Bakhtinian Carnivalisation in Austin Coates' *City of Broken Promises*

Christina Miu Bing Cheng*

ABSTRACT: In *City of Broken Promises,* Austin Coates has delineated late eighteenth-century Portuguese Macao as the inscrutable and seductive Orient, or the East, and, not least, as the West's shackled 'Other'. This colonialist novel is redolent of benighted backwardness and sexual fantasy, along with colonial ideology and Orientalist stereotype. Even so, the author inadvertently reworks the colonial/Orientalist perception. Resonant with a Bakhtinian carnival aesthetic, he discloses a dissenting stance of subversion, in which colonial hierarchy and supremacy are ridiculed through the switching of roles. The Bakhtinian carnivalisation in literature entertains the idea that literary texts do not merely contain a unitary ideological perspective, they may well draw a veil over concealed voices that are riddled with a revolutionary potential to mock dominant ideologies. Symbolising the superior/masculine West, Thomas van Mierop, an Englishman, is forced out from the East by dysentery and punished by death at sea. His Chinese pensioner-mistress Martha, reified as the inferior/feminine East in an 'Oriental harem', emerges in the end as a successful trader and the greatest public benefactress of Macao. The novel oddly reveals a hidden resistance to imperial transgressions and a reversal of the West over the East paradigm in the present rhetoric.

KEYWORDS: Bakhtinian carnival aesthetic; Inscrutable/seductive East; Boundary transgression; Orientalist stereotype; Colonial hierarchy and supremacy.

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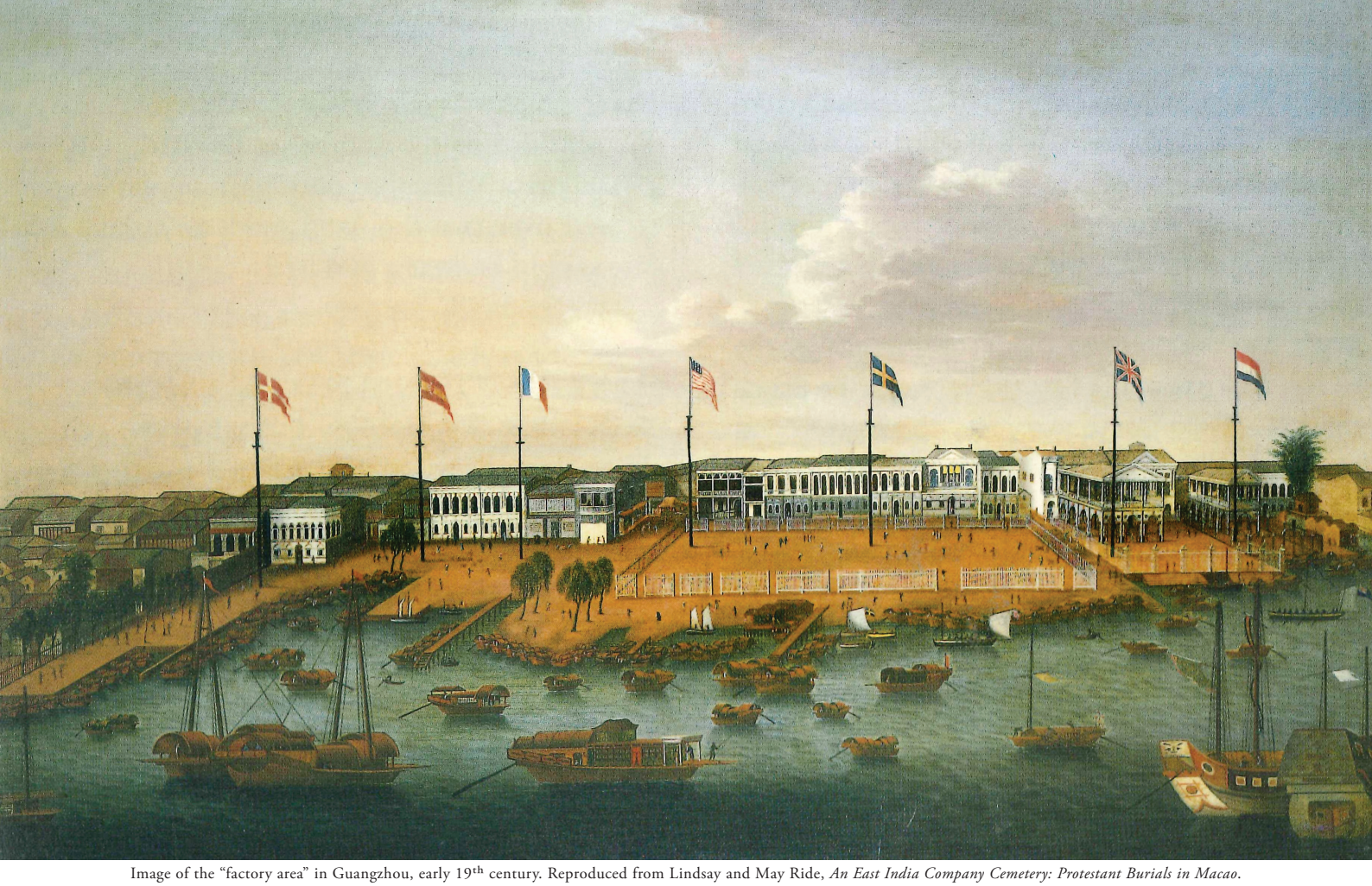


Image of the "factory area" in Guangzhou, early 19th century. Reproduced from Lindsay and May Ride, *An East India Company Cemetery: Protestant Burials in Macao*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996, p. 15.

A tiny peninsula located at the periphery of China's southernmost coastal province, Portuguese Macao has never failed to be a favourable backdrop to capture the imagination and attention of Western writers in colonialist literary genres. Austin Coates (1922–1997), for instance, has contrived and 're-presented' this colonial space as the inscrutable and seductive Orient, or the East, in *City of Broken Promises* (1967), set at the peak of Western imperialism and colonialism in the late eighteenth century.

Born in London, Austin Coates was a British civil servant and spent most of his life in Asia. During the Second World War, he served in the Royal Air Force intelligence in India, Burma (renamed as Myanmar in 1989), Malaya (reconstituted as Malaysia in 1963), and Indonesia. In 1949, he joined the Government of Hong Kong as Assistant Colonial Secretary, and later as Magistrate in the New Territories, then a country district in Hong Kong. After leaving government service in 1962, he resided mainly in this British colony and concentrated on writing. He has combined the early part of his writing career as a journalist, guidebook author, and regional novelist with his official post as a colonial administrator, diplomat, and adviser on Chinese affairs.

In light of his familiarity with the East, he wrote extensively on topics related to the Asia-Pacific region, especially Hong Kong and Macao. With his experience as a magistrate in the New Territories, he published his memoirs, *Myself a Mandarin*, in 1968. Besides, given his close association with the Chinese and the Portuguese, he wrote two books on the history of Macao: *A Macao Narrative* (1978) and *Macao and the British, 1637–1842: Prelude to Hong Kong* (1988).

In *City of Broken Promises*, he is obviously imbued with unexamined confidence to feed Macao into colonial ideology and Orientalist essentialism. Yet, he inadvertently articulates a dissenting voice of subversion, which overturns the West–East polarities and shatters certain stereotypes in line with the Bakhtinian carnival aesthetic in literature. One may wonder how the novel is riddled with an argument against the West's experience in Macao, how it exposes

a paradigm shift of the West over the East in colonial discourse, and how it posits a punishment of the Western transgressor.

