



## Female subjectivities in postcolonial literature

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*If children's literature and the criticism of children's literature take upon themselves to decolonize the world, they will prove the most effective postcolonial project in the long run, for the world always ultimately belongs to children. If today's children grow up with postcolonial education, and if they are encouraged to understand and appreciate racial/ethnic difference that would tremendously expedite the progress towards a global postcoloniality.*

(Shaobo Xie 2000, p.13)

Reading postcolonial theory prompts the question posed by Leela Gandhi: 'How can the historian/investigator avoid the inevitable risk of presenting herself as an authoritative representative of subaltern consciousness?' (1998, p.3), which arises naturally out of Gayatri Spivak's challenging essay 'Can the subaltern speak?' (1985). Keeping this in mind, it seems necessary to preface any writing about postcolonial literature designed for a young adult readership with a statement of position. The crucial element which informs such writing is after all governed by location, in terms of ideological perspective, as well as geographically. Since the texts proposed for investigation are published by and written for a Western audience, and I am myself educated in a Western humanist tradition, I ought to be aware of the influence of this tradition on my perspectives and judgements. The processes of writing texts exploring cultural difference and the literary-critical practices of evaluating the success of such texts alike form part of a counterhegemonic movement attempting to redress a long history of imperialism, a movement which seeks to promote a feminist postcolonial perspective.

The role of the postcolonial critic is political. In his introduction to *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context*, a collection of articles about postcolonial representation in children's literature, Roderick McGillis asserts the responsibility of the postcolonial critic 'to read works of literature for their stated and unstated assumptions about the other' (2000, p.xxviii). He sees this as necessary given the 'neocolonial sensibility which does appear in many books for the young' (p.xxiv). McGillis defines 'neocolonialism' as a style of writing that

*...manifests itself as both a depiction of minority cultures as inveterately other and inferior in some way to the dominant European or Eurocentric culture, or as an appropriation of other cultures – that is, an assimilation of minority cultures into the mainstream way of thinking.*

(McGillis 2000, p.xxiv)

This position is further elaborated by Shaobo Xie, who claims that this process of redefining the relationship between self and cultural other is indicative of 'a changed world characterised by increased

tolerance and understanding' but also points to its capacity to mirror 'a world saturated with imperialist ideas, stereotypes, and narratives' (2000, p.1). A more pointed observation by Leela Gandhi locates the resistance to change in the humanist tradition, claiming that 'the entire field of the humanities is vitiated by a compulsion to claim a spurious universality and also to disguise its political investment in the production of 'major' or dominant knowledges' (1998, p.44).

Edward Said defines the Orient as:

*... the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilisations and its languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea personality, experience.*

(Said 1978, pp.1-2)

Said uses Nietzsche's philosophy to foreground the impossibility of conveying a single 'objective' truth because attitudes are embodied in forms of language like idioms and metaphors. I suggest that the ideas of the Orient described by Said, although originating in the nineteenth century, continue to permeate novels about life in contemporary India written from a Western point of view, with the intention of illuminating cultural otherness.

In this essay I discuss two young adult novels addressing the powerlessness of widows in India: Frances Mary Hendry's *Chandra* (1997); and Gloria Whelan's *Homeless Bird* (2000). These novels seek to introduce Western readers to the plight of young girls of a similar age in another culture. But do they, despite their laudable intentions, propagate the schism created by reinforcing colonial perceptions of otherness rather than stimulating thought? Do they close or open discussion? Do they celebrate difference or underpin an ideology of dominance? Are the female protagonists represented as strong subjects despite their location as 'Other'? These texts about young Indian widows show one view of the position of women from a postcolonial perspective, but is this representative of all narratives written about Oriental cultures? Another recent series by Deborah Ellis, about the situation faced by women and girls living under Islamic fundamentalist law, presents female protagonists differently. Ellis's representations of the female protagonists Parvana and Shauzia diverge significantly from depictions of young women in *Chandra* and *Homeless Bird*. The differences between these pairs of novels requires an analysis of the language used to convey 'Otherness'.

