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ECHOES OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FRANCOPHONE LITERATURE

A COGNITIVE READING OF SHUMONA SINHA'S *FENÊTRE SUR L'ABÎME* (2008)

ABSTRACT   This article analyzes Shumona Sinha's first novel, *Fenêtre sur l'abîme* (*Window to the Abyss,* 2008) from a cognitive perspective. As the narrator, a young Bengali woman named Madhuban, is struggling to make sense of her existence, past events and present sensations, as well as nightmares and memories unfold in an accelerating rhythm, questioning the impact of her life experience upon her mental health. Drawing on Alan Palmer's typology of fictional minds, the aim of this work is to provide some preliminary remarks on the textual representation of the narrator's mind, depicted on the verge of a mental breakdown triggered the by physical and emotional abuse she was subjected to by her family in Calcutta, and reinforced by her emigration to Paris.

Key words: Shumona Sinha, Indian-Francophone literature, fictional minds, cognitive literary studies

INTRODUCTION – FROM CALCUTTA TO PARIS

As a Francophone novelist of Bengali origins, Shumona Sinha's place in the field of contemporary French and Francophone literature can be analyzed from a variety of diverse perspectives. The writer was born in 1973 in Calcutta, where, in her own words, *books are sacred and people are proud of belonging to Tagore's country*.[1] Indeed, as she emigrated to Paris in 2001 and started publishing in French in 2008, she can be considered a translingual author – a term that Alain Ausoni borrows from Steven G. Kellman in order to name those authors who gave up their mother tongue and chose to write in a language learnt later in their lives[2]. In France, a considerable number of these writers hail from Eastern Europe, and their choice of language is often motivated by the desire to gain international visibility while voicing the history of their country and questioning their bilingual and bicultural identity –Andreï Makine's 1995 novel *Dreams of My Russian Summers*, awarded the Goncourt Prize, is symptomatic in this sense[3]. Similarly, writers such as the Romanian Matei Vişniec, the Czech Milan Kundera or the Bosnian *Velibor Čolić* perceived France as the "Promised Land", a place with freedom of expression and safety at times when their homelands were governed by totalitarian regimes or left prey to wars, political upheavals and social uncertainty. At the same time, in a framework which is less concerned with the linguistic conversion and which focuses primarily on the literary language of an author, Sinha can be considered a Francophone writer, namely a non-French author whose oeuvre is written partially or entirely in French[4]. This less sophisticated criterion places her in the same category as writers from Maghreb, like the Algerian Assia Djebar, from Sub-Saharan Africa, like the Senegalese *Cheikh Hamidou Kane, as well as from other French-speaking countries*

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[1] "An interview with Shumona Sinha", YouTube, 20 January 2016, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KW-W4fvNx0c>, 15 February 2018. The author's first name can also be spelled "Sumana". The author has published four novels so far, namely *Fenêtre sur l'abîme* (2008), *Assommons les pauvres!* (2011), *Calcutta* (2014) and *Apatride* (2017), and she has received several literary awards, among which the "Prix Valéry-Larbaud" (2012) and the French Academy's "Prix du rayonnement de la langue et de la littérature françaises" (2014). She also worked as an interpreter at the OFPRA (Office français de protection des réfugiés et réfugiés – the French Office for the Protection of Expatriates and Refugees), from where she was fired upon the publication of her second novel, in which she depicted the difficult life of asylum seekers.

[2] A. Ausoni, "Écriture translingue et autobiographie", in A. Ausoni F. Arribert Narce (eds.), *L'autobiographie entre autres. Écrire la vie aujourd'hui*, Oxford 2013, pp. 63-85, and idem, *Mémoires d'outre-langue. L'Écriture translingue de soi*, Genève 2018. See also idem, "L'écriture translingue comme conversion. Notes sur la posture littéraire d'Hector Bianciotti, et sa postérité", *CoSMo. Comparative Studies in Modernism*, vol. 11 (2017), pp. 51-60; C. Allard, S. De Balsi (eds.), *Le choix d'écrire en français. Études sur la francophonie translingue*, Amiens 2016, and S.G. Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination*, Lincoln 2000.

[3] The novel's French title is *Le testament français* (*The French Testament*). A. Makine, *Dreams of My Russian Summers*, transl. by G. Strachan, New York 1997.

[4] For further information on Francophone literature, see B. Jack, *Francophone Literatures. An Introductory Survey*, Oxford 1996.

and regions, such as Belgium, Switzerland or Quebec. From this perspective, Sinha is also a member of the Francophone Indian literary diaspora, along with the Pondichéry-born authors Kichenassamy Madavane (b. 1964) and Stephan L. J. Van Puyvelde (b. 1978). She is also a writer of "minor literature", in Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, namely an author who belongs to an ethnical minority, but writes in what the two philosophers call in their essay on Kafka a "major" language[5].

