

Postcolonial Servitude: Interiority and System in Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*

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Abstract: This article focuses on Pakistani-American writer Daniyal Mueenuddin's notable first collection of interlinked short stories *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2009) as an example of an emergent wave of contemporary transnational fiction that foregrounds the figure of the domestic servant as central rather than marginal and emphasizes diverse servants' vulnerability and agency. The essay situates Mueenuddin's fiction in the contexts of Anglophone South Asian literary history and Pakistan's postcolonial feudal system and argues that he makes a significant intervention by crafting strategies of subaltern representation that explore servant interiority and highlight the interlocking systems of power that dehumanize stigmatized subaltern individuals locked in domestic servitude. It examines the intersections of gender, sexuality, and class evoked in Mueenuddin's stories; the psychic complexities of individuals who struggle against habitual abjection, subordination, and disempowerment; and the ways that servants, working in the intimacy of employers' homes, strive to ameliorate their lot within frameworks of patriarchy, corruption, and violence. Mueenuddin's cultural work aims to shift readers' ways of seeing, defamiliarize the familiar, and encourage empathy and ethical action in specific postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: domestic servants, subaltern representation, Daniyal Mueenuddin, feudalism in Pakistan, South Asian fiction in English, *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*

Her presence was slight, and went unnoticed. But when illness or indisposition kept her away, she was seen everywhere: in the dirty cups and saucers, upon the dusty furniture, in the sheets of unmade beds.

Rohinton Mistry, *Family Matters* (64)

In a novel occupied with the difficulties of a Parsi family in Bombay, Rohinton Mistry pauses briefly to notice what often goes “unnoticed” both in the home and in the text: the family’s domestic servant whose labor is noticed only when it is absent; a female body on which the household depends but which is “seen” only in the physical traces of work not done; a person defined negatively in terms of “unmade” beds and unclean cups (64). Indeed, the female servant is not seen in *Family Matters*, which notes her invisibility, but does not make her any more visible. Perhaps this is because Mistry, a male, middle-class Indian-Canadian writer, is too cautious to risk the challenges of representing the subaltern subjectivity of an illiterate domestic female servant and is clear about his focus on the (not unrelated) problems of obligation, dependency, intimacy, aging, and gender dynamics within one middle-class family.

Yet I begin with Mistry’s percipient observation because it points to a growing interest among his contemporaries to address this challenge, and it points to a new wave of South Asian fiction in English that explores the phenomenon of domestic servitude. In British drama and fiction from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, a foundational tradition for Anglophone postcolonial writers, servants are either absent as protagonists (unsurprisingly, given that literary and literate storytellers historically emerge from and primarily address the ruling classes rather than the ruled), or present not as representations of actual servants or any historical underclass but to serve a variety of aesthetic or narrational purposes. They often signify the protagonist’s socio-economic status and class privilege; serve as comic relief; enable the plot; bear witness or provide crucial information; offer unequal parallels to the master(s) narrative; tell the master’s story rather than their own; provide local color or setting; and (sometimes) subvert or destabilize the (self-)

portrayal of the dominant classes.¹ In imperial British fiction, servants as racial others frequently figure as caregivers (in the work of Rudyard Kipling and Flora Annie Steel, for example) or helpers in adventure and discovery (in the work of writers such as Joseph Conrad, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. Rider Haggard). Such characters are usually depicted as lesser beings to be managed by the white narrator with indulgence, nostalgia, or contempt. Yet literary scholars have not noticed that just as domestic servants disappear from post-1945 western literature, they re-appear in postcolonial literatures, especially in South Asian fiction, to play rather different roles.

It is no surprise that the figure of the domestic servant should be present in, and even essential to, twentieth and twenty-first century fiction from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Iran given the socio-economic structures of inequality, rural to urban migration, reliance upon domestic labor instead of technological appliances, and ubiquitous presence of servants in lower-, middle-, and upper-class homes in these countries (as was the case in Britain until World War II). As sociologist Raka Ray and anthropologist Seemin Qayum argue in their pathbreaking study, thanks to “long unbroken histories of domestic servitude,” distinctive South Asian “cultures of servitude” (and upper-class dependence on domestic servants) have evolved from colonial and feudal to modern times that are constitutive of contemporary Indian elite or middle classes (2). Ray and Qayum define a “culture of servitude” as “one in which social relations of domination/ subordination, dependency and inequality are normalized and permeate both the domestic and public spheres” (3). The pervasiveness of such systems of servitude in South Asia is indicated by a Kolkata truism: “[E]veryone has a servant who is not himself or herself a servant” (qtd. in Ray and Qayum 169).² In an era of postcolonial modernity and globalization, industrialization and agricultural change, systems of domestic service are arguably on the rise worldwide as more and more urban households employ individuals who have few options other than to do menial work as cooks, bearers, nursemaids, cleaners, kitchen-workers, chauffeurs, gardeners, and watchmen.³ In literatures emergent from nations newly freed from European colonization and founded upon hopes of creating

modern democratic and egalitarian societies, both the invisibility *and* visibility of servants take on new meanings as middle-class postcolonial writers either call attention to or fail to notice the continuing disenfranchisement of servants (the *other of the other*, the serving people of a formerly colonized newly emergent bourgeoisie) present in their midst.

Whereas earlier South Asian literature, as I elaborate below, casts servant figures as necessary *background* for the emergence of a postcolonial elite, a new wave of writers has begun to intervene in this tradition and create new discourses and awareness of servitude and subjection by *foregrounding* and humanizing the servant figure as a protagonist that is central, not marginal, to the text. In this essay I focus on Pakistani-American writer Daniyal Mueenuddin's debut collection of interlocking stories, *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2009), as an example of this emergent trend in contemporary South Asian and transnational fiction in English. I argue that Mueenuddin's most significant interventions are his evocation of the psychic *interiority* of servitude and his exploration of the daily indignities and culture of humiliation and subservience experienced by diverse servants as individuals. He asks how such a system affects relations among servants and between servants and employers, as well as how it is gendered, sexualized, or inscribed on the body. A major goal of his stories, I suggest, is to re-humanize those who are regularly dehumanized, to build an understanding of different subjectivities through detailed observation and nuanced representation, and to carve a space for the articulation of desire for those otherwise rendered as (and who come to see themselves as) abject or merely instrumental. He is less interested, then, in what servants can tell us about the constitution of the upper classes or how elite subjects are formed and understand themselves, and more in interrogating a system that is taken as normal in Pakistan, in de-normalizing it, and making visible and questioning what is usually taken for granted. Another goal for Mueenuddin, however, is to understand the ways that those empowered to command or abuse servants are *systemically* enabled to enact such power. His stories thus ask us to focus, with an important duality of vision, both on servant and employer interiority and interaction as well as the interlocking social, political, historical, legal, gendered, and cultural frameworks that neces-

sarily constitute servant subjectivities and interrelationships—in other words, on the *systems* within which individuals are placed and that shape who they become.

Born in 1963 to an American journalist mother and a Pakistani father who was a feudal landowner and government official, Mueenuddin was raised in Lahore, Pakistan, and Elroy, Wisconsin. He majored in English at Dartmouth College, earned a law degree from Yale University, and worked as a corporate lawyer in New York City before returning to manage his father's farmlands in southern Punjab, where he began writing fiction. Of the eight stories in *In Other Rooms*, three were first published in *The New Yorker*. One appeared in *Granta*, one was published in *Zoetrope*, and one was selected by Salman Rushdie for *The Best American Short Stories of 2008*. *In Other Rooms* was a 2009 National Book Awards and Pulitzer Prize finalist and was named one of the top ten books of the year by *Time Magazine*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *The Guardian* and *The Economist*, among others. Mueenuddin describes his position as “internally displaced” but consequently enriched and acknowledges that his perspective is, like many transnational writers, that of a privileged insider-outsider, not solely Pakistani or American but hyphenated or multiply affiliated (Mueenuddin, “Daniyal”).⁴ He is thus able to see as insiders might not, and translate (as attested by his success in prestigious American and British venues), with stunning empathy, acuity, and precision the lives of Punjabi Pakistanis ranging from humble villagers, middlemen, and hangers-on to the most aristocratic and cosmopolitan of elite jet-setters. The stories in *In Other Rooms* are loosely linked through the figure of K. K. Harouni, an aging feudal landlord challenged by the rise of a nouveau riche industrialist class, and revolve around this feudal world in transition. They shift perspectives, zooming in to concentrate on different individuals and their related but hierarchically disparate lives. Decentering the employer/landowner, Mueenuddin refrains from making Harouni the focus of even one story: over half of the tales zero in on domestic servants—male and female, rural and urban, young and old—with an attentiveness, complexity, and diversity that is unprecedented in Anglophone South Asian or diasporic writing.