*Chandra*, winner of The Writer's Guild Award and the Lancashire Book Award, establishes a scenario of life in another country in the first few pages by describing an exotic setting. The narrative is focalised through Chandra's perspective. She passes through her local market on the way to school, and the reader sees her world seemingly from her viewpoint. She sees the 'boy with the sugar-cane crusher where she often spent a few paise on a drink of the sweet juice' (p.1), wearing clothing which would seem like fancy dress to a Western eyes – a 'sea-green uniform of cotton salwar trousers and kameez tunic down to her knees ... her white dupatta scarf folded and pinned across her chest so that the ends fell gracefully behind her shoulders' (p.2) The way Hendry creates her protagonist immediately sets up a polarity between the similarities between the Western readers' world of school and friendship and the fairytale qualities inherent in the primitive, archaic, colourful world of India. Here, at the beginning of the novel, Hendry's narrative promotes a desire for the Orient in stressing the attraction and novelty of the unfamiliar as well as establishing a connection with the familiar: friendship and schoolgirl confidences.

Chandra herself is portrayed as a playful, intelligent, high-achieving scholar, with sparkling eyes and a tendency to rebel internally against the model of womanhood with its 'duty to be obedient and good-tempered and respectful' extolled by her mother (p.3). The contradictions of a woman's life are highlighted by Chandra's mother's loss of an individual identity, her reduction to a nameless function. This is explained in this conversation between Chandra and her grandmother:

*'Her husband calls her 'my wife', you and your brothers call her 'mata', I call her 'beti'. In some places, she'd be called 'mother of Kirpal', and nothing else. A woman's name can be lost, forgotten, among her relationships. Ji haa, her name is Verahi. She has a BA degree, did you know? And she was a librarian. But when she married, your father told her she must give it all up to look after him and their children, and she obeyed. Tradition says that it is the mother who creates the atmosphere in a home. She has created happiness.'*

(Hendry 1997, p.11)

*Homeless Bird* is also a much lauded and award winning story of a young Indian girl, 'caught up in a current of tradition that threatens to sweep her toward a terrifying state', according to the cover notes. As in *Chandra*, the narrative opens with discussions of the protagonist's readiness for marriage. The poverty of this family and Koly's destined role to relieve the pressure on the amount of food available emphasise her function as a commodity in the traditional process of preserving the family. Unlike Chandra, she is illiterate as her parents have chosen to use their limited resources to provide her with a dowry. According to their customs, a woman's role is to work in the home; learning will be of no use to her after marriage. Again, mention is made of caste; both families are Brahman, the highest Hindu caste. Koly's misgivings and fears are focalised through her own thoughts – her hopes for a young, kind and handsome husband countered by her brothers' jeers at her worthiness – and reinforced by her mother's tears despite her outward urgings and praise of her abilities as a hard worker to her prospective in laws, who seem to value her most for the dowry she brings.

*I longed to beg my parents to take me home. I would promise to eat very little and work very hard. But I could not ask for such a thing. To refuse to go through with the marriage would bring dishonour on my family. I told myself that if my eyes were not so big or my nose smaller, if I were not so large or my hair straighter, the Mehtas would be kinder. Still I knew that despite my flaws, my parents cared for me.*

(Whelan 2000, pp.14-15)

But these novels depict traditional Hindu culture as overriding parental affection by insisting that a daughter's function is to contribute to the family honour by obedience, duty and servitude, denying her own wishes if they conflict with the family's interests.

Both writers make it clear that the girls are silenced in this culture of arranged marriages. The writers are speaking for them, for the subalterns. Ania Loomba discusses the difficulties arising from this commendable desire on the part of postcolonial intellectuals to 'make visible the position of the marginalised' with reference to Spivak's essay 'Can the subaltern speak?', reiterating Spivak's warning against 'romanticising and homogenising the subaltern subject' (1985, p.109). This concern is the major premise of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's discussion paper 'Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses' (2003a). Mohanty is critical of tendencies in scholarship and writing by educated feminists, whether based in western discourse or representing third-world women

reflecting on their own culture, which describe underprivileged voiceless women. She notes that such representations tend to assume that 'their own middle-class culture [is] the norm', treating 'peasants and working-class histories as Other' (Mohanty 2003a, p.50). In *Chandra*, the middle-class views of the writer are expressed through the grandmother's speech to her granddaughter about her mother's nameless, self-effacing role as a wife, without elaborating on the mother's choices.