In a different light, Sinha can be regarded as a representative of what Jean Rouaud and Michel Le Bris refer to as "world-literature" in their attempt to do away the obsolete center versus periphery, as well as French versus Francophone distinction. Signed by over forty other intellectuals including: Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, Édouard Glissant, Boualem Sansal and Tahar Ben Jelloun, their 2007 manifest, entitled *Pour une littérature-monde* (*For a World-Literature*)[6], emerged as a response to the traditional classification of French-language authors as *either* French *or* Francophone writers, which is a taxonomy that stems from both colonialism and postcolonialism, as well as from methodological nationalism. If its aim was to symbolically erode the borders between the "exotic" Francophone and "classy and aristocratic" French by deeming the dialectical relation between center and periphery as outdated on the one hand, and between language and nation on the other, the concept of world-literature is, nevertheless, controversial. One of the most relevant arguments against it is Véronique Porra's remark that it dismisses centuries of history and political and linguistic imaginary – all of which indeed played a central role in Sinha's decision of immigrating to Paris and writing in French[7]. Her first novel, along with the rest of her work, is thus inspired from her personal experience, depicting a Bengali young woman fond of French culture and literature who moves from Calcutta to Paris. Although the heroine, Madhuban, shares a number of biographical elements with the author, such as the year of birth, the year when they emigrated, their interest in literature, the studies at the Sorbonne University and a subsequent marriage with an elderly man[8], there are other, more significant details

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[5]   G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, transl. by D. Polan, Minneapolis–London 2003, p. 16-17. Rightfully qualified as *brilliant, though also frustrating and at times misleading*, the concept of minor literature analyzes fiction from a perspective in which everything is political and takes on a collective value. C. Koelb, "*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (review)", *MFS. Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 (1987), p. 376.

[6]   J. Rouaud, M. Le Bris (eds.), *Pour une littérature-monde*, Paris 2007. On the notion of world literature in an Indian context, see R. Krishnaswamy, "Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization", *Comparative Literature*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2010), pp. 399-419.

[7]   *One does not rewrite the History with a simple manifest. A simple declaration of intention is not enough to change the perception of an age-old culture and language*, our translation. V. Porra, "Malaise dans la littérature-monde (en français): de la reprise des discours aux paradoxes de l'énonciation", *Recherches & Travaux*, vol. 76 (2010), p. 123.

[8]   Madhuban marries her professor of French poetry, Jacques-Antoine, while Shumona Sinha was married to the poet Lionel Ray, thirty-eight years her senior. The author playfully mentions the latter in her text, as the poet for whom Madhuban and Jacques-Antoine shared a common interest which eventually brought them closer and led to their marriage. Lionel Ray is thus mentioned as a character in the novel's storyworld, but Madhuban does not know him personally.

that distinguish them. As a consequence, despite the resemblances between Madhuban and Shumona Sinha, the novel is not an autobiography, nor is it a piece of autofiction. The text does not respect the triple nominal protocol considered by Philippe Lejeune as the defining feature of an autobiographical novel, namely the identity between the signing author, the narrator, and the main character[9]. Similarly, according to Vincent Colonna's definition, autoficional works imply a degree of fictionalisation of the self in which the main character, who shares the name of the author, goes through experiences invented by the latter, which did not occur in his or her real life[10].

Having said this, drawing on her own experience, Sinha creates a storyworld that shares the typical aesthetic and stylistic traits of both feminist and postmodern fiction. Exposing and, at the same time, subverting the woman's place in both the West Bengali and the Western European society by depicting a vulnerable yet independent and rebellious female character, the self-referential text challenges hierarchical binary oppositions, particularly the one between men and women[11]. In these respects, *mutatis mutandis*, *Fenêtre sur l'abîme* does not differ substantially from other contemporary postmodern works that revolve around the themes of displacement, loss of identity and alienation. However, the central feature of the novel, which renders the text worthy of the both the critic's and the lay reader's attention, is, as we will show, its depiction of the maddening female subjectivity, struggling to heal from repetitive cultural and personal traumas. The most appropriate conceptual tool to shed light on this aspect of the novel is, we believe, Alan Palmer's notion of intermentality, which enables us to read this text from a cognitive literary perspective. This article will thus take a methodological distance from the intercultural and multilingual prisms through which translingual postmodern narratives are usually analyzed, focusing less on the cultural and political aspects of the novel, and more on what we consider to be the text's keystone, namely the depiction of the narrator's mind.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – COGNITIVE LITERARY STUDIES AND THE MIND

Rooted in the second cognitive revolution which took place in the 1980s[12], the cognitive literary studies – or cognitive literary science (*CLSci*) – represent the latest para-

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9   P. Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris 1975.

10   V. Colonna, *L'autofiction, essai sur la fictionalisation de soi en littérature*, Paris 1989, p. 30.

11   M.C. Michael, *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse. Post-World War II Fiction*, New York 1996, pp. 22-26.

