

## Mixed Voices: Post/colonial Biographies and Transnational Identities

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This article aims at showing the relevance of family biographies to a social history of transnational identities. It focuses on individuals from four generations of an extended family of South Asian descent - all of them outstanding in their chosen fields. The path of an Indian psychiatrist working in early twentieth-century colonial India crosses with that of an eminent Indian philologist and language instructor based in Berlin when he marries the latter's daughter. The life trajectories of these individuals were shaped by broader political circumstances such as colonialism, two world wars, de-colonisation, and the partition of India. They were also Parsis, belonging to a minority community known for its cosmopolitan outlook, western education and economic success. The psychiatrist's two daughters went their own different ways - one, settling in Pakistan married to a Muslim and becoming a renowned postcolonial poet and Professor of English Literature in Karachi. The other, travelling the world, spent most of her professional career in Germany and gained repute as a documentary film maker and director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. The paths of the Parsi poet based in Pakistan, Maki Kureishi, and of her nephew Hanif, of Pakistani descent and domiciled in Britain, do not cross.

The sources used include poems, novels, newspapers, official correspondence, government proceedings, and personal communications.

**Keywords:** nationhood; Parsi; cosmopolitan; postcolonial; literature; migration

*Silence.*

VLADIMIR:

They all speak at once.

ESTRAGON:

Each one to itself.

*Silence.*

VLADIMIR:

Rather they whisper.

ESTRAGON:

They rustle.

VLADIMIR:

They murmur.

ESTRAGON:

They rustle.

*Silence.*

VLADIMIR:

What do they say?

ESTRAGON:

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They talk about their lives.  
(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)

## **Introduction**

This article explores how members of the same family negotiate the ruptures caused by structural challenges such as migration, colonialism, war and decolonisation.

Does re-location to a different country and culture necessarily imply dis-location and post/colonial identity problems, being caught in the web of seemingly clear-cut nationhood affiliations as ‘in-betweens’ or ‘hyphenated cosmopolitans’? One of the protagonists of the family at the centre of attention here has been accused by his sister of ‘selling family’ – an accusation that highlights yet another important issue for historians using family history as part of their academic work: who owns a family’s biography?<sup>1</sup>

The use of biographies in historical writing is not a new phenomenon. It has been central to what has become known as the ‘great men theory of history’, namely an approach that, in Thomas Carlyle’s (1795-1881) words, holds that, ‘The history of the world is but the biography of great men.’<sup>2</sup> This contention has long been challenged, not least by social and subaltern history, and gender studies. Yet, biographies have remained popular among historians and gained renewed impetus in the wake of historiographic trends such as social history and microhistory, focusing on little men and women, and a concern with agency and actors. Within the German and postcolonial context of history writing in particular, the appeal of life stories and

family biographies has been particularly prominent in attempts to fathom the impact of, as well as the contribution and resistance to, Nazi and colonial rule respectively. At their best, such biographies have avoided privileging one or the other side of the hackneyed structure/agency bifurcation and instead explored how individual lives were anchored in, overwhelmed by, submitted to, resisted and made the most of challenges and opportunities posed by the wider socio-political structures, ideologies and socio-economic processes.

However, as Liebau, von Oppen and Strickrodt have pointed out, ‘the relationship between individual biographies and their social, political and economic contexts is complicated’.<sup>3</sup> The intricate dialectics between structure and agency, or how the former connects with or may be challenged and disrupted by actors’ subjectivities, still requires further attention, despite the various recent ‘turns’ in historical writing - spatial, global and transnational – that are intent on dealing with it. Claims and assertions at times tend to be stronger than the analytical evidence contained in the biographies or life stories chosen to illustrate particular links in an almost anecdotal way.<sup>4</sup> Attempts have been made to explore, for example, how ordinary lives that crossed national, racial and cartographic boundaries threatened the stability of national identity and nationhood;<sup>5</sup> how individuals’ connections across the empire effected the continual reformulation of imperial discourses, practices and cultures, and helped to re-imagine the geographies of the British Empire and destabilise the categories of metropole and colony;<sup>6</sup> the significance of the networks and connections that South Asians established on British soil;<sup>7</sup> and how, in the wake of economic, political and cultural globalization, actors too have become globalised.<sup>8</sup>

These efforts reaffirm the need to ask anew questions regarding the relationship between society and individual, and structure, event and agency.<sup>9</sup>

The central concern of this article is to explore the trials, achievements and choices of and connections between individuals who belonged to the same extended family and inhabited disparate spaces, socio-cultural orders and power structures. The dimensions of nation, nationhood and the transnational are foregrounded in this analysis and may not have been the ones that individual family members might have selected as narrative lenses. In a similar vein, it is difficult to fathom if and how the heuristic framework of 'family' used for this biography would have resonated with and was relevant to the actors. Furthermore, would specific members of the group assembled here have felt themselves in good and wisely chosen company or would they have preferred to be looked at alongside other relatives? Views on the 'punctuation' applied to their family biography, namely where it ought to start and end, too, may have been contested. These issues are vitally important in the writing of family biographies and biographies more generally, not only during an age when 'alternative facts' are propagated in various media outlets but also because historians need to be reflective and keep in mind how a particular account of people's lives is necessarily hegemonic. This has been acknowledged, not least by Foucault in the German introduction to his *I, Pierre Rivière*, and from the 1990s has also become central to historical debates on who 'speaks' for historical subjects.<sup>10</sup>

