

## The rhetoric of Sara Suleri: Life Writing and postcolonial theory

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### Abstract:

This article reads Sara Suleri's memoirs *Meatless Days* (1989) and *Boys Will Be Boys* (2003) in dialogue with *The Rhetoric of English India* (1992), her influential work of postcolonial theory. It argues that Suleri's life writing and scholarship respond to the same fundamental questions about writing and description, and foreground visual metaphors to show how the memoirist distorts or imaginatively invents her absent subjects as a critic distorts or invents the text they read. Like memoir, Suleri understands criticism to be an act of creative, and distorting, remembrance. Reading Suleri's work in this way prompts us to re-read the postcolonial theory of the 1980s and 1990s as a body of literature, a register of and a meditation on a history of 20th-century migration and cultural encounter.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, Sara Suleri Goodyear (b.1953) was an "academic postcolonial star" (Seyhan 2013, 197). Her father was a scion of Pakistani journalism, and a supporter of Jinnah and Pakistani nationalism. Her mother, born in Wales, was a professor of English literature in Lahore. Suleri is a Professor Emeritus at Yale, where she was teaching when her memoir *Meatless Days* was published in 1989. She subsequently wrote *The Rhetoric of English India*, a book of criticism, in 1992, and *Boys Will Be Boys*, a second memoir, in 2003. Azade Seyhan (2013) remembers how *Meatless Days* was a popular text "on the syllabi of exile literature courses" in American universities in the 1990s, "because of its elegant and accessible theoretical musings and its focus on the questions that these courses emphasize". But it "disappeared relatively fast from college syllabi", perhaps due to "a certain fatigue with the plenitude of postcolonial discourses"

(197). A similar story could be told of *The Rhetoric of English India*, whose reputation was tied even more directly to what Seyhan presents as something of an academic fad.

If the popularity of Suleri's memoirs can be attributed to their "theoretical" orientation, it is odd that no one has read these memoirs in dialogue with her more explicit theoretical statements in *The Rhetoric of English India*.<sup>1</sup> My first aim in this article is to do just that. I argue that Suleri's scholarship and life writing respond to the same fundamental questions about writing and description. Both bodies of work foreground visual metaphors to show how the memoirist distorts or imaginatively invents her absent subjects (her parents, her sisters, her friends, distanced from her by death or geography) as a critic distorts or invents the text they read. Suleri understands criticism, like memoir, to be an act of creative, and distorting, remembrance.

But there are also broader implications to reading Suleri's work in this way. In an influential 2011 essay, "What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say", Neil Lazarus drew a sharp distinction between the postcolonial period (an era in later 20th-century history), postcolonial literature (a body of creative writing registering the experience of decolonisation and its aftermath), and postcolonial theory (a deconstruction-influenced body of cultural theory prominent in Anglo-American universities in the 1980s and 90s). Drawing on a long tradition of critiques of postcolonialism, Lazarus argued that whereas the literature of the postcolonial world gave a vivid portrait of a postcolonial period riven by material inequality and new forms of capitalist imperialism, the postcolonial theory of the 1980s and 1990s did not. Using a rarefied, poststructuralist vocabulary to describe cultural fusion, "ambivalence" or hybridity", at the expense of systematic materialist analysis, postcolonial theory was (according to Lazarus) a symptom of this new imperialism, rather than a critical comment upon it. (See Lazarus 2011, 3–7, 11–12 [and *passim*.] for a thorough exposition of this argument). Major publications from the last ten

years – including Lazarus's own *Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), and the edited collection *What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say* (Bernard, Elmarsafy, and Murray 2015) – have built on Lazarus's critique, affirming the distinction he draws between period, literature, and theory.<sup>2</sup>

My reading of Suleri complicates this picture. In her memoirs, for example, an intellectual biography emerges which posits a clear link between life in postcolonial Pakistan and the ideas about literature and language she professes in works of postcolonial theory like *The Rhetoric of English India*. At the same time, the memoirs draw on ideas explored in *Rhetoric* and on research she did for that book. Though *Meatless Days* and *Rhetoric* are generically different, literature, theory, and historical experience feed into one another in both texts. Lazarus is right to differentiate between the postcolonial era, postcolonial literature and postcolonial theory. Only a proportion of the literary production of the formerly colonized world engages or reflects the concerns of postcolonial theory, and the tendency – especially in Europe and America – to view the diversity of South Asian literature (for example) through the narrow lens of 1990s postcolonial theory was and remains reductive. Nonetheless, as I have argued in another context, postcolonial theory emerged out of close engagement with key writers from the decolonising world (see Ghosh 2017). In Suleri's work we also see how the theory of the 1980s and 90s shaped a body of literature.