12   Cognitive science is the interdisciplinary study of mental activity, embracing artificial intelligence, psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics and, recently, literary studies. The first cognitive revolution occurred in the late 1950s in the United States, from where it spread around the globe. It was a response to the behaviorist paradigm in psychology, which, in its extreme version, argued that non-quantifiable mental phenomena such as thought or consciousness cannot and should not be studied. The driving force of the first cognitive wave was the metaphor of the mind as machine,

digm in literary studies[13]. Lying between the medical humanities[14] and the cognitive cultural studies[15], cognitive literary studies share with the former an interest in the depiction of pathology in fiction, and with the latter, the practice of analyzing texts through the prism of recent discoveries in neuroscience and psychology. As Alan Richardson put it, the cognitive literary studies emerged from the scholars' frustration with poststructuralism on the one hand, and the desire to imagine a future after the heyday of postmodernism on the other[16]. Thus, the denomination of cognitive literary studies is relatively recent, having been proposed at the University of Oxford in 2013 by Michael Burke and Emily Troscianko. The same university has afterwards published two of the most significant contributions to the field, namely *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies* edited by Lisa Zunshine, and *Cognitive Literary Science. Dialogues Between Literature and Cognition* edited by Emily Troscianko and Michael Burke themselves[17]. Cognitive approaches in literature, however, date back to the 1980s, one of the pioneering works being Reuven Tsur's innovative method – which he would later name "cognitive poetics" – of combining philosophy and psychology with literary analysis[18].

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whilst that of the second is the mind as a dynamic process. In a non-Cartesian perspective, the second cognitive revolution considers cognition as embodied, which means that it does not see the mind as separated from the body. State-of-the-art research in cognitive science is published in journals such as *Cognitive Science*, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *Cognition*, *Social Cognition*, *Cognitive and Behavioral Neurology*, *Cognitive Neuropsychology*, *Cognitive Psychology*, *Cognitive Systems Research*, *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience*, *In Cognito – Cahiers Romans de Sciences Cognitives*, and *intellectica*. Cf. M. Bogdanova, "Cognitive Science: From Multidisciplinarity to Interdisciplinarity", *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2017); S. Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, New York–London 1997; T. Collins, D. Andler, C. Tallon-Baudry (eds.), *La cognition. Du neurone à la société*, Paris 2018; L. Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition*, London 2010, and D. Andler, *Cognitive Science*, 27 January 2006, at <andler.dec.ens.fr/pdf/94.pdf>, 20 January 2018.

[13] F. Lavocat (ed.), *Interprétation littéraire et sciences cognitives*, Paris 2016, back cover.

[14] Medical humanities is an interdisciplinary field drawing on both medical studies and the humanities in pursuit of educational goals. Cf. D. Kirklin, R. Richardson (eds.), *Medical Humanities. A Practical Introduction*, London 2001. See also E. Troscianko's video conference, "Why We Need Cognitive Literary Studies to Help Us Understand & Treat Mental Illness", YouTube, 26 October 2016, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRu6LmP351c>, 30 January 2018.

[15] Cognitive cultural studies analyze cultural manifestations drawing on discoveries in neuroscience, discursive and evolutionary psychology, anthropology, cognitive linguistics and the theory of mind. Cf. L. Zunshine, "Introduction. What Is Cognitive Cultural Studies?", in eadem (ed.), *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, Baltimore 2010, pp. 1-33; P. Garratt (ed.), *The Cognitive Humanities. Embodied Mind in Literature and Culture*, London 2016; J.-A. Olsen, *L'esprit du roman. Œuvre, fiction et récit*, Bern 2004.

[16] A. Richardson, "Cognitive Science and the Future of Literary Studies", *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 23, no. 1 (1999), pp. 157-173.

[17] L. Zunshine (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, Oxford 2015; E.T. Troscianko, M. Burke (eds.), *Cognitive Literary Science. Dialogues between Literature and Cognition*, Oxford 2017. Burke and Troscianko also edited in 2013 a special number of the *Journal of Literary Semantics* entitled "Explorations in Cognitive Literary Science", vol. 42, no. 2 (2013).

[18] R. Tsur, *What is Cognitive Poetics?*, Tel Aviv 1983; idem, *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*, Brighton–Portland 2008.

According to Lisa Zunshine, the best definition of this emerging field belongs to Alan Richardson, according to whom cognitive literary studies consist of *the work of literary critics and theorists vitally interested in cognitive science [...] and therefore with a good deal to say to one another, whatever their differences*[19].

One of the main interests of cognitive literary studies is the interaction between literary fiction and the human mind, whether it comes to the way in which the mind interprets texts, or to the manner in which it is depicted in them. Cognitive narratologists are particularly preoccupied with this aspect. They consist of a new generation of theorists that find classical narratology limiting and aim, as Monika Fludernik noticed, to call it into question, but also, as David Herman mentioned, to enrich it in the light of information that was unavailable to the classical narratologists of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Gérard Genette or Roland Barthes[20]. One of the definitions of the mind – a term that has come to replace, in cognitive literary studies, the traditional notion of character – used in cognitive narratology is the one proposed by Alan Palmer. The British narratologist is the author of two theoretical studies, *Fictional Minds* (2004) and of *Social Minds in the Novel* (2010), which, albeit occasionally criticized[21], have, as Marie-Laure Ryan put it, revolutionized the study of fictional minds[22]. In his first work, Palmer defines the mind as equivalent to *all aspects of our inner life: not just cognition and perception, but also dispositions, feelings, beliefs, and emotions*[23]. In his second book, he introduces a typology of fictional minds which is, in his own words, *rudimentary*[24], but nonetheless encompassing and, as we aim to show, efficient.