### **Hanif Kureishi: '...an Englishman born and bred, almost'**

Writing on the 'Complexities of Home and Homeland in Pakistani English Poetry and Fiction', Muneeza Shamsie referred to Pakistan as 'an ideological state'.<sup>11</sup> She

suggested that the concept behind Pakistan as a Muslim homeland was 'transgeographical' or, in Benedict Anderson's earlier term, an 'imagined community'.<sup>12</sup> Pakistan, Shamsie argues, 'began as a discourse, in response to the Muslim demand for political rights in undivided India'. As we know, the imaginary can be as powerful as the boundaries imposed by the *Realpolitik* of geographically delimited nation states. This issue will be particularly relevant in regard to one generation of protagonists at the centre of this article, Britain-born and bred Hanif Kureishi. He is considered by Berlin-based (and self-proclaimed '(un)-settled') Shamsie as a 'Pakistani English writer'. Many literary critics in Britain, in contrast, such as Sukhdev Dandhu, identify Kureishi as 'a literary godfather to a generation of British Asians'<sup>13</sup>. This highlights that the locality, context and experiences of the observer clearly have an influence on how people's identity and legacy are framed. Kureishi on his part has refused to consider himself, and second-generation British Asians, as mere 'in-betweens' and hence as subjects of postcolonial identity problems. Still, Kureishi puts centre-stage the persistent relevance of his Pakistani family origin when he introduces the leading character in his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* with the words: 'My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost.'<sup>14</sup>

Like Kureishi's Karim Amir, the two main, male protagonists in this article crossed political, cultural and social boundaries during their lives, re-locating their family homes from colonial India to Germany and Pakistan. The two female protagonists travelled the globe, settling down ('(un)settled'?) in Pakistan and in Germany (retiring in Thailand). How did they deal with the political circumstances and upheavals, and the structural constraints as well as opportunities facing them in Europe and South

Asia? Did they feel and act as 'in-betweens', 'almosts' and dis-located colonial and postcolonial subjects – different to those who had remained at the place of descent and community of birth?

### **Jal Dhunjibhoy and Shirin Vacha: 'Where do you come from?'**

Jal Edulji Dhunjibhoy was born in colonial India in 1889. He was a Parsi and married Shirin Vacha, the eldest daughter of well-to-do and well-educated Ardeshir and Hirabai Vacha. The Vachas had moved to Berlin, where Ardeshir worked as a lecturer at the Seminar for Oriental Languages and later at the University of Berlin. Shirin, known as 'Cilla', had been born in 1899 in Berlin and according to one of her daughters she and her four siblings were 'brought up completely European', to the extent that she 'did not really regard herself as Indian'.<sup>15</sup>

Not feeling Indian may not necessarily have been due to the fact that, like Jal Dhunjibhoy, the Vachas were Parsis. Religious, ethnic and national identities may interweave and not necessarily be exclusive. In colonial India, the Parsis were a small community of not more than 100,000 people at the time and most of them lived in Bombay. As Amalendu Guha has argued, members of this small community had been the 'earliest to enter modern industries, and they were able to maintain their lead in this field well until the end of World War I.'<sup>16</sup> Reasons cited for the Parsis' success include their religiously grounded work ethic (if Zoroastrianism is seen in a Eurocentric way as mirroring Weber's 'protestant work ethic'); close community spirit and endogamy; lack of caste barriers; production-orientated peasant-artisan background; and, 'above all, their acceptability to British patrons as stable collaborators.'<sup>17</sup> Parsis were consistently portrayed as more western in appearance

than members of other communities and about 25 percent of them spoke English (as compared to less than one percent of Jains and half a percent of Hindus at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century).<sup>18</sup> As Amar Farooqui has shown, Parsis also played an eminent role in the opium trade and the transformation of Bombay into a leading city of the empire during the early nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

Shirin Dhunjibhoy (née Vacha) spent her childhood and teenage years in what was then one of the most exciting cities in the world. It may not be surprising that she did not feel 'Indian'.<sup>20</sup> We do not know if she deeply identified as a Parsi, having been exposed to German city life during her formative years. For her husband Jal, in contrast, Parsiness, and India, as it then was, a colonial behemoth ruled by the British, were central aspects in the formation of his personal identity. According to his daughter, when asked 'Where do you come from?', he would answer, as did most India born and bred Parsis of his generation: 'I am a Parsi – from India.'<sup>21</sup> In Shirin's and Jal's cases, religious and cultural background, and geographic origins and ancestral ties informed their feelings of communal and personal belonging in disparate ways, in line with their early experiences in life.

Shirin's cosmopolitan experience in Europe did not marry well with Jal's rootedness in Parsidom and India. The couple's two daughters, brought up in northern India, moved happily or, at times, in rebellious response to their father's attempts at imposing his views, beyond the boundaries of Parsidom, refusing to 'read the Parsi (Zoroastrian) scriptures' when they were young.<sup>22</sup> The daughters had come to see their father 'as a man with rigid ideas of class, race and patriarchy' and they struggled to move beyond the constraints imposed by him.<sup>23</sup> Following Christian

education in a Catholic school in Bengal, they continued to challenge their father's core convictions when they later became Buddhist, in the case of the younger (Roshan), and married a Muslim (Maki), in the case of the older sibling.

For Jal, being a Parsi in early twentieth-century India had its advantages. For example, it made him socially more acceptable to his European colleagues on account of this community's reputation for cosmopolitan attitudes and behaviours, or 'western' habits and manners, as contemporaries would have put it. Having been trained in Bombay, he was subsequently appointed as medical director of the largest mental hospital in British India.<sup>24</sup> Despite occupying such a senior position from 1925 to 1940 and antagonising his daughters on account of his racism, and classist and patriarchal attitudes, he himself was at the same time caught up in the sticky web of colonial racial prejudice and social discrimination. The latter he shared with at least one of his two daughters, Roshan – albeit, as it will transpire, within highly different socio-political and geo-cultural settings.