### **Pictures of Pakistan**

An anecdote, repeated in *Meatless Days* and *Boys Will Be Boys*, crystallises the epoch and social world in which Sara Suleri grew up. It concerns the relationship between Z[ulfikar] A[li] Bhutto, minister of foreign affairs and later fourth president of Pakistan, and Suleri's

father Z[iauddin] A[hmed] Suleri, newspaper magnate, military colonel (public relations), and loyal champion of Muhammad Ali Jinnah.<sup>3</sup> For a while, Suleri writes, her father was a close friend of Bhutto, the journalist modelling his cigar habit on the politician. Then, as Bhutto accrued power, they split. “‘Ah, Suleri, Suleri,’ Bhutto sighed when they met, ‘Now all we have left in common are our initials’” (Suleri 1991, 120).

What it means for Sara Suleri to be her father's daughter is a subject she has addressed in almost all her published writing. “Papa and Pakistan”, one of the nine chapters of *Meatless Days*, describes the career of her father, whom she frequently refers to by his first name, Ziauddin, as a journalist and, briefly, public relations officer for Pakistan's security services, alongside the history of Pakistani nationalism and independence. *Boys Will Be Boys* (Suleri 2003), subtitled *A Daughter's Elegy*, expands on this narrative after her father's death (*Boys Will Be Boys* was the title of the autobiography Z.A. Suleri, or “Pip”, joked he would write, but never did). *The Rhetoric of English India* bears the dedication “for my father”, below which Suleri prints, in Urdu, an encomium to the ideal Muslim man: “He is like the drops of morning dew that calm my heart / But also the storm that could make rivers tremble with fear” (v). *Rhetoric's* descriptions of the language of Pakistani newspapers as sensational yet evasive, “descend[ed]” from “adolescent”, historically amnesiac stories of male adventure like Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, can be read as a sly parody of her journalist father (1992, 111, 178). “Pip” is presented in her memoirs as a “preposterous” figure, both boyish and patrician, anglophile and nationalist, who would contradict in the evening what he had sworn by in the afternoon (Suleri 2003, 11).<sup>4</sup> Daughterhood, for Suleri, is an ambivalent relationship. In *Meatless Days*, she describes herself as a teenager, acting as Pip's amanuensis: “trained [ ... ] to decipher my father's impossible hand”. She sits through long afternoons transcribing his “Men and Matters” articles for typesetting, or searching through his archive of articles

until it “felt as though my fingerprints were wearing out with the impact of all that ink”. This image, her fingerprints disappearing as she sifts her father’s writings, suggests the subsuming of her identity into his, and it is clear she feels a “sympathy” for her father (121–122). Her fascination with language, like her sense of the absurd, is in substantial part his bequest. At the same time, for Suleri, daughterhood also entails a recognition, perhaps sometimes an assertion, of her difference from Ziauddin. Her portraits of her father emphasise not just her sympathy with, but her distance from, their subject.

In contrast to her father’s journalism or “news”, Suleri describes both *Meatless Days* and *Boys Will Be Boys* as comprised of “tale[s]” (1991, 172) or “little tales” (2003, 116). *Meatless Days* consists of a series of such “tales,” each focussing on a relation or a friend of the author. These chapters are themselves constructed from a series of loosely connected vignettes, and this associative structure is developed in *Boys Will Be Boys*, where the chapters have less internal coherence, and throughout the book the vignettes weave back to the figure of her father. As with her father’s “news”, the “tale” is a kind of writing Suleri discusses in *Rhetoric*, positioning her own work – without overt acknowledgement – within the generic map of “English Indian” writing that she herself has drawn. Whereas “news” is associated with patriarchal politics and the fantasies of adolescent boys, the “tale” is associated with what Suleri calls “the feminine picturesque”, exemplified by 19th-century travelogue-cum-autobiographies such as Fanny Parks’s (1850) *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*<sup>5</sup> and Harriet Tytler’s (1986) post-Mutiny memoir, *An Englishwoman in India* (published in part in 1858, and not in full until 1986). By calling these works “feminine”, Suleri is alluding to the idea that much 19th-century women’s life-writing was “discontinuous, digressive, fragmented”: taking the form of diaries, travel-fragments, memories or tales (see Stanton [1987, 11] for a sceptical description of this literary-historical commonplace). The “picturesque”, for Suleri, is a

