Asia's Europes: Anti-colonial attitudes in the novels of Ondaatje and Shamsie.

MAGGIE ANN BOWERS

University of Portsmouth

Margaret.bowers@port.ac.uk

Biographical Statement: Maggie Ann Bowers is a senior lecturer in literatures in English at the University of Portsmouth, UK. Her research field covers contemporary postcolonial studies, most particularly focusing upon comparative multi-ethnic literatures of North America and Native American Studies. She is the author of Routledge's New Critical Idiom *Magic(al) Realism*. Recent research projects have examined the links between storytelling and ritual and law and sovereignty in Native American writing.

Word Count: 6698

Abstract:

This article examines the significance of a network of references in the novels *The English Patient* (1992) by Canadian Sri Lankan writer Michael Ondaatje, and *Burnt Shadows* (2009) and *A God in Every Stone* (2014) by British Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie. Ondaatje's and Shamsie's novels explore anti-European Asian sentiment in the early to mid 20th century, with a particular shared focus upon the colonization of northern India and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Both writers draw upon the works of ancient Greek historian Herodotus allowing a comparison of the imperialism of the ancient and modern worlds. This study was inspired by rereading Ondaatje's *The English Patient* within the framework of subaltern theories by Pankaj Mishra and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Ultimately, the novels propose that an understanding of the role of historicity in imperial thinking helps to explain how historical events such as the bombing of Japan and 9/11 are linked.

Keywords: Historicity, subaltern, World War, Ondaatje, Shamsie

This article traces connections between contemporary novels written in English by diasporic South Asian writers that critique European ideology from an Asian perspective, exploring moments of decolonization. The novels *The English Patient* (1992) by the Canadian Sri Lankan writer Michael Ondaatje and *Burnt Shadows* (2009) and *A God in Every Stone* (2014) by the British Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie have been written in the past three decades but refer back to images of Europe during the war years of the first half of the 20th century.ⁱ The three novels are connected texts that examine the concept of European historicity as a basis for the continuation of colonialist ideas. This study was inspired by rereading Ondaatje's *The English Patient* within the framework of subaltern theory. Rather than focusing the reading upon the English Patient it considers the story through the eyes of the Sikh sapper Kip, and argues that the same disregard of Asian history that provided the rationale for the colonial conquest of India also allowed the bombing of Japan with atomic bombs during World War II. Ondaatje's argument is reinforced in Shamsie's work which reveals that the lack of recognition of the history of Asian countries by Britain during the colonization of the North Western Frontier, and at the time of the bombing of Nagasaki is connected to the absence of knowledge among the British and American public of the history of insurgency, war in Afghanistan and events leading to 9/11.

Being recent texts, the novels *Burnt Shadows* and *A God in Every Stone* by Kamila Shamsie have not had wide critical coverage. *Burnt Shadows* follows the journey

taken through life by Hiroko Tanaka from Japan via India to New York. We are first presented with Hiroko in a tale of love lost in Nagasaki when her German fiancé is killed in the atomic blast. Because of her experience of war-time horror, Hiroko remains dedicated to promoting humanitarianism and shuns the limitations of nationality and race. She marries a Pathan scholar in Delhi when staying in the colonial home of her late fiancé's sister Elisabeth. Ultimately, Hiroko comes into conflict with Elisabeth's grand-daughter after 9/11 when she tries to help a suspected terrorist (a friend of her son) escape to Canada. The second book, *A God in Every Stone* intertwines the lives of the central characters who are brought together in England, Turkey and Peshawar and suffer tragic consequences. The English girl Vivian Rose falls in love with the archaeologist Tahsin Bey in Turkey in the early years of the 20th century where they share a desire to find the ancient golden jewelry called the Circlet of Scylax. Vivian escapes the depression of post-World War One in England and seeks the Circlet in the North West Frontier region of India. Here, she lives with the colonial community but reaches out to teach Greek history to a local boy, Najeeb. Her actions, both in England and in Peshawar, place Najeeb, his brother Qayyum and Vivian's lover Tahsin in mortal danger (with Tahsin being assassinated after she betrays him to British intelligence).