Jal pursued his career as a psychiatrist at a time when the 'Indianisation' of the colonial medical services was in full swing.<sup>25</sup> Indianisation operated alongside the decentralization of some of the colonial services in 1919 (via the devolution of medical administration to individual provinces) and the establishment of local self-government in the various provinces in 1935. The colonial government had responded to demands by pressure groups in Britain and reformist and revolutionary anti-British movements in India. Jal was among the first few 'Native' medical officers to head a major medical institution. Previously only Europeans had access to such leading positions, with Indians relegated to the subaltern ranks. A new imperial order



was under way. However, this did not mean that earlier colonial attitudes had disappeared completely. In 1919, for example, *The Indian Gentleman's Guide to Etiquette* recommended:

The Indian gentleman, with all self-respect to himself, should not enter into a compartment reserved for Europeans, any more than he should enter a carriage set apart for ladies. Although you may have acquired the habits and manners of the European, have the courage to show that you are not ashamed of being an Indian, and in all such cases, identify yourself with the race to which you belong.<sup>26</sup>

Although some Indians may have been the equals of Europeans in terms of their formal positions and achievements within the imperial order, they were still, as had been the case during most of the nineteenth century, not considered by the other officers of the service as equals in a social sense.<sup>27</sup> We do not know how Jal felt about the allegedly merely superficial Europeanness evoked in the etiquette book in contrast to his experience of the long-established and enduring westernization of the Parsis. He may have been inclined to distance himself from the allegedly less than skin-deep westernization of Indians in order to maintain his own feelings of personal integrity when faced with conceited Europeans. For people like him who had benefited from Indianisation, yet were exposed to persistent institutional racism and social snobbery, multiple loyalties and cultural identifications were possible.

Although Jal's family lived, as his daughter Roshan put it, 'like minor royalty', with servants 'everywhere' and people standing 'saluting, as our car went by', he was still

snubbed by his European peers: 'I know my father complained from time to time about racism. He received about Rs. 1000 less than his British counterparts.'<sup>28</sup> There is also much evidence of discrimination, envy and ill-will on the part of British colleagues, some of whom felt threatened by professional competition in the medical market place from highly competent and dedicated Indian medical practitioners, such as Jal, who would have a few decades earlier been confined to the lower ranks of the colonial services.<sup>29</sup> According to Roshan, her father 'understood racism and discrimination very well, but somehow he accepted it as a fact of life'.<sup>30</sup> There was more to this acceptance than the fatalism that is so often attributed to Indians.

Jal had 'married upwards' when he became betrothed to Shirin Vacha. Unlike Shirin, he 'came from a lower middle class family in Bombay'.<sup>31</sup> He was sponsored to get a western education at Grant Medical College in Bombay and was sent overseas for lengthy periods on several occasions by the British colonial government, visiting medical institutions in the United States and all over Europe, including London and Berlin (where his wife's parents resided), giving lectures and meeting medical practitioners and researchers working at the cutting edge of his field.<sup>32</sup> According to his daughter, Jal 'felt he owed everything he had achieved to [...] the British'.<sup>33</sup> His daughter noted: 'He was torn between two loyalties'.<sup>34</sup> Here we may presume that she referred to feelings of indebtedness to the British colonial masters and Jal's recognition that he was also born and bred Indian, almost.

Feeling Parsi first and Indian second sits alongside the conflict of loyalties generated by the colonial context, namely between coloniser and colonised or the British and Indians. This emphasises that people's experiences and feelings are not always

clear-cut and neatly dichotomous but multiply determined and many-layered. This is in stark contrast to the political demands of the day, when Indians were forced to declare which side they were on. This applied to whole families – the older as well as the younger generation. In the face of political challenges to colonial rule, the British at the time ensured Indian collaborators' or protégés' allegiance by threat of dismissal and imprisonment. There were numerous instances of Indians who had benefited from the Indianisation of the colonial services and were punished when they – or family members – rallied behind the 'Quit India' agenda or other political groups. As Roshan reports: 'The British ... were also threatening higher Indian officers and functionaries, if their children joined the Freedom movement'.<sup>35</sup>

### **Ardeshir Vacha: 'The Austrian Tyrol Mystery'**

Feelings of personal identity and cultural identifications were vitally informed, and unsettled by, wider political developments. In the Dhunjibhoys' case, the younger generation was firm in its rejection of colonial power, potentially endangering themselves and their family. Their grandparents' life back in Germany had also been marred by political circumstances beyond their control. Ardeshir Vacha fell victim to accusations of collaboration with the enemy during World War I. Like his son-in-law in India later on, Ardeshir tried to avoid taking sides, managing to pursue a successful career in Berlin for more than 40 years.<sup>36</sup> He taught Hindi and Persian to important German diplomats, and to missionaries and staff of the German-African Trading Company. However, as a colonial subject, he held a British passport and therefore he became, when Britain declared war on Germany in 1914, an enemy of the state and of the people – lest he was willing to act as an informer and collaborator. In 1918, Vacha, as an 'enemy alien', was under heavy police

surveillance and forbidden to leave Berlin. He mused: 'I am not allowed to mix with captive Indians. It would cause great inconvenience...'.<sup>37</sup>

In any case, Ardeshir did not want to get involved, fearing that he would face problems if ever he went back to Bombay.<sup>38</sup> He refused to teach German soldiers and to act as a regular translator for Indian prisoners of war. Only once did he help out. When Hindu prisoners of war in nearby Wittenberg were in danger of starving themselves to death, he guided German authorities on the culturally appropriate necessity to establish kitchen areas where the Indian soldiers could prepare their own meals.<sup>39</sup>

Ardeshir seems to have made efforts to leave the door open for his return to his *Heimat* or homeland in Bombay. However, he never returned. Whether this was by choice, by accident, or due to political circumstances is difficult to establish. In fact, how the end of his life came about is shrouded in what the *Irish Press* in April 1936 called an 'Austrian Tyrol Mystery'. Ardeshir had been 'reported missing' and his body was found two months later, 'in a pond', where it had 'lain in the water for a long time', making it difficult to ascertain 'how he met his death'.<sup>40</sup> The Austrian *Reichspost* put the circumstances slightly differently. Under the headline 'Missing Professor Found Dead In The Brenner Area', he was referred to in polite terms as a 'Bombay born British citizen', a 'University Professor' in Berlin, and 'a hard-of-hearing elderly gentleman'.<sup>41</sup> He had apparently travelled by rail from Monaco to Berlin, but 'left the train at the Brenner', namely the border between Italy and Austria. He then 'hiked on foot to [Austrian] Tyrol' and was last seen about 12 km away, in Steinach, a distance he could easily have walked within a day. Something must have

happened on the next stretch of his journey, on the way to Innsbruck, as Ardeshir's body was retrieved by saw mill workers when they serviced the weir on the river Sill in Matrei, some 5 km further down the valley.