The seemingly independent but interlinked stories in the collection offer different dimensions of intersecting lives that all occupy Harouni's world. Collectively they describe two arcs: a movement from exterior to interior to exterior spaces; and, secondly, a movement that begins with servant stories, shifts to higher classes, and moves back to a villager whose life is destroyed after he becomes a servant. Servants thus both frame and occupy the center of the collection. Beginning with "Nawabdin," a story about an electrician on the outer borders of a feudal household, the collection shifts to male-female intra-servant sexual relations in "Saleema," male-female employer-servant relations in "Provide, Provide," and male-male employer-servant relations in "About a Burning Girl." The title story, "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders," appears in the middle of the collection and concerns a lower-middle class girl, caught between servants and elites, who tries to improve her lot by having sex with her wealthy older relative, Harouni. The servants in this story become guardians of social and moral codes when they enact either resentment or servility toward the girl, whose transgressive sexual labor both lowers and elevates them in relation to her. The only story in the collection that does not feature servants is "Our Lady of Paris," in which an upper-class Pakistani couple in Paris (tellingly, the narrative is the only one not set in Pakistan) manipulates their son's American girlfriend into leaving him. Even "Lily," a story about a disintegrating marriage between a socialite and a landowner, highlights how the constant presence of servants both enables their employers' freedom from labor and limits their privacy. The collection as a whole is thus carefully shaped with an intricate thematic and formal design.

Western reviewers have compared Mueenuddin to Chekhov, Turgenyev, Steinbeck, and Faulkner, but apart from some obvious comparisons to Mohsin Hamid, another internationally successful young male Pakistani writer with Ivy League credentials, none have attempted to link Mueenuddin's writing to other South Asian or postcolonial writers (which is rather odd, given the detailed texture of Mueenuddin's work and its setting in Pakistan).⁵ I propose that Mueenuddin's fiction both does something new in the context of South Asian literature in English, insisting on changes to habituated or acculturated ways

of seeing and representing, and belongs to a broader global wave of fiction that is attempting something similar. This internationally published recent fiction, which includes Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger* (2008), Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef* (1994), Thrity Umrigar's *The Space Between Us* (2006), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and Mona Simpson's *My Hollywood* (2010), has begun to re-think the invisibility of servants and servitude and to address servant interiority, agency, and vulnerability as a form of social and cultural intervention. Mueenuddin is distinctive among these authors in his use of the interlinked short story, which, unlike the single servant perspective of a novel's protagonist, allows for an intra-textual comparative exploration of multiple and diverse servant subjectivities and experiences.

To clarify, by "domestic servitude" I refer to a complex of relations distinguished from both slavery and indentured labor. In much of South Asia, a domestic servant is (nominally) paid for his or her labor and, though constrained by a severe lack of choices and informal networks of emotion, obligation, or tradition, is able to voluntarily enter or leave the service of an employer without notice and without any binding legal or written contract. That said, he or she is nonetheless also among the most vulnerable in society, unprotected from abuse or injustice, and powerless to prevent sudden termination of employment and loss of shelter or lodging at the whim of the employer. I focus on domestic servants not as generalized representatives of subaltern or impoverished classes (which include peasants, factory workers, shopkeepers, Dalits, and beggars) but more specifically as individuals who work and often live in homes that can afford to retain and pay them, and whose interactions with their employers thus present the intimate interface between unequal classes and the paradoxes of close contact and distance between individuals from very different social strata. Domestic servitude in South Asia is understood to be a deeply stigmatized position, a permanent rather than temporary constituent of identity that produces expectations of loyalty, deference, and even self-abasement on one side, and varying degrees of obligation on the other.⁶ It is distinct from other forms of work or "classic capital/labor relationships" that are constituted by the "market," as Ray and Qayum argue, because it "inhabits the private, intimate space

of the home” (192). The employer’s home is a workplace even for the live-in servant. The home becomes a site where the private and public as well as leisure and work intersect, producing in many cultures of servitude what Ray and Qayum call a “rhetoric of love” and “family,” a “complex discourse” that both conceals exploitation and makes it “bearable” on both sides (93).

Domestic servitude thus offers (internal to postcolonial societies) what in the context of colonial cross-cultural encounters Mary Louise Pratt terms a “contact zone”—a site of simultaneous intimacy, distance, and mutual adaptation. Instead of treating colonizer and colonized as sealed and separate entities, Pratt’s focus on contact foregrounds “the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters” and emphasizes “how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other” via “copresence” and “interaction, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (7). I borrow this notion of the contact zone to examine internal or intra-cultural dynamics within modern postcolonial societies—employer-servant relations in contemporary transnational postcolonial fiction—where similar asymmetries of power operate for individuals of radically different socio-economic, familial, and educational backgrounds (though often of the same race or nationality) similarly locked in close proximity.

Methodologically I call on both intensive close analysis of Mueenuddin’s technical and formal choices, and broader interdisciplinary frameworks that include the historical contexts of Pakistan’s postcolonial feudal system, a socio-cultural understanding of abjection and power relations in Pakistan’s contemporary culture of servitude, and gender and sexual formations to identify his stories’ innovations and interventions and unfold the arguments they make. I explore how these stories represent, or seek to evoke empathy for, figures who may seem remote to international readers and so familiar that they are easily overlooked by bourgeois South Asian audiences. I examine how the stories complicate the spheres of the private (sexual and emotional interactions among servants and employers) as well as the public (the intrusion of state violence, law, and corruption in servant lives) and delineate their imbrication. I am interested in what cultural assumptions and social

failures the stories endeavor to expose as well as the attitudinal shifts they exemplify and seek to effect in readers.⁷

In contemporary literary and cultural studies, gender, sexuality, race, class, and nationality are increasingly taken for granted as significant and mutually constitutive, historically contingent, categories of analysis. However, we (especially in postcolonial studies) have yet to pay attention to domestic servitude as a similarly significant social, cultural, or economic construction or dimension of identity formation or constituent of human interaction. This essay contributes to this enterprise by exploring Mueenuddin's interventions in contemporary forms of servitude and their constitution.

Some Necessary Context and a Clarification Before Reading Mueenuddin Closely

It would be hard to find modern South Asian fiction that does not take domestic servitude in lower-middle- to upper-class households for granted. Writers with diverse national, religious, and ethnic affiliations offer illuminatingly different, culturally conditioned responses to similar economic socio-cultural arrangements and the ensuing interpersonal dynamics. However, it is possible to discern some patterns or representative modes that form a literary tradition against which Mueenuddin's departures can be measured. Here I briefly highlight three types of representation in earlier South Asian fiction: the servant as semi-visible background to help constitute the rising middle class; the servant visible as a domestic functionary whom women observe, depend on, and control; and the servant as visibly important yet a butt of comic humor. The first type of representation, which appears in works by authors ranging from R. K. Narayan to Nirad Chaudhuri, briefly mentions the servant figure to provide a backdrop against which the bourgeois colonized subject may emerge. Often seeking to establish for Western readers the existence of a "civilized" Indian middle-class and its attendant privileges, and to affirm for Indian English readers their middle-class identities, such writers call upon servants as humble foils in narratives that focus on employers as protagonists who are sometimes concerned about but usually unable to understand their culturally and psychologically remote

servants.⁸ The second type of representative mode, apparent in the work of women writers from the 1950s and 1960s such as Attia Hosain and Zeenuth Futehally, pays more attention to the simultaneously affectionate and antagonistic interactions between female protagonists and their servants. This mode explores the cross-class intimacy between women or the paradox of women who have authority over men within the arena of the home. Such writing is interested in domesticity and is linked with its secret sharer, the figure of the *domestic* or servant.⁹ Both the first and second modes of representation are frequently accompanied by bourgeois prejudices about servant unreliability, criminality, sexuality or, alternatively, by implicit distancing calls for pity, while the narrative focus remains on the necessarily removed bourgeois protagonist or narrator.¹⁰ South Asian English writing took a definitive turn with the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1980. With its broad national and historical scope and its interest in the challenges of a newly decolonized nation, especially the interdependence and contrasts between rich and poor, *Midnight's Children* granted new attention to servants, from Mary Pereira, the nurse turned ayah, to Padma, the narrator's cook, first audience, and sexual partner. Although Rushdie grants more importance to servants than most writers who precede him, his comic, external narrative standpoint and often condescending mode of representation allow little interiority for the other who remains other. Servants (mostly women) are still subordinated to the self-absorbed upper-class male narrator's story.¹¹

In contrast to these three types of representation, Mueenuddin eschews the instrumental use of servant figures that elevate or help educate the bourgeois (post)colonial subject or perpetuate servant stereotypes. In Mueenuddin's servant stories the third person narrator effaces himself (with one important exception) and directs readers' attention unobtrusively and empathetically to the servant's interiority. Unlike contemporaries such as Adiga and Gunesekera, Mueenuddin does not attempt to narrate stories through servants' voices; unlike Umrigar, he does not focus on relations among women.¹² Whether they explore intra-servant sexuality, the exploitation of female servants by their male masters, or the struggles of various servants to ameliorate their lot, his stories focus

on the choices, complex emotions, and intimate relations of individual servants. If he explores an employer's perspective, as in "Provide, Provide," it is to unravel its ethical failures and negative effects on servants. In Mueenuddin's fiction, servants are not learning devices, helpless victims, or reflective foils for upper-class protagonists. They are complex human beings located in a thickly described mesh of social and cultural conditions that are shown to shape their actions and subjectivity. Moreover, as the stories build, the accretion of perspectives creates a multi-dimensional kaleidoscope effect that allows each servant's story to reflect off of and add to the others.

