giant quilt maker" (Mistry 340; quoted Morey 177), the various stories told by the four main characters are "stitched together into a quilt" (Morey 177). Again, Mistry's novel lends itself to interpretation as national allegory, as does Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, where the central organizing figure of the perforated sheet comes to stand not only for the fragmentation of personal and national identity, but also for India and the novel's technique, which Rushdie has referred to as "the world viewed in fragments" ("A Tall Story").

I will return to the patchwork and its possible appropriateness as a prism for interpreting globalization, but before concluding with this, I would like briefly to examine aspects of the work of Amitav Ghosh, which, as I mentioned, suggest connections between several of the areas I am discussing. Although Ghosh has displayed a distrust of interpretation, far in excess of the average writer's suspicions of critics, he began his career as a social anthropologist and, in my opinion, his work to date, fictional and non-fictional [significantly he blurs the boundaries between the two] represents a particularly distinctive contribution to the theorization of national and international identity. His most factual work to date, *In An Antique Land*, blends anthropology, travel-writing, cultural theory and fiction to produce a possible rather than a supposedly "authentic" account of subaltern history, which interrogates the notion that East and West were separate worlds in the medieval period, as the "I" narrator pursues the fugitive traces of an eleventh-century slave to be found in the letters of the Jewish merchant who was his master. Meanwhile, this narrator, an obvious Ghosh persona, since he is a

social anthropologist doing fieldwork in Egypt, discovers the migrant, unsettled nature of what he has taken to be settled, “authentic” cultures. Although the cultural interaction delineated cannot exactly be described as “global,” since it only involves movements between North Africa, Europe and Asia, it effectively erodes the idea that pre-modern national cultures, as characteristically represented in the West, were hermetically sealed. Ghosh’s novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* is more overtly fictive, but again it interweaves a network of traces – from the history of late nineteenth-century malaria research, theological movements generally deemed to be heretical in the West and slightly futuristic information technology *inter alia* – to provide the possibility of an alternative subaltern history, which exists in parallel with colonial history as an equally (or possibly more) potent epistemological system, albeit one which has traditionally operated through silence rather than articulation.⁸ Again, international – and in this case the word “global” clearly is appropriate – networks operate across conventionally drawn borders, both national frontiers and cognitive mappings.

Such interweaving has been central to Ghosh’s work from the outset. He wrote his Oxford doctorate on the history of weaving and the cloth trade between England and India in the nineteenth century and this topic fed into his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, which follows the fortunes of a young weaver who travels from his home village near Calcutta to work in the Gulf. The novel suggests that weaving is a diasporic activity, which transcends national boundaries and unites worlds which have habitually been viewed as separate, and in so doing it anticipates Ghosh’s later contention, in *In An Antique Land*, that the medieval trade-routes functioned as a mobile inter-continental network that was largely unaware of Western Oriental/Occidental bifurcations. In his second novel, *The Shadow Lines*, which is centered on the partition of Bengal, and also explores partition in a range of other contexts, weaving is less literally central, but, as Robert Dixon points out, it remains an “organizing figure” (9) in a text which challenges notions of the rootedness of place. Putting this another way, *The Shadow Lines* operates through a poetics of migrancy, radically unsettling essentialist conceptions of both nation and subjectivity. So too does *The Calcutta Chromosome*,

⁸ For a fuller discussion of this aspect of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, see my essay “The Discoverer Discovered.”

Ghosh's most powerful anthropological detective-story to date, in which the Web assumes much the same role as weaving in Ghosh's earlier work, functioning as a metonym for the interpenetration of cultures, which is central to all of Ghosh's writing.

Ghosh's emphasis is slightly different from Hariharan's and Mistry's – if not Rushdie's – in that while his India is clearly a patchwork, his emphasis on the interweaving of cultural strands transgresses the boundaries of the nation-state, as well as most conventional mappings of region, in which the Orientalist bifurcation of East and West is one of the most sharply drawn shadow lines. The evidence that he supplies in *In an Antique Land* lends particular support to Anderson's contention that the modern notion of the nation-state has no real precedent in earlier history. More interestingly still, his movement between weaving and the Web as metonyms for the way cultural traffic operates suggests the possible valency of reading globalization as a patchwork.

So is patchwork a more useful paradigm for the narrativization of globalization than the melting pot or the mosaic? Clearly all three models are possible. Again, I think, one needs to distinguish between empirical and idealized accounts. Macro-historical versions tend to dominate the historiography of culture as we move into the third millennium, but globalization has clearly resulted in more access to knowledge being available to more people, even if the gap between the information-elect and the information-preterite is a gaping one. The patchwork arguably brings together major and minor power-players, without insisting that the latter be melted down to form part of the dominant hegemony as in the case of the melting pot or, as in the case of the mosaic, perpetuating a model that ensures the twain will never meet. This is particularly so if one puts the emphasis on the *process* of stitching (or, as in Ghosh's case, weaving). The model of stitching pieces of fabric together into a whole allows for the co-existence of macro- and micro-histories and of movement between the two, which in turn reflects the extent to which cultures interpenetrate one another, bringing new formations into being in a process of constant mutation. Whether or not it corresponds to the empirical reality of globalization, it is perhaps the most satisfactory of the models as an ideal to aspire towards. Of course, all three metaphors need to be located within the two dominant signifiers of globalization: the Net and the Web. However, both of these are finally ambiguous: nets entrap but when they become internets they become constituencies of communal interest; webs catch small insects, but also suggest the fusion of cultural traditions, allowing for the possibility of new cultural formations. So reconfigur-

ing Net and Web as a patchwork seems to me the most satisfactory of the alternatives I have proposed. If I seem to have strayed from literature, then I would want to add that, as I have shown, it is a metaphor favoured by some of the finest writers from contemporary multicultural societies that are at the cutting edge of the contemporary predicament of globalization.

I began on a rather self-indulgent personal note; and I should like to end on one. About five years ago, my wife and I bought our own traditional American patchwork bedspread in the U.S. Or so it seemed. We imagined it as having been lovingly crafted by grandmothers in Vermont. Again, disillusion came swiftly. Taking it out of the packaging, we discovered that it was "made in Taiwan." Having survived the shock, half a decade later, I would like to think that this represents a kind of reverse economic colonization, in which a symbol of older American ways has been appropriated by an East Asian nation. At the very least it *ought* to represent the extent to which the Americanized global patchwork admits other elements. Unfortunately, though, this mainly operates to the benefit of Western consumers – possibly even my mythical grandmothers in Vermont, who are probably buying such patchworks themselves – and one worries that globalization is increasingly commodifying world literature in similar ways, admitting numerous strands into the patchwork, but doing so primarily, though not exclusively, for the benefit of Western readers. This said, the patchwork model does seem to allow for the possibility of changes in economic relations. Bangalore, India's I.T. boom city, processes Wall Street's transactions overnight: Indian writing in English has become one of the most significant growth industries in world literature in the two decades since the publication of *Midnight's Children* in 1981. Nevertheless, as the economic and literary maps of the world are redrawn, there are those who are in danger of being erased from them almost entirely.

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