The question is of course why Ardeshir had left the train at the Italian/Austrian border. Was he really 'mentally ill', as suggested by the Austrian newspaper? Was there some altercation when his passport was scrutinised at the border, during a time when pro-Nazi activities were rife and foreigners did not always receive a warm welcome. The media speculated that the Herr Professor had either taken his own life or been involved in an accident.<sup>42</sup> It is not known what the family's views were on the matter, but whether or not politically motivated or xenophobic foul play had been at work, the Dhunjibhoys would have been all too well aware of the impact of political ruptures on the work and private life of an India-born, British subject in actual (WWI) and potential (pre-WWII) enemy territory in Europe.

Jal Dhunjibhoy's situation in inter-war colonial India was no less precarious. He was an Indian in the higher British colonial service in India during a period when many of his countrymen were involved in anti-colonial agitation. His daughters (and Ardeshir's grand-daughters) faced no such tangible threats to their careers and lives during the post-World War II period.

### **Jal Dunjibhoy and his daughters – 'tension and many arguments at home'**

Roshan, Jal's and Shirin's younger daughter, travelled the world and studied in the United States and in France, and, before retiring to Thailand, worked in The Netherlands and then in Germany. There she became, among many other things, a

political activist, feminist, documentary film maker, and director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. West Germans growing up in the 1960s will remember her as a frequent guest on a popular political roundtable discussion televised in a primetime Sunday morning slot, 'Werner Höfer's Internationaler Frühschoppen'. Roshan's older sister, Maki, too, studied and travelled overseas, but eventually settled down in Pakistan, where she became a renowned poet and professor of English Literature.

Back in British India during the early 1940s, the two sisters had not toed the colonial party line the way their father wanted them to. Maki was 'actively supporting the [Indian National] Congress' and Roshan, at the age of twelve, 'had paid [her] four annas to the CPI [Communist Party of India]'.<sup>43</sup> Not surprisingly, this became 'a time of tension and many arguments at home'. Roshan reported that her father was not involved in politics, perhaps cognizant of his father-in-law's precarious situation in Germany a couple of decades earlier. Jal tried to relate to people of all backgrounds and accommodated all castes and creeds within the mental hospital: religious festivals of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians were observed and places of worship as well as visits by clergymen and priests arranged. Hindu patients were allowed to cook their own food.

The politics of empire and resistance to it are highly diverse and divisive – within and outside of families. In the Dhunjibhoys' case, the younger generation's concerns were very different from the older ones'. However, there are also experiences that stamped both Jal's and his daughters' lives. Their international travels and acquaintance with people from all over the world, different cultures and religions is

one such aspect. These cosmopolitan encounters went beyond those or rather were located on a different plane than those of political allegiance and national identity.<sup>44</sup>

The daughters may have rebelled against their father's 'rigid ideas' about class, race and patriarchy, but he was in no way as conveniently mono-dimensional as they may have perceived him. Outside the parental relationship he exhibited a more gregarious, socializing persona. He is remembered by one of his friend's sons as having been a bit of a 'prankster, and often socially embarrassing with the opposite sex'.<sup>45</sup> There was a fairly outrageous and somewhat risqué ice-cream incident during a dinner party that was disclosed in correspondence with an elderly Indian neurosurgeon who had settled in the UK in the 1950s.<sup>46</sup> The episode illustrates the varied personae assumed by actors in different relational and social contexts and the necessity to consult a range of informants in biography-based history. It also led my own research on the family into an entirely new direction, causing my correspondent to respond to my surprise and consternation by saying that he was sorry my 'idealized image of Dhunjibhoy', whose professional abilities and personal tenacity in the face of political turmoil I had so admired, had been, as he put it, 'somewhat tainted by the ice-cream incident'.<sup>47</sup>

### **Jal and Shirin Dhunjibhoy: '... back to civilization', in Pakistan**

While Roshan had referred to her father's 'flourishing private practice', the son of one of his friends in Karachi specified that Jal had worked as 'a psychiatrist, sexologist, venereologist'.<sup>48</sup> This was after he had moved to Karachi in Pakistan after Partition. The ice-cream episode and Jal's life in Pakistan open up new perspectives and further issues. One of these concerns the fact that how we currently imagine social

life in Pakistan would not be congruent with what it was like in earlier periods, at least among the upper and middle classes. As Roshan pointed out, 'The horror that is today Pakistan did not start until 1973 and [Jal] died in 1972, at the age of 83.'<sup>49</sup> Another issue concerns the point that a daughter's experience and perception of her family may not overlap with outsiders' observations. It is also likely that Jal's attitude to and experience of work in Pakistan was very different from his time as hospital director in British-ruled India at the beginning of his career. In Pakistan he contributed as a senior medical officer to the establishment of an independent, postcolonial nation. In British India, during his daughters' childhood, he had been perceived by some colleagues as an epigone of British professionalism within a highly contested colonial context.<sup>50</sup> The medical director of the Maudsley Hospital in London, Edward Mapother, in contrast, characterised Jal in the acerbic and judgemental fashion for which he was known, as exemplifying 'well the commercial ability and certain other gifts which are shared by many Parsees and Jews; he is the salesman in psychiatry'.<sup>51</sup> Mapother further noted that Jal referred in his reports to his wide travels and the 'closeness of his acquaintance with psychiatrists in Europe and America', but had no 'equal intimacy with psychiatry itself'.<sup>52</sup> Mapother had visited Jal's institution only very briefly and much of his information was garnered from British colleagues in Bombay and Poona who had previously had hostile exchanges with Jal in British medical journals on the predisposition among Parsis to *Dementia Praecox*.<sup>53</sup>

