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Have you ever been the only person of your own colour or ethnicity in a large group or gathering? It has been said that there are two kinds of white people: those who have never found themselves in a situation where the majority of people around them are not white, and those who have been the only white person in the room. At that moment, for the first time perhaps, they discover what it is really like for the other people in their society, and, metaphorically, for the rest of the world outside the west: to be from a minority, to live as the person who is always in the margins, to be the person who never qualifies as the norm, the person who is not authorized to speak.

This is as true for peoples as for persons. Do you feel that your own people and country are somehow always positioned outside the mainstream? Have you ever felt that the moment you said the word ‘I’, that ‘I’ was someone else, not you? That in some obscure way, you were not the subject of your own sentence? Do you ever feel that whenever you speak, you have already in some sense been spoken for? Or that when you hear others speaking, that you are only ever going to be the object of their speech? Do you sense that those speaking would never think of trying to find out how things seem to you, from where you are? That you live in a world of others, a world that exists for others?

How can we find a way to talk about this? That is the first question.
which postcolonialism tries to answer. Since the early 1980s, postcolonialism has developed a body of writing that attempts to shift the dominant ways in which the relations between western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed. What does that mean? It means turning the world upside down. It means looking from the other side of the photograph, experiencing how differently things look when you live in Baghdad or Benin rather than Berlin or Boston, and understanding why. It means realizing that when western people look at the non-western world what they see is often more a mirror image of themselves and their own assumptions than the reality of what is really there, or of how people outside the west actually feel and perceive themselves. If you are someone who does not identify yourself as western, or as somehow not completely western even though you live in a western country, or someone who is part of a culture and yet excluded by its dominant voices, inside yet outside, then postcolonialism offers you a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which your interests come first, not last.

Postcolonialism claims the right of all people on this earth to the same material and cultural well-being. The reality, though, is that the world today is a world of inequality, and much of the difference falls across the broad division between people of the west and those of the non-west. This division between the rest and the west was made fairly absolute in the 19th century by the expansion of the European empires, as a result of which nine-tenths of the entire land surface of the globe was controlled by European, or European-derived, powers. Colonial and imperial rule was legitimized by anthropological theories which increasingly portrayed the peoples of the colonized world as inferior, childlike, or feminine, incapable of looking after themselves (despite having done so perfectly well for millennia) and requiring the paternal rule of the west for their own best interests (today they are deemed to require ‘development’). The basis of such anthropological theories was the concept of race. In simple terms, the west–non-west relation was thought of in terms of whites versus the non-white races. White
culture was regarded (and remains) the basis for ideas of legitimate government, law, economics, science, language, music, art, literature – in a word, civilization.

Throughout the period of colonial rule, colonized people contested this domination through many forms of active and passive resistance. It was only towards the end of the 19th century, however, that such resistance developed into coherent political movements: for the peoples of most of the earth, much of the 20th century involved the long struggle and eventual triumph against colonial rule, often at enormous cost of life and resources. In Asia, in Africa, in Latin America, people struggled against the politicians and administrators of European powers that ruled empires or the colonists who had settled their world.

When national sovereignty had finally been achieved, each state moved from colonial to autonomous, postcolonial status. Independence! However, in many ways this represented only a beginning, a relatively minor move from direct to indirect rule, a shift from colonial rule and domination to a position not so much of independence as of being in-dependence. It is striking that despite decolonization, the major world powers did not change substantially during the course of the 20th century. For the most part, the same (ex-)imperial countries continue to dominate those countries that they formerly ruled as colonies. The cases of Afghanistan, Cuba, Iran, and Iraq, make it clear that any country that has the nerve to resist its former imperial masters does so at its peril. All governments of these countries that have positioned themselves politically against western control have suffered military interventions by the west against them.

Yet the story is not wholly negative. The winning of independence from colonial rule remains an extraordinary achievement. And if power remains limited, the balance of power is slowly changing. For one thing, along with this shift from formal to informal empire, the western countries require ever more additional labour power at
home, which they fulfil through immigration. As a result of immigration, the clear division between the west and the rest in ethnic terms at least no longer operates absolutely. This is not to say that the president of the United States has ever been an African-American woman, or that Britain has elected an Asian Muslim as prime minister. Power remains carefully controlled. How many faces of power can you think of that are brown? The ones, that is, that appear on the front pages of the newspapers, where the everyday politics of world power are reported. Cultures are changing though: white Protestant America is being hispanized. Hispanic and black America have become the dynamic motors of much live western culture that operates beyond the graveyard culture of the heritage industry. Today, for many of the youth of Europe, Cuban culture rules, energizing and electrifying with its vibrant *son* and *salsa*. More generally, in terms of broad consensus, the dominance of western culture, on which much of the division between western and non-western peoples was assumed to rest in colonial times, has been dissolved into a more generous system of cultural respect and a tolerance for differences. Some of the limits of that respect will be explored in later sections of this book.

For now, what is important is that postcolonialism involves first of all the argument that the nations of the three non-western continents (Africa, Asia, Latin America) are largely in a situation of subordination to Europe and North America, and in a position of economic inequality. Postcolonialism names a politics and philosophy of activism that contests that disparity, and so continues in a new way the anti-colonial struggles of the past. It asserts not just the right of African, Asian, and Latin American peoples to access resources and material well-being, but also the dynamic power of their cultures, cultures that are now intervening in and transforming the societies of the west.

Postcolonial cultural analysis has been concerned with the elaboration of theoretical structures that contest the previous dominant western ways of seeing things. A simple analogy would be
with feminism, which has involved a comparable kind of project: there was a time when any book you might read, any speech you might hear, any film that you saw, was always told from the point of view of the male. The woman was there, but she was always an object, never a subject. From what you would read, or the films you would see, the woman was always the one who was looked at. She was never the observing eye. For centuries it was assumed that women were less intelligent than men and that they did not merit the same degree of education. They were not allowed a vote in the political system. By the same token, any kind of knowledge developed by women was regarded as non-serious, trivial, gossip, or alternatively as knowledge that had been discredited by science, such as superstition or traditional practices of childbirth or healing. All these attitudes were part of a larger system in which women were dominated, exploited, and physically abused by men. Slowly, but increasingly, from the end of the 18th century, feminists began to contest this situation. The more they contested it, the more it became increasingly obvious that these attitudes extended into the whole of the culture: social relations, politics, law, medicine, the arts, popular and academic knowledges.

As a politics and a practice, feminism has not involved a single system of thought, inspired by a single founder, as was the case with Marxism or psychoanalysis. It has rather been a collective work, developed by different women in different directions: its projects have been directed at a whole range of phenomena of injustice, from domestic violence to law and language to philosophy. Feminists have also had to contend with the fact that relations between women themselves are not equal and can in certain respects duplicate the same kinds of power hierarchies that exist between women and men. Yet at the same time, broadly speaking feminism has been a collective movement in which women from many different walks of life have worked towards common goals, namely the emancipation and empowerment of women, the right to make decisions that affect their own lives, and the right to have equal access to the law, to education, to medicine, to the workplace,
in the process changing those institutions themselves so that they no longer continue to represent only male interests and perspectives.