Palmer considered that the mind is embodied and that is has a social nature, drawing on the concept of socially distributed cognition to make a distinction between the traditional way of analyzing the mind, which he calls internalist, and his innovative proposal, the externalist one: *I want to stress emphatically that an interest in the mind does not necessarily entail a lack of interest in the social mind. [...] Fictional mental functioning*

19   A. Richardson quoted by L. Zunshine, "Introduction to Cognitive Literary Studies", in eadem (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook...*, p. 1.

20   M. Fludernik, "Narratology in the Twenty-First Century: The Cognitive Approach to Narrative", *PMLA*, vol. 125, no. 4 (2010), pp. 924-930. See also S. Patron (ed.), *Introduction à la narratologie postclassique. Les nouvelles directions de la recherche sur le récit*, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2018; D. Herman (ed.), *The Emergence of Mind. Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English*, Lincoln 2011; M. Turner, *The Literary Mind*, Oxford 1996.

21   The reception of his two main works was discussed in two special issued of the journals *Style* and *Narrative*, namely "Social Minds in Criticism and Fiction", in *Style*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2011), and "Social Minds in Factual and Fictional Narration", in *Narrative*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2015).

22   M.-L Ryan, "Kinds of Minds: On Alan Palmer's *Social Minds*", *Style*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2011), p. 654.

23   A. Palmer, *Fictional Minds*, Lincoln 2004, p. 19. For other definitions and approaches concerning fictional minds, see S. Patron's article, "La représentation de l'esprit dans la narratologie postclassique: un bref état de l'art", *Revue Critique de Fixxion Française Contemporaine* (2016), "Fictions de l'intériorité", at <http://www.revue-critique-de-fixxion-francaise-contemporaine.org/rcffc/article/view/fx13.11/106>, 21 November 2017.

24   A. Palmer, *Social Minds in the Novel*, Columbus 2010, p. 48, emphasis in the original.

should not be divorced from the social and physical context of the storyworld within which it occurs. In the view of the philosopher Brian Cantwell Smith (1999, 769), the classical (or internalist) view of the mind sees it as individual, abstract, detached, and general, while the new (or externalist) view sees it as social, embodied, engaged and specific. It is this new cognitive approach that underpins this book[25]. In other words, the externalist view of fictional minds implies considering them in the context in which they occur, and particularly in their relation to other minds. In this perspective, the notion embraces the entire mental activity and phenomena, dissolving the boundaries between emotions, beliefs, perception, sensations, reason and imagination, and viewing them as a network of interconnected processes[26]. For Palmer, cognition is thus shared, or socially distributed, among different minds. This takes a dynamic view on intersubjectivity, stating that the interaction between individuals is shaped by each mind's knowledge, expertise, feelings and emotions, social functioning being the result of the relations between them. Socially distributed cognition is best illustrated when we think of tasks that imply the collaboration of individuals, like performing a surgery or navigating a ship. In the realization of this kind of task, everyone plays a well-defined role and contributes in their own unique manner to the process[27].

With this in mind, Palmer operates a distinction between several types of interpersonal relationships that shape the real world's as well as the storyworlds' cognitive functioning. He described them as "intermental", namely occurring as a result of the interaction between two or several minds, explaining that while the intramental approach that has dominated character analysis in classical narratology stressed those elements that are *inner, introspective, private, solitary, individual, psychological, mysterious, and detached*, the intramental one is interested in *those aspects that are outer, active, public, social, behavioral, evident, embodied, and engaged*[28]. He divides the manifestations of intermentality into intermental encounters, which refer to the dialogues between characters; small intermental units, which describe close groups of friends, families and couples; medium-sized intermental units, which refer to groups of friends or work colleagues; large intermental units, like cities or societies, and, finally, group minds, which are not defined by the number of their members, but by the quality of the intermental thought that occurs between them. For example, the city of Middlemarch from George Eliot's homonymous novel is, Palmer shows, such an intermental mind[29]. In light of this

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[25]   Ibid., p. 8.

[26]   Cf. K. Hoemann, L.F. Barrett, "Concepts Dissolve Artificial Boundaries in the Study of Emotion and Cognition, Uniting Body, Brain and Mind", *Cognition and Emotion*, vol. 33 (2019). The term "cognition" can also be used in a restrictive sense, as Alan Palmer did in this definition of the mind, quoted above, as a synonym of "reason" or "thought".

[27]   E. Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild*, Cambridge, Mass. 1995, pp. 20-21. See also M. Merritt et al., "Cognition without Borders: 'Third Wave' Socially Distributed Cognition and Relational Autonomy", *Cognitive Systems Research*, vol. 25-26 (2013), pp. 61-71.

[28]   A. Palmer, *Social Minds...*, p. 39.

[29]   Idem, "Intermental Thought in the Novel: The Middlemarch Mind", *Style*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2005), pp. 427-439.

theoretical framework, we will proceed to the analysis of the literary depiction of inter-mental thought in Shumona Sinha's first novel, *Fenêtre sur l'abîme*.