In addition to this literary historical context, some socio-political historical context is necessary. At the time of independence in 1947, both Pakistan and India inherited a feudal landlord tenant-farming system of private land ownership that was partly created and partly formalized by British colonial rule. With the aim of consolidating colonial power after the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, the British instituted a system of indirect rule (particularly in the northern agricultural belt in Punjab, Sindh, and Bengal) via *zamindars* or *jagirdars*, many of whom were originally revenue collectors without legitimate or ancestral claims on the cultivators' lands. They were rewarded with land ownership for their loyalty to the British government and reliable collection of land revenue from tenant farmers (Rahman 159–64; Cheesman 12–13). Mueenuddin's stories allude to this formative history: K. K. Harouni's "family consolidated its lands and amassed power under the British, who made use of land-owning gentry to govern" (114). This system of land (re)distribution produced a ruling class of absentee landowners who wielded inordinate social and political power both locally and nationally. As Mueenuddin attests in his recent memoir essay in *The New Yorker*, his own ancestors benefitted from such an arrangement: "[I]n the eighteen-thirties and forties . . . as the British chronicles tell it, Kashmir groaned under the exactions of my ancestors, who were sent there as overlords by Ranjit Singh, ruler of all Punjab. . . . On his death, the British usurped his domains, and my family silkily changed allegiances and flourished under their rule, being rewarded with more lands and small honors, suitable for small gentry" ("Sameer" 64).

After independence, both Pakistani and Indian governments tried to curtail the power of the landowning class by passing various land reforms. Scholars with different agendas and national origins agree that these reforms failed in their promises, though they were more effective in India than Pakistan (Raj 131–41; Herring 125; Naqvi et al. 28–29). In India, *zamindari* or feudal landownership was legally abolished (as documented in Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and symbolized in the title's phallic "broken column"). In Pakistan, two different presidents passed reforms that imposed ceilings on land ownership: Ayub Khan in 1959, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto incrementally in 1972 and 1977. But even the most radical of these reforms were full of loopholes, designed at best to limit but not eliminate the monopoly of feudal families, and easily circumvented by a ruling class that controlled the government, legal system, and army (Herring 85–125).¹³ Subsequent to Bhutto's death in 1979, the period in which Mueenuddin's stories are set, the power and wealth of this patriarchal feudal landlord system remained entrenched. A rising industrial class rivaled the system, although not enough to ameliorate the living conditions of rural landless tenants, many of whom shifted to domestic service either in the homes of their feudal landlords or as migrant workers in middle-class urban homes. The current system of landownership-based feudal power (and consequent inequality, farmer poverty, and servitude) in Pakistan thus owes its origins to British colonialism and remains a powerful colonial legacy. Accordingly, I would argue that the feudalism-based servitude described in Mueenuddin's stories is "postcolonial" not only in the obvious sense of being part of a postcolonial nation's socio-cultural fabric and represented in its literature, but also in the specific sense of being a direct consequence of British colonization.

Finally, I would like to clarify that in my analysis of literary representations of servitude produced by writers from relatively privileged class backgrounds writing and publishing in English, I see *literary* rather than actual servants and analyze not the degree of mimetic representation but the cultural *work* of the representation as well as the literary and political functionality of the servant in contemporary postcolonial fiction.¹⁴ The literary servant doubles as a functionary who simultaneously performs

two kinds of work: domestic service in the imaginary world of the text (such as cooking and cleaning), and literary or narratival service in the dynamics of the text (such as interrogating the elite normative ethos and exploring forms of gendered cross-class interaction). Inevitably, literary representation raises thorny questions around the right to represent, the presumption of speaking for an “other,” and the problem of the subaltern who may or may not be heard even if she does speak.¹⁵ These are important questions that need to be raised, but it would be unfortunate if they led us to dismiss what a writer may have attempted or achieved, or to ignore what kinds of conversations, and among what audiences, the work seeks to engage. Granted, Mueenuddin and his cohort are upper- to middle-class writers, and I carry no romantic illusion that we can access “authentic” servant voices, perspectives, or experiences in their work.¹⁶ Instead, I am interested in the literary, cultural, and social work performed by such middle-class narratives addressed to both international and national readers of English. Rather than prejudge them as specious I aim to ask more productive questions about what they seek to do and in what contexts, given the current realistic limitations on the production and dissemination of writing by members of servant classes in third world nations.

In her important book *Fiction Across Borders*, Shameem Black argues that while late twentieth-century postcolonial, feminist, and ethnic minority criticism has produced necessary exposés of orientalist, sexist, or racist forms of representation and shown how the socially empowered writing self mirrors itself in representations of less privileged others, this work has led to the critical fallacy that *every* representation of those in less privileged social locations is an act of imaginative invasion and enacts representational violence. This fallacy, she contends, has limited what is considered legitimate subject matter for contemporary writers as well as the manner in which critics approach contemporary fiction: “Although the political problem of speaking for others stems from historical injustice and unequal social privilege, border crossing fiction need not always remain a passive casualty of such inequities of power” (61). Black proposes alternative modes of reading late twentieth and twenty-first century fiction that is aware of such critiques and strives to

address them. These modes would allow us to “attribute positive ethical significance to telling stories about others” (19–20) and “consider why some representations may be less prone toward representational violence than others” (31). While I find Black’s description of postcolonial criticism as merely “charting representational failings” to be reductive (66), I take seriously her exhortation to read efforts to imagine socially significant otherness through a more generous, alternative lens. I agree that while “writing about alterity has often been described as dangerous, *not* writing about the lives of others may be equally troubling” (Black 61; emphasis in original). I read Mueenuddin’s work, therefore, as exemplifying what Black calls “border-crossing fiction.”

Mueenuddin’s Servants: Balancing Interiority and System, Internal and External Worlds

In Lahore I was closer to the old servant who brought me up than to anyone else—thirty years after his death I still wear the bracelet he gave me when I went off to school in America. Because I was a child, the servants and the villagers were not guarded against me, unaware that I was watching: and therefore I learned the rhythms and details of their lives in a way that I never could as a grownup. I heard the women in the village calling to each other over their common walls, walked out with boys when they took their buffaloes to be watered at the canal. These people, their gestures and intonations as I observed them in my childhood, appear throughout the stories in *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*.

Mueenuddin, “An Interview”

Mueenuddin’s comment testifies to both the emotional attachments and distances between himself, a privileged employer’s child, and the servant hired to care for him and suggests how the contact zone of servant-child interactions continues to shape him and his writing. It also indicates how his liminal position as a feudal landlord’s child gave him access to a village community un-self-censored in his presence, a world of human relationships and hierarchies that he is now invested

in describing in its complexity. Anything but nostalgic, Mueenuddin's stories offer a double vision: they ask us to understand the interiority of vulnerable individuals situated within corrupt dehumanizing systems; and they ask us to understand the systems that induce actions that resist easy judgments based on universalist or liberal humanist ethical codes.

Mueenuddin's collection opens with "Nawabdin Electrician," (originally published in *The New Yorker*), and presents Nawabdin, an engaging villager whose success working on the farm of Harouni, his patron, hinges on his unique ability to cheat the electric company by "slowing down the revolutions of the electric meters" (13). But Nawabdin is also shown from within as a man of determined enterprise, an adoring husband, and a father of twelve girls who is well aware of and spiritedly facing the challenge of providing twelve dowries: "Another man might have thrown up his hands—but not Nawabdin. The daughters acted as a spur to his genius, and he looked with satisfaction in the mirror each morning at the face of a warrior going out to do battle" (15). For the likes of Nawabdin, the story makes clear, daily existence is indeed a war and only those most adept at reading and manipulating a corrupt system will survive it. Consequently, although Nawabdin is not strictly a domestic servant, he adopts the situational identity of a servant through performance (in Judith Butler's sense), *acting* like a servant before Harouni and *performing* servitude through servility and obeisance—as other servants in subsequent stories do. Moving between the "servants' sitting area" and the house, Nawabdin tends to farm and household machinery such as air conditioners (15), thereby gaining proximity to his employer: "Harouni . . . became familiar with this ubiquitous man, who not only accompanied him on his tours of inspection, but morning and night could be found standing on the master-bed rewiring the light fixture or in the bathroom poking at the water heater" (15–16). Then, "gauging the psychological moment," Nawabdin presents his humble supplication, a carefully constructed request for a motorcycle: "Sir, as you know, your lands stretch from here to the Indus, and on these lands are fully seventeen tube wells, and to tend these seventeen tube wells there is but one man, me, your servant. In your service I have earned these gray hairs"—here he bowed his head to show the gray—

‘and now I cannot fulfill my duties as I should. Enough, sir, enough, I beg you’” (16). The scene illustrates the male-male dynamics between feudal master and servant on which subsequent stories in the collection elaborate. With humor, gentleness, and understanding of the effects of systemic disempowerment, Mueenuddin portrays Nawabdin as a likeable opportunist. The subordinate has to learn to read his master with a care that the master’s privilege does not require him to reciprocate. Nawabdin must flatter and appease Harouni, literally bow and “beg” for what he needs by casting it as a way to provide better service, even though both understand that what drives each is self-interest.