In a comparable way, ‘postcolonial theory’ involves a conceptual reorientation towards the perspectives of knowledges, as well as needs, developed outside the west. It is concerned with developing the driving ideas of a political practice morally committed to transforming the conditions of exploitation and poverty in which large sections of the world’s population live out their daily lives. Some of this theoretical work has gained a reputation for obscurity and for involving complex ideas that ordinary people are not able to understand. When faced with the authority of theory produced by academics, people often assume that their own difficulties of comprehension arise from a deficiency in themselves. This is unfortunate, since many of these ideas were never produced by academics in the first place and can be understood relatively easily once the actual situations that they describe are understood. For this reason, this book seeks to introduce postcolonialism in a way not attempted before: rather than explaining it top down, that is elaborating the theory in abstract terms and then giving a few examples, it seeks to follow the larger politics of postcolonialism which are fundamentally populist and affirm the worth of ordinary people and their cultures. Postcolonialism will here be elaborated not from a top-down perspective but from below: the bulk of the sections that follow will start with a situation and then develop the ideas that emerge from its particular perspective. What you will get, therefore, is postcolonialism without the obscure theory, postcolonialism from below, which is what and where it should rightly be, given that it elaborates a politics of ‘the subaltern’, that is, subordinated classes and peoples.

Postcolonial theory, so-called, is not in fact a theory in the scientific sense, that is a coherently elaborated set of principles that can predict the outcome of a given set of phenomena. It comprises instead a related set of perspectives, which are juxtaposed against
one another, on occasion contradictorily. It involves issues that are often the preoccupation of other disciplines and activities, particularly to do with the position of women, of development, of ecology, of social justice, of socialism in its broadest sense. Above all, postcolonialism seeks to intervene, to force its alternative knowledges into the power structures of the west as well as the non-west. It seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between the different peoples of the world.

For this reason, there will be no attempt here to elaborate postcolonialism as a single set of ideas, or as a single practice. At one level there is no single entity called ‘postcolonial theory’: postcolonialism, as a term, describes practices and ideas as various as those within feminism or socialism. The book therefore is not written as a series of chapters that develop an overall thesis or argument as in the standard model of academic writing. Instead it uses the technique of montage to juxtapose perspectives and times against one another, seeking to generate a creative set of relations between them. For much of postcolonial theory is not so much about static ideas or practices, as about the relations between ideas and practices: relations of harmony, relations of conflict, generative relations between different peoples and their cultures. Postcolonialism is about a changing world, a world that has been changed by struggle and which its practitioners intend to change further.

A lot of people don’t like the term ‘postcolonial’: now you may begin to see why. It disturbs the order of the world. It threatens privilege and power. It refuses to acknowledge the superiority of western cultures. Its radical agenda is to demand equality and well-being for all human beings on this earth.

You will now be migrating through that postcolonial earth: the chapters that follow will take you on a journey through its cities, the suburbs of its dispossessed, the poverty of its rural landscape.
Though these scenes are acknowledged to exist, many of them are invisible, the lives and daily experiences of their inhabitants even more so. The chapters of this book comprise different 'scenes', snapshots taken in various locations around the world and juxtaposed against one another. This book therefore amounts to a kind of photograph album, but not one in which you are just gazing at the image, made static and unreal, turned into an object divorced from the whispers of actuality. These are stories from the other side of photographs. Testimonies from the people who are looking at you as you read. The montage has been left as a rough cut that deliberately juxtaposes incompatible splintered elements. A series of shorts that stage the contradictions of the history of the present, by catching its images fleetingly at a standstill. These fragmentary moments also trace a larger journey of translation, from the disempowered to the empowered.

When we begin to teach 'marginality', we start with the source books of the contemporary study of the cultural politics of colonialism and its aftermath: the great texts of the 'Arab World', most often Frantz Fanon, a Christian psychiatrist from Martinique ... It is also from this general context that we find the source book in our discipline: Edward Said's *Orientalism* ... Said's book was not a study of marginality, nor even of marginalization. It was the study of the construction of an object, for investigation and control. The study of colonial discourse, directly released by work such as Said's, has, however, blossomed into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for.

Chapter 1

Subaltern knowledge

You find yourself a refugee

You wake one morning from troubled dreams to discover that your world has been transformed. Under cover of night, you have been transported elsewhere. As you open your eyes, the first thing you notice is the sound of the wind blowing across flat, empty land.

You are walking with your family towards a living cemetery on the borderlands between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Towards Peshawar, city of flowers, city of spies. A frontier town, the first stop for travellers from Kabul who have passed out through the carved city gate of Torkham, down the long narrow curves of grey rock of the Khyber Pass to the flat plain that lies beyond, to the Grand Trunk Road that runs, stretches, streams all the way to Kolkata.

In the Old City, among the many shops and stalls in the Khyber Bazaar around the Darwash mosque, you will find a narrow street where the houses climb into the sky with their ornamented balconies exploding out towards each other. This street is known as the Qissa Khawani Bazaar, the street of storytellers. Over the centuries, fabulous intricate tales have been elaborated there between men relaxing over bubbling amber shishas, trying to outdo the professional storytellers, or amongst those more quickly sipping
sweet, syrupy tea in glasses at the chai stalls. The stories that are being traded there now are not for you.

You are far to the west, beyond the colonial cantonment, beyond the huge suburbs of temporary housing of those who have arrived long since, out into the flats that lie before the mountains. The rest of your family, two of your children, are missing. You are carrying with you a bag of clothes, a mat, for prayer and sleep, a large plastic container for water, and some aluminium pots. Some soldiers on the road stop you from walking further. The Jalozai refugee camp near Peshawar has been closed. Pashtuns who arrive now from Afghanistan are shepherded towards Chaman, not a refugee camp but a ‘waiting area’. Here, once your eye moves above tent level, the earth is flat and featureless until it hits the dusky distant shapes of the Himalayan foothills on the horizon.

Since this is not an official refugee camp, there is no one here to register you or mark your arrival as you slowly make your way forwards. While your children sit exhausted and hungry on the
bare, sandy brown earth, the skin on their blown bellies marked with the crimson stars of infection, you go in search of water and food, and with the hope of being issued with materials for housing – three sticks of wood and a large plastic sheet. This will be your tent, where you and your family will live – that is, those who manage to survive the lack of food, the dehydration, the dysentery, the cholera.

You may leave within months. Or, if you are unlucky – like the Somali refugees in Kenya, the Palestinian refugees in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, or the ‘internally displaced persons’ in Sri Lanka or the South Africa of the 1970s – you may find that you are to be there for a decade, or for several. This may be the only home you, your children, and your grandchildren will ever have.