TRANSGRESSION INTO THE INSCRUTABLE EAST

Austin Coates recounts the 'true' story of Marta da Silva Merop in this historical novel. According to the blurb, it is based on oral tradition handed down through generations in Macao, and on documents that survive about them in Macao, Lisbon, and London. Renaming the heroine as Martha, he presents the plot in the rhetoric of realism and reconstructs the decisive years in her life from 1780 to 1795, during which her story is mapped onto the history of Macao and Hong Kong and, in particular, along with the insidious opium trade engaged by the mighty East India Company (EIC).[1]

It is springtime, the year is 1780, and 24-year-old Thomas Kuyck van Mierop has sailed on the East India Company's ship *Grenada*, and reaches the China coast. He has joined the EIC as a supercargo, or commercial officer, in the tea trade (Coates 1967, 3–4). Together with British opium traders, he ventures to transgress into the East to make his fortune.[2]

Van Mierop is an Englishman of Anglo-Dutch parentage — born to a puritanical Protestant, stern-disciplined Dutch father and a progressive, reform-minded English mother. Poised to show 'the extremes of reserve and caution required in the tight European society of the China coast' (Coates 1967, 12), he is dapper:

> *Thomas van Mierop had wavy copper-coloured hair and blue eyes deep-set in a rugged, handsome face. He wore a buff surcoat and breeches, a plain white kerchief, and cuffs that extended no more than an inch beyond his sleeves, with only a hint of embroidery — the latest London fashion. There was a quietness, a sense of purpose, about this young man.*
> (Coates 1967, 12)

With impeccable disposition, he is good-looking — having curvy brownish hair and deep blue eyes. Apart from displaying discreet decorum, he has immaculate taste in his fashionable London apparel. This white man readily bespeaks the civilised, superior West.

As a tradition, the EIC provides a group of 'pensioners' to entertain its officers when they return to Macao after the trading season in Guangzhou.[3] One may ask under what context a group of pensioners, or entertainers, owned by the EIC comes into existence. The author enumerates, 'No women. An enclave of supposed celibates. For in addition to being unable to bring European women to China, Company officers were absolutely forbidden by the Company to marry local women' (Coates 1967, 33–34).[4] The EIC's pensioners are actually unofficial wives, or mistresses/prostitutes, serving its officers. The euphemistic term 'pensioner' used by the EIC is 'solely in accountancy, to cover the contingency of wives at home in England examining their husbands' disbursements in China' (Coates 1967, 71).

So, as a tradition, van Mierop has been assigned a pensioner. The newcomer unhesitatingly copes with China fashion amid the 'tight European society of the China coast' to accept a pensioner, as it is said that 'China fashion was in its own way as ritualistic as the East India Company sitting down to supper' (Coates 1967, 35). His pensioner Martha is just 14 years old:

> *Her eyes, up-tilted and almond-shaped, and her pale, exceptionally smooth skin suggested that she was Chinese; yet the way she wore her fine black hair, and her black dress, short and shapeless, was more European than Chinese. Still no more than a child, could she have been one of the servants' daughters, influenced in some way by the Portuguese? [...] She was very pale, in the manner of the southern Chinese, and had a round little face which he [Thomas] now began to observe was full of determination, and she had dimples.*
> (Coates 1967, 21–22)

Casa Garden. Photograph by the author.

'Still no more than a child', the pubescent pensioner is portrayed with a set of Asian generic characteristics: up-tilted and almond-shaped eyes, pale smooth skin, fine black hair, round little face and dimples. Her characterisation perhaps offers a kind of epidermal fetishism that fosters her benefactor's furtive fascination with paedophilia, if not miscegenation.

Against the backdrop of the novel, Austin Coates' Macao is redolent of familiar colonial images and motifs of the backward East, which are indicated by a tapestry of scenery with hillside cobbled-stone streets, palanquins, pig-tailed Chinese, child prostitutes, women with tiny bound feet, and emaciated opium-smokers. Furthermore, Macao is saturated with a litany of shutters, screens and curtains — sheer signs that seem intended to denote concealment and the impenetrability of the inscrutable East.

A NO-NAME ORPHAN

Back in 1766, this girl, a few days old, is abandoned on the steps of the Church of São Domingos.[5] Chinese by birth, she is a no-name baby and brought into the Franciscan Convent of Santa Clara by the Reverend Mother Clemencia, Abbess of the Convent. She has been baptised Martha, a Christian name personifying the busy housekeeper in the biblical story of *The Raising of Lazarus* (Hall 1995, 201). When she grows a bit older, she helps Sister Grace working in the laundry and kitchen. True to her personified name, Martha is engaged in doing housework in the Convent.

As the impoverished Convent finds it difficult to feed an additional mouth, the Mother Abbess applies for a subsidy from the Santa Casa de Misericórdia[6] for the child's upkeep. Shortly, the orphan is adopted by Monsieur Auvray, a French private trader. She becomes

his favourite, but this relatively comfortable life lasts for only five years. No sooner has the tender-hearted Frenchman died than she is immediately thrown out of the house by Teresa da Silva, the woman who has been living with Auvray.

Just as Teresa calls her a 'viper' and a 'black-souled Chinese devil', Teresa's daughter, Dominie, despises her as the 'stinking heathen' (Coates 1967, 64). Worse still, Sister Grace, now the new Abbess in Macao, detests her as a 'daughter of hell' (Coates 1967, 65), and mercilessly rejects her return to the Convent — her last resort for shelter and sanctuary. As the Convent's door is tightly shut behind her, the homeless and desolate orphan is loitering around the hushed dark street, where she is drugged and sold into prostitution by Dominie's Macanese cousin. Martha, still a child at 13, becomes a prostitute or pensioner in the EIC's house on Hospital Street.

Holy House of Mercy. Photograph by the author.

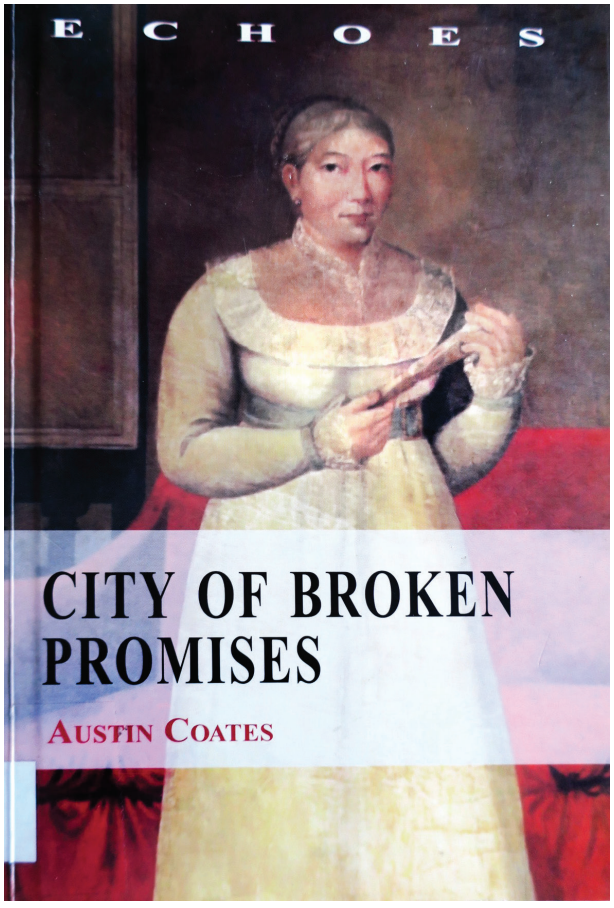
The all-powerful, multi-national EIC has already established its headquarters at Casa Garden[7], and is actively engaging in the trafficking of Indian opium to China. At the same time, this corporation runs a house (more specifically, a brothel) for trafficking young girls as pensioners/prostitutes to entertain its officers. As soon as a girl becomes a pensioner, her 'position in the household was worse than that of a slave', and by obscure conventions, she can neither leave the house, nor even 'go near any door or window that is open' (Coates 1967, 37, 39). All EIC's pensioners are hence compelled to stay all the time in an enclosed whorehouse — a veritable harem of native women.