rhetorical strategy in which large-scale historical phenomena which were difficult to acknowledge or represent – the violence of colonial administration on the colonised, and the psychological and physical toll it took on the administrators – were transposed into an album of euphemistic pictures. Images of “sunlight and scorpions”, of white children in peril, or of the *zenana* (a place of female confinement) provided a set of tropes, Suleri argues, through which deeper anxieties (the threat of disease or revolt, the claustrophobia of English woman in India) became “speakable” or representable, but were at the same time masked or “disguised” (1992, 90). “The digressiveness” of these picturesque stories, Suleri writes, “turn[s] history into a *tale*, reducing its violence into the commiserative idiom of anecdote” (1992, 100; my emphasis).

The digressive and picturesque qualities of her own “tales” and their ability to turn violence into anecdote are consciously drawn attention to by Suleri in both her memoirs. The Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, the 13-day culmination of a ten-month conflict, is remembered by Suleri as “a war I do not wish to dwell upon” (“we were numbed”, she writes, “frozen, listening to the radio play night and day”) (2003, 31). Born in June 1953, Suleri was 18 during that December conflict, and when she does describe it, in *Meatless Days*, she does so by means of an anecdote or picture. Her sister’s husband, she writes, “was off fighting, and we spent the war together with her father-in-law, the brigadier, in the pink house on the hill”:

It was an ideal location for antiaircraft guns, so there was a bevy of soldiers and weaponry installed upon our roof. During each air raid the brigadier would stride purposefully into the garden and bark commands at them, as though the crux of the war rested upon his stiff upper lip. Then Dacca fell, and General Yahya came on television to resign the presidency and concede defeat. “Drunk, by God!” barked the brigadier as we sat watching, “Drunk!” (Suleri 1991, 8–9).

In this passage, the war is reduced to a single scene, the “pink house on the hill”, the “bevy of soldiers and weaponry”, the striding brigadier, the television screen. The real gravity of the scene jars with the narrator’s insistent informality (a “bevy” of soldiers, rather than a troop),<sup>6</sup> and the story of the war is compressed into four paratactic sentences. The act of picturing is made literal in the image of the family watching the television screen: the capitulation of Pakistan emblematised by the image of the drunk, defeated general. The war is remembered – both reconstructed in this scene, but also recalled by the characters after the defeat – euphemistically. The brigadier “bit on his moustache”. ““Yes,’ he barked, ‘these are trying times’”. Yahya’s mistress, who has appeared at the pink house, can only repeat, “it is trying to us all”. “We had entered the era of trying times”, concludes the narrator, ironically participating in the project of suppressing historical narrative with euphemism (9).

The adolescent Suleri was half-shielded from the war, watching events on television. But the adult narrator does not explicitly fill in the historical detail. The adult Suleri “pictures” the war in this scene through the rhetorical strategy of the picturesque referred to earlier, rather than attempting to describe it realistically. This is, as I say, an ironic performance: her “picture” of the war does not in fact deny its violence, and the affect of the inappropriate comedy is unsettling, or even frightening. But it remains hazy to the reader *exactly* what is being gestured towards. It is as if the scale of the violence and depth of political turbulence were too vast and chaotic to be named at the time, and are too painful now to be reconstructed and dwelt on.<sup>7</sup>