Refugee: you are unsettled, uprooted. You have been translated. Who translated you? Who broke your links with the land? You have been forcibly moved off, or you have fled war or famine. You are mobile, mobilized, stumbling along your line of flight. But nothing flows. In moving, your life has come to a halt. Your life has been fractured, your family fragmented. The lovely dull familiar stabilities of ordinary everyday life and local social existence that

How rich our mutability, how easily we change (and are changed) from one thing to another, how unstable our place – and all because of the missing foundation of our existence, the lost ground of our origin, the broken link with our land and our past. There are no Palestinians. Who are the Palestinians? ‘The inhabitants of Judea and Samaria.’ Non-Jews. Terrorists. Troublemakers. DPs. Refugees. Names on a card. Numbers on a list. Praised in speeches – *el pueblo palestino, il popolo palestino, le peuple palestin* – but treated as interruptions, intermittent presences.

you have known have passed. Compressed into a brief moment, you have experienced the violent disruptions of capitalism, the end of the comforts of the commonplace. You have become an emblem of everything that people are experiencing in cold modernity across different times. You encounter a new world, a new culture to which you have to adapt while trying to preserve your own recognizable forms of identity. Putting the two together is an experience of pain. Perhaps one day you, or your children, will see it as a form of liberation, but not now. Life has become too fragile, too uncertain. You can count on nothing. You have become an object in the eyes of the world. Who is interested in your experiences now, in what you think or feel? Politicians of the world rush to legislate to prevent you from entry into their countries. Asylum seeker: barred.

You are the intruder. You are untimely, you are out of place. A refugee tearing yourself from your own land, carrying your body, beliefs, your language and your desires, your habits and your affections, across to the strange subliminal spaces of unrecognizable worlds. Everything that happens in this raw, painful experience of
disruption, dislocation, and dis-remembering paradoxically fuels the cruel but creative crucible of the postcolonial.

**Different kinds of knowledge**

One thing that you would be unlikely to do in the Jalozai camp is to read this book, even if you were literate, and it had been translated into Pushto. You would talk a lot, speak to many people about day-to-day problems, sometimes relating longer and harder tales of suffering amid war and famine, trying to make sense of your experiences. If you met any of those from elsewhere working for your support, you would most likely speak to them of your needs – for medicine, for food, shelter. You would not articulate your experiences for the benefit of others you would never meet, you would not translate your life into a story or a representation for others. Yet you are the not-so-silent hero of this book: it is written for you. Even if you will never read these words, they are written for you.

Whether you could read this book or not brings out one of the major ways in which the world is divided, though the line can be cut in

By far the greater part of the archive through which knowledge about the so-called Third World is generated in the metropolises has traditionally been, and continues to be, assembled within metropolitan institutions of research and explication . . . The archive itself is dispersed through myriad academic disciplines and genres of writing – from philological reconstruction of the classics to lowbrow reports by missionaries and administrators; from Area Study Programmes and even the central fields of the Humanities to translation projects sponsored by Foundations and private publishing houses – generating all kinds of classificatory practices.

Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory* (1992)
many places. Whether you have clean water or not, whether you have adequate food and health care or not, whether you can read or not, whether or not you have formal education. Everyone has informal education, and the boundary lines between the formal and the informal are more than fluid. The knowledge that you need is the knowledge you learn informally. From your own family and environment. The knowledge you learn formally is someone else's knowledge. Who authorized it? Whose knowledge is it? The knowledge that you learn at different schools will not be the same, and the frame of mind in which you learn will not be the same either: think of the differences for children between those who attend private schools in the west costing £15,000 a year, and those who began the school year in 2001 at the Al-Khader school near Bethlehem. The school buildings had been destroyed by Israeli military action and the children had to learn in a tent. Or think about the learning experiences of the Palestinian girl in Figure 3, who walks to school through the ruins of the Rafah refugee camp.

3. A Palestinian school girl walks in the ruins of a refugee camp in Rafah in southern Gaza Strip, 15 April 2001. This happened a day after Israeli forces attacked the camp in the second incursion in less than a week into an area that Israel handed over to full Palestinian control under interim peace deals.
where she lives, where the day before three Israeli tanks and two bulldozers had reduced the buildings to rubble.

Not a lot has changed in Palestine in the 50 years since schools were first held in the open air at Khan Yunis refugee camp, Gaza Strip, or at the Jalazone refugee camp in the West Bank. If they are still alive, those boys are now old men, living in refugee camps that are themselves habitual targets for military strikes. How does it feel to have lived through such a life?

Thinking of these schools today while you read will help to develop the perspectives from which postcolonialism is generated. Think of Al-Khader, of Beit Jala, of Jalozai, of Jalazone, of Jenin, of Khan Yunis, of Rafah. How does the life that people live there compare to mine or yours? Imagine what it is like to grow up in a close, deprived community, and then see it literally bulldozed to the ground on the 4. The early UNRWA school, Jalazone refugee camp, West Bank, 1951.
orders of the state. Read Bloke Modisane’s account of the destruction of Sophiatown, the vibrant centre of black cultural life in Johannesburg, by the South African apartheid government in 1958.

Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown ... In the name of slum clearance they had brought the bulldozers and gored into her body, and for a brief moment, looking down Good Street, Sophiatown was like one of its own many victims; a man gored by the knives of Sophiatown, lying in the open gutters, a raisin in the smelling drains, dying of multiple stab wounds, gaping wells gushing forth blood; the look of shock and bewilderment, of horror and incredulity, on the face of the dying man.

Bloke Modisane, *Blame Me on History* (1963)

Modisane doesn’t allow us, though, to make the mistake of assuming that such experiences, differences between the privileged and the wretched of the earth, only involve the questions of suffering and deprivation. There are other kinds of riches, other kinds of loss. Other kinds of ways of thinking about the world. Human, rather than material.

The third world goes tricontinental

See a picture of children who are assembling at a school, standing barefoot on the stones, and you know you are in ‘the third world’. This third world is the postcolonial world. The term ‘third world’ was originally invented on the model of the Third Estate of the French Revolution. The world was divided according to the two major political systems, capitalism and socialism, and these were the first and second worlds. The third world was made up of what was left over: the ‘non-aligned’ nations, the new independent nations that had formerly made up the colonies of the imperial
powers. At the Bandung Conference of 1955, 29 mostly newly independent African and Asian countries, including Egypt, Ghana, India, and Indonesia, initiated what became known as the non-aligned movement. They saw themselves as an independent power bloc, with a new ‘third world’ perspective on political, economic, and cultural global priorities. It was an event of enormous importance; it symbolized the common attempt of the people of colour in the world to throw off the yoke of the white western nations. Politically, there was to be a third way, neither that of the west nor that of the Soviet bloc. However, that third way was slow to be defined or developed. The term gradually became associated with the economic and political problems that such countries encountered, and consequently with poverty, famine, unrest: ‘the Gap’.