Born with nothing, not even with a legal name, the orphan lives on the fringes of society, and is relegated to the debased in the social hierarchy, not to mention that she is treated 'as a creature unspeakably lower' in the EIC's living quarters (Coates 1967, 72). In the Roman Catholic 'City of the Name of God of Macao in China', the little harlot is the very victim of public scorn, moralists' attacks, and social ostracism.

ORIENTALISM AND COLONIAL STEREOTYPES

It appears that *City of Broken Promises* neatly feeds into the cultural criticism of Orientalism, theorised by Edward Said (1935–2003), a Palestinian-American and a founder of the academic field of postcolonial studies. Said's *Orientalism* is a work of intellectual history; a Western authoritative discourse for dominating, articulating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient or the East. This style of thought is constructed, if not fabricated, as an all-encompassing representation of, and a form of knowledge about, the Orient, which is considered the West's imaginative 'Other'.

Central to Said's thesis on fundamental othering are two main points: first, that images stress the Orient's radical separation from, and in opposition to, the West;



Book cover of Austin Coates, *City of Broken Promises*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009 edition.

second, that images invest the Orient with a timeless essentialism (Said 1978, 43, 70).

This Western 'knowledge of the Orient' immediately puts the West on top in a series of binary relationships, and inevitably shows the West's common, contemptuous depiction of the East. According to Said, the Orientals might be thought and assumed to be 'irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"', by contrast, the Occidentals would be regarded as 'rational, virtuous, mature, "normal"' (Said 1978, 40). These disjunctive images nonetheless reinforce the difference and an unbridgeable gap between the East and the West, and produce the East in a displaced and de-centred way that is inferior to the West.

Said's concept of Orientalist power echoes a new topic in the territory of colonial discourse — the stereotype, proposed by Homi K. Bhabha (b. 1949), an Indian literary and cultural critic and an influential theorist of postcolonial culture. Bhabha's colonial stereotype is the fixed form of difference and an arrested, fetishistic mode of representation. Pivotal in the discourse of colonialism, stereotyping is produced as a fixed reality which is at once knowable and visible (Bhabha 2003, 148–172). The stereotype is thus a mediated portrayal of a given reality, the disavowal of difference, and the scenario of colonial fantasy.

Often based on partial 'truths', stereotyping is not necessarily wrong, but this fixed pattern of representation may prejudicially exaggerate distortions, create false expectations, and reinforce misjudgement. Hence, it likely tends to obscure the reader's critical sensibilities for an awareness of the particularity of manifold cultural matrices.

By way of the Orientalist viewpoint in colonial discourse, Macao in *City of Broken Promises* has been alluded to as the West's 'Other' and is accorded with the motif of a child mistress in need of a surrogate father/patron. Moreover, following the colonialist preference for exoticism and backwardness of the East, the Portuguese enclave at the estuary of the Pearl River is described as a place of sexual fantasy, weakness, dependence, subservience, poverty, chaos, irrationality, and evil.

The author ardently delineates the polarities between the East and the West, and evokes certain persistent tropes contrasting the East with the West. Van Mierop (representing the West) is mature (24-year-old) and educated, whereas Martha (representing the East) is immature (14-year-old), illiterate, and benighted. Nurtured by caring parents, he has a puritanical, decent upbringing. Quite to the contrary, she is marred by a deprived upbringing — an orphan abandoned at birth, no legal name, and no identity.

Further, van Mierop is a trader and exists in an open world as he regularly travels to Guangzhou during the trading seasons. On the other hand, Martha is an ostracised whore caged in a closed world, and is obliged

to remain constantly confined in the EIC's brothel. She is *de facto* a captive and lives in a most sealed off 'Oriental harem', which is a colourless, dull ghetto of confinement with fastened curtains and screens. That the shuttered whorehouse puts forward the imagery of inscrutability signals her subjugation as well.

The stereotyping of Martha readily brings to mind a Burmese woman, Ma Hla May, in *Burmese Days* (first published in 1934) by George Orwell (1903–1950), an English novelist, journalist and critic. Orwell spent five years (1922–1927) serving in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, then a province of British India (Burma gained independence in 1948, now Myanmar). Set in (fictional) Kyauktada in Upper Burma during the declining days of the British Empire in the 1920s, the centre of the novel is John Flory, a jaded Englishman engaged in the timber trade.

On the point that a birthmark is emblematic of human imperfection, the timber merchant is stigmatised with a dark blue birthmark on his face, which he obsessively wants to hide, and of which he is hauntingly ashamed. Be that as it may, the white colonist, about 35 years old, has no difficulty in attracting a young local mistress — Ma Hla May. She is featured as an alluring doll:

> *Ma Hla May was a woman of twenty-two or -three, and perhaps five feet tall. She was dressed in a* longyi *of pale blue embroidered Chinese satin, and a starched white muslin* ingyi *on which several gold lockets hung. Her hair was coiled in a tight black cylinder like ebony, and decorated with jasmine flowers. Her tiny, straight, slender body was as contourless as a bas-relief carved upon a tree. She was like a doll, with her oval, still face the colour of new copper, and her narrow eyes; an outlandish doll and yet a grotesquely beautiful one.* **(Orwell 1989, 51)**

In an alien land, Flory becomes fascinated with this 'outlandish doll', whose short and shapeless body at once furnishes a sexual fetish. Her outlandishness and uncurving body are repeatedly focused, 'Flory thought he had never noticed here how dark Ma Hla May's face was, and how outlandish her tiny, stiff body, straight as a soldier's, with not a curve in it except the vase-like curve of her hips' (Orwell 1989, 89).

Just as van Mierop takes on a Chinese child mistress, Flory is enchanted by a Burmese doll-like mistress. These two 'exotic' Orientals are rendered as fetish objects for the Occidentals' sexual consumption.

THE MANICHEAN ALLEGORY

Shortly after arriving in Macao, van Mierop departs for Guangzhou where he stays at the Factory[8] waiting for the trading season to begin. Although there are girls providing every kind of service at the Factory, he does not have a feeling that 'there could be any other like her [Martha] in Macao, so attractive to him, at the same time so lively a companion' (Coates 1967, 89). Martha has obviously transformed herself into a compliant pensioner-mistress to entertain her benefactor.