Both narratives focus on the powerlessness of the young brides. The preparation of the brides for the wedding ceremony, the process of painting their hands and faces by their mothers or other female relatives, and their adornment with precious jewels are similar in both narratives, although more elaborate in *Chandra* than *Homeless Bird*. The descriptions of the wedding feasts, in each case accentuating beautiful but strange and exotic customs, focus on the importance of maintaining tradition in terms of the status of the family, but also intertwine this with concern about the expense incurred. In *Chandra*, Hendry parodies modern cultural practices, holding up to ridicule aspects like the presence at the wedding feast of 'expensive, tasteless western-style bread' (p.22) set on the table amongst the traditional food.

The differences between Oriental and Western culture is foregrounded in the descriptions of weddings, but the feeling of being chosen and feted, acquiring status, being the central figure have resonances with a society that also inscribes weddings with customs which could be seen as equally exotic from an Indian perspective. The lucrative bridal industry in the West also capitalises on cultural desires, but these novels set in India do not allude to parallels or similarities with Western practices. Indeed, Western romance writing which targets a female audience, including adolescent girls, reinforces the desirability of the married state. Meghan Sweeney discusses the 'silk and satin fantasies' that pervade the imagination of middle-class girls in the West from an early age, stemming from a post war tradition that grew in the nineteen fifties 'to create a sense of cultural coherence, emphasise prosperity, and establish or maintain a sense of well being'. Sweeney highlights the pressures placed on writers to provide 'happy ever after' wedding scenes for an adolescent female readership (Sweeney 2007, p.1). *Chandra* and *Homeless Bird* show arranged marriages as a completely othered cultural practice, with the traces of romantic desire expressed by the protagonists rendered tragic by the mercenary traits exposed in the narratives. Again, the texts set up ambivalent desires, playing off exotic practices of dress and decoration that resonate with Western desires for marriage against the notion of sacrificial rites that deny 'true love', the Western ideal.

The way language is used in these two narratives also situates the subjects on the margins. In *Chandra*, the dialogue is peppered with hyphenated double adjectives, probably an attempt to recreate the way English is used in idiomatic speech in India. Spivak calls this 'Indian English', a hybrid of standard English, not used in Indian writing since it is viewed as an artificial written language 'used only as the medium of protest, as mockery or teratology; and sometimes as no more than local colour, necessarily from above' (Spivak 1996, p.19). In Hendry's hands, expressions like 'catty-ratty', 'skinny-thinny', 'pokey-hole', 'complaining-criticizing' have the quality of pidgin English, with undertones of nursery chatter, a babyish language, insinuating that the speakers are not quite mature enough to be able to speak proper English. This mixture of romantic and exotic imagery, undermined by the critical, undermining tone of irony in *Chandra*, and the attention to the families' preoccupation with monetary values in both narratives, combine to intimate to the Western reader that the brides should be pitied. Koly is duped into marrying a terminally ill bridegroom as a result of her family's powerless position. Poverty and cultural tradition make her a victim. Illiteracy and ignorance render her powerless.

Both narratives covertly endorse Western values by subtly denigrating 'other' cultural practices, so that they do not contribute to a 'postcolonial discourse of difference' according to the method advocated by Xie, who says that: 'only through celebrating and legitimizing difference can the uncanny, alien otherness be recognized, accepted, and appreciated' (p.4). The way the narrative represents cultural practices, although engaging with the process of making marginality visible, derides difference. There is an unspoken agreement established between the reader and the narration that belittles the exotic.