In many ways, the Bandung Conference marks the origin of postcolonialism as a self-conscious political philosophy. A more militant version of third-world politics, as a global alliance resisting the continuing imperialism of the west, came 11 years later at the great Tricontinental Conference held in Havana in 1966. For the first time, this brought Latin America (including the Caribbean) together with Africa and Asia, the three continents of the South – hence the name ‘tricontinental’. In many ways, tricontinental is a more appropriate term to use than ‘postcolonial’. The Tricontinental Conference established a journal (called simply Tricontinental) which for the first time brought together the writings of ‘postcolonial’ theorists and activists (Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Jean-Paul Sartre), elaborated not as a single political and theoretical position but as a transnational body of work with a common aim of popular liberation. Many postcolonial theorists in the United States, however, remain unaware of this radical antecedent to their own work: because of the US blockade of Cuba, the journal was not allowed to be imported into the country.

As terms, both ‘tricontinental’ and ‘third world’ retain their power because they suggest an alternative culture, an alternative
The colonialists usually say that it was they who brought us into history: today we show that this is not so. They made us leave history, our history, to follow them, right at the back, to follow the progress of their history.

Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source* (1973)

'epistemology', or system of knowledge. Most of the writing that has dominated what the world calls knowledge has been produced by people living in western countries in the past three or more centuries, and it is this kind of knowledge that is elaborated within and sanctioned by the academy, the institutional knowledge corporation. The origins of much of this knowledge, particularly mathematical and scientific, came from the Arab world, which is why today even westerners write in Arabic whenever they write a number. Much emphasis in western schools is placed on the Latin and Greek inheritance of western civilization, but most westerners remain completely unaware of

What is the role that we, the exploited people of the world, must play? . . .

The contribution that falls to us, the exploited and backward of the world, is to eliminate the foundations sustaining imperialism: our oppressed nations, from which capital, raw materials and cheap labor (both workers and technicians) are extracted, and to which new capital (tools of domination), arms and all kinds of goods are exported, sinking us into absolute dependence. The fundamental element of that strategic objective, then, will be the real liberation of the peoples . . .

Che Guevara, 'Message to the Tricontinental' (1967)
5. Che Guevara, ‘Message to the Tricontinental’, 16 April 1967. Sent ‘from somewhere in the world’ to the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL), Guevara’s one public statement made in the interval between his disappearance from Cuba in the spring of 1965 and his murder in Bolivia on 9 October 1967 was published in the first issue of Tricontinental magazine.
the fact that they read and write Arabic every day. Imagine the headline: ‘Al-gebra banned in US schools after Al-Qaeda link discovered.’

Postcolonialism begins from its own knowledges, many of them more recently elaborated during the long course of the anti-colonial movements, and starts from the premise that those in the west, both within and outside the academy, should take such other knowledges, other perspectives, as seriously as those of the west. Postcolonialism, or tricontinentalism, is a general name for these insurgent knowledges that come from the subaltern, the dispossessed, and seek to change the terms and values under which we all live. You can learn it anywhere if you want to. The only qualification you need to start is to make sure that you are looking at the world not from above, but from below.

Burning their books

In *The Big Sea* (1940), the African-American novelist Langston Hughes tells the story of his leaving New York on a ship for Africa. He climbs to the top of the deck and throws all the books he has brought with him for the voyage as far as he can out into the sea. As they spin into the ocean one by one, he senses the exhilaration of freedom: ‘It was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart when I threw the books into the water’. He is leaving behind everything he has known and been taught, on his way to the world from which his ancestors came. All the hierarchical culture, in which the African-American is put firmly at the bottom, can be discarded in the return to a continent in which he will be amongst his own people, with their own way of doing things:

My Africa, motherland of the Negro peoples! And me a Negro! Africa! The real thing, to be touched and seen, not merely read about in a book.
When Hughes gets to Africa at last, one thing hurts him a lot when he talks to the people.

The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro.
'I am a Negro, too.'

But they only laughed at me and shook their heads and said: 'You, white man! You, white man!'

Frantz Fanon had the opposite experience. In Martinique, he had always been considered one of the fair-skinned. On arrival in Lyon in France, however, he found that people called out in the street when they saw him: 'Look! A negro!'. Fanon comments:

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Fanon’s first response is to experience the pain of, as he puts it, being ‘sealed into that crushing objecthood’. Later he realizes that the problem goes even deeper. That being turned into an object, the object of a pointing finger and a deriding gaze, is only the exterior part. What also happens is that those in such situations come to internalize this view of themselves, to see themselves as different, ‘other’, lesser.

I also was tired of learning and reciting poems in praise of daffodils, and my relations with the few ‘real’ English boys and girls I had met were awkward. I had discovered that if I called myself English they would snub me haughtily: ‘You’re not English; you’re a horrid colonial’.

Jean Rhys, ‘The Day They Burned the Books’ (1968)
In ‘The Day They Burned the Books’, the white Creole novelist Jean Rhys tells the story of Mr Sawyer, a white steamship agent on a Caribbean island, who is married to a woman of colour whom he periodically abuses in drunken moments. At the back of his house Mr Sawyer builds a small room, which he lines with English books that he has specially sent out to him. His sickly ‘half-caste’ son Eddie is the first to challenge the assumption of the narrator, a young girl, that everything from ‘home’, that is England, is naturally superior to anything on the island. At the same time, Eddie borrows books from the library, and when his father dies, he takes possession of it. After a few days, Eddie and the narrator walk into the library to find Mrs Sawyer, who has patiently remained married for so many years, erupting in a rage of hate, pulling the books from the shelves, separating them all into two piles. The ones to be sold, and the ones to be burned. When she pulls one particular book off the shelf, Eddie pleads with her not to burn it, telling her that he is reading it. Eventually he snatches it from her, shrieking ‘Now I’ve got to hate you too’. The narrator grabs one for herself too, and the children run out into the garden and to the street, and then sit together for a while in the darkness. Eddie begins to cry. In a gesture of sympathy for Eddie’s profound loneliness, the girl asks Eddie what his book is. It is Kipling’s *Kim*. She has not been so lucky. She instinctively feels her prize to be a momentous thing, but when she looks to see what it is, she is very disappointed, ‘because it was in French and seemed dull. *Fort Comme La Mort*, it was called . . .’

Jean Rhys’ story reads as an allegory not of colonialism as such, but of the gendered power relations of colonialism, where decades of patriarchal exploitation and aggressive racial-cultural hatred are answered by Mrs Sawyer’s violent rejection of the culture on which such superiority is founded. Eddie’s contradictory reaction, hating his father, hating ‘home’, England, but wanting his father’s books, brings him into conflict with his mother, whom he loves but who in turn hates all his father’s books. Eddie’s marginal place is between conflicting, competing cultures: identifying with one emotionally, curious about the other intellectually.
Such ambivalent attitudes and multiple identities are defined by the Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga as the native’s ‘nervous condition’, his or her existence strung out between the incompatible layers of different cultures. When an original culture is superimposed with a colonial or dominant culture through education, it produces a nervous condition of ambivalence, uncertainty, a blurring of cultural boundaries, inside and outside, an otherness within. In *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Tambudzai, the narrator who dreams of education, walks into the house of her headmaster relative who has adopted white ways. She finds that she does not know where to sit, she does not know how to read the conventional signs of a room, she does not know which language to use – English or Shona? The individuals in such a society are subject to the painfulness of what Fanon recognizes as a hybridized split existence, trying to live as two different, incompatible people at once. The negotiation between different identities, between the layers of different value systems (especially in the case of women, for whom the options seem to be mutually contradictory) is part of the process of becoming white, changing your race and your class by assimilating the dominant culture. Except that, though you may assimilate white values, you never quite can become white enough.