Suleri’s reliance on historical “pictures” is most extreme when she turns to a period that predates her birth. She refers to the violence occasioned by partition in 1947 as “slaughter of a kind I do not wish to remember or describe” (2003, 119), and suggests that its architects, people like her father who had envisaged Pakistan through the 1930s, had

been picture-makers of a kind themselves. Muslim League leaders, she writes, spent “the crazy winter of 1946” drawing and re-drawing maps “with something of the maniacal neatness of a Mughal miniaturist” (1991, 74). But what is emphasised is her own propensity to “picture” this period. It is, after all, her eye that sees these men as “Mughal miniaturists”. It is she who sees the map of the partitioned subcontinent as a human figure whose “shrugging motion had been suddenly petrified” (74). Furthermore, she introduces her most flagrant picture of this moment with an admission of her own distance from the scene she is describing. “Born after all of this”, she writes, it was not “the business of my generation” (74), so her account of the moment of partition is framed as an act of speculation, and as a picturesque transposition of a messy reality into a “tidy” picture:

I often wonder at them, those brand-new Pakistanis, being walked into the world as though into a hotel room – or a concept as tidy and as brittle and intact. [ ... ] They arrived [in the hotel room] unkempt, but pleased. It was what they had asked for, after all. (74).

To “wonder at”, here, is to see or to imaginatively picture. In *Boys Will Be Boys*, she concludes, “I was never born a colonized person and do not really know the elation that [Pip] felt when he hoisted up the Pakistani flag” (120).

Criticism of Suleri’s memoirs has tended to say that their structure (episodic chapters each focussing on a relation or friend of the author) takes emphasis away from the presentation of a singular subjectivity or perspective. Oliver Lovesey (1997), for example, says that “*Meatless Days* constructs postcolonial subjectivity almost exclusively by talking about other people; Suleri is not her tale’s protagonist” (43). Shazia Rahman (2004) concurs: “the very structure of her autobiography”, she writes, lead us to understand that “Suleri’s life story cannot be read except in relation to the stories of others



in her life. [ ... ] We are led to believe that others define her" (349). Bart Moore-Gilbert (2009) has argued of *Meatless Days* that "in contrast to traditional autobiography, it does not 'foreground' the progressive development of a privileged self. [ ... ] Instead, narrative attention is 'evenly distributed' between Suleri herself, family members, and the seemingly inexorable degeneration of the new nation" (103). For this reason, Moore-Gilbert reads Suleri's pictorial language as a metaphor for her own descriptive precision: "Time and again, in a few beautifully exact brush-strokes, Suleri constructs dramatic scenes in which not only event but character is anatomised with sometimes cruel sharpness and insight" (102). However, a closer analysis of the pictorial language and visual metaphors in her memoirs, prompted by a reading of her critical work on the "picturesque", brings different characteristics to light. Writing what she calls a "daughter's elegy" of her father's life – in "Papa and Pakistan" and *Boys Will Be Boys* – Suleri draws attention to the distance of the writer from her subject. Sara's digressive "tales", contrasting with Ziauddin's "news", draw attention to the close-yet-constrained access she had to the world of the military and high politics, as a young woman in a middle-class family in the patriarchal Pakistan of the 1970s. They also draw attention to the temporal distance between her parents' generation and her own. "Picturing" the past, Suleri is not just making sly reference to the position from which she viewed it at the time, but also acknowledging that, as a child of the 1950s, she was born into a country shaped by world-historical tremors (partition, the war of 1965, the war of 1971) that she can only partially remember as a teenager, or as a child, if she can remember them, first hand, at all.

In the penultimate chapter of *The Rhetoric of English India*, Suleri turns to the Indian-Trinidadian V.S. Naipaul, an inheritor of this English-Indian rhetorical tradition, yet one who wrote during and after the years of decolonisation. What interested Suleri about Naipaul was how he would return to or participate in colonial narrative genres or

representational schemas in “self-conscious” or “guilty” ways (1992, 150, 157). These generic performances drew attention to the styles of writing and seeing he had inherited from his colonial education in Trinidad, and to his sense of his own approaching obsolescence. Naipaul, for Suleri, belonged to a “postcolonial” moment in which the imprint of colonial ideas was still sharp, though growing fainter or less clearly visible as time passed after decolonisation (149). In *Meatless Days* and *Boys Will Be Boys* Suleri pursues a similar rhetorical strategy, returning to a generic vocabulary whose colonial inheritance she is herself, in the same period, mapping and archiving. She is not just talking about her inheritance and her position in a patriarchal, postcolonial household, but also instantiating or performing the influence of these contexts on her style of writing and expression, self-consciously exaggerating this influence for effect. As rhetorical tropes, her digressive tales might be read as instances of paralipsis, drawing attention to a subject by claiming to skirt it, and emphasising the gravity of a situation by pretending to make light of it (the 1971 war and its aftermath, for example, become “the era of trying times”). Through this trope, Suleri also articulates her own relation to these subjects or situations, and her sense of herself as a child of this historical moment: shaped by it, but also at a distance from it.