In the acknowledgements of the novel *Burnt Shadows* Kamila Shamsie notes that she has borrowed a chapter heading from Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. The reference by Shamsie to Ondaatje's novel reinforces my observation of a connection between the two writers, who are both seeking to reimagine the relationship between Europe and Asia in the 20th century. I will show how *The English Patient* and *Burnt Shadows* can be read as companion novels, in which the bombing of the cities of

Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War Two interpolate a deeper understanding of the problems of nationalism and colonialism in the hands of Europeans. Shamsie's later work *A God in Every Stone*, in turn, shares with Ondaatje's *The English Patient* a concern for European attitudes toward history, colonialism and nationalism, with Herodotus' *The Histories* echoing in both textsⁱⁱ.

It is with the help of the critical perspective provided by Pankaj Mishra's history of 20th century Asia *From the Ruins of Empire* (2013) and Dipesh Chakrabarty's repositioning of Europe in Asian history in *Provincializing Europe* (2008) that I will demonstrate how the three novels can be understood in relation to European colonialism in early 20th century India, a context of complex inter-Asian relationships and growing anti-European sentiment. Inspired by subaltern studies, the two critics show how incidents and debate within Asia in the first half of the 20th century provided the basis for decolonization, revealing the decline of empire as a success of Asian self-confidence and organization rather than a European failure, in effect shifting the agency for decolonization from Europe to Asia. Mishra identifies the role of the World Wars in the changing attitudes of Asian people towards Europe, which contributed to the process of decolonization, stating:

Liberal democracy, long tainted in the East by association with Western imperialism, now looked feeble within the West itself, compromised by the rapacity and selfishness of ruling elites. Science appeared to have been complicit in the uncontrollable and mindless slaughter of the First World War, which mocked every notion of rationality and utilitarianism. (211)

This sentiment, already wide spread across Asia in the 1920s and 1930s was reinforced by the extremes of post-Enlightenment scientific pragmatism that provides the rationale for the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War Two.

Despite their shared reexamination of European ideology, the three novels follow very different trajectories: Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* examines nationalism and its link to war in the context of Italy and North Africa just before and during World War Two. His characters form two groups: a British colonial pre-war geographic expedition in North Africa and an accidentally formed international household of psychologically and physically damaged people at the end of World War Two in Italy. Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* straddles World War Two Japan, post-World War Two India and late 20th/21st-century Afghanistan and the United States. The central figure, Hiroko, bears a burn from the atomic blast across her back that symbolizes the unerring lack of humanity in conflicts from World War Two to the Afghanistan wars and 9/11. Shamsie presents these events to us as integrally linked, implicating the involvement of the West in 20th century Asia. *A God in Every Stone* recognizes these links even earlier; the dual central figures of the novel who are brought together in Peshawar are a wounded Pathan soldier returning from Europe after World War One, and an English female archaeologist, whose late Turkish lover has left her obsessed with ancient Greek history. All three novels are critical of Europe and, in particular, of Europe's ideologies of colonialism and its related philosophies of nationalism and enforced national identities.

The ambiguous response by the characters to national identity is best revealed in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* when Hana, the English Patient's nurse, sings the

Marseillaise at the request of her fellow Canadian Caravaggio. Caravaggio, having heard her sing the French National Anthem as a child, seeks to re-experience hearing young Hana render the song full of innocent conviction in the words of proletarian revolution and pride. When she sings it as a woman, having lived through the horrors of war, she does so with a weary cynicism. The commentary reads: “There was no certainty to the song anymore, the singer could only be one voice against all the mountains of power” (269). What is most significant is the recognition that Hana’s ideological position has shifted as a consequence of her experience of European warfare. This is revealed in the comment: “Caravaggio realized she was singing with and echoing the heart of the sapper” (269). The sapper, a Sikh from the Punjab serving in the British Army, who is known for most of the book as “Kip” but is actually called Kirpal Singh (thus ironically sharing a name with a famous Punjabi spy of the early 20th century British Army), struggles with the differences between his acquired westernized attitudes and the views of his anti-colonial brother back in India. Kip explains “Asia is still not a free continent, and he [his brother] is appalled at how we throw ourselves into English wars”. Still, until he hears news of the bombing of Hiroshima, Kip himself is tied by loyalty and trust in the western “civilization” that has provided an education for him. However, in his analysis of the situation in Asia, although he endorses British colonialism, he also draws upon Asian sources of knowledge when he counters his brother stating “Sikhs have been brutalized by the Japanese in Malaya” (217). The novel thus reveals a debate about Asia’s future as one between Asians. This is also the aim of Mishra and Chakrabarty, to retrace this key period in anti-colonial history and to rewrite it by eradicating the colonizer as the ubiquitous agent in Asian politics.