During the earlier period, in British India, Jal seemed to have been fully wrapped up in his work, perhaps even beyond the call of duty. This is attested by the fact that mortality rates in his institution were consistently the lowest out of twenty or so



mental hospitals in British India, including the neighbouring institution at Ranchi, where Europeans and Eurasians only were treated under highly privileged conditions.<sup>54</sup> His daughter remembered, perhaps not without a trace of the former child's bitterness:

I think he loved the hospital even more than his family. [...] I have seen my father cry only once in my life – the day he said good-bye to the Hospital staff and patients. The mental hospital was his life's work and he had put his heart and soul into it.<sup>55</sup>

In 1941, Jal had been obliged to assume military duties, as most Indian Medical Service staff had a military commission in addition to their civilian medical duties. He was sent to Karachi, taking on 'the North West Command as Psychiatrist in charge of the area'.<sup>56</sup> Following Partition after the end of the war in the East and Independence, Karachi, where Jal and his family were stationed, now became part of the newly created Muslim Pakistan. A heartrending cross-border traffic of refugees ensued, with Muslim families who had for generations lived in what was now India, moving to a new country, while Hindus from the western provinces of the former British India migrated further east. It is at this point, so it seems, that Jal's Parsi roots began to stir anew. The cross-border migration was in most cases not a matter of personal choice but spurred on by political watersheds. Jal chose to stay on in Pakistan: 'because there is a good Parsi community and I have many friends and know no one, anymore, in Bombay'.<sup>57</sup> Jal had been born in Bombay and was an Indian, almost, but clearly always a Parsi first. He settled down in Pakistan, not for

any political reason nor in order to be part of Muslims' 'ideological state' or of a new Muslim nation, but for personal reasons and social and cultural convenience.

As in India, Jal was put into leading positions by the early Pakistani governments, being made 'Psychiatric Head of many medical institutions'<sup>58</sup> and teaching at Dow Medical College<sup>59</sup> before working in private practice towards the end of his life. But he also seems to have immersed himself in the social life of the city. He may have allowed himself to express his more gregarious and socially uninhibited side more freely during his time in Pakistan. The fact that his daughters left home to pursue their University studies overseas, in the UK, France and America, may have contributed to setting free hitherto less conspicuously expressed traits. There were also more opportunities for socializing in post-war Karachi, which was known as a cosmopolitan hub. Shirin, his Berlin-born wife, had breathed a sigh of relief when they left 'backward' Ranchi in British India (nowadays in Jharkhand). Whilst it had been 'heart wrenching for everyone', Shirin 'was glad to get back to civilization'.<sup>60</sup>

In his *My Ear at His Heart*, Hanif Kureishi occasionally comments on the social and drinking culture present in Pakistan, in particular in relation to the life trajectory of his uncle Omar Kureishi (1928-2005), a socially outgoing and internationally renowned Pakistani writer and cricket commentator. Parsis', and in particular Parsi women's, gregariousness and perceived promiscuity are highlighted a couple of times, for example, in Hanif's story of his father's unpublished novel when Bibi weeps as she had 'caught Colonel Murad cuddling the wife of a rich Parsi wine merchant in the back of a car', or when he danced with Parsi women or girls.<sup>61</sup> To what extent it is true that Parsis are 'well known for their love of drink-fuelled parties'<sup>62</sup> and whether

Hanif's repeated reference to the women picked up by the main protagonist in his father's writing being Parsi tells us more about Hindu and Muslim social restrictions and perceptions of the Parsi community - and in particular its women - is a moot point. What is still more important in this context is that despite all the reported merrymaking and continued professional success, Jal's time in Pakistan was fraught with problems. His daughter Roshan suggested that he 'died a disappointed man, who did not understand the world around him, any more'.<sup>63</sup> She speculated that 'Perhaps, he rose too fast and could not really bridge the gaps of culture, religion and racism', as he 'lived in a fast changing world, full of demands and pressures'. Most strikingly, perhaps, Roshan related an episode that encapsulated the man's final retreat into his Parsiness:

I remember when he retired and took off his uniform for the last time – it was like an actor taking off his make-up. Everything changed: his accent, his clothes, his hobbies. He slipped comfortably into becoming an old, orthodox Parsi.<sup>64</sup>

It seems as if Jal had come full circle: from his Parsi roots in Indian Bombay; to the cosmopolitan professional whose career was made by the British, and his collaboration in the cause of Indianisation of the colonial service, to his time in his new homeland of choice where 'the early Pakistani governments respected him',<sup>65</sup> to his death as 'a tired and disappointed man' who was still able to link up with his Parsi identity in the face of rapid social and political changes. We can only gain glimpses of what may have caused him to be so disappointed towards the end of a seemingly prosperous career during the colonial and postcolonial periods. The fact that his

older daughter Maki married a Muslim, living in Karachi, would not have eased his melancholy. To the contrary: according to Roshan, he was 'heart broken' about this liaison. 'Like many Parsis', she explained, 'he disliked Muslims'.<sup>66</sup>

### **Maki Kureishi and Roshan Dhunjibhoy – 'Mixed Voices'**

Jal would not have been able to ignore his older daughter's new Muslim family connections. She married into a large, prosperous family, the Kureishis. Together with her husband Abo Kureishi - the brother of Omar Kureishi and of Hanif Kureishi's father Rafiushan - she belonged to a set of intellectuals at the forefront of literary pursuits. Hanif refers to his Parsi aunt and his uncle Abo only once, in passing: 'Two of my father's older brothers, Abo and Achoo, both of whom had spent the war in London, were particularly academic. Abo was in Karachi, married to an important Pakistani poet and academic, Maki Kureishi ....'.<sup>67</sup> Hanif's attention in his *My Ear to his Heart* is focused almost exclusively on the lives of the male protagonists in his father's family, and especially Omar's. Women figure only in a somewhat mono-dimensional way, as wives, mistresses or 'whores'. Yet it is Maki, the eminent postcolonial poet and professor of English Literature who graduated at Cambridge and taught at Karachi University, with whom there is a strong link, but apparently no personal bond, in regard to Hanif's own literary ambitions and some of the major themes of his work.

