

‘No Better or Worse Than Anyone, But an Equal’: Negotiating Mutuality in Adib Khan’s *Seasonal Adjustments*

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One of the most urgent predicaments of our time can be described in deceptively simple terms: how are we to live together in this new century—this century that has begun so sadly, so violently? (Ang 141)

In a world increasingly characterized by globalisation, transnationalisation, and migration, individuals belonging to different cultural contexts are inevitably brought into contact. At this very intersection of intercultural relations, conjunctions, and collusions, resides the fundamental question of whether or not human beings embark on new creative processes of reinvention and re-imagination. Will they be capable of transforming cultural divisions and rigid nationalist boundaries into forms of transnational dialogue, mutual recognition, and inclusion? As encounters and disruptions caused by (neo)colonialism and migration have led more often than not to alienation and conflict, the question of how people can effectively make cultural tensions productive rather than destructive has powerfully edged its way into contemporary theoretical and critical discourse.

Cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and transculturalism are indeed the new ‘isms’ on the block of a broad interdisciplinary approach¹ encompassing British Studies, American Studies and World Literatures in English, through which cultures are recognised as deeply intertwined and characterised by ‘determinants common to all’ (Welsch 4). They not only powerfully pinpoint the dynamic aspects of moving *through* and *across* the rigid stability of national boundaries experienced by migrants but also recognise at the same time the dangers of possible *transnational nationalisms* through which hegemonic structures can be further stretched globally across the planet. Here, as Benedict Anderson aptly points out in the case of the global Chinese diaspora, ‘wherever the “Chinese” happen to end up—Jamaica, Hungary or South Africa—they remain countable Chinese, and it matters little if they also happen to be citizens of those nation-states’ (131). In fact if, on the one hand, diasporic formations are seen transcending the boundaries of nation-states, on the other, the same exclusivist structures of domination may very well shift transnationally, thus re-establishing diasporic identities based on their ‘internal unity, logically set apart from “others” [...] a site of both support and oppression, emancipation and confinement, solidarity and division’ (Ang 142).

In order to overcome the usual Manichaean demarcation of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’, and indeed between ‘Asian’ and ‘Western’, a mutuality negotiated on the *linking* instead of the *ranking* of human relationships is therefore fundamental to effectively prevent the absorption of heterogeneous and hybrid identities into the same old hegemonic dominator systems, which structurally rely on exclusivist sameness and homogeneity. As Riane Eisler has remarked in her cultural transformation theory, there are two basic ways of structuring social relations: the

dominator model, in which an unequal, fear-based system of *ranking* posits one half of humanity over the other, and

the second, in which social relations are primarily based on the principle of *linking* rather than ranking, may best be described as the *partnership* model. In this model—beginning with the most fundamental differences in our species, between male and female—diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority. (*Chalice* xvii)

The dominator model primarily refers to social systems generally characterised by hierarchic and authoritarian structures, in which *difference* is an oppositional dualism based on dominator power and other forms of inequality and oppression. Here, human beings and social systems are divided into 'us' and 'others', 'winners' and 'losers', instead of 'both/and' resolution and co-existence. This is further supported by violent metaphors of combat and warfare as opposed to those supporting cooperation and connection. Conversely, in the partnership model, the question of mixed-up differences is oriented toward finding new ways of making any conflict and difference productive rather than destructive, as 'diversity is not automatically equated with inferiority or superiority' (Eisler, *Dynamics* 161). Although these models are conventionally described as opposites, societies are never solely based on one or the other, but rather on a series of elements of both these models, as a matter of degree, thus viewing societal differences in terms of a continuum. By situating social systems within Riane Eisler's mutual paradigm, the old dominator in-group-versus-out-group rankings are transcended by valuing diversity and honouring equal recognition and inclusion through mutually respectful relationships. Here, we have a productive enactment of an equalitarian² mutuality which has the capacity to re-inscribe the grids of dominator conditioning by unravelling conventional binarisms of hegemonic and authoritative systems and take new steps toward the construction of greater transcultural understanding.