As time goes by, van Mierop has already spent four years on the south China coast. When he is back at the end of the trading season, he notices that his pensioner has grown up considerably and is more charming than before. He stares at her with a fetishistic gaze in disbelief and wonder:

> *He returned to find her a young woman of strange sophistication and style. She had coiffed her hair in European style, drawn up from the temples, giving her a more mature appearance, and was wearing a superb, long skirted European dress of black taffeta, low at the neck, very high at the sleeve, but with her arms and all that part of her breast and neck which in Europe would have been revealed […]. She carried lace gloves and a fan, and from her sleeve hung an embroidered purse.* **(Coates 1967, 101)**

Grooming herself in an appealing appearance awaiting his return, Martha has now grown into an irresistible object of desire and comes to embody the seductive East.

In the meantime, van Mierop manages to buy a house on Hospital Street, which is traditionally an EIC's residence. In his newly acquired house, Martha spends her time on engaging in the flower trade and wine trade during his absence from Macao. The author narrates, 'For trade had become part of her life, and none knew better than she how vital it was to her. The house in Hospital Street would not be hers to live in for ever, nor would she be young for ever. Englishmen came and went, and their women, like flowers whose bloom is over, were cast away' (Coates 1967, 139). The commercial skills she gains pave the way for her to become a successful trader later.

It is van Mierop's sixth year in the East. He comes home in summer after the trading season. To his surprise, he finds an empty wicker basket cradle outside the silent house. He is told by the maid that Martha has given birth to 'an exceedingly beautiful boy', but he only 'lived for a little less than two days' (Coates 1967, 146). Even to his chagrin, the young mother quickly forgets the dead baby, 'The child had died two months ago. Since then, domestic matters and trade had re-absorbed her life, and his gravity and emotion belonged to a moment in time which for her was already over' (Coates 1967, 147). Martha is therefore depicted to have lacked the subtle sensitivity to understand the painful motherly love for the deceased baby.

Martha's far-too-quick 'amnesia' is in stark contrast to van Mierop's 'appalled sorrow which had nothing whatever to do with the lost child' (Coates 1967, 146). While the pensioner appears to be childlike and somewhat irrational, her benefactor is mature and rational to feel the pain of the death of the new-born. What is also suggested here is the Orientalist discourse that points to the supposed callousness of the Oriental and the cheapness of life in the East.

After six years as van Mierop's mistress, 20-year-old Martha has changed with time. 'The childlike impudence which so often and enchantingly haunted her expression had gone. Her dimples were no longer mischievous; they had somehow become thoughtful. Even her features seemed to have been refined, giving her a dignity beyond her years' (Coates 1967, 146). The child pensioner has reached womanhood, and her benefactor is so besotted with her that he intends to make a dauntless decision.

Planning to break the EIC's rules against marrying local women, van Mierop asks Martha to marry him, '[W]hen my time comes to leave, I wish you come with me to England. If we cannot be married before we leave, we will be married in England' (Coates 1967, 148). Without the slightest feeling of the marriage proposal as a godsend, she reacts to it as a would-be broken promise:

> *Many, many have promised to others what you are promising now to me. None, Tom, none has ever kept his word. This is a city of broken promises. I know it. I was born here. It may be that you will try to keep your promise. If it still pleases you to keep me here, I am sure you will. But this you must know. Though I might dearly love to, I would be a fool if I believed you. In Macao we know this, that when the time comes it is always otherwise. Whatever words may have been said, whatever promises made, when an Englishman goes, it is alone.* (Coates 1967, 149)

Martha is well aware that Macao is a city of broken promises. The promises made by others to marry their Macao mistresses are only to leave them abandoned and their children bastards when they are gone.

It is, moreover, a conventional taboo for any Englishman to marry a local woman in Macao. In violating the rules, as Mierop puts in his journal, '[an Englishman] was forthwith repudiated by his business partner, who appropriated his goods and denied him access to his office. He was refused any form of passage abroad, and ostracised from European society' (Coates 1967, 99). The author reiterates, 'Like everyone else in Macao she [Martha] knew of the man who had been

driven out to sell vegetables to fishermen outcasts, and who at the sight of another European would slink away with the furtive haste of a rat' (Coates 1967, 222–223). A mixed marriage is all but viewed as a shameful match.

By 'saving' his pensioner from Macao and taking her to England, the white man plays the role of a messianic hero, who plans to rescue a deplorable 'child' from the hellish East to the Arcadian West. The narrative tellingly demonstrates an unbridgeable gap between the East and the West through disjunctive representations.

The portrayal of van Mierop as a 'saviour' brings to mind the colonialist ideal as is in Rudyard Kipling's (1865–1936) seven-stanza poem, 'The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands' (1899). In the poem, Kipling elaborates the paradox and the theory of Empire building from the ideological stance of a mature imperial power. The 'White Man' is, according to Kipling, laden with the paternalistic duty to rule and take care of the 'Half devil and half child' and to 'Fill full the mouth of Famine/And bid the sickness cease' (Kipling 1933, 320–321).[9]

Macao, likewise, is likened to the 'half devil and half child'. In his journal, van Mierop records that Macao is a bizarre place 'with its feasts and processions, its pride, superstition and ignorance, its priests, prostitutes and borrowing idlers, its climate of sanctity and decadence' (Coates 1967, 158). Quite differently, England is represented as the protector and benefactor of Macao, just as van Mierop patronises his child mistress.

This conflicting structure instantly endorses the power relations of what Abdul R. JanMohamed (b. 1945) has called the 'Manichean allegory', which is the central trope in colonialist literature. JanMohamed defines the Manichean allegory as the 'opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native' (JanMohamed 1985, 63). Such a binary relationship is produced by means of the juxtaposition of two opposed, essentialised entities — the West and the East. The rendering of essentialistic and reified images of the 'Other' has inevitably, if not naively, overlooked social and cultural specificities and the protean phenomena of this ever-changing world.

SUBMISSIVE ORIENTAL WOMEN

Illustrated as a city of broken promises, Macao is also a city of abandonment, which can be traced in *A-Chan, a Tancareira* (*A-Chan, the Tanka Girl*). Set in Macao in the 1940s, it is a short story by Henrique de Senna Fernandes (1923–2010), a Macanese writer. The eponymous heroine is not Tanka[10] by birth, but she is sold at the age of six by her poor parents and later re-sold to an old Tanka woman. The sale and re-sale, like livestock, metaphorically allude to her mutant ethnicity shifting from being associated with the majority land people to the minority Tanka boat dwellers.

In the same trajectory of presenting Martha, the Tanka girl is from the lowest social echelon. She has no parents, no specific name — the name 'A-Chan' is a commonly simple appellation applied to somebody, denoting an insignificant identity. She has no house, though she does have an egg-shaped boat left by her surrogate Tanka mother. If a house represents a solid, concrete possession, a boat is no doubt emblematic of movement and unpredictability. Much the same as duckweed, A-Chan is literally floating without any roots — she dwells in the boat and earns a living by ferrying passengers in the Inner Harbour.