Maki Kureishi established herself as 'one of Pakistan's foremost poets writing in English'.<sup>68</sup> In contrast to her father's firm Parsi conviction, she has been described as viewing 'the world with a degree of detachment'.<sup>69</sup> This has been attributed to her being 'an Anglicized Parsi married to an Anglicized Muslim'.<sup>70</sup> Other factors may

have been important, too. As a member of a family with a strong-willed younger sister at loggerheads with an equally determined father who was described by one of his superiors in British India as a man possessed of 'self-confidence and acumen', Maki may have developed the kind of 'introspective' mindset for which she has become recognised.<sup>71</sup> East-West duality figures in her work in a gently contemplative, if harrowing, way (see for example the poem 'Kittens'). The poetry forum that she founded in the 1970s together with Adrian Husain was known as 'Mixed Voices'. She contended that Afro-Caribbean poetry was 'nearer in content to Pakistani experiences than is British poetry', showing that her spiritual world extended beyond Europe and South Asia.<sup>72</sup> All this and the fact that her work was published in anthologies such as *The Worlds of the Muslim Imagination* (1986) would have been difficult for her father to understand, had he lived long enough to know about it.

Maki writes gently and perspicaciously about seemingly highly apolitical or philosophically mundane matters, as in her poem 'Kittens', when she engages with the different ways of disposing of 'too many' of them.<sup>73</sup>

My relatives say: Take them  
to a bazaar and let them go  
each to his destiny. They'll live  
off pickings. But they are so small  
somebody may step on one  
like a tomato.

Maki then shifts perspective:

The European thing to do  
is drown them. Warm water  
is advised to lessen the shock.  
They are so small it takes only  
a minute. You hold them down  
and turn your head away.

She asks:

Snagged by two cultures, which  
shall I choose?

Despite staying on in Pakistan, rather than settling in Europe like her sister, Maki's experience was still formed by at least two worlds. It would be difficult to imagine her slipping 'comfortably' like her father did into any one particular cultural universe.

Maki's younger sister, Roshan, chose an entirely different path. In her *curriculum vitae* Roshan listed the countries she had visited; there were 46 of them and they ranged from Afghanistan to Vietnam. Travel was clearly part of her chosen job, just as her father's position had enabled him to travel regularly overseas in order for him to become acquainted with the latest psychiatric ideas and procedures. Roshan was a TV and radio producer in The Netherlands (1951-1958) and in Germany (1962-1978), specializing on documentaries and political and cultural themes. She taught

documentary film making in Berlin (1975/6), set up the Department of Mass Communication in the West Indies (1978-1981) and worked as a freelance producer for German TV and Radio on the history, political movements and culture in Asia, Africa and Latin America (1981-1993). Finally, she became a founder member and director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation (1993-2001), which referred to her as the 'grand old dame of the Heinrich Böll Foundation'.<sup>74</sup> Besides, she was a communist, a feminist and a supporter of the green movement. This is a distinguished and culturally open-minded yet determined and clearly focused career trajectory, requiring a different mind-set from Maki's, as well as a willingness to clearly differentiate fact from fiction and a doggedness to succeed within a highly male-dominated professional environment. Echoes resound of her father's tenacity and pragmatism in the face of professional challenges and colleagues' bigotry. Roshan, too, experienced racism. In an interview with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung she declared in 2001: 'I experienced racism right until my last day in Germany.'<sup>75</sup>

In contrast to the situation her father found himself in during the early twentieth century within a colonial context, and more akin to her maternal grandfather's life, Roshan's overseas career was her own choice and of her own making. Any loyalties she harboured were to the causes to which she was dedicated or which she herself had initiated. Her father had been no less successful in his career, yet the various turning points in his life were not altogether self-determined, but imposed by war, induced by Partition, and, on his retirement, he re-embraced Parsiness as a kind of personal default setting. Was the daughter spared on her retirement in 2001 the kind of 'disappointment' experienced so keenly by her father? Roshan moved to Thailand, where she soon established a high profile among Chiang Mai residents. This is

evidenced by a feature article about her in the *Chiangmai Mail* of 2004. The reporter concluded his piece, suggesting: 'Roshan Dhunjibhoy will never stop investigating life, society and its basis, and will never stop being one of the more interesting women in Chiang Mai. The political debate starts now!' <sup>76</sup> Significantly, when the reporter had asked her 'if she was no longer Indian, but now an international woman', Roshan replied: 'My roots are very solidly Indian, but after that my training has been very British.' An astounding response, perhaps, given that she had fought against her father's personal domineering and British colonial domination and had spent over 40 years of her life in Europe. Looking back on her life from her new home in a country in the so-called 'global south', Roshan acknowledged the early Indian and British influence, with experiences in America, France, the Netherlands and Germany moving to the margin.

In a poem dedicated to Roshan, her sister Maki enunciated the sisters' different life choices as well as their shared experience. <sup>77</sup>

...

Always the long, repeated journeys looking for  
something you've left behind.