The deep seated emotional resistance to rebellion against patriarchal authority is explained by Loomba in 'Dead women tell no tales: Issues of female subjectivity, subaltern agency and tradition in colonial and post-colonial writings on widow immolation in India':

*... the disenfranchisement of Indian men led to a situation whereby women became the grounds and signs for the colonial struggle. Indian nationalisms of different shades produced their own versions of the good Hindu wife, each of which became emblematic of Indian-ness and tradition, a sign of rebellion against colonial authority and a symbol of the vision of the future.*

(Loomba 2006, p.312)

Chandra's refusal of her father's authority, her refusal to acquiesce to the approved behaviour of self-sacrifice and abjection of widows required by the customs of his family, has a parallel with Koly's route to freedom from patriarchal dominance. What is at issue in these stories for young Western eyes is that they are related in such a way that the indigenous culture is denigrated by a continuing colonial perspective. They offer no avenue for understanding how the individual stories fit within the current political situation. Perhaps it is too disheartening to reveal that there is an increase in parts of India in society of sanctioned honour killings rather than ongoing reform (Verma, 2004).

The novels discussed here treat the two young female protagonists as part of group of victims outside the social network, proposing individual resolutions which remove them from their own culture. Chandra is saved temporarily from the immediate threat of danger posed by her father and her relatives, but it is intimated that she may have to return in the future. Koly is subsumed into the nationalist notion of modern Indian women, enjoying a degree of independence due to the benevolence of her husband. It is a romantic conclusion, designed to satisfy Western desires but preserving the oriental ambience of 'otherness'. Neither narrative fulfils the ambitions for postcolonial children's literature called for by Xie as quoted at the beginning of this chapter: they do not 'expedite the progress towards a global postcoloniality'.

The subaltern doesn't 'speak' in *Chandra* and *Homeless Bird*, but is further muted by a representation that accepts Western desires and ways of seeing as the overarching point of view. The colonial presence pervades the texts to such a degree that the intention of provoking a political consciousness is subsumed by the desire to comfort the Western reader with the idea that fate, individual courage and an inner drive for change will triumph over adversity. The fictitious lives of these exotic Indian girls, as exemplified by these award-winning novels, are retold in a fairy tale manner that keeps them safely quarantined from the world of their middle-class Western readers, who are prevented by neo-colonial filters from understanding or celebrating otherness.

I now consider the differences between this style of writing for young adults and books and the three novels written by Deborah Ellis concerning the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan: *Parvana* (2002a), *Parvana's Journey* (2002b) and *Shauzia* (2003), addressing the following question: Do these

texts work to construct a subaltern who successfully represents herself through the text? The cover notes of *Parvana* ostensibly appear to advertise a story that has many similarities to *Chandra* and *Homeless Bird*: 'By turns exciting and touching, *Parvana* is a story of courage in the face of overwhelming fear and repression'. There are, however, subtle differences in the way language is used which influence the ability of the reader to identify her/himself with the life of 'a young girl growing up in Afghanistan under the control of an extreme religious military group' (Cover notes). The call to readers to use their imagination to put themselves in Parvana's position is an invitation to consider a very different life.

*Imagine living in a country where women and girls are not allowed to leave the house without a man. Imagine having to wear clothes that cover every part of your body, including your face, whenever you go out.*

(*Parvana* 2002)

This style of writing, which invites the reader to become involved in the narrative, provides an immediate sense of connection rather than a focus on representing the world of the text as exotic and different. The main protagonists, Parvana and Shauzia, are not accorded romantic status. Nor are they portrayed as naïve. The opening chapter in *Parvana* describes her family situation; educated parents who believed in education 'for everyone, even girls' (Ellis, 2002a, p.11), life in a single crowded room with three siblings, her father injured in the bombing and her mother dismissed from her job as a writer by the Taliban. Girls are no longer allowed to attend school, and Parvana's role is to help her one-legged father walk to the marketplace. The family survives on a meagre income derived from selling their remaining possessions and her father's work as a reader and scribe for the illiterate. She has learned survival behaviour, and has become 'used to holding her tongue and hiding her face' (Ellis 2002a, p.10) to avoid notice:

*She was afraid to look up at the soldiers. She had seen what they did, especially to women, the way they would whip and beat someone they thought should be punished.*

(Ellis 2002a, p.10)

But this narrative is not about setting up binary divisions between men and women. Mohanty analyses how studies which avoid reductiveness work to illuminate the position of the oppressed in the so-called Third World. The avoidance of generalisations and a focus on specificity which acknowledges 'the intricacies and effects of particular power networks' (p.60) rather than defining the subjects in the first instance as a gender group is seen as advantageous in 'designing strategies to combat oppressions' (p.61):