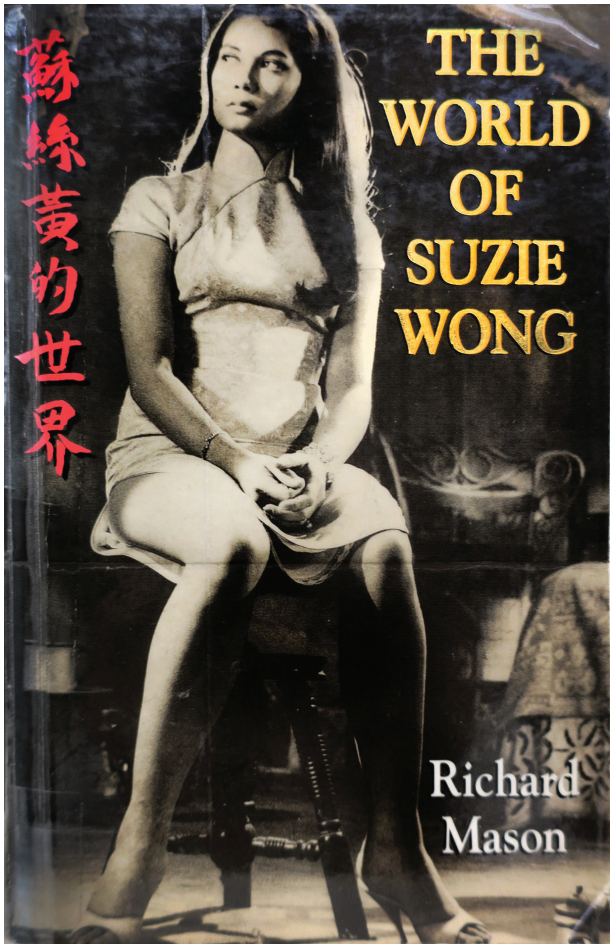
At 20, A-Chan meets Manuel, a Portuguese sailor, who is stranded in Macao during the Second World War. Manuel soon has an affair with her, even though she is *feia* (ugly), *ignorante* (ignorant), and has *olhos oblíquos* (slanting eyes) and a *nariz chato, grosseiro* (flat, big nose). He likes her only because she has '*terna expressão de escrava submissa*' (a tender expression of a submissive slave) (Senna Fernandes 1997, 11). The dallying Westerner is not hunting for a fantasy of an Oriental feminine ideal, but what attracts him is her

slavish submissiveness. For that reason, the boat girl is wooed to be his subservient slave/mistress.

After the war, the ocean-going sailor is ready to go back to Portugal and takes with him their little Eurasian daughter. The novel ends with A-Chan bidding him farewell, '*Cuidadinho... Cuidadinho*' (Take care... Take care) (Senna Fernandes 1997, 18). With unruffled emotion, the abandoned mistress accepts her fate with stoicism.

The story appears to be a cliché falling in line with the Orientalist penchant for the East–West romance — juxtaposing a submissive Oriental woman with a flirtatious white man, as is in yet another short story, *Madame Butterfly* (first published in 1898), by John Luther Long (1861–1927), which was adapted into an opera by Giacomo Puccini in 1904. Set in Nagasaki, Japan, at the end of the nineteenth century, it tells the story of Cio-Cio-San, a 15-year-old Japanese geisha (a performance artist and companion). She has been acquired as the wife of Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton,[11] an American naval officer. But before long, Pinkerton divorces her and leaves Japan with their son. Unlike A-Chan's stoical endurance of abandonment, Cio-Cio-San commits suicide for an unrequited love. Both *A-Chan, a Tancareira* and *Madame Butterfly* exemplify the archetypical tragedy of miscegenation.

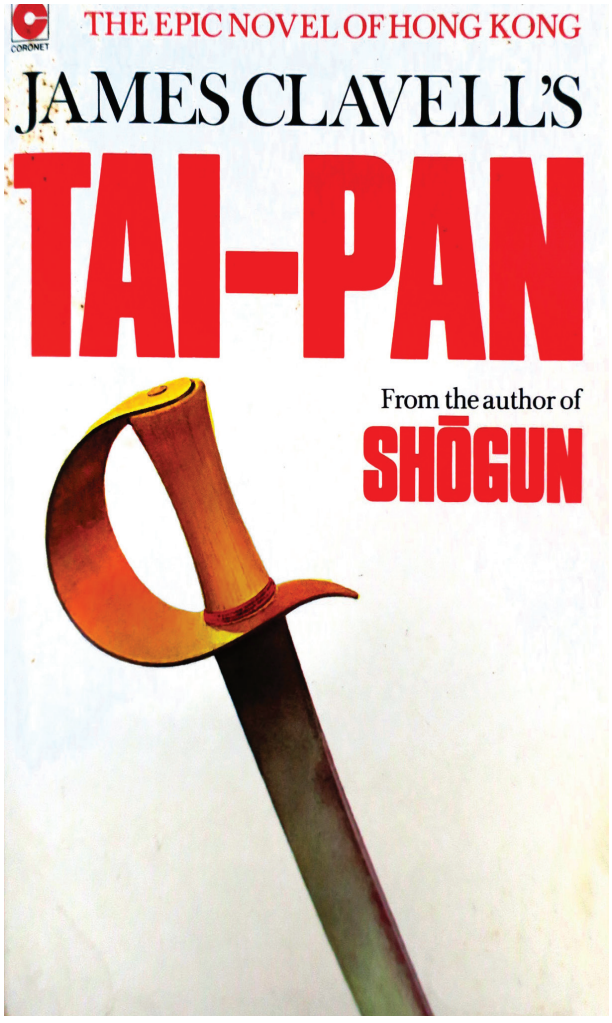
The imagery of Oriental woman as mistress/prostitute recurrently appears to be a favourite motif in colonialist literary works. In the same vein of portraying Macao's Martha and A-Chan, Chinese women in Hong Kong have also been created as mistresses and prostitutes to please Westerners. *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957) by British novelist Richard Mason (1919–1997) is set in Hong Kong in the 1950s, which was made into a film of the same name in 1960. The eponymous character Suzie Wong is an enticing and intelligent prostitute who works in the neon-signed, teeming Wanchai district. She is depicted as an Oriental temptress flirting with Robert Lomax, a young Englishman, who visits Hong Kong in search of inspiration for his paintings. The novel ends happily with them marrying.



Book cover of Richard Mason, *The World of Suzie Wong*. London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1957.

Another case is in *Tai-Pan* (1966) by James Clavell (1921–1994), an Australian and later naturalised American. The novel is set against the backdrop after the British victory of the First Opium War when foreign traders begin to move into Hong Kong in the 1840s. The leading protagonist Dirk Struan is a pirate, an opium smuggler, and a ruthless intriguer. As an indispensable ingredient in the novel, May-may, his Chinese mistress, is concocted merely as an acquiescent, subservient sexual object. Her sole purpose in life is to please the Scottish *Tai-Pan* (supreme leader) of Struan & Company, the most powerful private trading company at that time.

The two novels by Richard Mason and James Clavell respectively come laden with the exoticisation and eroticisation of Chinese women. Both authors



Book cover of James Clavell, *Tai-Pan*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966.

have followed the colonialist literary tendency to present Oriental women as objects of sexual desire for Occidental men's consumption. In a word, the sensualised and fetishised images of Oriental women are typical, dominant motifs in the literary works as discussed above. The illustrations of Martha, Ma Hla May, A-Chan, Cio-Cio-San, Suzie Wong, and May-may are cases in point. They are stereotyped as submissive mistresses/prostitutes, and reductively essentialised as the seductive East.

BAKHTINIAN THEORIES IN LITERATURE

Hailed as the greatest theorist of literature in the twentieth century (Todorov 1984, ix), Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895–1975) was a Russian literary theorist/critic and philosopher of language. He came to light as a literary rising star in the 1970s, and his wide-ranging writings and ideas have ever since greatly influenced Western structuralism, post-structuralism, social theory, and the theory of the novel.