In an important shift of perspective, Mueenuddin takes us into Nawabdin’s consciousness, his playful ardor with his wife, and his anxiety about providing for his offspring. Nawabdin acquires a motorbike, which brings him status, business beyond his employer’s farm, and the attention of a robber who shoots him six times in the groin. Able to call for help, Nawabdin survives—thanks to his new ability to pay those who attend him. The story suggests that in such a system of structural inequality, Nawabdin’s mild dishonesties call for compassion rather than easy condemnation. It focuses not on the hardened old man Nawabdin serves, nor on the robber, but on Nawabdin, using an unobtrusive third person voice that invites us into Nawabdin’s interiority. The narrator is present not as a character but as a quiet voice that moves almost unnoticeably from the world outside to that inside Nawabdin. The narrator’s self-effacing quality is a strategy, I argue, that exemplifies what Black describes as border-crossing fiction (60).

As Nawabdin lies on the road expecting to die, readers are asked to focus on his pain and thoughts as well as his perceptions, such as the disinfectant he smells, and on his needs, desires, hopes, and fears for his children. Consequently, even though it is based on an actual fraudulent employee who worked for the author (Mueenuddin, “Daniyal”), the story draws sympathy towards Nawabdin, making us want him to survive and return to his family. In the closing scene, as the dying robber lies callously unattended in the bed next to Nawabdin’s and abjectly begs forgiveness, we are asked to understand (across class or national lines) Nawabdin’s hard refusal: “Never. I won’t forgive you. You had

your life, I had mine. At every step of the road I went the right way and you the wrong. . . . My wife and children would have begged in the street, and you would have sold my motorbike to pay for [drugs]" (Mueenuddin, "Nawabdin" 28). Mueenuddin locates Nawabdin in a complexly situated code of ethics. As Nawabdin sees it, he does not victimize the vulnerable or seek personal pleasure. In the total absence of safety nets or social support, and placed in a system riddled with corruption, his actions are, and must be, geared exclusively by a responsibility for his dependents' survival. While in an ideal world the pharmacist would help and Nawabdin would forgive the dying man, such expectations, Mueenuddin suggests, arise from a world out of touch with the realities in which they live. The story does not argue for ethical relativism but *situates* both judgments and actions within their specific contexts and networks of power.¹⁷

To demonstrate how Mueenuddin interweaves this dual focus on individuality and system and asks us to rethink and resist easy moral judgments, I want to compare two stories, "Saleema" and "Provide, Provide," both of which center on young servant women who transgress sexual cultural mores by using their bodies to access power. I will also briefly relate them to another pair of stories from the collection, "About a Burning Girl" and "A Spoiled Man," which focus on male servants (young and old) and their interactions with employers (both male and female) and systems of law enforcement. These two pairings also cross over: "Saleema" and "A Spoiled Man" are concerned with the interiority of subordinate servant figures, while the other two narratives concentrate on the interiority of employers. Though the shift to an employer's consciousness may seem to turn attention away from servants and evoke sympathy for the employers, I argue that it is designed to explore the effects of their evident corruption and callousness on the servant toward whom our sympathy is ultimately directed. The shift encourages us to examine how the empowered are enabled to subordinate the disempowered and how they see their power themselves. All four stories also explore the intersection of individual servants with systems of power (patriarchy, law, police) that constitute and ultimately threaten them. Each story is interested in the different forms of vulner-

ability and agency of those who inhabit a particular feudal culture of servitude within a contemporary postcolonial state. Each uses different techniques and builds on linked stories to expand its range of meaning.

“Saleema” opens with a calm reflective voice that makes no attempt to draw attention to itself (“Saleema was born in the Jhulan clan”) and sweeps over place and time, providing us with Saleema’s ancestry and childhood, and arrives, in two paragraphs, at the present moment in which Saleema is found: in her “cramped servants’ quarters” (30), a servant in Harouni’s Lahore household and the dissatisfied wife of a drug-addict. This voice then deftly pulls us into her inner life as she ponders her next move now that the powerful cook she had slept with has dumped her: “She picked at the chipped polish on her long slim toe, feeling sorry for herself” (30). “Saleema” alternates between what Mieke Bal calls “character-bound internal focalization” and anonymous “non-character-bound external focalization” (105), reporting what Saleema sees or feels as well as what the narrator wants us to see. However, since the story does not provide access to other characters’ perceptions or feelings, and only to how Saleema *reads* others’ acts or feelings, her consciousness is the one to which the story grants the most importance, upon which it centers, and to which it pulls our empathy. As Bal notes, “focalization is . . . the most important, most penetrating, and most subtle means of manipulation” (116) and embedding ideology in a text. Readers are drawn to see through the lens provided by the focalizer, even when there are clues to suggest that the focal perspective is flawed or unreliable.

Mueenuddin’s narration shifts between these kinds of focalization so that *what* Mueenuddin tells us of Saleema’s machinations blends with how Saleema sees and understands her world: “She had been a maid-servant in three houses so far, since her husband lost his job . . . and in every one she had opened her legs for the cook” (30). The crudeness of this formulation emphasizes Saleema’s consciousness and ethos; as a subordinate female servant in a large feudal household, she has learnt how to access food and indirect power among servants via sex with the “lord” of the kitchen (30). Soon after, we are told what Saleema “knew” almost as if she needed to remind herself: “Saleema knew that he [Hassan the

cook] was through with her, would sweeten up and try to fuck her now and then, out of cruelty as much as anything else, to show he could—but the easy days were over, now she had no one to protect her” (31). The gender- and age-based hierarchies among servants that enable this capricious exertion of power by an older male servant over a younger female one is confirmed by the narrator, whose voice merges with what Saleema “knew”: “In this household a man who had served ten years counted as a new servant. Hassan had been there over fifty, Rafik, the master’s valet, the same. Even the nameless junior gardener had been there four or five” (31–32). Then gradually the narrator’s voice emerges to add what Saleema probably also knew: “With less than a month’s service Saleema counted for nothing. Nor did she have patronage. She had been hired on approval, to serve the master’s eldest daughter, Begum Kamila, who lived in New York. . . . Haughty and proud, Kamila allowed no intimacies” (32).

Thus the story also begins by establishing Saleema’s knowledge of her isolation and outsider status. Unlike fiction by women writers that explores intimacies and bonds between women—servants and employers—this story presents Saleema as a new, temporary maid in a male-run household, alone and vulnerable, unsupported even by the woman she is hired to serve. Suzanne Keen identifies two narrative techniques that narrative theorists and empirical researchers believe evoke reader empathy: character identification, which includes “naming, description, indirect implication of traits, . . . [and] depicted actions,” and narrative situation, which is “the nature of the mediation between author and reader, . . . the person of narration, . . . the internal or external perspective on characters, . . . [and] the style of representation of characters’ consciousness” (93). Moreover, authors themselves frequently identify empathy (feeling *with* and *for* their characters) as crucial to both their own acts of creation and the effects they seek to inspire in readers (Keen 123–31). Mueenuddin’s use of these techniques, in presenting through free indirect style Saleema’s memories of her sexually abused, impecunious childhood, her mother’s mistreatment, her escape via marriage, as well as her own feelings and consciousness, or her gutsy actions and reactions to her world in a non-judgmental third person voice, seem

designed to invite diverse readers to empathize if not identify with her as protagonist, care about her, and understand her struggles for agency in a context that gives her few options. Saleema's opportunism is not something we are asked to condemn. Instead it invites understanding, as we see her struggle against humiliation and exploitation.

Mueenuddin thus also makes clear the system in which Saleema finds herself as well as her awareness of her vulnerability. Through dialogue and carefully observed detail, Mueenuddin presents the idiosyncrasies of Punjabi villagers' speech, the sexual slurs of male servants toward a woman they can insult with impunity, and the daily indignities, disrespect, and physical conditions that oppress Saleema. Although she is subjected to sexual harassment and reduced to weeping alone in a filthy toilet she is forced to share with male servants, Saleema is not presented as a victim. Like all of Mueenuddin's servant protagonists, Saleema makes choices within her limited options, choices that we are asked to understand within their specific contexts. Without education, money, family, or social support, she has to rely only on herself in a world set up to exploit her. Determined to find another "protector" and aware that only a man can deflect other male predators, she chooses Rafik the valet, a man three times her age, and whom she accurately reads as having a rare decency. We see her as she cannot see herself—as designing and manipulative—but we are also repeatedly brought back to her inner world, as Saleema rides in a private car for the first time to follow Harouni and his daughter on a visit to the feudal farmland, holds her mistress' emerald ring left by the bathtub "feeling the heft of the stone, guessing what it must be worth" (39), hand-washes Kamila's clothes, and enjoys rare physical pleasures like sitting in the sun (40) or taking a shower (33). In contrast, we are only given access to Rafik's feelings and thoughts as Saleema interprets them. Mueenuddin maintains our focus on Saleema's attempts to orchestrate what she can of her life. We are invited into her perspective when she is amazed at the size of Harouni's property: "My village would fit in a corner of this garden, and we were thirty families" (39). When Rafik, as a loyal servant, denounces the estate managers who cheat his feudal master, we understand Saleema's disagreement: "At least their bellies are full" (40). Her sympathies lie

with those who violate the expected feudal allegiance because she understands their desperation to survive.