*Practices which characterize women's status and roles vary according to class. Women are constituted as women through the complex interaction between class, culture, religion, and other ideological institutions and frameworks. They are not 'women' – a coherent group – solely on the basis of a particular economic system or policy. Such reductive cross-cultural comparisons result in the colonisation of the specifics of daily existence and the complexities of political interests which women of different social classes and cultures represent and mobilize.*

(Mohanty 2003a, p.61 )

Parvana's father is also a victim of the Taliban:

*The word Taliban meant religious scholars, but Parvana's father told her that religion was about teaching people how to be better human beings, how to be kinder. 'The Taliban are not making Afghanistan a kinder place to live!' he said.*

(Ellis 2002a, p.16)

When her father is imprisoned by the Taliban, Parvana's hair is cut off so that she can disguise herself as a boy in order to allow her out into the city to support the family. She is aware of the danger she faces if she transgresses the behavioural modes proscribed by the Taliban, and justifiably afraid. However, the text actively resists any depiction of the Taliban as evil stereotypes, although it describes specific acts of brutality. Parvana's encounter with an individual soldier who, unable to read himself, asks her to read aloud a letter belonging to his dead wife, trembling and tearful, confuses her:

*Parvana took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Up until then, she had seen Talibs only as men who beat women and arrested her father. Could they have feelings of sorrow, like other human beings?*

(Ellis 2002a, pp.81-2)

The protagonist in this instance does not pit herself against tradition embodied by the family, but works with them against an oppressive regime. Within the walls of Parvana's family home, girls and women have an equal and valid voice. The narrative links her parents together when describing their university education and their professional status. In contrast to the mothers in *Chandra* and *Homeless Bird*, who are depicted as complicit with the ideology that treats women as men's possessions, Parvana's mother is shown as resistant to the Taliban. She defies the ordinances that confine women to the house and restrict their movement around the city without men, and determinedly sets out to visit her husband in prison:

*Mother wasn't supposed to be out of her home without a man, or without a note from her husband.*

*'Nooria, write mother a note.'*

*'Don't bother, Nooria. I will not walk around my own city with a note pinned to my burqa as if I were a kindergarten child. I have a university degree!'*

(Ellis 2002a, p.40)

Her opposition is fruitless, and she lapses into despair. Parvana then takes on the role of assertive behaviour modelled by her mother and leaves the house to buy food, risking herself by leaving the house without a man, and without a burqa. She runs into an old family friend, Mrs Weera, who returns home with her and helps her mother regain her courage. These older women characters endorse a gendered identity of assertive female accomplishment. Parvana's mother is able to hold the family together with the support of another strong woman. Parvana's character is shown to be shaped by their modes of performing their gender, and also by her father's approval of strong female conduct, as demonstrated by his story of Malali, a young girl who inspired an Afghan victory over British invading troops in the nineteenth century (a reminder to the western reader of colonial invasions) (pp.30-1). Mrs Weera, a former school teacher and a member of the Afghan Women's Union with Parvana's mother, is a strong personality who uses expressions and idioms reminiscent of a British schoolgirl, parodying colonial rule on one hand but also showing strength and humour. She moves into Parvana's household with her grandchild, 'the last of the Weeras' (Ellis 2002a, p.87), and organises the family 'as though she were assigning positions on a hockey field' (Ellis 2002a, p.85), galvanising them into action. Transforming Parvana into a boy so that she can go outside to earn money for her family is depicted as acting a part (Ellis 2002a, p.67), but as it is put to her as a necessary choice, supported by rational

arguments, Parvana accepts the role. When she is interacting with men, including the Taliban, she realises that while assuming the dress of a boy she also must assume a confident manner. The emphasis is on outward appearance and the political situation that necessitates disguise. Parvana wears a mask of masculinity as part of a survival strategy; there is no attempt to attribute the change to becoming masculine. When Parvana feels it is safe to revert to female attire, she does not feel diminished in any way:

*Parvana liked being back in girl clothes. The shalwar kameez Leila gave her was light blue with white embroidery down the front. It made her feel almost pretty again.*

(Ellis 2002b, p.109)