Especially known for his broad ideas on the social nature of language, literature, and meaning, Bakhtin theorises two significant categories in literature — dialogism and carnivalism. As a defining characteristic of literary works, dialogism (dominated by heteroglossia, literally meaning other-languagedness) denotes a constant interaction between meanings. Bakhtin's dialogism may conceal 'unofficial' or unconscious voices, which possibly contest, overturn, and parody dominant discourses (Bakhtin 1981, 426). Textual materials are, therefore, regarded as sites where multiple voices of culture and different systems of authority interact in order to display diversified perspectives.

Bakhtin's carnivalism transcends carnival's literal definition as a festive life in collective celebration. The parodic qualities of festivities are exactly the carnival spirit, from which emerges the reversal of roles and power, as well as a liberation from norms of etiquette and decency (Bakhtin 1968, 9–10). By elaborating and associating the concept of 'carnival' with literary genres, Bakhtin calls the transposition of the spirit of carnival festivities into the language of literature 'the carnivalisation of literature', which may contain a revolutionary potential to expose the arbitrary nature of official construction of the real (Bakhtin 1984, 122). In a word, Bakhtin's carnival aesthetic in literary genres emphasises the decentralising forces that translate a symbolic egalitarianism by the switching of roles, and challenge, if not subvert, dominant ideologies.

In analysing key Bakhtinian categories, Robert Stam argues that the carnival aesthetic aptly offers a corrective to certain Eurocentric prejudices, 'Bakhtin's oxymoronic carnival aesthetic, in which everything is pregnant with its opposite, implies an alternative logic

of non-exclusive opposites and permanent contradiction that transgresses the monologic true-or-false thinking typical of Western rationalism' (Stam 1989, 22). Quite in the same vein, Simon Dentith further expounds Bakhtin's notion of 'carnival' by talking of the carnivalesque, which refers to carnivalised writings that reproduce 'the characteristic inversions, parodies and discrownings of carnival proper' (Dentith 1995, 65).

The Bakhtinian carnivalesque in literature easily brings to mind *The Lover* (*L'Amant*) (1986), an autobiographical novel by Marguerite Duras (1914–1996), a French novelist, which was adapted into a film under the same title in 1992. Set against the backdrop of French Vietnam in the 1930s, *The Lover* apparently attempts to bring down and refashion the Oriental relationship in a (post-)colonial fashion. This sensuous literary work features a clandestine romance between a teenage daughter of a French widow and a young Chinese–Vietnamese scion of a rich family in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). Throughout the novel, neither the French girl nor her lover is given a name.

Compared to *City of Broken Promises*, *The Lover* clearly shows reverse presentations of the East and the West. The Chinese lover (representing the East) is 27 years old, mature, wealthy and elegant, while the French girl (representing the West) is 'fifteen and half. The body's thin, undersized almost, childish breasts still, red and pale pink make-up' (Duras 1986, 24). He is heir to a fortune; his father is a business magnate. To the contrary, she is poverty-stricken; her mother is financially strapped and maniacally depressive.

The novel is replete with the imagery of the West's decaying colonialism in Vietnam, which is alluded to by a lack of money, power, and a father figure in the French family. Most of all, their house is dilapidated as '[t]he roof, rotted by the endless rain, goes on disintegrating' (Duras 1986, 30). Bowing to the disapproval of his imposing father to take on a 'foreign devil' as his bride, the Chinese lover has to break off the love affair with 'the little white whore from Sadec' (Duras 1986, 38).

Resonant with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, *The Lover* not only dissolves some familiar polarities between the East and the West, it also repudiates the domination/subjugation of the West over the East paradigm through the switching of roles. The East (Vietnam and the Chinese lover's father) is no longer the weak modalities of childhood, poverty and dependence, rather it is patriarchal, affluent and authoritative.

Book cover of Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*. London. Flamingo, 1986.

Similarly, there are profuse carnivalesque elements undermining and contesting colonial ideology in the seemingly unified surface of *City of Broken Promises*, not least the very essentialistic images of the colonial hierarchy and supremacy are derided and punctured. As the plot unfolds, van Mierop has already spent 13 years

in the East. He is now 37, slim, bronzed and fit, and looks to have changed little (Coates 1967, 116). The narration, nevertheless, continues with an Aristotelian *peripeteia* (a sudden reversal of situation) at that point.

Before the trading season ends, he unexpectedly comes back very sick from Guangzhou in early April and collapses on arrival at the Inner Harbour. He has contracted 'a recurring form of dysentery' (Coates 1967, 204), which tortures him persistently. Surgeon Duncan advises him to leave Macao for a change of climate[12] and return to England where 'only climate can cure' (Coates 1967, 210). The ailing Englishman is no doubt unfit for the humid subtropical climate of south China,[13] and his physical vulnerability is detrimental to his transgression into the East.

In his illness, van Mierop determines to officially marry his pensioner before leaving for England, 'I cannot board that ship till He [God] has seen me wed' (Coates 1967, 225). However, Father Montepardo, the senior secular priest and Canon of the Cathedral, refuses to marry them in the Roman Catholic Church. He has, therefore, to arrange for a secret marriage to take place inside the room of his house. They are married by the authority of God alone, whose benignity, they believe, is greater than His representative on Earth.

The marriage is momentous for Martha, because of the wedlock she earns a Western appellation — Martha Mierop. Even so, her new name is not legally binding at all. It is simply a 'secret marriage' between them without the Roman Catholic priest's blessing or any official documentary endorsement.

PUNISHMENT OF WESTERN INTRUDERS

In spite of the fact that *Burmese Days* is being overwhelmed with Orientalist images in colonial discourse, it simultaneously unveils an imperial anxiety, in which *Pax Britannica* is waning, and the British presence in Burma is satirised and ridiculed. As the story progresses, Ma Hla May has been Flory's mistress for two years, yet, no sooner has he met Elizabeth Lackersteen — a 22-year-old English woman from Paris arriving to stay with her aunt and uncle — than the 'outlandish doll' falls out of favour with him. She is driven out of his house with 'a cheque for a hundred rupees' (Orwell 1989, 116) — Flory earns 700 rupees a month.

Flory is love-struck and becomes infatuated with this tall, slender and pretty white woman, whom he feels can bring him back to 'the air of England — dear England' (Orwell 1989, 156). Besides, he has a sensation that 'only by marrying her could his life be salvaged' in the 'solitary hell' (Orwell 1989, 184, 186). The Englishman plainly maintains an ambivalent, if not racist, attitude towards this province in British India. Whilst he has kept a local mistress to justify his passion for Burma, he considers that only an English woman would be desirable as his wife.

Despite his birthmarked cheek, Elizabeth at first considers him because he looks 'so splendidly manly, with his *pagri*-cloth shirt open at the throat, and his shorts and puttees and shooting boots' (Orwell 1989, 167). Such a promising romantic storyline dissipates as they have totally dissimilar sentiments about Burma. Unlike Flory who appreciates Burmese culture, and shows favourable treatment and great support for the natives, Elizabeth embraces an Anglo-Eurocentric perspective and expressly does not take to this alien place. Imperious as she is, the white woman condescendingly describes the Chinamen in the bazaar as 'absolutely disgusting people' and even loathes the Burmans (Burmese natives) as being 'beastly' (Orwell 1989, 136–137).