The story grows in emotional power with slow accretion of details, showing how Saleema's unexpected love for Rafik grows, but also how that love is inextricable from her need for security and a mild amelioration of status. It grants priority to both the fact and articulation of Saleema's complex desires and her efforts to exercise agency within a densely textured socio-economic, gendered cultural fabric. It reaches crisis not with Saleema's pregnancy or the birth of her illegitimate son, but with a letter from Rafik's aging wife. Against stereotype, Mueenuddin renders Rafik's rejection of Saleema as an ironic exercise of the very decency that drew her to him. We see Rafik via Saleema's reading: "[S] he could tell that the letter had shaken him, as a man of principle. The baby and her love had made him gentler . . . but the same gentleness would bend him towards his duty, which always would be to his wife and grown sons. He would punish himself and thus her for not loving his wife and for loving Saleema so much and so carnally" (55). Unlike her previous lovers, Rafik rejects Saleema not from callousness but in response to a cultural system that gives him both the power to renounce her and the duty to honor his wife. Yet while the story is interested in the complex, differently situated, gendered subjectivities of both servants, it remains focused on Saleema, her disempowerment, her feelings as she moves from "panic" and "jealousy" to "a strange pride" that she could occasion so much turmoil (55), and her understanding of Rafik's decision because she understands the system they both inhabit (57).

We are also, however, asked to see what she does not understand. *She* is the one to whom Rafik turns for comfort when Harouni dies: "She couldn't understand what [Rafik] said, except that he repeated how he had fastened the old man's shirt the last evening in the hospital; but he kept saying *butters* instead of *buttons*. He couldn't finish the sentence, he repeated the first words over and over" (58; emphasis in original). Mueenuddin echoes the end of *King Lear* ("Pray you undo this button") to focus on the grief, not of a king mourning his daughter, but of a servant whose very sense of self depended on the master he served daily for over fifty years and without whom he is literally bereft of himself. In the

contact zone of a feudal household in which servants' interactions with one another are dependent on their mutually constituted identities as their master's servants and where the master's illness "weakens the bond among servants" (Mueenuddin, "Saleema" 57), Rafik's broken speech reflects his broken sense of self. Saleema, as a newcomer to this system, cannot fathom this.¹⁸

The end of the story can be shocking to many readers both for its style and its content. The narrator suddenly pulls back from Saleema's perspective to conclude, in one paragraph, with her decline and death: "Within two years she was finished, began using rocket pills, . . . lost her job. . . . And then, soon enough, she died, and the boy begged in the streets, one of the sparrows of Lahore" (60).¹⁹ Why, after the lengthy immersion in Saleema's interiority, does Mueenuddin jerk us out of it so abruptly? The story evokes a cinematic effect of zooming out at the end to contrast its assiduously created interiority and humanity with the dehumanizing reality and lack of safety nets and support systems faced by Saleema and her child. No one will save her from the streets, as she learns: not the employers who dismiss her, nor Hassan who "degraded her," nor Rafik who "renounced her" (59). It is by immersion in her interiority that the story creates its intense affect, highlighting the callousness of systems—both social and narratorial—that see her only from the outside. In addition to the cultural work of protesting such systems of social, economic, and gendered injustice, Mueenuddin's story encourages a shift in ways of seeing and indeed foregrounds and contrasts those ways of seeing.

"Provide, Provide," placed third in the collection, explores how a servant woman named Zainab similarly uses sex to access power and is then ruthlessly abandoned by Jaglani, her employer and Harouni's estate manager. The story alternates focalization between the narrator and Jaglani so that we do not have direct access to Zainab's consciousness. Yet because the story is positioned directly after "Saleema," we are encouraged to read it differently than we otherwise might. Having been sensitized by "Saleema" to a female servant's vulnerability and interiority, readers are cued to interrogate Jaglani's ways of seeing, to read between the lines, and to notice the ways he fails to understand the woman who

serves him. The two stories thus work as a pair: both explore a female servant's exploitation and agency, but one proceeds from the inside-out and the other from the outside-in.²⁰ Mueenuddin's choice to tell the story primarily from Jaglani's perspective does not, I argue, render Zainab less significant than Jaglani, but rather highlights, while keeping our focus on Zainab, how insignificant she is rendered by the men—her brother as well as her master and eventual husband—to whom she is closest and on whom she is forced to depend. The technical challenge Mueenuddin sets himself is the opposite of that of "Saleema": how to maintain sympathy for Zainab while giving the interiority to Jaglani.

"Provide, Provide" opens by presenting a series of layers or concentric circles of male hierarchical power in the feudal landowning system within which Zainab is located. Harouni is clearly at the top or center, though he is threatened by the rise of a new industrialist class. Jaglani, Harouni's estate-manager, has taken advantage of his master's ineptitude to line his own pockets and is next. Below or beyond him is Mustafa, Jaglani's personal chauffeur who recommends his sister to Jaglani as cook. Jaglani thus occupies a middle position as both subordinate (to Harouni) and master (to Mustafa). The story consequently explores nuanced relationships of servitude and subordination between men as well as between men and women. In two parallel scenes, we see how Jaglani and Mustafa have both learnt to gauge the psychology of their respective employers and devise ways to better their positions within the feudal system.

First, in an exclusively male-to-male interaction, Jaglani both soothes and cheats his master, whose implicit shame at having to sell ancestral land he intuits and adroitly manages: "They spoke for a minute about a murder recently committed by one of the tenants, a matter of a girl. Jaglani knew to do this, in order to paper over the embarrassment his master must feel at having to sell land held by his family for three generations" (62–63). The instrumentally mentioned but unnamed girl, possibly a victim of honor killing, remains notably irrelevant to both men. Second, in a similar scene, Mustafa asks Jaglani for employment for his sister Zainab, who has left her husband. As the servant of a subordinate, Mustafa also knows how to enact servility. He had "always managed to

ask favors in a way that made Jaglani glow, choosing moments when his master felt satisfied, with work or with politics, the moment when the day seemed sweetest” (65). The ironic title “Provide, Provide” thus suggests the pressures upon men of all classes to act as sole providers for their extended families and dependents. It applies to Jaglani, who must provide for his first wife and sons in the city (and all their dependents) as well as Mustafa, who provides for Zainab by offering her to Jaglani as a cook, and for his own family by using his sister’s sexual services as leverage.²¹

Having set the scene, Mueenuddin moves into Jaglani’s perspective as he first notices Zainab crouched over the stove, greeting him respectfully with modest decorum as she “covered her head, turning her face away” (66). She becomes the target of Jaglani’s interest; when she comes closer to serve his food, “he looked up at her suddenly, wanting to find out what kind of woman she might be” (66). This aggressive, intrusive proximity and easy sexual predation is quite different, Mueenuddin makes clear to his international readers, from the world of liveried British servitude represented in films like *Gosford Park* (2001) and television shows like *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971–75) in which the distance between employers and servants is highly formalized and, as in *Downton Abbey* (2010–), also romanticized. As with Saleema, Mueenuddin presents Zainab as capable of initiative rather than a passive victim. Careful of decorum, she serves Jaglani food and drink and one day offers to massage him, extending her solicitous care of his bodily comforts to sexual needs.

Because the narrator focuses on how Jaglani sees Zainab, it is not initially clear why she acquiesces to him, whether she feels she has a choice, or whether she has calculated some instrumental gain. These are not questions that occur to Jaglani as he becomes besotted with her: “As he drove around the farm, or in the city, the vision of her giving herself so trustingly would come to him” (69). Although he cannot understand her he is perceptive enough to realize that for all her sexual responsiveness, she remains remote: “She did not caress him, and he felt that she herself was not touched to the core. . . . Although she massaged him, cooked for him, cleaned his house, and made love to him, he found that after two months she still had not come any closer” (70). Via dialogue,

we get glimpses of Zainab's complexity and are invited to see her as Jaglani cannot. He offers her money after a quarrel:

“You buy me things and then later you'll think you bought me. I was never for sale,” she replied, standing up [from his bed].

“Stop,” he called. He spoke in the voice he might have used with a servant.

She left, quietly closing the door behind her. (69)

With dignity, she implicitly insists on a line between servitude and servility, between the domestic work for which she is paid and the sex to which she submits but for which she refuses payment (even though she has sex with him because she exists in a relation of feudal, subservient employment). When Jaglani crosses that line, she resists, leaving untouched the money he places by the bed. Given the harsh world of gendered injustice and sexual surveillance that Zainab inhabits—she knows that though he is exempt from the villagers' opprobrium because they are “afraid” of his power, she is not exempt (70)—we understand why she does not trust him and will not stay the night.

Yet despite Zainab's moments of resistance and exertion of agency, Mueenuddin leaves no doubt of her systemic disadvantage and Jaglani's abuse of power. The shifts between the narrator's commentary and Jaglani's perspective direct us to examine Jaglani's actions, motivations, obtuseness, and the social framework and structure of feeling that constitute them. We are shown how Jaglani has the power to bully Zainab's husband into divorcing her and to intimidate the *maulvi* into performing a secret second marriage. Zainab is subject to Jaglani's actions and caught in a legal and cultural system controlled by ruthless men unscrupulous about how they position her. She is even kept ignorant of the fact that her marriage to Jaglani is technically incomplete. Jaglani takes care of the paperwork so that the legal documents to which illiterate Zainab “affixed her thumbprint” and that are signed by only one male witness (“the other three required witnesses would sign later if the need arose” (76)) enable Jaglani to claim her whenever he wants, but not vice versa. She is thus left legally unprotected when he dies.