Intriguingly, Kip and his brother's argument reflects the developments in the attitudes of the influential poet and political commentator, Rabindranath Tagore. During the early part of the 20th century, Tagore had admired Japan and saw it as the light leading Asia out of the grip of European colonial power, much as Kip's brother does. Only later in 1929, after the Japanese invasion of Korea, did he alter his view, telling the Japanese: "You have been infected with the virus of European imperialism" (Tagore quoted in Mishra p. 239). For Tagore, European colonialism revealed the worst aspects of human nature, projected through seemingly desirable concepts (such as social cooperation), yet ruined by the rationality of European economics. Tagore's rhetoric moves between praise for European people and their ideals and criticism of the appropriation of those ideals for the work of the "machine" of nationalism with "no twinge of pity or moral responsibility" (23). With regard to the British, Tagore claims "I know that these people love justice and freedom, and hate lies" (28). Yet he regrets that "[w]e have felt the greatness of this people as we feel the sun; but as for the Nation, it is for us as a thick mist of stifling nature covering the sun itself" (28). For Tagore, western civilization, which he terms the "spirit of the West" (31), offers the benefits of the ideals of humanity (31). However, he sees this spirit subsumed and discarded by the drive of the nation for economic and political power. He states, "In India we are suffering from this conflict between the spirit of the West and the Nation of the West" (31). Chakrabarty echoes this position in *Provincializing Europe* explaining that concepts such as the nation state, citizenship, human rights and scientific rationality are all associated with European ideology.

Talking in general terms, Tagore explains that when a society becomes a nation it "allows itself to be turned into a perfect organization of power, then there are few

crimes which it is unable to perpetrate” (23). According to Mishra “Tagore... represented a strong early trend, still visible today, of Asian intellectuals defining Western modes of politics, economics, science and culture as inhumanely utilitarian” (254). Chakrabarty concurs noting that “These concepts entail an unavoidable—and in a sense indispensable—universal and secular vision of the human. The European colonizer in the nineteenth century both preached this Enlightenment humanism at the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice” (4), effectively only seeking universal ideals as applicable for the “white man” (5). Two of the novels, *The English Patient* and *A God in Every Stone*, explore the colonial struggle to control the production of the histories of Asian people by means of metanarratives that comment on the figure of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, who is an intriguingly controversial figure in the context of the discourse of European imperialism and the construction of history.

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus also expressed a positive attitude towards human universalism combined with an understanding of its fragility when its ideals are employed as a rationale for inhumane deeds. At the beginning of *The Histories* Herodotus makes a claim that his intention is “that everything great and astounding, and all the glory of those exploits which served to display Greeks and barbarians alike to such effect, be kept alive” (3). Ann Ward notes in *Herodotus and the Philosophy of Empire* (2008), that “Herodotus makes the earth one in his writing by eliminating distinctions between continents...” but seeks to keep “the plurality and diversity among humanity” (168) by giving an account of the details of the diverse cultures in *The Histories*. His main focus is a record of the differing accounts of the wars between the great imperial cultures of the Persians and Greeks. His stories provide

insights into how human emotion has been manipulated by diplomacy to view imperial conquest as righteous. For instance, reciting the story of how the Persian Xerxes was persuaded to go to war against Greece, Herodotus claims Xerxes was swayed not by a desire for war but because his advisers played upon his vanity telling him “how exceptionally beautiful a land Europe was, how well endowed with every kind of fruit-bearing tree” (447). Intriguingly, at the end of *The Histories* Herodotus imagines an alternative to the imperial history he has just narrated. He narrates a tale in which Persian King Cyrus opts for freedom in his own lands rather than the conquest of new lands. Ward points out, Herodotus changes history to suit his desire, claiming that: “Herodotus holds out the possibility that the whole can be grasped intellectually in the mind of the human being, rather than spatially in the world of the human being” (190)

The controversy concerning Herodotus centres on the possibility to read him both as an imperialist and an anti-imperialist. Ann Ward produces a subtle reading of Herodotus that sees him examine two impulses in Greek society in *The Histories*: the one to praise the “divine” ideals of freedom and democracy; the second to scorn the corruption of those ideals by human action, particularly for the cause of empire (1). Ward traces these impulses to our present day, and particularly to 9/11. Ondaatje and Shamsie are also concerned with such ideological conundrums in our time, exploring these ideas through returning to the commentary of Herodotus. What makes his work continuously applicable to our time is his exploration of the contradictory impulses to unite people across nations and to see each culture as distinct.