In the end, Flory is punished for transgressing the boundary of the East and for having a dalliance with a local woman. The abandoned, wretched mistress takes revenge on him. Shrieking like a maniac during an evening church service, Ma Hla May ruins his reputation by yelling out a detailed account of his intimacy with her. The White man falls into utter disgrace within the Christian community, let alone the all-White European Club in Kyauktada. Elizabeth hates 'him now for his birthmark' and for keeping 'that grey-faced maniacal creature' as his mistress (Orwell 1989, 286).

Even worse, Flory has to pay for his attempted integration into two worlds — combining the English world with the Burmese world, which is indicated by his intention to marry Elizabeth and to live in Burma. All his dreams are broken. The English woman despises him as 'an unspeakable beast', and hates him 'as she would have hated a leper or a lunatic' (Orwell 1989, 290, 291). As his idealistic integration with the East and the West cannot be realised, he comes to be disillusioned with life in an expatriate community and grows insanely frustrated. His grievance at last drives him to commit suicide by shooting himself. The suicidal death of the innately imperfect Englishman (characterised by his hideous birthmark) signifies his unfitting existence in Burma. And, the uprising episode of the Burmese natives, labelled 'the incestuous children of pigs' by a racist timber merchant (Orwell 1989, 253), eerily foretells the demise of the inappropriate British presence in this colony. The novel somehow encrypts a hidden voice to admonish the West's intrusion into the East.

Flory's furtive fascination with the East and his subsequent punishment are reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's *Beyond the Pale* (first published in 1888). This short story is set in India, then a British colony. An Englishman by the name of Christopher Trejago transgresses into the area of Amir Nath's Gully, a poor and unpleasant slum. On an aimless wandering, he crosses the boundary to the Gully and has a covert relationship with Bisesa, a 15-year-old widow. It looks to be a paedophilic tendency that girls at puberty are reified as objects of desire in literary works: Bisesa is 15, Martha 14, Cio-Cio-San 15, and the French girl 15 and half.

Trejago is punished for his boundary transgression and for promiscuity — 'something sharp — knife, sword, or spear — thrust at Trejago in his boorka. The stroke missed his body, but cut into one of the muscles of the groin, and he limped slightly from the wound for the rest of his days' (Kipling 1985, 179). The text thus hints at castration; a loss of manhood. The Englishman is 'Orientalised' and 'unmanned' by the East as a feminine West. His wilful intrusion beyond the safe limits of the superior West into the 'half-child' East and his flirtation with teenaged Bisesa end tragically, leaving him limping for the rest of his days.

Much worse than Trejago's experience, van Mierop is harshly punished for crossing the boundary of the inscrutable East. In light of the incurable dysentery, the Westerner is obliged to board an ocean-going ship and return to the West. On board the ship, he is in a critical condition. He tells Ignatius, an English-speaking servant, to convey the last important message to Martha, 'Dear lad, tell her this with my dying love — USE MY NAME' (Coates 1967, 259). More than that, he puts 'my beloved wife Martha Mierop' in his will (Coates 1967, 262). As such, the pensioner-mistress finally gains a legally binding name, endorsed by a lawful document. She becomes van Mierop's legitimate wife.

Above all, van Mierop gives her a sum of 10,000 pounds,[14] together with his house on Hospital Street and all the furniture in it (Coates 1967, 264–265). Bequeathing all his fortune gathered in the East, he died and is buried at sea, never seeing his homeland again. He is barely 40. His 'forced' departure and untimely death constitute more than just an infraction of the romantic and exotic structure of this colonialist novel; these two episodes also serve to signify the consequences of his boundary transgression.

In fact, prior to van Mierop's death, he has already been punished 'unnoticeably' — his new-born son is dead; a symbolic allusion that the Westerner fails to put down new roots in the East. In addition, his son's death deprives him of a chance to assume the role of fatherhood, which allegorically implies that the West is no longer a father figure to the East.

At the denouement, the pensioner inherits her benefactor's fortune and his house. The trope of a house is reminiscent of *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1992), a novel by V. S. Naipaul (1932–2018), a Trinidadian writer of Indian descent. The central character Mohun Biswas grows up as a lonely child. After his marriage, he has

attempted several times to build a house that he can call his own. In a desperate struggle to acquire a house, Mr. Biswas aspires to assert his independence and to develop an authentic identity. He feels that only by having his own house can he overcome his feelings of isolation, rootlessness, and alienation.

Much in the same way that a house is crucial for Mr. Biswas, Martha at long last has a house of her own, which connotes that she is the possessor of a bastion that offers her feelings of safety, security, and autonomy. Once an ostracised pensioner hiding behind a closed world of screens, curtains and shutters, she now leads a new life with a new identity and a new great fortune. Unprecedentedly, she can advance into the open doorway and enjoy an almost unimaginable freedom.

Book cover of George Orwell, *Burmese Days*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1989.

THE PENSIONER'S METAMORPHOSIS

With her newly inherited affluence and a shrewd business acumen, Martha turns into the richest woman in Macao and can 'buy the entire Praia Grande waterfront' (Coates 1967, 275). Meanwhile, she strives to build a big ship, big enough to go out to the great sea, and most importantly, to send her name into the world. The imagery of building a ship seems to manifest her yearning to escape from the miserable memory of confinement at the Convent and at the EIC's brothel. It could also be her latent desire to sail like a ship in the ocean, where there is a sense of liberation and freedom from claustrophobic constraint.

A new ship has been built in her name, *Martha Mierop*, which is going to sail on her maiden voyage to Calcutta. In the final touch, a Chinese menial worker Kwai Suk (Uncle Kwai) is asked to paint the name on the hull of the ship. In a catastrophic turn, the author writes:

> *The patterned stencils were said to be the characters of foreign language, but to Kwai Suk they were not characters at all. They were mere lines, devoid of meaning. He contemplated the barbaric simplicity of foreign language […]. He held the stencil horizontally. It [a single vertical stroke] did not fit the space allotted to it. Something was wrong. He nonchalantly dropped the doorpost into the sea, and went on with the next character.* (Coates 1967, 300)

Not knowing the substance of the foreign 'barbaric simplicity', the worker drops the patterned stencil of the vertical doorpost character 'I' into the sea. Consequently, the name of the ship in bold white letters appears: ***MARTHA MEROP***. The new ship is

blessed by Father Montepardo before launching, 'and the ship began to move, the sight was so beautiful and awful, the strange majesty of what she [Martha] had created, without ever suspecting the true wonder of what a ship is, bore upon her in which terrible measure that she could look no more' (Coates 1967, 308–309).

The name of the ship is not at all *Martha Mierop*. Instead, it is *Martha Merop*, which has been blessed by God's representative on Earth, and which is inalterable. Significantly, through the naming of the ship, the pensioner attains a totally new identity as **Martha Merop** by dropping the 'I' in Mierop. The 'I', standing for Martha's first person pronoun, detaches from Mierop; the detachment metonymically symbolises that she is not a 'parasite' on van Mierop anymore. The abandoned orphan ultimately metamorphoses into an identifiable, independent person after having been kept as a pensioner-mistress for 15 years.