For this purpose, after brief consideration of the limitations revolving around South Asian Australian writers as an under-researched literary category within Australian literature, I have chosen to analyse Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994) and focus on how the main character Iqbal's quest for identity is restlessly forged through the difficulties of being outside dominator models across different social spaces. This without conforming to the expectations and ideals of dominator nationalist cultures and traditions, and surmounting racism, xenophobia and other forms of cultural stereotyping common to all cultures. Without such a cautious identification of Iqbal's developing consciousness, we would tend to grossly locate his migrant identity in a merely textualised 'exotic' and 'diasporic' continuum as a non-white outsider. I shall thus pay particular attention to Iqbal's apprehensive and restless self, animated by a dialectical process of being immersed in rigid cultural parochialism based on introverted configurations of control (dominator model), which he then transcends by progressing toward a more inclusive cosmopolitan world view. This welcomes and invites interaction with the new and the diverse (partnership model), through which human relationships are experienced as linked rather than ranked across the great surface of cultural differences.

Within Australian literature, discussions revolving around the study of Asian Australian writers inevitably raise a series of questions, especially when we intend to move beyond their assessment as a mere colonial and exotic import. Considering its relatively brief history,³ Asian Australian literary studies constitutes a highly contentious category since its critical

inception, identified as 'ethnic minority writing', 'migrant literature', and 'multicultural writing' (Jurgensen; Gunew). To this extent, David Carter observes that Australian literature appears to be 'more contentious than consensual [...] precisely because it has functioned to represent one version of consensus against another' (17), thus signalling a well-established Anglo-Celtic mainstream literary canon that excludes *other*—migrant—experiences expressed within modern Australian society. However, the unwillingness to specifically identify different Asian communities within has been also read by other scholars as a silent claim to white Australian cultural dominance and superiority (Jensen; Helff), casting Asians 'as an homogenised mass, socially inept and culturally inferior' (Rizvi 173).

In addition, if we consider the paucity of available critical assessment on South Asian Australian writers, Australian literature appears to be very much consensual in the politest of ways, ignoring and avoiding engagement rather than actually contesting *other* perceptions of the nation. Not surprisingly, as Robin Gerster also maintains, the Australian imaginative encounter with Asia attests to continuing national insularity, proudly defended by some critics and scholars reiterating that migrant writers could certainly be allowed into the realm of Literature as long as they are capable of producing 'good writing' (Dessaix) and adhering to long-established literary conventions (Rivett; Messner). Conveniently, they are also expected to commodify an idea of Asia in their writing by celebrating a series of palatable stereotypes exoticising alterity, easily marketable to Western readers (Paranjape; Huggan), or at times encouraged by literary editors and critics to distance their work from their cultural heritage when it becomes too exotic, as in the case for instance of Adib Khan's fiction.

Initially praised with several literary awards, including the prestigious Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in 1994, for portraying as Tim Winton puts it on the book jacket of *Seasonal Adjustments* 'the sticky web of attachment and belonging', his fiction was also criticised for being too exotic (Riemer 14; Sullivan 7) and praised again when his latest novel *Homecoming* (2003) displayed 'a fully Australian focus' (Matthews 52) where the central character of a Vietnam veteran, Martin Godwin, set in middle class Australia, Melbourne and Daylesford, successfully replaces the presence of the subcontinent. But why insist that Asian Australians must establish their nationality and a normative literary worthiness in order to be recognised first as Australian writers? Adib Khan resolves the dilemma with the following words:

Despite indignant bristling and the noises that continue to be heard among the alarmists and the self-proclaimed defendants of Australia's national literature, writing itself is beginning to assume more importance than the obsession with an ossified literary identity that is presumably meant to define the core of Australian culture. This is more evident in contemporary Australian fiction than in any other form of writing because of the variety of voices that has gained prominence in recent years. To a large extent, this 'opening up' of our literary universe is due to the incentives that new writers from different backgrounds have received from the Australian Council for the Arts and the willingness of some enterprising publishers to establish the kind of literary heterogeneity that is compatible with a multicultural society. (*Trends* 1)