A NARRATIVE OF MENTAL DISINTEGRATION

Fenêtre sur l'abîme is a first-person narrative told by a young Bengali woman named Madhuban, who moved from Calcutta to Paris at the age of twenty-seven to work as a high-school English instructor in the capital's "banlieues" – low-income neighbor-hoods on the outskirts of the city – whilst improving her French. As the text unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that the real reason of her emigration is to flee her seemingly caring, yet strict and, as we will see, abusive parents. Once in France, Mad-huban, a longtime fan of literature and art, engages into several romantic relationships before marrying her elderly professor of French literature, Antoine. Despite becoming his wife, she pursues her extramarital love affairs. The book is a retrospective over the last six years of the young woman's life, with the narrative acting as a confession to what the reader can speculate is her psychotherapist or psychiatrist. Indeed, the narrative reads as a long dialogue with a mental health specialist, whose voice, however, only ap-pears in the text as short lines echoed by the narrator as she is answering his questions[30]. Madhuban's mind is thus the prism through which both the plot and the other char-acters' minds are presented. The latter's images are inevitably subjective and limited to the narrator's opinions, feelings and experiences. Her mind appears to have two defin-ing characteristics, namely its fragmentation on the one hand, and the inability to find a place where she can belong on the other.

The rhetoric of fragmentation appears throughout the novel, beginning with the opening scene in which Madhuban recalls asking her former lover, David, to rape her before she returns home to her husband: *Rape me!, I used to tell him. Are you surprised? No? Well, he was*[31]. Apart from allowing the reader to infer from the outset, by the us-age of the deixis "*you*" – in French, "*vous*", in the second person plural – the presence of an interlocutor, the narrator starts her story with a violent scene only to continue it with another, in which the sexual violence inflicted upon her by her partner is replaced by the physical and emotional violence to which her parents subjected her in Calcutta, after discovering her love affair with Michel Bertrand, a married French diplomat[32]. Thus, the setting shifts from contemporary Paris to a few years previously in Calcutta, as Madhuban recollects a night when her outraged father pounces on her while she lay

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[30]   For example, *Oh, but of course! Of course I was working! So you're teasing me now?* (p. 40), or *Yes! I knew you'd ask this question sooner or later!* (p. 145). S. Sinha, *Fenêtre...* As the novel has not yet been trans-lated into English, all the translations belong to the author of this article.

[31]   Ibid., p. 7, emphasis in the original.

[32]   In French, the nouns "rape" (*violer*) and "violence" (*violence*) have the same Latin etymology, *violo*, which means "I maltreat, violate, or profane". Just like the act of raping, this verb implies inflicting something upon a person without his or her consent.

on the floor, beating her as she desperately tries to shield her eyes and her face[33]. In spite of her terror, her mother, who witnesses the event, does not provide any protection. Furthermore, as her father is intruding on the privacy and safety of her body, her mother is violating the intimacy of her mind: *I saw [my mother] pulling out of my drawer [...] letters, printed e-mails, plane tickets and several contraceptive pill packs*[34].

The technique of free association apparently used by her psychotherapist consists of expressing the context of consciousness without censorship and, as Matt Jarvis put it, it does not require the patients *to make any effort to recall or focus on anything specific*, allowing *their thoughts to drift and vocalize whatever crosses their mind*[35]. The consequence of its usage is a non-linear and fragmented story. As a result, Madhuban switches constantly from one temporal frame and narrative level to another, going back and forth in time while gradually introducing new characters and events. The novel becomes, as mentioned in several self-referential passages, a multi-layered *collage*[36] of memories, flashbacks, thoughts, dreams and nightmares as the narrator states that she is wandering freely in the alleys of her memory[37] or into her *decomposing past*[38], and flying between her *misty future* and her *past that burnt to ashes*[39]. Thus, pondering upon her sexual adventures triggers memories about a traumatic night spent in her parents' home, a party she attends on the banks of the river Seine in Paris makes her recollect another party she had organized in Calcutta for her friends, and talking about her lovers often results in her referring to one of them, called David, in a repetitive sentence – *No, I hadn't seen David yet*[40] / *No, it wasn't David*[41] / *It wasn't him yet*[42]. This sentence becomes the chorus of the novel and the prolepsis of the first half of the text, before David makes his appearance as a character. Or, the prolepsis – sometimes also referred to by the French term *annonce*[43] – is a brief allusion to a future event that blurs not only, in this case, the narrator's attempts to make sense of her own experience, but also, as Teresa Bridgeman noticed, the process of interpretation. *The explicit textual anachrony of the* annonce, *constituted by its departure from the prevailing reference time frame*, the researcher writes, *also serves as a foregrounding device, flagging it as an invitation to speculate. Not only does it positively invite predictive inferences by cueing*

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[33]   S. Sinha, *Fenêtre...*, pp. 7-8.

[34]   Ibid.

[35]   M. Jarvis, *Psychodynamic Psychology. Classical Theory and Contemporary Research*, London 2004, p. 168.

[36]   S. Sinha, *Fenêtre...*, p. 39.

[37]   Ibid., p. 83.

[38]   Ibid.

[39]   Ibid., p. 87.

[40]   Ibid., p. 11, 13.

[41]   Ibid., p. 58.

[42]   Ibid. See also p. 85: *David, David! I hadn't met him yet!*, and p. 129: *I hadn't seen David yet*.