Women are represented as strong within their own culture. Despite the daily struggle to survive, Mrs Weera decides to utilise the skills of Parvana's mother Fatana to start a magazine and uses the apartment to continue the girls' education. When Parvana encounters an old schoolmate, Shauzia, also working in the market disguised as a boy and brings her home for a visit, she questions her about her particular situation. The narrative is broadened to show a different story, again exploring diverse circumstances – Shauzia's family does not support her right to independence or education, but instead uses her to provide food. Although she condemns herself as a 'bad person' (Ellis 2002a, p.128), Shauzia realises that she will be trapped if she stays and forced by her changing body to become a girl again, subject to the dominant male hegemony. She secretly saves money and dreams of running away to France, a place she imagines must be full of smiling, happy people, to sit in a field of lavender and 'not think about anything' (ibid). This dream sustains her through days of digging bones for sale, and propels her to leave her dependent mother and sisters when she overhears her grandfather's plan to marry her off for the bride price. Parvana experiences conflicting feelings about Shauzia's decision to desert her family in order to achieve a better life for her (Ellis 2002a, p.163). The two friends part, planning to meet again in Paris at the top of the Eiffel Tower on the first day of spring twenty years on.

The sequel, *Parvana's Journey*, takes up the story some months after Parvana and her father have left Kabul in search of the rest of the family. This story expands on the themes established in *Parvana*. The protagonist's skills at self-preservation and a willingness to continue to find the rest of her family after her father dies enable her to help three other children. Each individual story adds to readers' information about the situation of children in a war-torn country. This is illustrated dramatically in the incidents leading up to the *eucaastrophe* of Leila's death. Leila has survived on the by-products of explosions, living by the side of a minefield, believing that she is protected by the acts of propitiating the ground with small offerings of food. Although she is only about seven or eight years old she has been able to feed herself and her grandmother for months. Through the perspective of Parvana, the novel's focaliser, the reader is positioned to grasp the absurdity of this belief, and Leila's final rash expedition into a minefield near the camp results in her death. Leila's death signifies the fragility of an individual solution, displacing any conclusive satisfaction. This ending reverberates through the narrative in a manner that emphasises the continuous nature of the problem of war. The Author's Note at the end of both *Parvana* and this sequel reinforces the real situation of refugees from war. In the essay 'Under Western Eyes Revisited', Mohanty underlines the price paid by women and children in the Third World as a result of war and globalisation:

*Poor women and girls are the hardest hit by the degradation of environmental conditions, wars, famines, privatization of services and deregulation of governments, the dismantling of welfare states, the restructuring of paid and unpaid work, increasing surveillance and incarceration in prisons, and*



*so on. And this is why a feminism without and beyond borders is necessary to address the injustices of globalisation.*

(Mohanty 2003b, p.234)

By focusing attention on the experiences of women and girls, Ellis's novels assist in the process Mohanty deems necessary to support the struggles of women who are casualties of governmental policies that denigrate and deprive women of human rights and education. The inclusion of information about the women's organisations and networks that provide support is instrumental in creating an awareness of the strength and knowledge of subalterns who are empowered to speak, inviting Western readers to view the protagonists from a perspective of understanding. This is particularly evident in the third novel in the series, *Shauzia*.