Book burning can be a gesture of liberation, or of powerlessness to make a statement by any other means. Usually, of course, it is generally thought of as oppressive, destructive, fascistic, as indeed it is when it consists of a nationalist attack on minority cultures. When agents of the Sinhalese United National Party burned down the Jaffna University Library in May 1981, for example: ‘Thousands of Tamil books, manuscripts and *ola*, dried palm leaf, documents were burnt, including the only copy of *Yalpanam Vaipavama*, a history of Jaffna’. When in May 1992, Serb nationalist forces threw incendiary grenades into the Oriental Institute (Orijentalni institut) in Sarajevo, home to one of Europe’s most important collections of Islamic manuscripts: ‘Virtually all of its contents were consumed by the flames. Losses included 5,263 bound manuscripts.
in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hebrew and local *alhamijado* – or *adzamijski* – (Serbo-Croat-Bosnian in Arabic script), as well as tens of thousands of Ottoman-era documents'. Ethnic cleansing involves destroying knowledge and histories as well as people.

‘Bradford Muslims’ has become a generic description not of Muslims who happen to live in Bradford, England, but of what are considered ‘fundamentalist’ Muslims in the west. On 14 January 1989 a group of Muslims in Bradford and Oldham publicly burned copies of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Commentators rushed to compare them to the Nazi book-burners in Germany in 1933. By comparison, we may note that the burning of J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books in the United States by fundamentalist Christian groups has received rather less press attention.

Rushdie’s position was complex because up to that point he had been one of the most noticeable proponents of anti-racism in Britain, voicing the politics and perspectives of the migrant community. Suddenly it became clear that within the communities of the ethnic minorities for whom he spoke, there were very different attitudes from Rushdie’s perspective of multicultural mixture (he calls it ‘chutnification’), endorsed by other ethnic minority writers, such as Hanif Kureishi, and also by the media. There is a deep split between celebratory multiculturalism and the real situation of many minorities who experience oppression in their everyday lives.

For the west, this appears largely as a division between liberals and conservatives: the first accept assimilation, while the second want to retain their unsullied cultural identity. For minorities in the west, or for those living outside the west, the divisions are less clear-cut. It is not unusual for individuals to want both at the same time. The nervous condition of postcolonial desire finds itself haunted by an ungovernable ambivalence.
The conflict of cultures and community around *The Satanic Verses* has been mainly represented in spatial terms and binary geopolitical polarities – Islamic fundamentalists vs. Western literary modernists, the quarrel of the ancient (ascriptive) migrants and modern (ironic) metropolitans. This obscures the anxiety of the irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity that articulates its problems of identification and its diasporic aesthetic in an uncanny, disjunctive temporality that is, at once, the *time* of cultural displacement, and the *space* of the ‘untranslatable’.

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994)
Chapter 2

History and power, from below and above

African and Caribbean revolutionaries in Harlem, 1924

I am looking at a photograph. Three men are standing together, posing quite stiffly and staring seriously and thoughtfully into the camera. Each is wearing a stylish suit, with a waistcoat and fob watch. The man in a white suit and wing tips in the centre wears a hat, the other two are carrying them. The shorter, slightly portly man on the right leans on the back of a folding wooden chair. Though they are posing together, the men keep physically separate from each other, suggesting that they are acquaintances but not close friends. There is an odd disjunction between the opulence of their outfits, and the rather run-down brick building behind them. It looks as though they are outside the back of an old tenement house or office building. The window behind has one shutter hanging to its right, but there is no corresponding shutter on the other side.

The photograph, taken by the famous photographer of the Harlem Renaissance James Van Der Zee, is of Marcus Garvey with George O. Marke and Prince Kojo Tovalou-Houénou, taken in August 1924. Garvey was from Jamaica, Marke from Sierre Leone, Tovalou-Houénou from Dahomey: they came together this day in New York City and are probably posing at the back of the former
Marcus Garvey with George O. Marke and Prince Kojo Tovalou-Houénou.

Black Star line offices at 56 West 135th Street in Harlem. Marke was supreme deputy potentate of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA): educated in Freetown and at the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh, Scotland, he had come to New York as a Sierraleonian delegate to the 1920 UNIA convention. In 1922, he was appointed minister plenipotentiary to the UNIA delegation to the League of Nations, which petitioned the League to turn the former German colonies in Africa over to black
settlement under the direction of the UNIA. The request was refused. The colonies were mandated to Britain and South Africa instead.

Garvey, founder of the UNIA, had by 1924 already been convicted on mail fraud charges by an FBI eager for an excuse to deport him. Having early joined Jamaica’s ‘National Club’, which sought independence from Britain, Garvey had travelled widely in Central America and then gone to London, where his sister Adriana was a governess. In London, he learned of the Pan-African movement, which had held its first conference there in 1900, and read Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery*. Most significantly, he met and became friends with the great Sudanese-Egyptian nationalist Duse Mohammed Ali, and worked with him on his radical nationalist newspaper, the *African Times and Orient Review*. When he returned to Jamaica to found the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1914, Garvey’s political philosophy, based on a simple, powerful message of black power and pride, was already formed. Two years later, he was invited to the United States by Booker T. Washington himself. Probably no black immigrant to the United States has ever had more political impact. He translated anti-colonial rhetoric into the language of civil rights and black empowerment, and throughout the 20th century the two would move forward, inalienably bound together, propelling each other. This photograph records one such vector, one such enabling moment.

Prince Tovalou-Houénou, for his part, had just arrived in New York from France to speak at the 1924 UNIA Convention at Harlem’s Liberty Hall. Tovalou-Houénou was president of the *Ligue Universelle de Défense de la Race Noire* (LDRN, the Universal League for the Defence of the Black Race), which he had founded in Paris after a famous incident in which some visiting white Americans had tried to have him thrown out of a café in Paris, on account of his being black. Looking at this
aristocratic man, the nephew of the exiled King of Dahomey, it is easy to see why he resented such treatment so forcefully that he aroused the sympathy of the entire French press, as a result of which Paris for many years had the reputation of being the western city most sympathetic to black artists and intellectuals. Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, Sidney Bechet: the French loved them—just as long as they weren’t Arabs.

At that 1924 Convention, Garvey was able to announce that there were now some 14,000 branches of the UNIA movement. Half of them were in North America, the rest spread throughout the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Africa; total membership was estimated at 6 million. That extraordinary globalized constituency was mirrored in the title of Tovalou-Houénou’s newspaper, Les Continents. Revolutionary movements across the Black Atlantic; three revolutionaries coming together in the United States from French and British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean in order to establish intercultural networks of activism and transnational solidarity.