Even under the current auspicious turn of Australian literary studies toward a transnational practice of literary criticism 'to explore and elaborate the many ways in which the national literature has always been connected to the world' (Dixon 20), there seems to be no intention

of expanding and including 'multicultural writing' into the Australian literary canon. Some attitudes are slow to change and not surprisingly going transnational may very well boil down to stretching the consolidated literary canonical norms toward Anglo-Celtic Australian writers and their works circulating around the world, hence moving further away from a modern representation of the nation based on the actual pluralistic composition of Australian society, where Asian Australian writers 'are important expressions of our people's lives' (Jacobs 211).

South Asian Australian writers—conventionally distinguished from the other more prominent East Asian ones—constitute an ever-expanding body of fiction that has become increasingly substantive since the first renowned publication of Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew's *The Time of the Peacock* in 1965, and 'have gained a foothold in Australian literary publishing' (Bennett 4). Yet, they have not been sufficiently analysed by critics and scholars, thus presenting numerous theoretical gaps and misunderstandings that deserve deeper scrutiny. Although Asian Australian literary studies 'have developed into an area of lively critical inquiry' (Ommundsen 504), South Asian Australian literature still remains a relatively under-researched area of a significant South Asian community resident in Australia.⁴

One of the many recurrent misconceptions, for instance, is the unilateral assumption that all texts are based on the experience of migration, seen as the only point of departure, usually traumatic and enforced, thus equating diasporic literature with the common themes of arrival and engagement with the host country, the inevitable displacement that follows, and the well-earned adaptation into Australian society. Arguably, this has been complicated and challenged since early fiction such as in Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* (1991). Here, the emigration of an upper class Sri Lankan couple to New South Wales is not merely portrayed as a journey of assimilation into the new land, the Down Under cultural desert of koala, kangaroo, and wombat, but also as a multi-faceted exploration of the fundamental question of identity seen as constantly evolving rather than merely bound by tradition (Schmidt-Haberkamp), to the extent that its readers are also asked 'to reflect on their process of interpreting the novel' (Bredella 382).

Even in more recent works such as Suneeta Peres da Costa's *Homework* (1999) and her short stories ('Dreamless', 'Older', 'Sydney 2000'), the concerns at work are vividly animated by the ambivalences arising from her own upbringing and the anxieties of finding a fitting place within the culture surrounding her. These can also be read 'as a transcultural negotiation as she erases the dividing line between reality and the imagination' (Alexander 170). Similarly, Michelle de Kretser's historical novel *The Rose Grower* (1999) is set in pre-revolutionary France and her subsequent works, *The Hamilton Case* (2003) and *The Lost Dog* (2007), clearly display deliberate attempts at unsettling fixed categories through textual hybridity (Gelder and Salzman).

In addressing the multifarious issues surrounding South Asian Australian literature, several problematic issues concerning the term 'South Asian' can be observed: it is commonly a label that conveniently slots all the differences existing among the national units of this region of the world into a singular homogenised community. South Asian identities are rarely viewed in terms of their former homeland (for instance Punjab or Tamil in the case of India), of their host society (as in the case of communities such as Anglo-Indians and Indo-Fijians), or of the present country (Australia), in which some of them have been born or have become legitimate citizens. The artificiality of a pan-subcontinental identity is further revealed by the

heterogeneous geographical vastness of a region, which includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, where differences of culture, history, and religion abound. Moreover, when South Asia is compared to Europe, although being less than half the size, it hosts more than twice its population, enriched by a long history of cultural exchanges that flourished through Indian Ocean trade routes long before European colonialism. If, on the one hand, the term 'South Asia' may appear more politically correct as it frees India's neighbouring nations⁵ from the label 'Indian sub-continent' (Trivedi 46), on the other hand, it should nonetheless be used with the awareness of being not only a vague umbrella construct which serves to point out the uneven coverage accorded to so many varied people, but also the multiplicity of responses offered by these writers on transcultural representations of Australia and the world at large. This is even more so as the label 'South Asian Australians' has been repeatedly rejected and contested by Michelle de Kretser, Chandani Lokugé, Suneeta Peres da Costa, Azhar Abidi, Adib Khan, and many others who 'have all, in different ways, made a point of distancing themselves from the burden of the personal, literary, and cultural heritage they as Asian diaspora writers are somehow expected to carry into their writing' (Ommundsen 509).