The references to Herodotus in *The English Patient* and *A God in Every Stone* are reflective of the same difficulty faced by their European characters Almásy and Vivian Rose, respectively. When Almásy is saved by the Bedouin in the desert, his

knowledge of Herodotus enables him to place himself geographically and temporally, like a modern-day Alexander the Great exploring his empire, saying: “So I knew their place before I crashed among them, knew when Alexander had traversed it in an earlier age, for this cause or that greed” (18). In this statement, Almásy reveals the inevitability of his association with the European Alexander and his imperialism. Vivian and Almásy, most particularly the latter, present themselves as internationalists who are breaking away from conventional forms of the national and, in the case of Vivian, gender identity. Almásy proclaims: “Erase the family name! Erase nations!” (139). Yet both fall into a position where they betray their ideals, helping (possibly inadvertently) the imperialist and fascist causes of 20th century Europe. To shake off the ideology imbued by one’s nation and move beyond one’s national identity is shown in *The English Patient* and *A God in Every Stone* to be more difficult and potentially more perilous than Herodotus admits. However, the alternative of allowing oneself to comply with racially and imperialistically determined social conventions, is shown in both novels to have potentially equally dangerous results.

Almásy blames enforced national identities for warfare and a lack of personal freedom. In this sense, Ondaatje’s novel takes a stance against western nation state politics and the conflicts they produce. Moreover, the novel reminds us of the historical significance of World War Two and its unanticipated role in growing anti-European and anti-colonial sentiment in Asia in the middle of the 20th century. The symbolism of the burnt body of the English patient, Almásy, that is void of any identifying features, his refusal to acknowledge any national identity, the shifting sands that make the desert impossible to map for the British geographical survey, the fleeting appearance of the desert nomads who rescue the English patient, all help to

counter the discourse of nationalism. Yet, the novel goes further, tracing the idea of the nation state back to European political and cultural thought, linking it to the influence of the classical world and ancient European civilizations. These assumptions rest upon one key concept: the idea that civilization is something that has developed over time and that history is the record of such development. This idea, Chakrabarty points out, is the “historicist” principle upon which colonialism is based: to be “civilized” is to grow and develop into such a state. In *Provincializing Europe* Dipesh Chakrabarty explains that:

The phenomenon of ‘political modernity’—namely, the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise—is impossible to *think* of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe. (4)

Concepts such as nation state, citizenship, human rights, scientific rationality are all implicated by association with this system.

As Chakrabarty notes “These concepts entail an unavoidable—and in a sense indispensable—universal and secular vision of the human. The European colonizer in the nineteenth century both preached this Enlightenment humanism at the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice” (4), effectively only seeking universal ideals as applicable for the “white man” (5). It is exactly this interrogation of European concepts that Pankaj Mishra’s considers with particular reference to Tagore. Tagore’s work articulates an understanding of European philosophical tradition that, even then, saw the connection between the destruction of the World Wars with the concepts of nation state ideology, scientific progress, democracy, and colonial

expansion. This is effectively expressed by Tagore, as quoted by Mishra, warning that the concept of European civilization is “a torch”, “not meant for showing light, but to set fire” (210). This attitude is shared in the novel by Kip who, upon hearing about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, imagines a flash of light and fire sweeping through the Japanese cities, mirroring the image of the violence of European “civilization” expressed by Tagore. In this reading, which I share with that by Joseph Pesch in “East meets West in Michael Ondaatje’s Novels”, the most significant moment in the text becomes this flash of revelation of the Enlightenment narrative of progress underlying European thought.

Until this point Kip is revealed to us as a product of a colonial education, and British military training, who believes in “a civilized world ” (Ondaatje 122). The discovery of the inhumane actions carried out on behalf of western nation states against the “brown skinned” Asians dismantles the assumptions that have underscored Kip’s colonial life. Kip guides the reader’s focus to see war-torn Europe through Asian eyes. On hearing the news from Japan, his decolonization process appears to be instantaneous. For Kip, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki could only be carried out with a sense of racial superiority that is embedded in British colonialism. His new understanding is encapsulated in his statement: “When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman” (286).