[43]   T. Bridgeman, "Thinking Ahead: A Cognitive Approach to Prolepsis", *Narrative*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2005), p. 125.

a future state of the narrative, there is a strong pragmatic implicature that it is important to know this information now, not later[44]. The reason why the reader is informed about David beforehand is disclosed at the end of the novel and, in retrospect, it assures the coherence of an otherwise deeply fragmented narrative – but we will come back to this element later.

It is not only Madhuban's narrative that is fragmented, but also her mind. Indeed, difficult as it might be to "diagnose" her with precision by using the cues provided by the text, the character seems to be suffering from one of the dissociative disorders which, as Donald Kalsched showed, emerge as a result of a traumatic experience[45]. Interestingly, Madhuban actually refers to herself as being *divided into pieces*[46], stating that around her *the worlds fall apart, they crumble*[47] while she is feeling confused and sick, and experiences sudden mood swings during which her joy turns into sorrow, frustration, anger and hatred[48]. The character's psyche appears to be split, and splitting is, as Kalsched puts it, *a violent affair* during which *the normally integrative tendencies in the psyche must be interrupted by force*[49] in order to protect it from unbearable pain and assure its physical as well as psychological survival. Splitting, however, occurs mostly in early trauma[50], about which Madhuban's narrative is silent, either because – we can infer – it did not occur, or because she is not aware of it. Although the text is elliptical concerning her childhood, the post-traumatic stress symptoms that she displays – sleep deprivation, recurrent nightmares, self-destructive behaviour and self-recrimination[51] – seem to stem not only from her illicit love affairs and her problematic relationship with her family, but also from deeper and earlier shattering events. Despite the fact that she does not remember or voice them, these events seem to continue to affect her throughout her adult life, by influencing her emotional states, her behavior and her decisions.

In this light, her frequent nightmares and her desire to be raped represent the embodied traces of early trauma. Indeed, the controlling behavior of her strict father and the unprotective nature of her submissive mother are alluded to a couple of times, when she succinctly describes her parents as *Marxist father, dreamy mother*[52], and also when she refers to the former as *the axis of the family* and *the decision maker* who is unwilling to accept the fact that his daughter has become a grown-up woman[53]. We can thus imply

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[44]   Ibid., p. 131.

[45]   D. Kalsched, *The Inner World of Trauma. Archetypal Defenses of the Personal Spirit*, London–New York 1996, p. 7.

[46]   S. Sinha, *Fenêtre…*, p. 189.

[47]   Ibid., p. 221.

[48]   Ibid., p. 208.

[49]   D. Kalsched, *The Inner World…*, p. 13.

[50]   Ibid., p. 203.

[51]   Cf. S.J. Egan, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Causes, Symptoms and Treatment*, Hauppauge 2010.

[52]   S. Sinha, *Fenêtre…*, p. 141.

[53]   Ibid., p. 62.

that her parents' behavior was similar throughout the heroine's life, and that her freedom was, therefore, limited. In this respect, Sinha's novel, although written in French, is representative of the 20th-century tendency, recurrent, as Nivedita Sen shows[54], in the Bengali literature, to depict social and political child rebellion. Acting as a heroine who calls the values of her family into question, Madhuban's multiple love affairs with married and foreign man – both attributes indicating a transgression –, along with her eventual immigration, turn the text into a narrative of emancipation and disobedience, portraying both the dysphoric and euphoric nature of a grown-up child's frustration and subsequent rebellion.

On a symbolic level, the absence of her parents' emotional and physical borders, along with their intrusive access to Madhuban's intimate life is represented by the recurrent motif of the invisible walls that seem to surround the character. Indeed, she dreams that upon her arrival to Paris she finds herself trapped in the so-called "aquarium" room of the Charles-de-Gaulle airport, watching all the other passengers walking away through the glass walls[55]. Similarly, she describes her home as a *large and empty* aquarium[56] in which she feels alone, and later states that she is David's *fish prisoner* kept in a *glass jar*[57]. In addition, she perceives Paris as a transparent city[58], as an *invisible podium*[59] and as a *glass palace*[60], in the middle of which she feels numb and isolated, trapped in an hourglass or in a glass bubble[61].

The motif of the invisible walls that leave her exposed and powerless are reinforced by that of the fragmented mirror, symbol of her dissociated mind. Madhuban repeatedly states perceiving only parts of herself in the city's mirrors[62], living in a mirror in order to avoid reality[63] and seeing life in infinite mirrors[64]. The mirror is by definition an ambivalent object, referring, as Sabine Melchior-Bonnet showed, to both one's vanity and one's psyche[65]. At the same time, mirrors invite melancholy[66] and self-reflection, and their presence in the novel, together with that of the invisible walls, can also be interpreted as self-referential elements, the book reflecting Madhuban's dispersed

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54 N. Sen, *Family, School and Nation. The Child and Literary Constructions in 20th-Century Bengal*, New Delhi–London–New York 2015.

55 S. Sinha, *Fenêtre...*, p. 12.

56 Ibid., p. 129.

57 Ibid. p. 172.

58 Ibid., p. 21.

59 Ibid., p. 76.

60 Ibid., p. 86.

61 Ibid., p. 221.

62 Ibid., p. 122, 144, 182.

63 Ibid., p. 115.

64 Ibid., p. 9.

65 S. Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror. A History*, transl. by K.H. Jewett, New York–London 2002, pp. 84 and next.