Mueenuddin presents Jaglani as torn between conflicting loyalties. He succumbs to Zainab's longing for a child yet is enabled to do to what he does by a patriarchal feudal system's ethos: "No one thought anything of it, he ruled his area in the old way, with force. He had the prerogative of taking a second wife, a chosen wife. Flushed with his power, Jaglani went further. He brought his son's infant daughter to Dunyapur and gave her to Zainab" (80). It seems to me a misreading to see the story (as some of my students have) as inviting empathy for Jaglani and condoning his treatment of Zainab since it gives us Jaglani's perspective and not hers. "Flushed with power" implies negative judgment and asks us to see Jaglani as he cannot see himself. The story complicates both the roles of oppressor and oppressed. It asks us both to see how a man like Jaglani can feel for Zainab and yet treat her the way he does within a system that empowers him at her expense, as well as how Zainab responds within her severely limited framework. It is thus not lack of concern for women but rather an effort to investigate how *systemically* such women are disempowered that drives Mueenuddin's shift of perspective in the story. Jaglani is presented as both powerful and susceptible, perceptive and self-absorbed, infatuated and yet able to repudiate Zainab when he learns he has terminal cancer. Once impelled to marry Zainab to ward off his fear of death (he decided to marry her after seeing a villager die of snakebite), now, with death at his door he is repelled by her servant status: "He minded very much that he had given his sons a stepmother of that class, a servant woman. He minded that he had insulted his first wife in that way, by marrying again, by marrying a servant. . . . He reproached himself for taking his eldest son's daughter and giving her to Zainab, transplanting the little girl onto such different stock" (86). Unlike "Saleema," in which the text's focus on the consciousness of the title character directs readers' empathy toward her, the focus on Jaglani's consciousness in "Provide, Provide" *averts* readers' empathy and directs us to experience the magnitude of *his* lack of empathy for the woman with whom he was once infatuated and whose fate he controls. The difference between Mueenuddin's treatment of Jaglani and Saleema lies in Jaglani's power and abuse of power as well as the way that the narrative voice directs us to scrutinize Jaglani's change of heart and crimi-

nal negligence and shows how they are fueled by a system that grants him such extraordinary privilege and impunity. Even as he knows he is dying Jaglani makes a promise that both know “meant nothing” (90) and leaves her as unprovided for as Rafik leaves Saleema.

As with “Saleema,” Mueenuddin ends the story with a sudden shift of perspective. After Jaglani’s death he returns us to the wider circles of male power in which Zainab is located, along with a brief shift to the perspective of Shabir, Jaglani’s son and heir. Shabir turns his fury upon Mustafa, now his driver, whom he plans to fire for witnessing his political humiliation. Neither man mentions Zainab, but her astonishing absence at the end points precisely to the ways in which she is disregarded in this macho world. Mueenuddin thus exposes the ways of seeing of those with power and highlights their deployment of that power over servants who have literally become family. We understand that Zainab’s brother, also a servant, will be punished not only for having seen Jaglani’s son “shamed” (96) but for his (shaming) link with the woman Jaglani secretly married. By sacking Mustafa, Shabir paradoxically comes closest to acknowledging the unwelcome existence of his father’s servant-wife: in his repudiation of that connection.

“About a Burning Girl,” the story that follows “Provide, Provide,” similarly invites scrutiny of an employer’s perspective to explore the self-interested callousness that servants are subject to within systemic forms of power. It further explores servants’ vulnerability to the law as they contend with both the vagaries of the criminal justice system and the amorality of employers. In depicting the warped perspective of such an employer, Mueenuddin turns the self-absorption of a middle-class male narrator into the butt of comic satire, making clearer than “Provide, Provide” how focusing on a corrupt perspective can invite critical distance rather than sympathy or identification. “About a Burning Girl” is the only story in the collection that is narrated in the first person, as if to expose, through his own sardonic voice, a “sessions judge in the Lahore High Court” who has cynically accepted the failure of the judiciary and of his own ambitions as well as the pervasiveness of bribery and corruption in Pakistan: “[D]espite my profession I don’t believe in justice. . . . I render decisions based on the relative pressures brought to bear on me” (97).

The judge's complacency is disrupted when, on a trip to his village, his male house servant Khadim is arrested for burning Khadim's brother's wife to death. The "facts" are impossible to ascertain, both for us and the judge, aside from the information that kerosene was poured over the woman and set aflame, and that she named Khadim as the perpetrator before dying. Uncaring of the truth, the judge's wife demands her servant back. "Good servants are impossible to find," she declares (104). Though the judge believes Khadim to be guilty of murder and theft, he bribes the police and medical personnel who recorded the dying woman's testimony to free the servant, whose culpability is ultimately left unclear. By highlighting the judge's unreliability as narrator, his disregard for justice as well as for a woman who dies a brutal death, and his willingness to manipulate the legal and medical systems for the sake of domestic peace, Mueenuddin asks us to judge both the judge and the system that he (over)sees and, in turn, to examine the amorality of a bourgeoisie that finds indispensable the routine comforts it demands of servants whose lives and ethics it regards as having no connection to its own.

It may seem as if the story confirms the servant's guilt and reinforces stereotypes of servant criminality. However, the story emphasizes the judge's criminality, which is certain, rather than that of Khadim, which remains uncertain. Mueenuddin presents both a mystery to be solved and the impossibility of finding the truth in this corrupt system given the malleability of evidence in the hands of those in power and the ease with which servants can be implicated or freed. Neither Khadim's nor the victim's subjectivity can be communicated through the judge's narrative, yet the story calls attention to the disappearance of those subjectivities through its form and title. At first the judge hears from Khadim's brother, who claims that his wife and her brother stole his father's life savings and that after police questioning she committed suicide (101–04). The judge then talks to Khadim's father, who confirms the loss of his savings but insists that the girl falsely accused Khadim (107–08). Finally, the judge meets with Mian Sarkar, his legal assistant, who "solves" the mystery and the problem by bribing the police and attending doctor to disregard the dying girl's testimony, thus inducing Khadim's brother to

confess to both crimes. By establishing how conveniently officials at all levels can be made to change their stories the narrative throws its final solution into question. The title, "About a Burning Girl," is thus heavily ironic, for the story circles *about* a girl—a mere relative of a servant—who never actually appears, marking her devaluation in this system. As in the preceding story, the nameless girl who suffers a brutal death is rendered immaterial; even her dying words are lost in the miasma of fabrications produced by different men. Like Zainab, Khadim's sister-in-law's disappearance from a narrative recounted by a man inured to the gendered feudal system only emphasizes the moral degradation of a judiciary and society that refuse her justice even in death.

The critique of the ruling class that the story activates is clearer when considered in relation to the last story of the collection, "A Spoiled Man," which also turns on the disappearance of a girl and a male servant's encounter with the police. Having established the limitations of the first person employer-narrator, Mueenuddin returns to third-person narration to contrast the interiority of the male servant with the naive perspective of his employer and make clear, with powerful affect, the servant's innocence and the abusiveness of the system the employer unleashes on the servant. "A Spoiled Man" takes us outside the strict boundaries of domestic servitude to focus on an aging watchman who literally exists on the fringes of Harouni's nephew's "weekend home" in Islamabad (221). Oddly self-contained and the inhabitant of a "portable cubicle" (225), Rezak, a humble, landless villager, a "small bowlegged man with a lopsided battered face" (221), is hired as an outdoor servant by Sonya, the nephew's American wife. A random beneficiary of Sonya's intermittent attention as she struggles to adapt to upper-class wifedom in a patriarchal feudal system, Rezak becomes "spoiled" (in the dual sense of being over-petted, and destroyed, or ruined): a fellow-villager offers him a disabled child-wife who vanishes; Sonya tries to help by getting a powerful friend to intervene, which results in the distraught Rezak being apprehended and tortured by the local constabulary, whose first impulse is always to blame and abuse the servant. Rezak dies from his injuries, abjectly grateful to the end to the Harouni family. With unmistakable irony, Mueenuddin provides a last

glimpse of Sonya “musing by the fire on having done the right thing for a lonely old man” (246).

The story clearly indicts the self-satisfied insularity and naïveté of a feudal landowner’s pampered white American wife who fails to understand both the horrible system of power and crime in which she embroils Rezak and the tidal consequences of her well-meaning intervention. More significantly, the text renders Sonya as peripheral and attends much more solicitously to the interiority of a man regarded as worthless trash by those in positions of power, such as the District Superintendent of Police. As with earlier stories, we are invited to understand how Rezak thinks and feels and to see him not merely as victim but as a spirit of independence and perseverance. Mueenuddin’s quiet narrative voice and careful details evidence Rezak’s initiative in volunteering his labor, his devotion and creativity in planting a vegetable garden to bring offerings to the big house, his artistry in building and decorating his tiny wooden hut, his tenderness toward the girl given to his care, his incomprehension of the rich and arrogant, and his desire to be buried in the orchard he felt privileged to tend. But Mueenuddin’s narrative also moves us out of Rezak’s consciousness to highlight the networks of power and greed that make him so vulnerable and the rapaciousness that runs rife in a system without checks or balances.