Consequently, the suggested literary grouping of South Asian Australian literature becomes productive if we wish to further identify a more nuanced and textured appraisal of Australia's shared and multiple histories and focus on the multiplicity of subjective responses and contestations of rigidly defined identities and national boundaries. More importantly, it allows these writers to emerge from the margins of an insular Anglo-Celtic literary canon and the blurred status of Asian studies, thus providing fascinating portrayals of a complex community within and across both Australia and South Asia enriched by their own unique intertwining of different cultural strands and heterogeneous origins. Their pluralised space and co-existing disparities productively stretch the boundaries of the geographical and social referents through which they are read and creatively transcend the limits of rigid national cultural spaces, making way for a transnational understanding of complex inter/cross-cultural relationships between Asia and Australia. By critically exploring this still rather unsystematically developed avenue within English literary studies, South Asian Australian writers can be visibly recognised and legitimately appreciated as distinct makers as well as agents of a more inclusive multicultural Australia.⁶

Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments* further illustrates the ways through which histories, landscapes, and identities are not confined within clear-cut national boundaries but creatively re-configured as capable of transforming cultural divisions into forms of transnational dialogue. Khan's imaginative return to Bangladesh is partly autobiographical as he migrated to Australia in 1973, and kept returning to his native country until his most recent visit in 1999, when he no longer felt anchored as 'the familiar landmarks have disappeared' (De Neefe par. 6). His cultural fragmentation, which took place early in his life in Pakistan by attending an English Catholic school run by Jesuits, has endowed him with a plural identity capable of locating and perceiving himself 'beyond the obvious coordinates of a street, a suburb, a town or a passport. I am no exception in this quiet search, and my vehicle of travel is writing fiction' (Khan, 'Footsteps' par. 16).⁷ Change is the main theme of *Seasonal Adjustments*, as inscribed in its title, and as represented by the main character, a displaced migrant deeply characterised by his ever-transforming identity. It depicts the existential journey of Iqbal, a teacher from Ballarat who goes back to his native country, Bangladesh, to visit his family after eighteen years.⁸ The timing of this trip coincides with his mid-life crisis as a burnt-out schoolteacher, complicated by the collapse of his marriage to his Australian wife Michelle, and by the poverty and squalor he experiences when reconnecting with his

land, burdened by the aftershocks of the war with Pakistan. He is accompanied by his young daughter Nadine who meets her paternal relatives for the first time. Her presence on this trip reminds him of the need to uphold the conviction of a possible world beyond the cruel demands of dominator cultures. For Iqbal it is thus necessary that she also connects to her Bangali heritage so she can be enriched by it, adding new dimensions to her world in order to be 'among a slowly growing minority which will learn how to combine traditions' (85). Iqbal belongs to an elite family, the Chaudhary, aristocratic landowners (*zamindari*) bearing the 'proud legacy of a Moghul title bestowed upon chosen warriors' (9) and based on the 'illusions of self-sacrifice and altruism' (158). His struggle, however, is in finding a sense of purpose in life, 'a kin desire to begin anew, a spirit of generosity toward oneself, a renewal of faith in humanity and a burning energy to create a new social order whose virtues are not merely remote ideals' (261). This quest is constantly expressed through an ever-evolving identity, an inward intimate sense of self, enriched by ambivalences and polarised views, re-created and constantly negotiated through memory, his only reliable device through which a deeper 'untainted national soul' (261) can be accessed.