What is particularly interesting here is that Almásy (the “English patient”), who is most frequently interpreted as an anti-establishment, and particularly anti-nationalist figure, concedes that, despite his dismissal of the nation state system, his way of thinking has been nonetheless embedded in colonial ideology. He realizes: “He knows

that the young sapper is right. They would never have dropped a bomb on a white nation” (286). The impulse of the reader at this point is to sympathetically protect Almásy from Kip’s accusation as he is not English, not racist, not a nationalist. Caravaggio is quick to defend Almásy by exclaiming “He isn’t an Englishman” (285). Still, the most striking aspect of the text is that European knowledge, and most particularly that passed on in classical education in the English public schools, is the source of the destruction.

Kip’s understanding reveals that it is history as a discipline, as a corner stone of European thought that provides the justification for the Europeans to colonize Asia, thus implicating Almásy for his encyclopedic knowledge of ancient European culture, and moreover, a love of the “father of history” Herodotus. Kip calls the atomic explosion “This tremor of western wisdom” (284) and his association of the discipline of history with colonialism appears to be a just one. The classicist Rosalind Thomas credits Herodotus with creating the very first text that attempted to present “a total history and description of the known world” (1), both historical and anthropological. In the Greece of the 5th century BC, India was considered to be at the extreme limit of the known world. The world centred upon Greece and the view that Herodotus takes follows such a perspective. Thus history was produced from ancient Europe, which already placed India at its peripheries.

As Chakrabarty notes, history is the foundation of colonial rule. Self-rule was withheld from the Indian population (and was rejected by many Indian intellectuals) due to the belief that history traces the development of civilizations, implying that civilization is something that develops—colonial India needed to develop, through the

adoption of British education and post-Enlightenment principles, before self-rule could be given—finding, of course, that the principles themselves reinforced a racial inability of Indians to develop into Europeans. Kip tells Almásy “I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often from *your* country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world” (283). The commentary (it is unclear if this is focalized as Kip or Almásy) calls it “The death of a civilization” (286). Which civilization died when the atomic bomb was dropped is not overtly stated. Yet, both Kip and Almásy come to believe that it is European civilization that has killed itself. Post-enlightenment European philosophy has revealed itself in its naked, inhumane form—the concept of civilization can no longer exist.

Yet, for the English patient, Herodotus is not simply an imperialist but a voice comprehensively representing all characters of history including those in the peripheries. He is convinced by Herodotus’ own comment (as relayed by Almásy) that he “sought out the supplementary to the main argument” thus finding “cul-de-sacs” in history. The supplements that most interest Almásy are those that help him understand his own story and attitudes, looking for stories that tell “how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love...” (119). The expression of imperial and nationalistic attitudes within Herodotus’ *The Histories* is tempered by the critical perspective of an outsider that he employs. Herodotus was thought to be from Caria and Ionia, now in modern day Turkey, from mixed Carian and Greek descent (Cartledge in the introduction to Herodotus *The Histories* xvi). In the ancient world these regions were overseas territories under the rule of Greece. According to critics such as Rosalind Thomas his identity provided him with an awareness of what

it was to live in the periphery in relation to the might of Athens (Thomas 15). Thus his discourse can be identified as both European and peripheral.

It is apt, therefore that the section of *A God in Every Stone* called “Twentieth-century Herodotus” seems not to refer to the English woman Vivian but actually to Najeeb, her pupil. In this chapter Najeeb succeeds in finding the Circlet of Scylax where other archaeologists have failed. However, from his position on the peripheries of the colonial world, Najeeb only gains permission to carry out a dig on an archaeological site in his own city through the intervention of a European woman, Vivian. Thus, the production of History by archaeology in India is literally controlled by the British. Bernard S Cohn in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* notes “The establishment and maintenance of these nation states depended upon determining, codifying, controlling, and representing the past” (3), and none more so than by the British in India.

Suspicious of the European activity of archaeology, the returning Pathan soldier Qayyum Gul reprimands his brother Najeeb for his interest in it, stating “Your museums are all part of their Civilising Mission, their White Man’s Burden, their moral justification for what they have done here” (185). This comment from Qayyum seems unfounded until it is placed in context with Vivian’s attitudes as an English historian. Vivian is careful not to become involved in colonial politics wanting to distance herself from imperial rule. Privately, she often takes an opposing view to that of the colonial administrators and British Army, but doing so does not remove the underlying problem of her ideology. Naïve about the imperial significance of history,

she admits “It was only amidst histories that were centuries old that she allowed her curiosity to become intervention” (198).