When we meet, all the doors swing open  
for this is where you live; but the rooms

are empty, echo to our timid  
grown-up voices; and this old child



who lifts a broken-toy face, is she  
you or me? Only our scars mark where we built  
  
our personal and nursery planet.  
Still, we've kept the knack. I, middle-aged, fidget  
  
with make-believe; you, homesick and not  
eager to come home, are foreign everywhere. Live European,  
  
stay haunted by the image of  
that makeshift geography we share.  
  
...

## **Conclusion**

Maki Kureishi did not only write about her own generation's experiences and feelings, but also reflected on those of future generations. Maki identifies the links between the generations, the legacy, hopes and expectations of the older – her and her parents' and grandparents' – generation for their child's child; links that are valid regardless of the specificity of the particular structural circumstances faced by them within metropolitan, colonial and postcolonial contexts. Maki's feelings and wishes may strike some as comforting and establishing a link across generations. Others may experience them as an albatross around their neck.

For my Grandson<sup>78</sup>

Small shape of our death, with loving care  
we nurture you, scanning our own mementos  
in your plump tenderness: in your eyes, hair  
or hands. Frail little being that must enclose  
more than yourself. One day you will grow to be  
like me or me or me. Even your allergies  
are identified. We shall harass you  
with our tall and sacrilegious  
gods. This is our final opportunity  
to survive. It is my future you will reconstruct  
in your grown-up life. Clutching our hungers  
we make dreams for you, part love and part  
cupidity: inching ownership further  
till your mind is patterned to our warped hearts.  
Turn from us, child, we are vampires  
wailing: Remember. That I may not entirely die.  
And forgive us the grasping appetite  
that manipulates love to stay undead  
for we fade like shadows till our absence  
is forgotten, unless you hold us in the light.

### **Coda**

Hanif, Maki's nephew, on his part, may have (almost?) achieved a reconciliation  
between ancestors and offspring, and the female and male influences in his life,

when he devoted his reflections on his father's (and uncle's) writing, *My Ear At His Heart*, to his mother and his sons. Yet it goes without saying that these are speculations based on the reading of fragments of writing by and reports about the protagonists selected for this article. Hanif asks half way through his memoir that he interweaves with his families' memories: 'I feel guilty about what I am doing to the family. By what right can I do this? Who does father, or anyone, belong to?'<sup>79</sup> He also notes that his three sons are "beginning to learn that they have entered a family story, and are curious to see where, and how, they fit into it".<sup>80</sup> Methodologically, family biographies are considered soft, fragile narratives in historical analysis. At the same time they provide at least fragmentary insights into the varied ways in which actors might have made sense of, responded to and settled into the supposedly 'strong' accounts of political, economic and social history.

ESTRAGON:

Well?

VLADIMIR:

What was I saying, we could go on from there.

ESTRAGON:

What were you saying when?

VLADIMIR:

At the very beginning.

ESTRAGON:

The very beginning of WHAT?

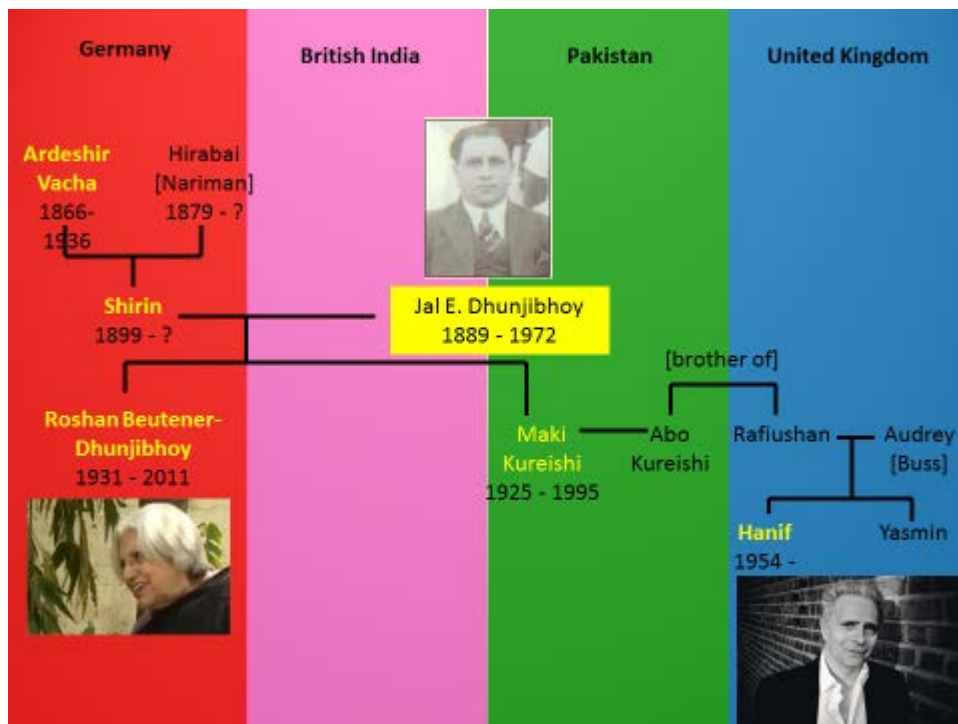
VLADIMIR:

This evening . . . I was saying . . . I was saying . . .

ESTRAGON:

I'm not a historian.

(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Please see the family tree that is presented above for the family connections between the main protagonists.

<sup>2</sup> Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*.

<sup>3</sup> Conference announcement: Ruptures and Linkages: Biography and History in the South. An international conference at the German Historical Institute London, 16-18 February 2012. This article is based on a paper presented at the conference.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold and Blackburn, eds, *Telling Lives in India*.

<sup>5</sup> Woollacott *et al.*, eds, *Transnational Lives*.

<sup>6</sup> Lambert and Lester, eds, *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire*.

<sup>7</sup> Nasta, ed., *India in Britain*

<sup>8</sup> Hausberger, ed., *Globale Lebensläufe*. Freitag and von Oppen, eds, *Translocality*.

<sup>9</sup> Hausberger, ed., *Globale Lebensläufe*.