66 Ibid., p. 243.

consciousness which is rendered in a transparent and uncensored manner to her psychotherapist and, ultimately, to the reader.

LIVING IN THE "IN-BETWEEN" – MADHUBAN'S INABILITY TO BELONG

The feeling of isolation Madhuban experiences in the French capital's *glass palace*[67] is strengthened by her apparent inability to feel connected to the others. Indeed, although several intermental units are depicted throughout the novel, Madhuban's place in them is liminary. Said differently, the character seems to belong to them, but in reality, she constantly feels as an outsider everywhere in the world. In her own words, *The verdict is always the same: eliminate the one who doesn't fit in!* Find the odd one out! *From the modest neighborhood in Calcutta to the square of Carré du forum des Halles, at the Sorbonne and on the boulevards, in the sub and on the embankments, and, as I would notice later, at the poetry evenings and in the restaurants, at noon or in the evening*[68].

Thus, Madhuban has an ambivalent position in all the small intermental units depicted in the novel, namely her family, the couples she forms with lovers, and her group of friends. On the one hand, she is part of each of these groups, but on the other she is separated by them either by legal, geographical, cultural or emotional factors. The only group in which she seems to fit is that of her girlfriends, who have the same age and similar interests and problems. However, from the moment she leaves her country, their presence fades away, reappearing only through occasional e-mails and phone calls. As far as her family is concerned, she seeks to distance herself at any cost from her severe and dysfunctional parents. Likewise, her lovers, Michel Bertrand and David, are both married, which leaves her in a secondary and clandestine position in their lives. Apart from this, she is also cheating on her own husband, Antoine, describing herself as a *legitimate stranger*[69] to him, a pun that subverts the meaning of the legal term "legitimate wife". Moreover, apart from Antoine, who appears to be seriously affected by her behavior and concerned about her life – he repeatedly advises her to see a psychologist – her other lovers seem rather careless and unconcerned about her mental health and her well-being. Michel Betrand, for example, disagrees with her plan of moving from Calcutta to Paris, but, as it appears, his motivation is not the fear of losing her. Instead, he is worried that she might enjoy her life in Paris, not need him anymore and, most importantly, stop perceiving him as her unique "French man". Similarly, when David's wife discovers their love affair and asks for a divorce, David appears to be concerned about his image, and does not refrain from resorting to lies that present her in a negative light in order to save his own appearance and diminish both his culpability and his

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[67]   S. Sinha, *Fenêtre…*, p. 86.

[68]   Ibid., p. 76, emphasis in the original.

[69]   Ibid., p. 142.

responsibility[70]. On the whole, Madhuban's inability to establish meaningful relationships is expressed by the recurrent phrase "two is a magic number"[71], which suggests that living in a functional couple is out of her realm of possibilities.

In addition, the two clearly-defined medium-sized intermental units that appear in the text, namely her students and her workplace colleagues, also turn her into an outsider. While teaching, she has the impression that all the teenagers blend into one single character[72], dressing, talking and acting in a similar manner, while she confronts them alone and is constantly questioning her behavior towards them. Similarly, her Indian colleagues from Paris make repeated negative remarks about her appearance and her outrageous and inadequate "Western" clothes, even explaining to her what she ironically calls *the caste hierarchy of the Indian bureaucracy*[73].

Another group presented through the prism of Madhuban's mind is that of French women. Apart from Carole, who hosts her a couple of nights and invites her to dinner from time to time, none of them, however, appears as an individualized presence. Indeed, they seem to act as an intermental unit, as a homogenous mind which shares numerous characteristics, but which is, Madhuban feels, inaccessible to foreigners. The heroine is particularly concerned with one of this unit's sub-groups, namely the professional, friendly yet somewhat patronizing Parisian shopkeepers that work for the well-known affordable brands such as: Mango, Zara, Naf Naf or Promod, from where she buys her clothes. Her repetitive attempts to *court*[74] them by pleasing and imitating them whilst hoping to make them cherish her prove to be unsuccessful, which only deepens her feeling of loneliness. The communion she seeks remains unattainable, and she has to settle for brief intermental encounters, namely short dialogues that do not go beyond social rituals. This leads the narrator to conclude that, once again, she is *the black sheep*[75] and *the odd one out*[76].

There are, however, two intermental structures to which Madhuban seems to belong. The first one is the city of Paris, where she lives both joyful and dramatic episodes, but where, at the same time, she experiences a feeling of freedom she was not familiar with during her life in Calcutta. In contrast to her hometown, depicted in dreamlike scenes, *covered in centuries-old grey dust* and perceived as *a kingdom of dust*[77], Paris appears to be more of a real-life city. Indeed, to the proliferation of Parisian toponyms – such as the square Saint-André-des-Arts, the boulevards Saint-Germain and Saint-Michel[78], the bookstore Gibert Jeune[79] and the student dormitory complex "la

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[70]   Ibid., p. 215-216.

[71]   Ibid., p. 202.

[72]   Ibid., p. 96.

[73]   Ibid., p. 153.

[74]   Ibid., p. 76.

[75]   Ibid., p. 115.

[76]   Ibid., p. 115, emphasis in the original.

[77]   Ibid., p. 60.