Fittingly for a collection of tales, the nine chapters of *Meatless Days* have been published in a variety of contexts and combinations over time, with different titles appended to each text. “Excellent Things in Women”, the first chapter of the eventual book, was first published in *Raritan* in 1987, winning a Pushcart Prize (and republication in the Pushcart anthology) the same year. The full book, *Meatless Days: A Memoir*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1989, and then the first two chapters were re-published in an e-pamphlet by Chicago in 2013, now with an extended subtitle:

*Excellent Things in Women: A Memoir of Postcolonial Pakistan*. In what sense might it be

helpful to read *Meatless Days* as “a memoir of postcolonial Pakistan”? How would it invite the reader to understand these key words “memoir” and “postcolonial”? To read these tales, along with those in *Boys Will Be Boys*, as forming a “memoir of postcolonial Pakistan” would be to see “postcolonial” experience as both the property of a particular generation, and of a particular narratorial perspective, looking back on a colonial and nationalist inheritance that is both diffuse in its legacies but not wholly visible in its historical details. It evinces a style of retrospect, of memoir writing, that is self-conscious about its position in relation to this past, inventive in the formal games that this perspective promotes, and flagrant in its habits of extrapolation and invention. This both emerges from and feeds back into the literary scholarship Suleri was producing in the same period: the map of English-Indian rhetoric she was drawing, and the “idiom of postcolonialism” she would describe in *The Rhetoric of English India* (1992, 21).

### **Criticism as elegy**

In her memoirs, Suleri foregrounds the act of creative picture-making and imaginative invention.. Similar acts of invention are foregrounded in her criticism. Indeed, across her three single-author books, criticism and memoir are seen as continuous enterprises: both involve interpreting, remembering, and hence inventing, at least to some extent, the lives of other people.

Towards the beginning of *Rhetoric*, Suleri discusses a speech by Edmund Burke on Charles James Fox’s 1783 East India Bill, which Burke himself had drafted. The fruit of Burke’s years of research into the so-called Indian Question, the bill attempted to circumscribe the powers of the East India Company to act as an administrator-state, whilst at the same time forbidding the formal state administration of India by the British. (Burke

proposed that British activities in India be governed by independent commissioners in London; the bill was defeated in the House of Lords.) What draws Suleri's attention is the language of "difficulty" or tentativeness with which Burke describes his "very remote" subject, the Indian subcontinent (Suleri 1992, 26). Whereas before the 1780s, Suleri argues, "India" had functioned in the popular imagination as an "exotic" space, "excessively available to traversal and description", "most inviting to European to European wills to plunder", the creeping spread of British power in India posed the question of how this space, hitherto "beyond the scope of cartography" might successfully be administered or mapped (1992, 26). Burke's bill, on Suleri's reading, expressed hesitation, or even terror, in the face of this prospect. "All this vast mass", he said to MPs in the Commons, "composed of so many orders and classes of men, is again infinitely diversified by manners, by religion, by hereditary employment, through all their possible combinations", a diversity which rendered the complacent idea that the area might be administered as one administers "the tenants of a manor" evidently false (quoted in Suleri 1992, 27). Through Burke's speech, Suleri traces a dawning awareness of "the central representational unavailability of Indian cultures and histories, even its sheer geography, to the colonizing eye": the speech expresses less the "moral zeal" for which Burke became famous than his "insistence on the difficulty of representing India at all in the English language" (26–27). This half-concealed doubt about the utility of British modes of inquiry and scholarship, and genres of narrative description, when attempting to comprehend the "sheer geography" of the Indian subcontinent, will be a motivating theme in the history of experiments in genre and style, sublimation and transposition, that Suleri presents through her book as characteristic of "the rhetoric of English India". Seeing similarities between Burke's horrified "catalogs" of the dizzying diversity of Indian peoples and Burke's

aesthetic theory, Suleri describes Burke's writings on India as constructing an "Indian sublime" (24).