Garvey’s movements around the Caribbean, the United States, and England, make him an early example of what Salman Rushdie characterizes as the state of being a ‘translated man’, that is, someone who is ‘translated’ across cultures. This is not something that people necessarily experience in a passive way: Garvey’s call for the restitution of the dignity of the black man was a call to self-translation. Translation is a way of thinking about how languages, people, and cultures are transformed as they move between different places. It can also be used more metaphorically, as a way of describing how the individual or the group can be transformed by changing their sense of their own place in society.

Here, standing in New York with each other, ready to speak to the
assembled audience of the UNIA at Liberty Hall, were three men who had not simply made the journey to Harlem from Jamaica, Dahomey, and Sierre Leone. They were themselves active cultural translators in the process of refiguring American culture too, and beyond that cultures right across the globe. Their meeting marks a moment of the translation of revolutionary ideologies between nations of the oppressed. Tovalou-Houénou was subsequently persecuted by the French colonial authorities, and Garvey was required by the FBI to leave the United States. For decades afterwards, the links between American civil rights activists, such as the singer Paul Robeson, and Caribbean and African anti-colonial leaders, would be the subject of surveillance by the FBI, MI5, and MI6. But it was too late – Garvey’s intervention had already been made. Caribbean radicalism had come to New York and London, and the cause of black empowerment would grow ever stronger. Generations of Caribbean radicals would follow in their footsteps to African-America: C. L. R. James, Claude McKay, George Padmore.

The most celebrated moment in this long history came in 1960 when Fidel Castro, having been mistreated in his midtown hotel,

The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact, non-Westerners never do.

Samuel P. Huntington, cited on the ‘Where is Raed?’ website, a day-to-day journal of everyday life in Baghdad under bombardment

I was standing on the balcony looking out over the skyline of yellow houses towards the dark limestone mountains of the North, which rose steeply into the evening sky. I could still make out the vast flag of Cyprus’ Turkish Republic hanging across the mountainside, an enormous mosaic of bright painted stones laid out to make a crescent and star between two horizontal stripes, all red against a white background. Wherever you are in Nicosia, whenever you look North, you see that flag, floating defiantly across the skyline, with its uncompromising message written beside it: ‘Ne mutlu turkum diyene’ – ‘How happy to be a Turk’. It is over 25 years since the island was partitioned. The barbed wire on the United Nations line dividing the two sides is rusty, many of the command and lookout posts seem to have been long deserted. Yet still virtually nothing moves across it; still the two sides stare at each other across walls, wire, and invisible mines of the divide, remembering their abandoned homes, the people in their families still missing, the nights when whole villages were massacred. One more lingering colonial effect that, coming after a hard-won independence struggle, could be safely blamed on the people themselves.

I watched the lingering light fading on the hills, listening to the adhān al-maghrib, the evening call to prayer, from the other side of the city. In the background, I could hear the sound of the Reuters emails coming in on the PC inside, as everyone all over the region filed in their evening reports. I looked back at the desk and saw
there was a message from Khaled, who had recently been posted to Baghdad. I double-clicked the cursor on his name and his message came up.

From: Khaled  
Sent: Wed 22/01/2003 23:08  
To: Shayan  
Cc:  
Subject: Re. Report  

Assalam alaikum. I managed to meet up at last tonight with that man I told you about. It was hard to get in touch with everything that was going on at the office, and at his office too, where they're busy trying to move the treasures of the collection to somewhere safer – the Museum is right by the main telephone exchange and the Foreign Ministry. Anyway, eventually we arranged to meet up at Al-Haj-Muhammad's, at the corner of Mustansir St. The conversation took an unexpected turn. Don't send this to the news desk – can you file it to features please? Also, ask Nick if he can get it syndicated. Thanks. K.

‘The right to bomb’: Baghdad, 21 January 2003  
As I walked in, I saw him from the other side of the room, staring abstractedly at the diamond-patterned tiles on the floor, his hands wrapped together at the end of his thin arms. I sat down and he ordered coffee for us both. We spoke warmly of old mutual friends, and of his years in Paris and in London. Sadiq is a senior deputy to the director-general of antiquities in Baghdad, specializing in Mesopotamian books of the Seljuk era (12th–13th centuries CE). Some years ago, he published an impressive scholarly account of Dioscorides’ *De Materia Medica* (1224 CE) on the strength of his Ph.D. research, and is now well known as an authority on medical treatises of that era. He spent over a year in Paris studying the *Kitab ad-Diryak* (*The Book of Antidotes*, 1199 CE) at the Bibliothèque
Nationale, and had sent me an article of his in which he analysed the exquisite illustrations in that book of the cultivation of plants for their medicinal properties. I wanted to know much more about the extraordinary role of plants and herbs in medicine at that time, and I began to explain to him why I had come. All of a sudden, the dust rose up from the floor and we heard a dull explosion in the distance. He caught my eye and rolled his tongue round his dry mouth. At first he said nothing, the natural instinct of a man who has survived against the odds through the turbulent, sometimes terrible decades of the regime. His scholarship, safely focused on the glorious artefacts created when Baghdad was the centre of the Islamic world eight centuries ago, has helped him to achieve a certain political invisibility. Then he looked me in the eye again and began to speak.

It's the British again. They have been bombing my family for over 80 years now. Four generations have lived and died with these unwanted visitors from Britain who come to pour explosives on us from the skies. It first began in 1920. My great grandfather, Abd Al Rahman, was walking into our village for his last-born son's wedding when a two-winged plane suddenly came over the horizon and dropped a fireball amongst the celebrations. The guests were divided into separate areas for men and women, as they used to be in the villages in those days. The bomb fell on the men gathered inside, and killed or maimed half the men in our family – the first-born son, three uncles, two cousins, four sons of my grandmother's father's brother. Since then, whenever it has suited them, the bombers come again.

Now their big brothers from America do most of it, but you can still see the RAF planes streaking across our skies flying their familiar routes, which they first charted in the 1920s. The flights began in earnest when they were preparing to leave finally (again) after the Second World War. They mapped every metre of our territory, laboriously, meticulously, took photographs of every square centimetre of our country. My cousin who studied there told me that
at Keele University in England there are millions of reconnaissance photographs on microfilm of Iraq and Iran taken by RAF 680 squadron before they left. You never know when we might need them, they said with a smile. When they look for oil, or decide to bomb us when they want to make sure they will have more of our oil for the future. Probably they still use them today when they sit in their operation rooms in England and plan which target amongst us to hit next.