Arriving in India in the 1930s, Vivian has been imbued with a complex attitude towards colonialism and India. At times she shows a level of anti-establishment thinking that reveals her sympathy with the people of Peshawar. She is seeking an archaeological site more out of romance, and in memory of her Turkish lover, than glory for the Empire. As such she follows non-colonial lines of research. When unable to find clues to the site she is seeking in Herodotus she turns instead to a Buddhist Chinese history of India, acknowledging the connections and value of Asian perspectives concerning ancient India (96). Still, her inability to recognize the link between past discourses of empire and those of her present, associates her with Empire. Thus, her ignorance of contemporary politics, and her puzzling inability to resist male colonial authority lead her to betray her lover, instigating his killing. This dangerous naivety allows Vivian to educate Najeeb in western history without misgivings, yet not without creating tensions within his family and community. When asked by Qayyum why the English like to “find history” Vivian admits “I don’t know” (72). Her lack of self-reflexivity mirrors that of the colonial community at the British Club, that she so appears to detest. Upon arrival in India by train she leaves a carriage in order to disassociate herself from a colonial woman within because “the other woman had decided to embark on a lecture to her daughter, a bored child of no more than ten, about the importance of a woman’s dress in maintaining standards in the Empire” (70). For all Vivian’s daringly modern hair and clothes style, and her misguided belief that she is not one of them, her unwitting complicity with Empire, and its discourse of history, is far more damaging.

By concentrating on ancient history Vivian and Almásy both deceive themselves that they are avoiding interfering in nation state politics. Although both claim to have an international and somewhat anti-establishment view both are also complicit in colonial activities, and in fact betray their claims to internationalism by providing intelligence to the nationalists and imperialists (both British, Ottoman and German). Given that neither of them can explain their duplicitous behavior to themselves, it is not surprising that neither of them recognizes the cultural imperialism that can be found in their beloved Herodotus.

By introducing Najeeb to western history and archaeology, Vivian unintentionally prolongs the influence of a discourse that naturalizes the existence of British colonialism in early 20th century India. With specific reference to archaeology, Cohn notes that archaeology and the associated creation of a historical discourse dictated the nature of the relationship between the British and India. He explains that “The objects through which this relationship was constructed were found, discovered, collected, and classified as part of a larger European project to decipher *the* history of India”. Therefore, “It was the British who, in the nineteenth century, defined in an authoritative and effective fashion how the value and meaning of the objects produced or found in India were determined” (77). Najeeb orders the items in his own museum according to what he was taught by Vivian. He places a Greek and an Indian statue symbolically together so that “He laid them down in profile so they looked each other in the eye, their mouths inches apart each other” (239). Najeeb thus creates an abstracted form of colonial East/West relations, focused upon one another, at the expense of all other connections. The attention drawn to the colonial relationship

diverts the colonized's attention away from finding allies with other colonized peoples or with other nations within their own region. It is this that Mishra notes in relation to colonial history—that the “thralldom” with Europe (to use the word employed by Jawaharlal Nehru) delays the decolonization process by seeing India only in relation to the European discourse of progress (2). Cohn refers to James Ferguson's work in the mid-19th century as an example of the British attitude to Indian history and its archaeology, promoting the idea that India, including the many peoples that had conquered and settled it, lacked a history of its own as it lacked records and archives to build a history upon. Ferguson's purpose was to show “how and when they [other ‘races’] arose, how they became corrupted, and when and by what steps they sank to their present level” (cited in Cohn, 92).