Back in Bangladesh, he finds himself incapable of identifying with his country and reacts with utter discontent: 'from the air-conditioned comfort of the car, I view the third world with the critical eyes of an intolerant alien [...] I am not plagued by guilt or tortuous self-recriminations about my reactions to what I see [...] Everything appears to be dilapidated. Old. Dirty. I am relieved I do not live here any more' (46). His family sees his self-imposed migration as an 'act of greed' (136) and accords him a cold welcome. He has been flirting with the West for quite some time and their mutual relationship has been irreparably altered. The gap is further widened by the family's mistaken belief that he has been enjoying great privilege by living in such a wealthy and progressive country. This is in fact in sharp contrast to his personal experience, an unpretentious life regulated by provincial uniformity and suburban routine: 'like a good Australian I have been seduced by the common dream of a brick-veneer house [...] the neighbours, unlike the free-roaming koalas, are politely amiable from a distance' (122).

In Australia, Iqbal's disappointment and frustration with the country is vividly represented through the difficult relationship with his wife Michelle and her conservative Catholic and xenophobic parents. They constitute the source of many stereotypes of Asian people seen as 'devious, unscrupulous, greedy and godless. [Their] understated philosophy—copulate and populate' (86-87) in which Iqbal represents most things they believe are going wrong with Australia: 'I was not among those who had smuggled across in a boat and surreptitiously made my way to Melbourne to begin a cosy life at the expense of the honest, tax-paying Aussie battler' (86). Here, it is worth noting that the novel, published in 1994, appeared amidst Australia's unfavourable immigration policies of the 1990s where the influx of ethnic groups 'gave rise to outpourings of anti-Asian racism over the arrival of "boat people", refugees and asylum seekers' (Jayasuriya 71), tensions still underlying national immigration debates today. Those were the years of Pauline Hanson's divisive One Nation political party and Bruce Ruxton's xenophobic nationalism where migrants had to be assimilated into Australian society and deny their native cultural traditions, which represented a threatening challenge to the conservative white Anglo-Celtic national identity.⁹

Significantly, both xenophobia and religious fundamentalism come under the spotlight on many occasions as oppressive dominator systems, which Iqbal struggles to transcend.¹⁰ His consistent rejection of rigid conventions and traditional sources of dominator authority is

equally accorded to both Australia and Bangladesh, which contributes to him feeling a stranger wherever he goes. When it is demanded that he embrace the normative expectations of both Catholic and Islamic religions, he struggles and rejects both, finding them essentially unequal towards humanity. Iqbal takes a clear stand against his daughter Nadine being baptised and wishes one day that she will be able to combine world traditions and become an independent thinker instead of blindly adhering to an exclusive affirmation of her cultural identity. For his Australian in-laws it is unthinkable that their niece would grow up without a clear understanding of belonging to a specific community. More deeply, Iqbal's objection to baptism is a blunt refusal to uphold what his wife and family consider to be the immutable virtues of every decent Australian: 'a blind devotion to the monarchy, an active support for the policies of the RSL, a life-long membership of the Liberal Party and an undying belief that Australia should continue to draw all its spiritual and cultural sustenance from Europe, even in the distant future' (86). As Lars Jensen aptly observes, the argument between Iqbal and his in-laws proves to be even more revelatory in highlighting 'how the resort of Asian stereotypes is never far below the surface in Australia and how it is not the preserve of the uneducated. Rather, such stereotypes are bred into high and low through a whole range of representational systems' (142).