The conclusion to “A Spoiled Man” also serves as a conclusion to the collection and suggests symbolic overtones that apply to the many servant figures that are subjects of earlier stories. With an echo of the “unhonour’d dead” who lie in “many a mouldering heap” in Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), Mueenuddin leaves us with a final image of Rezak’s small, soon-forgotten grave in a corner of Sonya’s orchard, covered by falling autumn leaves. This image can be read as a complex emblem of postcolonial servitude, of those who live and die and remain (as do Rezak’s remains) on the peripheries of feudal power. At the same time, his body mingles with the soil that produces the orchard fruit and fertilizes what the feudal owners absorb into their bodies, inextricable from the land they possess. Servants, the story suggests, remain in relations of enforced distance and proximity, intimacy and exploitation. It emphasizes the obscurity of the spoiled

man, whose last remnants are absorbed by an order that erases him and his humanity. His handmade habitation, the makeshift hut, is slowly plundered and depleted of its carefully gathered possessions: “[E]ven the filthy mattress pulled out and put to use, taken by the sweeper who cleaned the toilets in the big house. The door of the little cabin hung open, the wind and blown rain scoured it clean” (247). Mueenuddin closes with this reminder of extreme poverty (Rezak’s belongings are used by one even lower in the system of servitude) and the erasure of the human beings that we are asked to see not as curiosities but as figures of resilience and agency, however minor, in broader national and global systems that we are invited to scrutinize, understand, and deplore.

Representing the Servant in a Global Context

In an interview, Mueenuddin reports having been asked how he “can . . . presume to speak for characters like Saleema or Nawabdin when [he has] never been hungry for even a day in [his] life”. He responds, “But that’s what fiction writers do—write about others’ lives. I am not writing about Daniyal Mueenuddin’s life” (Interview). His reply, which argues for a more capacious understanding of imaginative and empathetic reach, suggests how contemporary writers are often placed in a catch-22 by narrow criticism: they are accused of inauthenticity or presumption if they write about others, and of narcissism if they write only about themselves. The kneejerk self-righteousness that denounces any writer with relative privilege for presuming to represent (create the voice or imagine the perspective of) a person with less privilege bespeaks a broader critical problem that stems, I believe, from prevalent misreadings of Spivak’s important essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. Such interpretations presume that the essay forbids *any* or *every* attempt to represent the subaltern.²² Spivak critiques European intellectuals such as Foucault and Deleuze and positivist social scientists (historians and anthropologists, for example) who assume they can act as transparent transmitters of the consciousness of those lost in official records or dominant discourses. At no point in her essay, however, does Spivak attack the literary effort of imagining socially significant otherness.²³ In fact, she distinguishes between two senses of “representation” collapsed in the English term—the

German *vertreten* (to speak for, as elected representatives are authorized to do) and *darstellen* (to re-present, as in art) (70), the difference between “proxy” and “portrait” (71). To attempt to portray via imaginative, empathetic literary means is not the same as “speaking for” others and claiming historical truth.

Indeed, Spivak states that “[t]he intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation” (80). Yet too often writers like Mueenuddin are critiqued or dismissed for attempting to write fiction about subaltern subjects. Clearly, we need to be cautious about many forms of representation of socially significant otherness, as feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff notes. Much like Black, Alcoff argues for *some* kinds of speaking for; she focuses on how we may determine *when* it may be valid to speak for others (12) and how to lessen the dangers (24). Surely silence, as she submits, is an additional ethical problem rather than an alternative: “[I]f I don’t speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege?” (Alcoff 8). “Even a complete retreat from speech,” she asserts, “is not neutral since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance” (20).

I argue that Mueenuddin, neither subaltern nor metropolitan, situated in that third space of postcolonial and transnational class privilege, takes on this political responsibility, aware of the dangers but unwilling to remain silent. The stakes are thus high for such storytelling, which seeks to disrupt the continued dominance of ideologies of servitude that maintain and reinforce oppression within postcolonial Pakistan and to represent, in both senses, i.e., imagining and speaking for those who are not yet at least able to reach a national, let alone global, audience. Do Mueenuddin’s stories avoid all of the dangers of representational violence, given his position vis-a-vis those he represents? Reader opinions will differ, but I have tried to demonstrate that a nuanced reading must account for a writer’s subtle techniques and representational choices instead of dismissing his work *a priori* based solely on his positionality. Black argues that border-crossing writers reveal their self-awareness and locate themselves and their standpoint

in their fiction, while Alcoff concludes, “anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive methods involved” (24). Mueenuddin both positions himself clearly via extra-textual commentary (testifying, for example, in his many interviews) and, in his fiction, analyzes the systemic power relations and discursive politics involved in interactions between servants and non-servants. Stylistically, his stories have the tact not to presume total insight into the “other” (not that anyone has total insight into the “self,” either).²⁴ Hence he avoids creating a first person servant voice or narrator and instead deploys, as I suggest above, a carefully constructed third person narrative voice that maintains a respectful distance from the subaltern subjectivities he portrays. Moreover, as if in contrast to his own enterprise of attempting to represent, his stories dramatize the disastrous consequences when those in power—the self-absorbed judge, Jaglani, the police—fail to empathize with, imagine the interiority of, or speak for (or to) those over whom they have power.

Alcoff adds that for readers “to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context. One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or her credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; *one must look at where the speech goes and what it does there*” (26; emphasis added). Mueenuddin’s fiction is designed to speak to multiple audiences, both local and global, and to perform cultural work on at least two important levels. First, *within* the nation, it addresses itself to elite (educated middle- and upper-class) Pakistani readers who routinely employ servants who remain invisible to them. Many testify to the eye-opening experience this entails. A young woman from Lahore now living in New York writes on her blog:

Mueenuddin’s stories left me puzzled, stunned. . . . Nawabdin, Saleema, Zainab, Rezak . . . were alien to me, foreigners, their private lives detached from mine by an invisible wall. Of course I knew people *like* them – we kept servants at home, like any

well-off Pakistani family, and most of them came from the villages surrounding Lahore. But I really knew nothing about them, . . . I knew nothing beyond the rudiments, the apparent facts. . . . [W]ould I ever know what they really thought about me, or any of us, what they said to each other in the confidence of the kitchen? (Khan)

Even if his stories succeed only in making middle-class readers see the workers in their homes as more than furniture, they have achieved something. More broadly, in addressing the Pakistani nation Mueenuddin's fiction implicitly critiques the postcolonial nation for so utterly failing its most vulnerable citizens. It examines the complex effects of servitude on vulnerable individuals located at different levels of a carefully analyzed feudal system that has itself been passed down to an ineffectual postcolonial state as a colonial legacy. His insider-outsider focus on the servant asks for a re-vision of the nation and defamiliarizes what is taken for granted; it makes the unseen seen. As I argue above, Mueenuddin uses varying techniques and shifts perspectives from servants to employers and back to invite readers to *see* differently. Fiction, as Dominic LaCapra notes, "may have transformative effects more through its style or mode of narration than in the concrete image or representation of any desirable alternative society or polity" (4).

Secondly, in writing *beyond* the nation in a post-9/11 context, like many contemporary Pakistani English-language writers, Mueenuddin also addresses international readers, educates them about the complexities of Pakistani society, and insists on layers of power and dimensions unknown to or ignored by dominant global media. His work is linked to an emergent wave of world literature from South Asia and elsewhere that examines and calls attention to the subtleties and invisibility of servitude across nations. His fiction is thus rooted in the specificities of a postcolonial Pakistani context while also participating in an emergent trend in world literature. David Damrosch contends that "world literature is not . . . [a] canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading" (5) and concludes that "[w]orld literature . . . is a double refraction, one that can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with

the source and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone" (283). Both the national and the global, the originary and recipient cultures, he suggests, are necessary and simultaneous foci for reading world literature. As global English fiction, Mueenuddin's work is not just produced in one cultural or national context and read in another, but is always already transnational or "born-translated," to use Rebecca Walkowitz's term, so that a focus on either context would delimit an adequate reading.²⁵

In his conclusion to *The Servant's Hand*, Bruce Robbins acknowledges the "marginal and suggestive" nature of the "literary presence" of servants in canonical British literature (205), a characteristic of a "long [historical] moment . . . that [has] finally ended" (220–21). He suggests the beginning of a new moment in which Third World literature would "bring back the servant" in new ways (223). Decades later, his prediction is validated by the work of writers like Mueenuddin, who bring back the servant as neither marginal nor suggestive but as central to our thinking about nation, society, interiority, and literature itself.