Though her claims about Burke are supported by extensive, sometimes gleefully apposite quotation (glee, pleasure and rapture are often present in her criticism), Suleri's writings on Burke also acknowledge the quiddity of her own readings. Burke, in his *Philosophical Enquiry* has written, "I do not now recall any thing beautiful that is not smooth," which Suleri reads as "a charming if inadvertent confession of his forgetfulness of the conifer, a tree surely more prone to beauty than sublimity, particularly in its Himalayan setting" (42). As the chapter develops, Burke's response both to "beautiful" and "sublime" objects are subsumed, under Suleri's gaze, into a larger "dilemma of spectatorship", "in which to observe and list is furthermore to lose" (43). This is an idea that echoes throughout Suleri's criticism and memoirs. Suleri's extensive attention to the passage in the *Philosophical Enquiry* in which Burke attempts to describe the beauty of the dove ("the head increasing insensibly to the middle"; "the neck los[ing] itself in a larger swell") is a characteristic moment in her writing in which an apparent detour gives a glimpse of her underlying subject. "The ebb and swell of this catalog", she writes:

lends such a flux to the condition of beauty that a reader is left somewhat apprehensive about what its ultimate shape may be, for Burke's bird seems perversely drawn to take more directions than even the most appreciative eye could tolerate. More vortex than bird, its various parts struggle against coherence into a nameable object, until the point of stress in this passage becomes less the indescribability of beauty than beauty's will to disembodiment. (42)

The body of the dove becomes a "vortex", an emptiness which transfixes the reader, swallowing her attention. The object of critical description is lost under the pressure of the

observation and investment. All that remains from this encounter is the proliferating catalogue, a collateral form, the textual residue of spectatorship. It survives but also subsumes its subject. Glossing, and perhaps embellishing Burke's words, there is a question about the extent to which his text is written over by Suleri's own.

Suleri's ideas are shaped by their historical moment, not just in Pakistani history, but also in the history of American scholarship. The book was written and researched during the high noon of deconstruction-inspired criticism. Suleri arrived at Yale in 1983, the year of the premature death of Paul de Man, and the year before the publication of his last book *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. The title of that book is echoed in the title of *The Rhetoric of English India*, which was written and published in the decade that followed. Suleri is not often thought of as a member of the Yale School of deconstructionist critics inspired by Paul de Man, but her participation in what she calls the "Yale Chorus" is a notable, though brief, subplot in *Boys Will Be Boys* (2003, 46). Harold Bloom is introduced as "my admired friend" (72), whilst Geoffrey and Renee Hartman accompany Suleri on a trip to a conference in Tunis, at which "Geoffrey is particularly good at giving sagacious nods during a lecture he would be hard-pressed to paraphrase" (72). In "Autobiography as De/acement", one of the best-known essays from *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, de Man (1984) had compared the act of memorialising with the rhetorical trope "prosopopoeia": "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity". We think we are writing *about* our past selves, or our absent friends (De Man said), whereas in fact we are writing *to* them. Or rather at them, or over them: we address them, but they cannot speak back. In this pose, de Man continues, we both "deface" our subject – conferring a mask that is our invention and not their own – but also arrest ourselves, entering into a death-like dialogue with someone who is unable to respond (75–76, 78).<sup>8</sup>

Suleri echoes de Man's idea of the memoir as a form of prosopopoeia when she reflects at the end of *Meatless Days* on the nature of her "tales":

I wrote about my grandmother once and, having written such a tale, thought to use it as a surrogate for the letters that I owed to intimates, those who – in the manner of old friends – had fallen by the wayside into mere remembrance. Such people are a danger to your life, becoming as they do indistinguishable from invention, friends that you idly muse you wished you have – until your brain gets up and chides, 'This one, you had'. (1991, 172)

Alongside her grandmother (in "Excellent Things in Women") and her father, the "tales" in *Meatless Days* constitute letters to a range of Suleri's friends and relations, some distant (her brother Shahid or her friend "Mustakori") and others (her sister Ifat, her mother Mair) dead. Like de Man, she worries that in the process of addressing them, the addressees become "indistinguishable from invention" to her and her readers. Also like de Man, she sees this commerce with an invented addressee as perilously solipsistic, "a danger to your life". The counterargument – the voice in the brain "chid[ing], 'This one you had'" – is ambiguous. Is it contesting the pessimism of the foregoing paragraph: the woman you worry that you have invented was real after all? Or is the stress different, *this* one you had: the written version, the invention, was yours at least, if nothing else was. The ambiguity is important, refusing the trite extremes of either scepticism or naivety, but also presenting a mind torn between pessimism and consolation, and unsure about the accuracy, or otherwise, of her projections.