Every square centimetre of our country photographed, from Al Basrah on the Gulf to Amādiyāh in the mountains to the north. Our country! In a sense, though, it has hardly been our country at all - even if it has always been our land. Like most of the states in the Middle East it was invented by two men, one French, one English, during the First World War. Georges Sykes and Sir Mark Picot, they were called. You know, they just met up in London and decided in secret between the two of them how it would all be. The defeated Ottoman Empire would be dismembered, and new countries – Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon – simply invented out of the bits for the convenience of the two colonial powers that would rule them. The British, of course, already controlled Egypt and Sudan. Iraq was made out of three leftover vilayat (provinces) of the Ottoman Empire. In 1920, they said they would give the Kurds an independent state, Kurdistan; in 1923, they just forgot all about it, according to the whim of the moment. They created states that were no nations, just sets of lines drawn on the map according to their interests. There had been no borders or boundaries between us all. The whole of the Empire was open from one end to the other. There were different regions, of course, ours was Upper and Lower Mesopotamia, as it always had been. Then their boundaries, drawn in the fluid sand with their barbed wire, marked out their new ‘protectorates’, empty they said except for a few nameless tribesmen like my great grandfather and grandfather who did not need to be consulted about what was good for them. Nomads have no rights. They are not really there at all.
Not like the oil company that came quickly afterwards. Or the soldiers. Those French quickly landed their Senegalese troops in Beirut when the war ended and occupied the whole northern coastal area. The British, with their Indian troops, controlled Palestine, put in advisers elsewhere in Syria, and occupied the whole of Mesopotamia. All their Middle Eastern colonies in those days were run by Anglo-Indian administrations. They were not British colonies you know – they were ‘dependencies of British India’.

He stopped for a moment, looked hard at the floor, and fell into silence. I offered him a cigarette. He smoked it for a while, watching the blue smoke rise to the ceiling.

‘So what happened then?’ I asked. ‘After they had taken over?’ He breathed hard, and shook his head.

Well. Between the two of them, they occupied the whole of the old territories of the Empire. At the same time, the British made several public statements to international forums that all ‘liberated’ territories would be governed on the principle of what they called the ‘consent of the governed’, by their own national administrations. The Arabs took them at their word: had they not already been induced to fight with the British against the Turks on that very promise? Remember that so-called Lawrence of Arabia they still make so much of. So, in March 1920, the General Syrian Congress in Damascus passed a resolution proclaiming independence for Syria, Palestine, and the Lebanon. Iraqi leaders immediately declared Iraq’s independence too, with Amir Abdullah their king. Those British and French responded by going straight to the League of Nations, which obligingly gave them mandates over the whole territory. Not surprising, since they controlled it anyway. Mandate from whom? They said themselves that the term ‘mandate’ was just a piece of legal fiction to legitimate their new colonies.

We didn’t just accept it all, though. King Faisal’s troops attacked the French on the Lebanon border, the Arabs rose against the Jews in
Palestine, and our people of the Middle Euphrates rose against the British. The French responded by occupying the whole of Syria. In Iraq, the British did not use their Indian troops: instead they used the newly formed Royal Air Force to bomb us. My great grandfather’s wedding, remember? They had already used the RAF in Somaliland. In a two-month joint operation with the British Camel Corps they had overthrown the Dervish leader Mohammed bin Abdullah Hassan – whom the British characteristically just called the 'Mad Mullah'. Mad because he wanted to get rid of them, of course. It was generally thought that the air force bombing and strafing against the nationalists had been the key to the operation’s success.

Their new colonial secretary, Winston Churchill, he recognized early on the advantages of airpower for maintaining imperial control over his vast British territories. Before the uprising had even begun, he had enquired about the possibility of using airpower to take control of Iraq. This would involve, he said, using ‘some kind of asphyxiating bombs calculated to cause disablement of some kind but not death ... for use in preliminary operations against turbulent tribes’. You can’t forget words like that. Nor the ones that followed. ‘I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas’, he said. ‘I am strongly in favour of using poison gas against uncivilized tribes.’ So, after the Somaliland success, Churchill ordered a similar RAF operation in Iraq. The result was predictable. The rebellious Iraqis were also successfully ‘pacified’. They made war and called it peace. Does it make any difference for them? Churchill came to Cairo the next year, with his Lawrence of Arabia, for a conference on the future of the British mandates. No Arabs were invited. They installed Faisal, whom the French had thrown out of Syria, as King of Iraq. Despite fierce resistance in Baghdad, a plebiscite was arranged to vote him in.

Yes, the new RAF had been out to prove its use. It had only just been set up as a separate section of their armed forces. Anyone could see the advantages of technology like that for controlling far-away
peoples. Wing-Commander Sir Arthur Harris, that notorious 'Bomber Harris', put it this way: 'The Arab and Kurd now know what real bombing means in casualties and damage. Within 45 minutes a full-size village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured.' Just 45 minutes a village – not bad. So the British established five RAF squadrons in Britain, five in Egypt, four in Iraq and in India, and one in the Far East. From now on we would never see their faces when we were fighting. Yes, after they had got rid of the Turks, when some of us had fought alongside them, they returned from the air like demons. For months RAF 30 Squadron flew over us, killing our men and our families until it was safe for the Indian soldiers and their British officers to set up their camps nearby. British control was restored.

I still have one of the propaganda photographs they produced at the time of our first 'liberation' from the Turks. It's a picture of the 'Peace Review'. This Peace Review was just the first, for another defeat and triumph followed – this time that of the British over the Iraqis. Look at that de Havilland 9 flying overhead, with its machine-gunner facing backwards ready to spray bullets on anyone below, with its 450 pounds of bombs tucked beneath its wings. Doesn't leave you many illusions about who is in charge. Power comes from above. Look.

He rummaged in his briefcase, took out an old, dog-eared postcard, and handed it to me. I peered at it for a while, trying to make it all out. From the shadows, it must have been evening. A big circle of Arab spectators was watching a military parade. In the centre, British officers were standing opposite a line of ranked Camel Corps. Huge flags were flapping above them, while an old two-winged aircraft was flying prominently overhead. I could make out the French flag and the Union Jack.

'What's the flag at the front?' I asked.
8. Peace review, Baghdad, 1918.
It's the Italian navy ensign. They fought on the side of the British in that war, remember. Keep it! A souvenir, for you, to remember all this when you leave. They will only stay a while, my grandfather had heard. Indeed, they did go away eventually, in 1932, but as in Egypt, this did not mean that we became really independent. Some independence! We were made to sign a treaty in which we agreed to let Britain control our foreign policy, keep its two air bases at Habbaniyya near Baghdad and Shu‘aiba near Basra, use Iraq freely for its troops in time of war, and maintain its complete monopoly of the Iraq Petroleum Company. It may have been called the Iraq Petroleum Company, but the British government controlled it. There was no Iraqi ownership at all. According to the independence treaty, the IPC was given exclusive exploration rights in Iraq. These were revoked in 1961, but the company itself did not come under Iraqi control until it was nationalized by Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein in 1972. That was a popular move. No wonder they don’t like him! They want to get their oil back. They are already talking about which of their companies will get the rights to it when they have occupied our country again.

He smiled for a moment, and then sunk back into his chair as if he was thinking ahead to the prospect of another occupation. He had stopped looking at me, and was going over it all in his mind, as if it was a story that once started, he could not stop himself from telling right through to the end, however many times he would have to backtrack and retrace the pattern of its compulsive, sinuous repetitions.