As Ferguson, in Cohn's summary, saw it “the British were called upon to provide India with a history. All the civilizations which had entered India, except the fifth one [the British], displayed the same history, by succumbing to the inevitable effects of the climate, and their intermingling with the inhabitants...” (93). In effect, by following Vivian's archaeological methods, Najeeb neglects the need to produce a history of India of its own, allowing the British to create their own imperial history which promotes their superiority. In exploring the discourse of archaeology *A God in Every Stone* answers a question asked by the Pathan character Sajjad in the earlier novel *Burnt Shadows*: “Why have the English remained so English?”. He reflects, “Throughout India's history conquerors have come from elsewhere, and all of them... have become Indian” and he rightly acknowledges, “But when the English leave, they'll be going home” (82). In their desire to remain separate from the local populations the colonial British, then, according to Sajjad present themselves with a

sense of exceptionalism, one with which we associate the neo-colonial Americans of today. This element is explored with significance in Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* through the character Kim Burton (a name highly resonant with colonial connotations)ⁱⁱⁱ. Kim's family background is complex: she has an English colonial grandfather and a German/English grandmother, a father who is loyal to the India of his childhood and leaves his daughter in New York before he is killed in Afghanistan. It is here that Kim and Hiroko clash: working across multiple lines of betrayal, Hiroko wishes to help an Afghan to escape from America due to his friendship with her son Raza, while Kim wants to see him, indeed all Afghans, punished for the death of her father. Eventually during Kim's act of revenge, it is Raza who is arrested by the CIA as a suspected terrorist, when Kim unwittingly leads the police to him. Thus the young American Kim, carrying with her the weight of colonial influence, becomes an accomplice in the lack of humanity shown by western nations. Hiroko, echoing Ondaatje's Kip sarcastically states "In the big picture of the Second World War, what was seventy-five thousand more Japanese dead? Acceptable, that's what it was. In the big picture of threats to America, what is one Afghan? Expendable." She concludes, with bitter regret, "I understand for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb" (362). For Hiroko, Kim's crime is to abandon universal human compassion in favour of an American protectionism. Kim, in effect, is willing to ignore the Afghan's human rights in order, exceptionally, to protect those of Americans.

Shamsie's examination of North American neo-colonialism prompts us to ask where we position the Canadian characters in Ondaatje novel. Revealing a shared suspicion of national identities with Almásy, Hana claims to be from the geographical region of

“Upper America” (Ondaatje 81). Yet, it appears that Ondaatje is creating a state of exceptionalism for Canadian characters. He characterizes them as uniquely innocent of imperial violence despite their settler-colonial identity. Kip identifies America as just as culpable as Europe in the bombing of Japan but does not mention Canada. It seems to me that Ondaatje uses Canada’s postcolonial status to provide a partially marginalized, distanced perspective for his Canadian characters from which to view European nationalism during World War Two, but by doing so he fails to interrogate Canadian settler-colonial attitudes and their culpability in attempting to maintain European civilization.

Thus, at the end of Ondaatje’s novel the tension between the internationalism and imperialism remains. The ending exaggerates and romanticizes the theme of transnationalism so that Hana and Kirpal find themselves rather mysteriously psychically connected while living at opposite ends of the world. However, the real tension in the ending is that Kirpal is now a doctor – in a lab coat. His epiphany when he is in Italy that he is “Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here” (291) and his subsequent rejection of all things European, has been replaced with a life in India as a western-style doctor, dependent upon rational scientific medical thinking. Despite following his early 20th century revolutionary name-sake in defying the British Army, he settles for a curiously westernized life in India. Is this a comment on the inevitability of western globalization and the difficulty of throwing off colonial ideology? Certainly it puts in mind the warning found in other novels of what happens to doctors in India who practice western medicine (thinking of the two Doctors Aziz—in Forster’s *A Passage to India* and in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*). It seems that it is his western education that holds him in “thralldom”. Although his

experiences of European warfare during World War Two make him turn away from all things European, they appear to have only a limited effect.

Shamsie's Indian soldier, Qayyum Gul, learns earlier in his life to discern between human relations and political relations. Like Kip, he gains a suspicion of colonial power while serving in Europe in the allied armies. Yet, despite losing his eye and part of his face in the trenches at Ypres, Qayyum has a residual affection for the men of the British army, identifying himself at the same time as a Pathan and a veteran of the British Army. While Kip is unable to separate the individual Europeans from the guilt of the colonial powers (wanting to kill the "English patient" in revenge for the bombing of Hiroshima), Qayyum sees comrades even in the lines of British Army men facing him while he takes part in an anti-colonial protest: "Qayyum, weaponless at the front, understood that something would shift soon, something would happen. But for the moment he saw no need to stifle the unexpected love he felt for the uniformed men of the British Indian Army, seeing in each one of them the comrades he had lost at Vipers [*sic*], and himself, too, as glimpsed through a dead eye" (205).