[78]   Ibid., p. 53.

[79]   Ibid., p. 56.

Cité Universitaire"[80] – corresponds a receding image of Calcutta, whose geography is scarcely evoked. Shrouded in myth and literature, Paris acts as an intermental mind, a city that has a well-defined life and identity of its own. The French capital is, however, ambivalent. Thus, while allowing Madhuban to feel free to wander in the streets and devote herself to her favorite pastimes, like going to the cinema and reading, Paris is also the place where her emotional breakdown – or, as the title suggests, her fall into the *abyss* – takes place. Nevertheless, followed by repeated encounters with her psychotherapist, her breakdown could also be interpreted as a springboard for her upcoming recovery. Despite the fact that the text is silent about the subsequent evolution of her mental states, it becomes increasingly clear that Madhuban develops a close therapeutic relationship with her psychotherapist, whom she sees regularly and whom she seemingly trusts. The relationship between the two is, we can infer, the heroine's only genuine intermental encounter, which gradually becomes a small intermental unit. If emotional healing emerges as a result of this process, then – in Madhuban's parlance – the number "two" will step out of the realm of magic into that of possibility.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUDING – AN *OPERA APERTA*

The ending of the novel is ambiguous, turning the text in what Umberto Eco calls an *opera aperta*, or an *open text*. Open texts, the Italian scholar writes, are defined by indeterminacy, and leave considerable room for different, sometimes conflicting interpretations. Furthermore, *each interpretation is reechoed by other, and vice-versa*[81]. Thus, Madhuban asserts having stabbed to death her lover David in rage. This enables the reader to interpret both her story and the presence of her psychotherapist in a different light. Indeed, if the narrator is a murderer, then the therapy sessions are probably imposed upon her by law. Furthermore, the recurrent references to David can now be explained by the fact that she is telling the story of his murder. Her choice of words, however, calls into question these hypotheses: *David! I've killed David! On the sidewalk in Paris. In his apartment. In mine. In the room 615, with its wallpaper, its yellow, moderately cheerful flowers. I've killed him how I used to kill him in my nightmares*[82]. This paragraph echoes a previous one, in which she states that David *went away*[83] – another ambiguous lexical construction which can be interpreted either as a euphemism for David's death, or as his actual disappearance from her life. Furthermore, the fact that one of the therapy sessions takes place not in the mental health specialist's cabinet, but in a café, suggests that the narrator is not in detention. It is, however, difficult to establish whether her alleged murder is a fantasy, a delusion or a real event.

In a different light, *Fenêtre sur l'abîme* echoes two other texts which depict transgressive female protagonists that address, in one form or the other, the topic of mental

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[80]   Ibid., p. 57.

[81]   U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington 1991, pp. 7-9.

[82]   S. Sinha, *Fenêtre...*, p. 234.

[83]   Ibid., p. 133.

illness. The first one is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), a classic of French and universal literature revolving around Emma, a 19th-century young lady who marries an elderly village doctor and has several extramarital love affairs before dying by suicide. Unlike Emma Bovary, however, Madhuban's despair is provoked not because of social conventions, but because she is trying from the beginning to set herself free from them. Another character Madhuban is reminiscent of is Heinrich Böll's Katharina Blum, the protagonist of his 1974 novel, *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum, or: How Violence Develops and Where it Can Lead*. The character is an innocent housekeeper whose life is ruined by the aggressive way in which a fictional tabloid named *The Zeitung* (*The Newspaper*) is leading an investigation on the man with whom she has fallen in love. The pressure she is subjected to increases gradually, until she eventually murders one of the journalists, who shows up uninvited to her house and wants to talk her into sleeping with him. Both Madhuban and Katharina Blum have symbolic names with delicate feminine connotations – Madhuban means "honey forest" in Bengali, while Blum echoes "Blume", the German noun for flower. They both lose their innocence and engage into destructive behaviors as a result of their interaction with what appears to be a harsh and unforgiving outside world. There is no doubt, however, about Katharina's crime, while Madhuban's appears, as stated previously, in an ambiguous light.

Regardless of the real or imagined nature of the heroine's murder, *Fenêtre sur l'abîme* is an open window to what Donald Kalsched called "the inner world of trauma"[84], portraying an accurate description of the depths of a fragmented and suffering mind. The book is thus one of those novels that, as the American writer and psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom put it, explore the pathological mechanisms of the human mind[85]. Yalom describes in the following words his experience of reading authors such as Dostoyevksy, Tolstoy, Samnuel Beckett, Milan Kundera, Hermann Hesse, Álvaro Mutis and Knut Hamsun: *I felt they were telling my story: and not only my story, but the story of every patient who had ever consulted me. More and more I grasped the many issues my patients struggled with – aging, loss, death, major life choices such as what profession to pursue and whom to marry – were often more cogently addressed by novelists and philosophers than by members of my own field*[86]. Upon analyzing her first novel, it seems to us that Shumona Sinha's is promisingly moving towards this gallery of writers.

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[84]   D. Kalsched, *The Inner World...*, p. 2.

[85]   I.D. Yalom, *Becoming Myself. A Psychiatrist's Memoir*, New York 2017, p. 178.

[86]   Ibid.

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