The word 'Mierop' is erratically altered, if not wiped out. 'Merop', without the 'I', suggests that van Mierop is metaphorically 'eliminated' by Kwai Suk. Besides, due to the eradication of the phallic 'I', van Mierop is symbolically castrated, even posthumously, and, not least, he has been 'cordially' dispossessed of all his gains in the East. The worker's nonchalant mistake turns out to be a celebration of Martha's dramatic metamorphosis, as well as a proclamation of the climactic extinction of van Mierop in the East. His expulsion from Macao makes it possible for Martha to transcend from a debased pensioner to a uniquely authentic person.

Despite playing a minor role, Kwai Suk is a determining character, who exemplifies an 'unofficial' voice of subversion in this colonialist literary text. It is he who brings forth a vindication against Western imperialism and transgression, and furnishes a Bakhtinian dialogic standpoint, which offers a corrective to certain Eurocentric prejudices. The episodes of naming and launching the *Martha Merop* are par excellence an allegory of the triumph of the supposed inferiority of the East over the putative superiority of the West.

CONCLUSION

The Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism and carnivalism in literature espouse the idea that textual materials are polyvalent and do not simply contain a unitary ideological perspective. Instead, they may encrypt 'unconscious' voices, which are riddled with a subversive potential to defy dominant ideological discourses.

Ostensibly encompassing colonial and ideological fantasies, *City of Broken Promises* demarcates the world into two opposite modes of representation and creates a binary contradiction. It is, moreover, lavishly immersed in Orientalist stereotype, in which Macao is constructed as the West's shackled 'Other'. In particular, it reinforces the Manichean allegory that the West is the patron/giver, whereas the East is its recipient. Such unreflective stereotyping does not only generate an ambivalent polarity, but also postulates a masculine/feminine relationship between the West and the East.

Regardless of his unexamined confidence in delineating a literary work that is permeated with rich colonialist favour, Austin Coates climactically cracks wide open a dialogic voice to topple colonial ideology by the switching of roles. Signifying the superior/masculine West, Thomas van Mierop is ousted from the East by dysentery and punished by death at sea. Martha, reified as the inferior/feminine East in an Orientalist romance, eventually emerges as a wealthy trader and the most generous public benefactress of Macao.[15]

Such a caricature of the colonial hierarchy and supremacy brings into view a buried resistance to imperial transgressions in the present rhetoric. Along with a latent argument against the West's presence in the East, the author unintentionally, if not unconsciously, reworks the Orientalist perception, dissolves certain stereotypes, and fractures the West over the East paradigm with the Bakhtinian carnival aesthetic. RC

LITERATURA

NOTES

1 On behalf of the English Crown with a Royal Charter granted by Queen Elizabeth I on the last day of December 1599, the English East India Company subsequently grew into the largest commercial organisation on Earth. After the Union of England with Scotland, the British East India Company eventually enjoyed a monopoly of all British trade in the East. Moreover, it became the dominant military and political force ruling the Mughal state of Bengal in 1757. The EIC obtained the monopoly on opium distribution at Patna and Benares in Bengal in 1773, and from the 1770s, it started exporting sizeable and lucrative Bengali opium to China.

2 The second half of the eighteenth century already saw an increased flow of products and people from British settlements in India to Macao before the onward journey to Guangzhou. In the late eighteenth century, more British traders set foot in Macao when Hong Kong was still a 'barren rock' (Lord Palmerston's term). On the British in Macao, see Jessica Hanser, "British Private Traders between India and China," in *The Private Side of the Canton Trade, 1700–1840: Beyond the Companies*, ed. Paul A. Van Dyke and Susan E. Schopp (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018), 7–20.

3 From the beginning of the eighteenth century, Guangzhou — the only city in Qing China open to foreign trade — was perhaps the most favoured trading port in the world. Chinese authorities only allowed foreign traders to remain in Guangzhou during the annual 'trading season' from October to May, after which they had to leave that city. Macao thus turned into the only Western residential area between trading seasons and was home to a fairly large community of multi-ethnic traders.

4 Starkly distinctive from the Portuguese ideology of pan-racialism that officially tolerated, if not celebrated, racial fusion through mixed marriages of different races, Britain entertained the threatening idea of racial and cultural degeneration as a result of mixed unions. In view of the fact that concubinage with local women had been commonly practised by members of the colonial services in the British Crown colonies, Lord Crewe, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, issued a sexual directive in 1909. Known as the Crewe Circular, it attempted to curb 'racial deterioration' and 'racial anarchy' by forbidding liaisons between British colonists and native women. On this matter, see Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

5 It is believed that the historical Marta da Silva Merop died on 8 March 1828. See P. H. M. Jones, *Golden Guide to Hong Kong and Macau* (Hong Kong: The Far Eastern Economic Review, 1969), 371.

6 Founded in 1569 by Dom Belchior Carneiro (b. 1513), the first Bishop of China and Japan, the Santa Casa de Misericórdia (Holy House of Mercy) is Macao's oldest charitable institution. Today it is still actively engaged in taking care of the underprivileged. The neoclassical building of the institution, with an ornate colonnaded façade, dates back to the eighteenth century. It was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2005, and forms part of the Historic Centre of Macao.

7 Casa Garden was built in 1770 as the residence of Manuel Pereira, a wealthy Portuguese merchant. It was then rented to the EIC as their base in Macao. This striking building was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2005. It is now the headquarters of the Fundação Oriente (Orient Foundation).

8 During the trading seasons countless foreigners involved in different kinds of trade and commerce were granted privileges and equal access to do business in Guangzhou. They lived and worked in the 'factory area' within a small strip of land designated for foreign traders in the western suburbs of Guangzhou.

9 Rudyard Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands' is about the Philippine–American War (1899–1902). In the poem, Kipling encourages American colonisation and annexation of the Philippine Islands. The phrase 'the white man's burden' is ideologically used to justify imperial conquest as a mission-of-civilisation in the nineteenth century. One may consider the work of Katharine Moore, *Kipling and the White Man's Burden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968).

10 The Tanka minorities are boat dwellers marginalised as an inferior race. They are not even recognised within China's 56 ethnic groups and often carry a disparaging stigma.

11 Derived from the name of Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, the term 'Pinkerton Syndrome' was first coined in Singapore. It refers to the perceived tendency of Asian women to see Caucasians as more desirable than Asian men for marriage or relationships. Pinkerton Syndrome has also come to suggest exploitative affairs between Western men and Asian women.

12 The majority of southern China falls into the humid subtropical climate category. Macao is located within the tropics and the typhoon zone, with a monsoon climate. The southwest monsoon brings uncomfortable humidity and sweltering heat between May and October, when most of the annual rain falls. From October it is cool and dry, following a steady northwest wind.

13 Lindsay and May Ride conducted research on 160 gravestones of foreigners (British, European, and American) in the Old Protestant Cemetery in Macao. It shines light on the fact that many died young in their 20s or 30s, succumbing to various kinds of diseases in subtropical south China. One may refer to the work of Lindsay and May Ride, *An East India Company Cemetery: Protestant Burials in Macao* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996).

14 Austin Coates has a footnote expounding that 'in today's money, about US$1,200,000'.

15 The real Marta da Silva Merop was the most generous benefactress of the Santa Casa de Misericórdia, where her full-length portrait has been hung on the second floor of the institution, just opposite to the display of the skull of Dom Belchior Carneiro. She is, however, depicted with the appearance of a blonde as shown on the book cover of Austin Coates' 2009 edition of *City of Broken Promises*.

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