The same myopic vision of religious traditions enmeshed with ossified nationalism has been acutely perceived by Iqbal since childhood, such as in the formative experience of being involved in a holy war against red ants led by his fanatical Muslim playmate Khuda Buksh. After having burnt anthills with kerosene, he was consumed by so much guilt that he never committed a violent act again whereas Khuda Buksh as an adult still displayed a distorted perception of the world which did not include Jews, Christians, or Buddhists: 'there were only Muslims and Hindus locked in a kind of Manichean struggle for the ultimate mastery of the universe' (Khan, *Adjustments* 37). As a young practising Muslim, Iqbal also recalls how much he struggled to understand the Koran: 'it was drummed into me from an early age that submission was the defining quality of Islam. I have never reconciled myself to the notion of arbitrary suffering as a trial of faith [...] I see little dignity and purpose in the punitive harshness of life around me' (41). This is also echoed in his early years in a Catholic school: 'caught between Catechism and Koranic lessons, I was like a young Everyman in a variation of a morality play' (88-89) where a Peshawari *mullah* completed the indoctrination at home after school. The intersection of religious and nationalist dominator configurations is further articulated in the clear identification of the damaging oppression inflicted by the English medium school as the institutionalised violent ranking system of the British colonisation, which used

impressionable children from affluent families as raw material to be shaped and moulded into arrogant stereotypes before spouting them out as aliens in their indigenous environment [...] At schools the sterling figures of male celibacy [...] were committed to the propagation of a fundamentalist brand of Christianity and the destruction of communist ideals behind an imposing facade of academic excellence. (88-89)

Similarly, back in Bangladesh, Iqbal faces the same conservative parochialism expressed by his family on several occasions, such as the racial intolerance for having the burden of a foreign wife, the demand of instilling Islamic values in his daughter, and the enforced family tradition of the Chaudhary lineage dominated by patriarchal male figures.

Iqbal's overtly critical rejection of dominator national narratives is not only confined to religion but also conveyed in his accounts of both Bangladeshi and Australian landscapes, both characterised by moral decay and rigid cultural barriers. They are not seen as geographical locations but as living anthropomorphic entities struggling to come to terms with their respective national identities. Iqbal confesses that

when I first arrived in Australia, I thought it was an ideal sanctuary, prosperous and inexperienced in suffering. I knew nothing about the Aborigines then [...] I suppose if you get to know anything well enough you discover its flaws. It was my mistake to think that Australia was nearly perfect [...] But more recently it has become a very frustrated youth unable to see a clear reflection of itself to reaffirm its self-love. I don't know if my criticism is an outpouring of disillusionment or whether it is an uncharitable comment on a tired society rapidly running out of creative energy and searching for someone to blame. (123)

The image of an immature Australia as a youth tottering on the brink of adulthood who struggles to come to term with aging and self-responsibility is juxtaposed with the history of violence, poverty, and backwardness of Bangladesh, seen in its continuous struggle to move beyond old political regimes. From the very first page, his native place appears muddy, chaotic, and animated by 'an undisciplined energy of confusion. It emanated from that distinct brand of third-world inefficiency which converts the simplest organisational routine into a laborious, time-consuming exercise generating a frightful clamour appropriate for a riot-stricken territory' (282). His village is traversed by a river that slithers away like a restless snake, and surrounded by sickly thin trees which 'scaly-skinned fruits hanging droopily like the shrivelled breasts of starving women' (3). Iqbal wonders whether these deplorable conditions reflect a racial limitation which condemns the country to perpetual abjection and he becomes even more aware of no longer belonging. Neither Bangladesh nor Australia represents home, yet they have both become the diverse facets of his dissatisfied and fragmented being. This, however, only serves to reinforce his deep conviction that 'the most important identity is that of a human being' (250), and to deepen his awareness of being an ever-growing composite of diverse cultures. In a world where human relationships are predominantly measured by 'the fallacy of cultural superiority' (33) and ranked through unequal hierarchies of domination, he finds himself unable to identify with a single mainstream tradition or a place as he cannot view life from a stationary position. He admits that there are occasions when he regrets the exposure to 'the diversity of cultural radiation, which has bleached [his] individuality' (9). Yet, for Iqbal 'to entrench oneself in the groove of an established tradition requires a certain amount of unconscious dedication to ignorance' (249-50). From this multi-discursive space, where 'the world seems to open up just a little more each day to expose the magnitude of its imperfections' (153), the inequalities and prejudices arising from Christian and Islamic cultural traditions, the Anglo-Saxon and the elite Chaudhary superiority, are creatively connected and re-configured in his imagination into transcultural partnerships, such as in the passage where he envisages himself as a United Nations referee appointed to supervise a battle between Christians and Muslims:

It is an honest confrontation. There are no political or moral pretensions. It is an open display of bigotry, prejudice and ignorance in a conflict for global supremacy [...] Those without fervent belief in their cause may not participate. Rational thinking is forbidden. Compromises are not allowed. Inflammatory

placards and banners are compulsory. (203)

Similarly, Iqbal is seen overcoming the same religious dominator binarism when he bridges Western and eastern cultural traditions through a transcultural fantasy that conveys his idea of a benign divinity: 'In moments of outrageous daydreaming, I have mobilised Michelangelo's masterpiece [David] and whisked it away to another land where it stands white and resplendent in the fiery pink and silvery-gray light of an Agra dawn in front of the Taj. A discourse between Michelangelo and Shahjahan. That's what heaven should be all about' (63).

However, the displacement experienced by being a migrant who values 'the agony of free thinking and the freedom of choice above the cosiness of belonging' (249) also offers some negative complexities. If, on the one hand, cultural fragmentation has enabled Iqbal to appreciate how much different people and cultures have in common, on the other hand, the irony of his self-righteous certitude is that he can be as narrow-minded as his in-laws in Australia, his family in Bangladesh, and his ex-wife. His fragilities and shortcomings pertain to all human beings, flawed creatures with 'such talent for inflicting pain on ourselves' (55), and explicitly surface in his reunion with his family after eighteen years of absence: he is troubled by his lack of tenderness for his mother, 'this portly, grey-haired woman sitting on the carpet' (47); worried when he is accused by both his wife Michelle and his younger sister Nafisa of being selfish and callous, treating love 'as an investable capital' (47), and forced to face his own prejudices when Nafisa admits being a lesbian: 'I think I am fairly tolerant and reasonably broad-minded, legacies of my exposure to the diversities of the world [...] I am dismayed by the revelation of my double standards [...] I have been unequivocal in support of gay rights. Yet I cannot deny that nauseating revulsion which scythed through me like a sharp blade' (221).

An elitist and at times patriarchal outlook is also revealed in many other circumstances: the meeting with his widowed cousin, Alya, for whom he feels no affection and only sees her intellectual puerility and lack of marital status, 'a plump, faded woman anxious to talk to me. She is on the hunt [...] armed with the fortune she inherited from her husband's shipping business' (74); or when he seizes the opportunity to 'civilise the locals by teaching them about cricket or asserting our superiority by thrashing them in a game of soccer' (23); and when he aloofly views his native country as a 'third world with the critical eyes of an intolerant alien' (46) where his capacity to be shocked has upset him as his reactions 'are those of someone who has never been exposed to such degradation' (101). Iqbal is not immune to dominator configurations, 'weaknesses of any human society' (123), and his flaws make him more human and deeply animated by a willingness to be left alone to be himself and learn how to expand his life to embrace existence as a creative act with all its imperfections, where the terms are negotiable and there are opportunities 'for U-turns and diversions, for slowing down, for pausing to search for a previously missed niche in the haste to keep going' (173). In this restless search for a self beyond artificial national barriers, he feels liberated by the emptiness of the Australian continent: 'there is space out there for the expansion of one's vision, for self-renewal. Its vast empty centre is like the microcosmic eye of the universe—mysterious and full of wonder' (124). Throughout the novel, Iqbal is always seen striving to come to terms with the complex fabric of his life, irreparably caught up in multiple memories and a permanent sense of loss. Through transcending the ranking of separate entities cast upon unequal hierarchies of domination, a glaring awareness emerges of a fundamental human equality mutually experienced across cultures, cogently summed up in

the following passage:

Do you know what it means to be a migrant? A lost soul forever adrift in search of a tarnished dream? You live in a perpetual state of conflict, torn between what was and what should have been. There is a consciousness of permanent loss. You get sick of wearing masks to hide your confused aloneness. You can never call anything your own. But out of this deprivation emerges an understanding of humanity unstifled by generic barriers. No, I wouldn't have it any other way. I have had my prejudices trimmed to manageable proportions. You realise that behind the trappings of cultural differences human strengths and failures are global constants. That is a very precious knowledge. A Bangali can be as indifferent, mean, egotistical, loving, creative, heroic, generous, humane, cruel and greedy as an Australian. It makes you appreciate the homogeneous blue print of human life. It is this impossible mixture which binds humanity, and I am a part of it. No better or worse than anyone, but an equal. An equal because I know I am a composite of all those contradictory characteristics which are far stronger than any racial or religious differences. And that is worth celebrating. (143)

Far beyond inhabiting an exotic diasporic space, Iqbal strives to embrace difference by merging into a cosmopolitan consciousness, through which he can trim his ego and resist the essentialising labelling of dominator oppositional constructions (Western/Asian, national/ethnic, modern/traditional). What is of interest here is that Khan problematises Iqbal's migrant identity by constantly transcending his supposed hyphenated in-betweenness of here and there as his voice tells him 'what it is like to be a stranger and yet to be at home, to live both inside and outside of one's immediate situation, to be permanently on the move, to think of one way return journeys but to realise at the same time the impossibility of doing so' ('Footsteps' par. 28). This is also skilfully conveyed in the novel by Khan's frequent use of flashbacks, recalling specific events through which Iqbal strives to be simply human, himself and to tell his own unique story in order to comprehend how to live a life that cannot be separated into individual strands but 'must remain interwoven in a complex texture' (296). In his quest for self, Iqbal critically exposes the flaws of dominator configurations imposed and maintained by family, education, religion, politics, and nationalism as global constants, from which the complicated entanglement of togetherness through difference becomes a cosmopolitan forum of human initiative for widening the horizons of mutual recognition and inclusion.

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¹ For a further discussion on transculturalism see for instance Klooss, Lindberg-Wada, Pennycook, and Schulze-Engler and Helff.

² 'Equalitarian is used instead of the more conventional "egalitarian". The reason is that "egalitarian" has traditionally only described equality between men and men (as the works of Locke, Rousseau, and other "rights of man" philosophers, as well as modern history, evidence). "Equalitarian" denotes social relations in a partnership society where women and men (and "masculine" and "feminine") are accorded equal value' (Eisler *Chalice* 216). For a detailed discussion of the partnership model in World Literatures, Languages and Education see the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) website at http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=195.

³ Recent studies on Asian Australian writers usually follow a pattern set by scholarship into Asian-American and Asian-Canadian, with special emphasis on East Asian, mainly Chinese cultural production. See Chan, Khoo, and Ommundsen.

⁴ As Dale points out, the next big trend in immigration would be with Indians, who in 2005 amounted to 120,000, a figure that does not include Asian born residents from other South Asian nations (11).

⁵ In *Seasonal Adjustments*, Australians have a prototype image of Iqbal as an Indian: 'it is laundered and made acceptable in their own minds. Everything, from language to food, religion, and accent, has been moulded into a composition to fit a uniform view about an Indian' (147-48).

⁶ Here the term multiculturalism refers to a critical response to nationalism that places great emphasis on the illusory notion of a cultural purity originating in the imperialistic impetus of dominant cultures.

⁷ Khan also admits that 'I was born in Pakistan, with familial connections in India, had a rebirth in Bangladesh without ever believing in reincarnation, and now I was an Australian in possession of a certificate of citizenship and an associated document of sixty-four pages, valid for ten years, to prove who I was' ('Footsteps' par. 14).

⁸ Khan's imaginative return to Bangladesh is further explored in his latest novel *Spiral Road* (2007).

⁹ These negative attitudes towards Asian communities have also been addressed in other works such as Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* (1991) and Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* (1983).

¹⁰ For a detailed study of xenophobia and difference in Khan's novel see also Alexander ('Disenchantment') and Tan.