The novel takes up Shauzia's story after she has crossed into Pakistan alone, disguised as a boy. She now lives in a camp for widows and orphans, under Mrs Weera's protection. Shauzia finds life in the camp limits her ability to fulfil her dream and argues with Mrs Weera, demanding payment for her work with the younger children. She rejects the offer of training to become a nurse, a beginning that in some stories about girls would seem a satisfactory conclusion. Rebellious and angry, Shauzia dresses herself again as a boy, cuts her hair, and sneaks away during the night. This is a direct contrast to Koli's acceptance of a similar offer in *Homeless Bird*, and subverts the colonial perspective of a compliant 'Other' grateful for any help. The encounter between Shauzia and an American family who have come to Pakistan for 'a bit of adventure' (Ellis 2003, p.90) is symptomatic of an attitude that Rey Chow identifies as an absolute reaction when confronted by a Far Eastern otherness, making them into 'an utterly incomprehensible, terrifying and fascinating spectacle' (1996, p.126). He goes on to say that 'it is our own limit that we encounter when we encounter another' (Chow 1996, p.127). The American family is happy to help Shauzia while she complies with their expectations of an appreciative victim, but are outraged by her misunderstanding of the extent of their willingness to help other needy people. Ellis balances the judgement of the narrative against this family and their objectification of Shauzia with descriptions of the aid workers in the camps, both in *Shauzia* and *Parvana's Journey*, particularly the unnamed nurse who goes beyond her role to help Parvana and her new siblings survive (Ellis 2002b, pp. 171-5). Shauzia's decision to return to Afghanistan with Mrs Weera and the nurses to help the victims of the bombing by American planes is not a return home in heroic style, but it is a return in the sense that she gives up her own dreams of utopia – the lavender fields in France – to join other women in their struggle against misfortune. The refusal of a neat conclusion subverts a tendency in children's literature to rely upon the humanist doctrine of a pervasive belief that everything turns out well in the end. Shauzia's decision endorses a life of continuous struggle.

Another aspect of the three novels that reinforces the text's representation of 'other' female subjectivities is that instead of making the setting exotic or 'strange' (Stephens 1992, p.202), the writing engages the reader with plain language. There is no attempt made to adorn the text here, or in other places, with exotic references, or to create a link between subject and reader by drawing parallels. The difference is made manifest in the stark and brutal reality of their situation. The language used to describe Kabul is plain and unadorned. There is no attempt made to describe the city before the Taliban took over as an exotic paradise, although it is said to be beautiful, with Parvana's older sister Noria able to remember 'whole sidewalks, traffic lights that changed colour, evening trips to restaurants and cinemas, browsing in fine clothes for clothes and books' (Ellis 2002a, p.18). The writer focuses on the common factors of life in a modern city in any part of the world, rather than the differences in style that may have distinguished it. In 'Where Have All the Natives Gone?' Rey Chow discusses how

Westerners can be discomfited by the inclination of other cultures to incorporate technological advances into their own societies, rejecting the picturesque and quaint in favour of comfort and modernity: 'the natives are no longer staying in their frames' (Chow 1996, p.123).

Ellis's texts do not engage with the question of the veil except for the Taliban's restrictions on women's movements outside the home without the homogenising burqa. There are no scenes which question the wearing of the chador, and once these foreign words have been introduced, they are not italicised. The girls wear boys' clothes as a disguise, not because it is more desirable to be a boy. The text is not concerned with producing stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, or of exotic and familiar. This lack of stereotypes opens up the representation of difference. Bhabha contends that the stereotype works as a 'false representation of a given reality': 'It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that ... [denies]... the play of difference' (Bhabha 1994, p.107). The absence of discussion about dress, specifically the veil, is significant because it avoids what Yegenoglu describes as colonial desires based on Foucauldian insights into the 'principles of modern disciplinary power which is concerned with actively shaping individual minds and bodies based on the knowledge acquired by rendering them perfectly visible' (p.108). The protagonists, in contrast to Chandra and Koli, are not constructed as sexual subjects. The narrative's silence on Parvana and Shauzia's romantic inclinations frees them to perform their gender without being treated as sexualised subjects, and thus focuses on their agentive personas.

The act of speaking for the subaltern as Deborah Ellis has done in her three books about life for young girls and their families in Afghanistan and Pakistan derives from a belief that the West needs to be educated and enlightened about the circumstances of repression of women's rights in these countries. Ellis's writing is also prompted by her belief that Westerners are ignorant of the lives of subaltern girls and women due to the way they are portrayed by the overwhelming majority of the mainstream Western media. The objectification and commodification of the female body that is described in Ellis's writings has the authoritative status of a passionately concerned and informed desire to give the subaltern a voice in the West, in conjunction with the few voices able to speak in the countries from which these stories originate. They fulfill Mohanty's hope for 'expansive and inclusive visions of feminism [and the] need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them' (2003b, p.2).

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### Biographical note

Joanna Harris had her doctorate conferred in April 2010. She is currently managing a secondary school library and has begun a research project based on letters written between her great-aunt and great-uncle during WW1 with a view to developing a history of that period suitable for secondary school.