So the British left, but only in name. We were to govern ourselves, we were told, under their guidance and control. Things came to a head during the Second World War, when many of us looked to the Axis powers to deliver us from submission to Britain. When Prime Minister Rashid ‘Ali al-Kailani got a bit awkward about giving permission for British troops to land in Iraq, they made it known that he would have to go, and he was forced to resign. Rashid ‘Ali responded by organizing a coup d'état against the anglophile Prince
Regent. The British refused to recognize his government, and demanded their right to more troop landings. Their commander at Habbaniyya then attacked Iraqi troops that had surrounded the base. Soon they occupied Basra, took Baghdad, and reinstated the Prince Regent on the throne. Their brute force had won control once more. Directed by the British Embassy, the new regime instituted a purge of the armed forces and government administration, and sent nationalist sympathizers for execution or to the Al-Faw detention camp. That's where they put my father, Abu Karim. He was in there all the time I was growing up as a young boy.

That cosy relationship between the British and their tame Iraqi dynasty (just like the one they had with the Shah of Persia and the King of Jordan, whom they'd also put on their thrones) continued right up to the Baghdad Pact in 1955, the last fawning agreement of a Hashemite monarch with the British. The next year it was Suez! The British were beaten! And before long, in 1958, there was a second army coup d'état, which brought the end of the hated Hashemite regime, and with it the end of British influence in Iraq. But not the end of British intervention. At first we thought we had seen the last of them. No tame monarchy, no bases, no canal, but still getting the oil they wanted. Why would they ever come back? They had left with their tails between their legs, and the freed world had asserted itself at Bandung. But then they lost Iran, and Saddam was encouraged to take them out. We were dying again. They were back.

Now they are saying that we are 'a threat' to them. But hasn't it always been they who have threatened us? Oh yes, they certainly constitute a threat to us. They have been developing nuclear weapons since the 1940s. They were bombing us with chemicals long before then. It was Churchill himself who ordered the use of mustard gas against the Kurds in Northern Iraq in 1923, when they rebelled on hearing that the British had abandoned their promise of a Kurdish state. It took almost a year and a half of repeated RAF attacks on the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniyya before they were finally
repressed. Well, hardly finally. The RAF was bombing the Kurds again in 1931 when the British were preparing Iraq for ‘independence’, which they were about to grant without any reference to the special position of the Kurds in Iraq. You can still meet Kurds today who can remember being machine-gunned and bombed by the RAF in the 1920s. My friend Ibrahim was visiting the Korak mountains a while ago and came across an old man who could still recall it all. ‘They were bombing here in the Kaniya Khoran’, he told him. ‘Sometimes they raided three times a day.’

Of course, it’s the Iraqis who are branded ‘irresponsible’. After all, didn’t Saddam invade Kuwait? Well, that was a mistake, though of course many of us Iraqis do feel strongly that historically Kuwait has always been part of Iraq. Anyway, you know very well how the Allies quickly mobilized in 1992 to restore Kuwait’s sovereignty and reclaim their oil. ‘How come they didn’t do the same for the Occupied Territories?’, people asked. Only a few amongst us were old enough to remember the stories of how in 1920 British planes and armoured cars had been mobilized against the Saudi kabals, ‘tribes’, who were invading Britain’s new ‘sovereign’ territories of Iraq and Transjordan. The British then gave a large part of Saudi territory to the new state of Iraq, and in compensation they handed over to Ibn Saud, Sultan of Nejd (Saudi Arabia, that is) – yes, they gave him two-thirds of Kuwait.

When the British government was practising that kind of arbitrary territorial fluidity, the Iraqi claim to the remainder was inevitable. Kuwait had, after all, originally been a part of the Ottoman province out of which Iraq was created, and without it, our access to the waters of the Gulf was made almost impossible. The British themselves took the strip of land between Maan and Aqaba from Ibn Saud in 1924, on the grounds that it had once formed part of the Ottoman province of Damascus and therefore ought to be part of Palestine. So it was the British who set up the authority of the argument. It was their Hashemite monarch, King Ghazi, who in the late 1930s first championed Iraq’s claim to Kuwait, which at that
time was a British colony, on the same grounds. The British, though, had signed a treaty of protection with the Sheikh of Kuwait as early as 1899, which is why, on the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, it was created as a separate puppet state and separated from the Ottoman province of Basra to which it had belonged. When the Iraqi general ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim once again made a claim to Kuwait on its independence from Britain in 1961, the British immediately responded by landing troops. Thirty years later they would be back. The bombs would begin again.

Yes, we are a threat to them. Every time we break bread, thousands of them are at risk from each munch of our teeth. Every time I chew a grape or a sugared date, suck a mulberry or an apricot, someone in England must shudder in fear. Every time my son climbs a tree to find a fig, the fine imperial gentlemen of England are put at risk. Yet all we have ever wanted to do is to live our own lives without them. The other night on TV I heard an old Iraqi layman saying, They have everything, we have nothing. We don’t want anything from them – but they still want more from us’. All we ask is for them to stop interfering with us. We have not been bombing them since 1920. It is they who have been bombing us. Do they never think of that? It never bothers them. They seem to think of it as their god-given right. Or is it another of their human rights – the right to bomb? Not by our God, alhamdo tillah. Bombing us ever since their air force was formed, whenever they chose. And still they claim that it is we who are a threat to them. So much so that they have been killing us over the decades, bomb after bomb after bomb, whenever we displeased them or went against their interests. Our problem, though, I suppose, is that we have never been an easy catch. We didn’t just go along with everything they wanted, like some countries in the Middle East. So they keep coming and bombing, but we keep slipping out of their grasp, again and again! They will never subdue us, you will see, never ‘pacify’ us – even if they keep at it for all eternity.

It was a few years ago, in 1998, two days before Ramadan. My family
were all sleeping in our flat in Baghdad, in the high apartment building that looks down Mansur St, towards Zawra' Park. A couple of hours before we were to rise for the early-morning prayer, the fajr, the sirens suddenly sounded and bombs began to fall around us, lighting the sky with their sinister firework explosions. The white powdery fronts of buildings and bridges were dropping away like sandcastles collapsing before the tide. Since then, and their invention of their 'no-fly zones', they have never really stopped. Except for when they vanish so that the Turks can fly in and bomb the Kurds – the very people that their no-fly zone is supposed to be protecting. The British themselves admit that they have bombed us at least once every other day over the past year. It is their longest bombing campaign since the Second World War. Now they say they are coming again, to destroy our families once more and to change our government just as they did so many times before. Why do they come out of the skies at us for so many years from so far away? Why are we of such interest to them? Because we have 'their' oil. That is the real threat that has never gone away, from 1920 until today.

I often wonder how they would feel if we had been bombing them in England every now and then from one generation to the next, if we changed their governments when it suited us, destroyed their hospitals, made sure they had no clean water, and killed their children and their families. How many children is it that have died now? I can't even bring myself to think how many. They say that their imperial era is over now. It does not feel that way when you hear the staccato crack of their fireballs from the air. Or when the building shakes around you and your children from their bombs as you lie in your bed. It is then that you dream of real freedom – in shaa' allah – freedom from the RAF.