Notes

- 1 A few well-known examples: Stephano and Trinculo in *The Tempest* serve as parallels to Antonio and Sebastian and evidence for Caliban's lower instincts; the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* mothers Juliet and enables the romance; housekeeper Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights* and butler Gabriel Betteredge in *The Moonstone* act as minor participants and witnesses to the stories of the families they narrate. Robbins' *The Servant's Hand*, a groundbreaking study of servants in European and British literature, begins by noting both "the exclusion of the people from literary representation" (ix) and the more surprising literary "effects" of the "power" of their invisible presence (ix, xi). More recent scholarship includes Burnett on cultural anxieties and fears expressed via servants in English Renaissance drama; Straub on constructions of gender and sexuality in intimate domestic affective relations on eighteenth-century British literature; and Fernandez on the instabilities introduced by servant literacy in nineteenth-century British fiction. Domestic servants in the US from the nineteenth century on were either descendents of, or white immigrants who were compared to, black slaves, so that, as Ryan argues, the discourse of domestic servitude in the US has always been imbued by the history of slavery. For a study of retrospective representations of black servitude in recent American historical fiction, see Jordan. As yet,

- however, there is no book-length study of domestic servitude in contemporary postcolonial or transnational Anglophone literature.
- 2 The recent international controversy over the Indian diplomat in New York who falsified how much she paid her Indian housemaid highlights how Indians outraged by a middle-class woman being strip-searched remained blind and indifferent to the exploitation and intimidation of a working-class Indian woman, a domestic servant. CNN reporter Moni Basu quotes Indian political scientist Sumit Ganguly: “Something we don’t want to talk about or think about is how we treat domestic workers. For God’s sake, we treat them like chattel. This is a national shame we have not confronted” (Basu).
 - 3 Since the end of colonialism in South and Southeast Asia, “industrialization, transnational capitalism, and the global economy have dramatically accelerated the expansion of the domestic worker phenomenon” (Adams and Dickey 4). This includes both intra- and inter-national (from country to city and country to country) worker migration. On female domestic servants in the US, see Parreñas, and Ehrenreich and Hochschild.
 - 4 Mueenuddin states that “[h]alf-Pakistani and half-American, I have spent equal amounts of time in each country, and so, knowing both cultures well and belonging to both, I equally belong to neither, looking at both with an outsider’s eye” (Murphy).
 - 5 See, for example, Murphy, Rosenberg, and Franks’ interview with Mueenuddin.
 - 6 See Ray and Qayum on the maintenance and performance of class distinctions between Bengali servants and employers by emphasis on physical separation in proximate spaces, e.g., places servants are allowed to sit or eat and use of different utensils (145–66).
 - 7 Many reviewers have noted that the freshness of Mueenuddin’s writing comes from his sympathetic focus on servants. Rosenberg, for instance, writes that “Mueenuddin’s collection of linked stories does for the servants of Pakistan what Steinbeck’s fiction did for the laborers of America, capturing the lives of individuals whose suffering stems from their class situation. . . . Mueenuddin’s sympathy lies not with Harouni . . . but with the workers, managers, and servants who sustain his farm, city mansion, and weekend home and whose lives are destroyed by the failure of the old system.” Silverman likewise finds Mueenuddin’s servant stories “brilliantly” successful by comparison with those about Pakistan’s elite, which he finds relatively “unoriginal” and “sentimental.” Murphy similarly notes that though Mueenuddin belongs to an “accomplished crowd” of young Anglophone Pakistani writers writing for “a global literary audience” (like Mohsin Hamid or Kamila Shamsie) he also “stands apart” because he spans a “range of Pakistani society” without restricting himself to the “urban elite.”
 - 8 For example, in a moment early in Narayan’s 1937 novel *The Bachelor of Arts*, the young male protagonist returns from a day at college to “shout” at a name-

less cook who brings him food, passes on the mother's injunctions, and reports back to her the son's doings (29–30). Early in Chaudhuri's 1951 memoir *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, the adult narrator describes his childhood self as physically and morally distinct from the naked servants (9) whom he observed going to prostitutes (29). Anand is a notable exception, a pioneer in exposing caste and class oppression and giving his underclass protagonists some interiority. However, his focus is on didactic protest against social degradation and abuse, not on domestic servitude: Bakha in *Untouchable* (1935) is a sweeper outside the home, while Munoo in *Coolie* (1936), though briefly a servant, is primarily a porter and factory worker. Compared to Mueenuddin, Anand is also less concerned with psychological depth or complexity; his protagonists are more representatives of a generic burdened underclass than exemplars of individuated nuanced subjectivities.

- 9 For example Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) and short stories in *Phoenix Flew* (1953) explore servant psychology but often conclude with the servants' surprising complexity or incurability as seen from the perspective of the (usually female) employer. It is understandable why so many South Asian women writers, albeit with different ideological frameworks, have paid attention to domestic servants given that, as Ray and Qayum note, a civilized household was defined by a wife's ability to govern her servants and manage her home (50).
- 10 A recent form of this type of representation and deployment of the servant figure can be seen in fiction such as Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (originally published as *Ice-Candy Man* in 1988) and Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) that at first glance appear to be centered on servant figures. However, in both (what I would call) semi-autobiographical guilt narratives, a first-person middle-class adult narrator tells the story of a childhood disrupted by intense national turmoil and political violence, witnessed most immediately when visited upon the bodies of servants to whom she or he is deeply attached. In both, the act of telling seems an effort to atone for a childhood act of betrayal: the Parsi child Lenny, Sidhwa's protagonist, naively gives away the hiding place of her Hindu ayah to Muslim men who then kidnap and rape the servant woman in about-to-be partitioned Pakistan (190–95); the Pashtun child Amir, Hosseini's protagonist, fails to protect Hassan, his servant-playmate, from being raped by a group of rich Pashtun boys who attack him as a member of the minority Hazaras in 1970s Afghanistan (73–79). Thus in both narratives the servant body becomes a displaced site of a sexual violence distantly witnessed and regretted by the protagonist, for whom the event occasions political and ethical awareness. Mueenuddin resists depicting servants as helpless victims or as an occasion for an upper-class protagonist's moral or political education and focuses instead on servant figures as ethically complex, central subjects in themselves, as having subjectivity and partial agency even in an unforgiving system.

- 11 Even Rushdie's amusingly told (autobiographical) story "The Courter," purportedly about the romance between his ayah and the porter of his family's apartment building in England, is really about the Rushdian narrator's own better choice. Mary gives up her love to return to India; by contrast, the narrator insists on both-and, on not choosing one culture over another.
- 12 Adiga in particular has suffered much (ungenerous) critique about his choice to construct the voice of a lower class character. Umrigar, in *The Space Between Us*, uses third person narration and alternates the perspectives of a female servant and her female employer.
- 13 Herring argues that Bhutto sought to appease industrial capitalists, not to destroy the feudal system of which he was a scion. He also quotes Bhutto admitting that "radical land reform [was] . . . politically impossible, explicitly recognizing the power of landed interests" (107, n. 35). See also Ahmad's important case study.
- 14 See Robbins for this important distinction between actual and literary servant (xi, 11–12, 41). A good illustration would be the work of the housekeeper in *Pride and Prejudice*: her actual (diegetic) work is to look after Darcy's house and show visitors around, but her literary work is to enable Elizabeth to see Darcy in a new, more favorable light.
- 15 In addition to Spivak's most cited "Can the Subaltern Speak?" I would direct readers to Alcoff's important essay "The Problem of Speaking for Others." Spivak has repeatedly clarified her claim that the subaltern cannot speak as meaning that the subaltern cannot be *heard* within the frameworks of dominant discourses ("Subaltern Talk").
- 16 See Chapter Four of Ray and Qayum for a discussion of the disparity in perspectives of servants and employers when interviewed about their work and lives.
- 17 In teaching this story, I have found my students disturbed by Nawabdin's callousness and his refusal to help or forgive the dying robber. But Mueenuddin does not present Nawabdin as a hero or exemplar of moral probity. With clear-eyed realism the story recognizes that in such a dog-eat-dog world, human beings become callous to those whom it is not in their interest to help and are concerned only for those most closely related to them. Such (liberal humanist or Christian) expectations of forgiveness or rising above one's circumstances are simply out of place. This is an example, I argue, of what Stallybrass and White have called "displaced abjection," "the process whereby 'low' social groups turn their figurative and actual power, *not* against those in authority, but against those who are even 'lower'" (53; emphasis in original).
- 18 The asymmetry between servants and employers in this contact zone goes without saying, for no employers depend emotionally on their servants in the way that Rafik depends on his master—the emotional and financial are inextricable in the relationship.

- 19 Originally titled “The Sparrows of Lahore,” the story’s new title emphasizes Saleema’s individuality rather than generality.
- 20 Both stories are linked to other stories. “In Other Rooms, Other Wonders” occurs at the same time as “Saleema” and offers a parallel tale of a young woman’s determination (and failure) to redress her disadvantages via sex with an older man. Husna, a young opportunistic relative of Harouni’s, chooses to forego respectable marriage and insinuate herself into Harouni’s house and bed as a way out of poverty. Harouni dies and Rafik appears in both stories, but neither woman is mentioned in the other’s story, as if the two co-exist in the same house without intersecting.
- 21 The title also alludes to Frost’s 1934 poem of the same title and suggests a similar critique of those who unscrupulously seek wealth or fame.
- 22 I understand the term “subaltern” to denote colonial or postcolonial non-elite, below the middle-class, and not just anyone from a postcolonial country.
- 23 This line of thinking, if taken to its logical consequence, would spell the end of literary fiction. Should Morrison refrain from representing an escaped slave’s experience that she has not personally experienced (and so on)?
- 24 It is worth recalling that “self” and “other” are binary oppositions that we have learnt to deconstruct, so that aspects of the “self” remain other to us and aspects of the “other” are like our selves.
- 25 Walkowitz elaborates: “Born-translated novels are designed to travel, so they tend to veer away from the modernist emphasis on linguistic experimentation. . . . Anglophone novels travel especially well because English has become the most-read, most-translated language in the world” (569–71).

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