Both novels raise the question of why an Indian man might wish to fight for the colonial oppressor. A soldier friend of Qayyum notes the seeming contrariness of a group of Pashtun mutineers "They join an army which fights fellow Pashtuns in the tribal areas, but they'll mutiny at the thought of taking up arms against the Turks" (48). Kip begins to regard his enrolment in the allied army as a mistake, when he goes against his brother's advice and follows the ideology that he had gained while being educated and trained in England. Qayyum's reaction to his experience of European warfare, on the other hand, is pacifist resistance, avoiding being drawn into Pathan

insurgency. In this way Qayyum follows his compatriot Rabindranath Tagore in his pacifist journey towards decolonization for the Indian people (Mishra 229). His final comment reveals his acceptance of the coming together of Najeeb, Vivian and himself in the streets of Peshawar in the aftermath of the massacre of anti-colonial protestors. Although it is unclear whether he refers to Najeeb or Vivian, Qayyum calls one of them, despite their obsession of European history, a “campaigner for the freedom from Empire for the peoples of India and Britain” (308). Here, Qayyum acknowledges that Vivian and Najeeb have finally acted out of human compassion rather than in reaction to or in accordance with national or colonial convention.

Nonetheless, despite the occasional acknowledgements of acts of humanity, these expansive novels take the rare stance of revealing anti-colonial Asian political thought in narratives that expose the bare bones of an inhumane colonialist European culture. While there are key characters in each novel who attempt to resist categories and conventions of national identity and nationalism, and to some degree moves towards a conception of post-ethnic identity, their accidental complicity reminds us of the difficulties of escaping western ideology. It reveals ultimately that access to power within European cultures will remain ethnically determined so long as the concepts of historicity and nationalism are central cultural assumptions in western thought.

Ann Ward recognizes a clear resonance when reading Herodotus in post-9/11 America. She interprets George W. Bush’s neo-colonial desire to expand American democracy across “rogue states”, thus creating international unity and protecting America, as the same contradictory anti-imperial/imperial impulse of the Greeks presented to us by Herodotus (189). Ondaatje and Shamsie’s novels not only go back

in time to explore similarly ambivalent attitudes to Europe during decolonization, but also reveal the traces of this ambivalence in the neo-colonialism of the western world today.

Works Cited:

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton NJ and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2008.

Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1996.

Herodotus. *The Histories*. Trans. Tom Holland. Intro. and notes by Paul Cartledge. London: Penguin, 2013.

Mishra, Pankaj. *From the Ruins of Empire: The revolt against the west and the remaking of Asia*. London: Penguin, 2013.

Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. London: Bloomsbury, 1992.

Pesch, Joseph. "East meets West in Michael Ondaatje's Novels" in W. Klooss ed. *Across the Lines: Intertextuality and transcultural communication in the new literatures in English*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.1998: 65-76.

Shamsie, Kamila. *Burnt Shadows*. London: Bloomsbury, 2009.

-----, *A God in Every Stone*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Skinner, Joseph E. *The Invention of Greek Ethnography: from Homer to Herodotus*.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Nationalism*. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1973 [1917].

Thomas, Rosalind. *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, science and the art of persuasion*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2000.

Ward, Ann. *Herodotus and the Philosophy of Empire*. Waco, Texas: Baylor UP, 2008.

ⁱ This essay is the result of research funded by the Strategic Research Fund by the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Portsmouth. It has developed from a symposium funded by the Centre for Studies in Literature at the University of Portsmouth.

ⁱⁱ Herodotus wrote *The Histories* during the 5th century BC, creating an account of the wars between the two great empires and protagonists of his time and region: the Greeks led by Alexander and the Persians led by Darius, then by Xerxes. The wars lasted almost fifty years and saw the Persians gain power over Athens, holding it under its imperial power for nearly thirty years. Herodotus' *The Histories* not only present the wars of his century but also incidental stories of those who played little part in the imperial struggles. His *The Histories* are still studied by critics (e.g. Ward, Skinner, Thomas) who debate Herodotus' attitude towards colonial expansion.

ⁱⁱⁱ The name Kim Burton carries association with the Irish-Indian character Kim from Kipling's eponymous novel set in the North West Frontier region as well as reminding us of Richard Burton, the 19th century orientalist explorer and translator of *The Arabian Nights*.