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10 Foucault, ed., *I, Pierre Rivière*. O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject'. Morris ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

11 Shamsie, in Lal and Kumar, eds, *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*,

12 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. See also: Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*.

Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, especially chapter 1 (Whose Imagined Community?).

13 Sandhu, 'Life lines'.

14 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

15 Personal communication, Roshan Dhunjibhoy, Chiangmai, to Dr Alok Sarin, New Delhi, 20 September 2009 (henceforth: Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009). Many thanks are due to Dr Alok Sarin for allowing me to refer to his correspondence with Roshan Dhunjibhoy.

16 Guha, 'More about the Parsi Seths', p. 117.

17 Guha, 'More about the Parsi Seths', p. 117.

18 See, for example, *Album of Men and Women of India* 1906, quoted in Luhmann, 'The Traumatized Social Self', p. 62.

19 Farooqui, *Opium City*. On various aspects of Parsidom, see also: Hinnells and Williams, eds, *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*.

20 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.

21 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.

22 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.

23 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.

24 On Jal E. Dhunjibhoy's work in India see: Ernst, *Colonialism and Transnational Psychiatry*.

25 See Ernst, 'The Indianization of Colonial Medicine'.

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- 26 Hardless, *The Indian Gentleman's Guide to Etiquette*.
- 27 Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class*, p. 107.
- 28 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- 29 Ernst, *Colonialism and Transnational Psychiatry*.
- 30 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- 31 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- 32 Ernst, "'Colonial' and 'Modern' Psychiatry in British India'.
- 33 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- 34 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- 35 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- 36 Thanks to Dr Heike Liebau, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, to whom I owe some of this information.
- 37 Quoted in Lange, 'South Asian Soldiers and German Academics'.
- 38 Many thanks to Dr Heike Liebau, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, to whom I owe this reference. HA Rep. 208 A, Nr 97 Bl. 31-32. 1916.
- 39 I owe this reference to Dr Heike Liebau, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin. HA Rep. 208 A Nar 96, Bl 3.
- 40 *Irish Press*, 7 April 1936, p. 9.
- 41 *Reichspost*, 7 April 1936, p. 7.
- 42 *Reichspost*, 7 April 1936, p. 7.
- 43 Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- 44 On 'cosmopolitanism' or 'cosmopolitics' see, for example, Cheah and Robbins, eds, *Cosmopolitics*. Breckenridge *et al.*, eds, *Cosmopolitanism*. Sluga and Horne, 'Cosmopolitanism'.

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- <sup>45</sup> Personal communication, Dr Ramanand Kalbag, Newcastle, to Professor Waltraud Ernst, 22 November 2011 (henceforth: Dr Ramanand Kalbag, 2011).
- <sup>46</sup> Dr Ramanand Kalbag, 2011.
- <sup>47</sup> Dr Ramanand Kalbag, 2011.
- <sup>48</sup> Personal communication, Dr Kershaw Kambatta, Karachi, to Dr Ramanand Kalbag, Newcastle, 20 March 2012.
- <sup>49</sup> Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- <sup>50</sup> On professional competitiveness and racism during this period, see Ernst, '“Colonial” and “Modern” Psychiatry in British India’.
- <sup>51</sup> Royal Bethlem Hospital Archive, London, Report on Psychiatry in India, Dr Edward Mapother, March 1931, p. 36
- <sup>52</sup> Royal Bethlem Hospital Archive, London, Report on Psychiatry in India, Dr Edward Mapother, March 1931, p. 37.
- <sup>53</sup> Ernst, 'The Indianization of Colonial Medicine’.
- <sup>54</sup> Ernst, *Colonialism and Transnational Psychiatry*.
- <sup>55</sup> Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- <sup>56</sup> Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- <sup>57</sup> Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- <sup>58</sup> Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.
- <sup>59</sup> Ahmed, “Development of mental health care in Pakistan”
- <sup>60</sup> Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009. On ‘cosmopolitan Karachi’, see Anwar and Viqar, ‘Producing cosmopolitan Karachi’.
- <sup>61</sup> Kureishi, *My Ear to His Heart*, 119, 255. The novel written by Hanif’s father titled ‘An Indian Adolescence’ remained unpublished. The manuscript was sent to Hanif by

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his publisher who had kept it in her office for more than eleven years. Kureishi, *My Ear to His Heart*, 1, 15.

<sup>62</sup> Dr Ramanand Kalbag, 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Roshan Dhunjibhoy, 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Kureishi, *My Ear to His Heart*, p. 103.

<sup>68</sup> Shamsie, *Dragonfly in the Sun*, p. 65.

<sup>69</sup> Shamsie, *Dragonfly in the Sun*, p. 65.

<sup>70</sup> Shamsie, *Dragonfly in the Sun*, p. 65.

<sup>71</sup> Colonel L. Cook, Inspector-General of Civil Hospitals, 1933, Introduction, in Dhunjibhoy, *Triennial Report*, p. v.

<sup>72</sup> Shamsie, *Dragonfly in the Sun*, p. 65.

<sup>73</sup> Kureishi, 'Kittens'.

<sup>74</sup> Unmüßig, Petersen and Pachaly, 'We Grieve for Roshan Dhunjibhoy'.

<sup>75</sup> Dhunjibhoy, 'Ich habe bis zum letzten Tag in Deutschland Rassismus gespürt'

<sup>76</sup> N.A., 'Weekly Biography: Roshan Dhunjibhoy/', *Chiangmai Mail*, 2, 13 (2003).

<http://www.chiangmai-mail.com/023/success.shtml>

<sup>77</sup> Kureishi, 'Christmas Letter to my Sister'.

<sup>78</sup> Kureishi, 'For my Grandson'.

<sup>79</sup> Kureishi, *My Ear to His Heart*, p. 115.

<sup>80</sup> Kureishi, *My Ear to His Heart*, p. 27.

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