One of Suleri's most poignant readings, really a translation and a reading, is found not in *Rhetoric* but in *Boys Will Be Boys*. She quotes the 19th-century Delhi poet Mōmin Khan Mōmin's lines:

*Tum meray paas hotay ho goya,*

*Jab koi doosra nahin hota.*<sup>9</sup>

“You are with me, as it were, / When no other can be there”, Suleri renders it. “But who can provide me with a better translation of *goyah*?” (“so to speak”) she asks.<sup>10</sup> What fascinates Suleri about the verse is how it:

conjures up a commonplace of love, of amorous discourse, but unsettles it by translating proximity into metaphor. “Next to you, as it were; you close to me, so to speak; that no other can be acknowledged.” All others are obliterated, except you who are also other (69).

Mōmin’s lines disturb Suleri because they reveal metaphors of proximity which had come to seem literal – to be with someone, to be near them – as fragile conceits or necessary fictions. Their meaning ramifies through her translation and commentary, and through the centrality of this new text in the life narrative of a woman for whom distance from intimate friends has been the norm, and family deaths a recurring motif. The fiction of their proximity – as if they were close enough to be seen, touched, or called out to – may be the first way in which we find Suleri inventing her subjects. Slipping into the second-person, the narrator calls out often to her departed father. “You will be back more times than you know” (121).

### **Picturing Sara Suleri**

The future novelist Kamila Shamsie was sixteen, living in Karachi, when *Meatless Days* was published in 1989. “In all the years since,” she writes in her introduction to the 2018 “Penguin Women Writers” reissue of the book, “I’ve struggled to find ways to adequately express its singular brilliance” (x). Sara Suleri Goodyear, who married in 1993 and took



her husband's name, continues to publish, though she has retired from her Yale professorship. But Shamsie's account of the memoir – a book she read as a teenager, and which continued to “echo” through her future reading and writing – insists on a generational gap, like that which separated Pip and Sara, separating Suleri (and *Meatless Days*) from herself. Thirty years have passed since the publication of *Meatless Days*, almost thirty years since the publication of *Rhetoric*, and the social and intellectual world from which they emerged has now itself become the subject of historical remembrance.

Both *Meatless Days* and *Boys Will Be Boys* describe a vibrant culture of Pakistani intellectuals, largely middle class and cosmopolitan like Suleri herself, moving between Pakistan, the USA and London. Alongside Suleri we meet Eqbal Ahmed, a friend of Pip's and an important influence on Edward W. Said (2003, 90-91). Ayesha Jalal, “my distinguished historian friend”, born in Lahore and educated at Wellesley and Cambridge, is glimpsed chiding a reactionary speaker at a conference on “Pakistan and Sustainable Development”, whilst a “Mr. Kureishi Senior”, father of Hanif, finds himself sitting next to Suleri during a lecture by Hanif at Yale, whispering the question “Was I related to Z.A. Suleri, the editor?” (2003, 90, 57).

These encounters between children of the South Asian bourgeoisie and the elite institutions of Anglo-American scholarship were formative in the development of postcolonial theory in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>11</sup> *The Rhetoric of English India* participated in a new wave of scholarship in the humanities, alongside Homi Bhabha's (1984) *The Location of Culture*, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essays from the period (gathered in *In Other Worlds* [1987] and *Outside in the Teaching Machine* [1993]), produced by scholars with similar academic trajectories. Like Suleri, educated at Kinnaird College and Punjab University in Lahore and then at Indiana University in the US, Bhabha went from the University of Mumbai to Oxford, and Spivak from the University of Calcutta to

Cornell. These scholars sought to break down the division (established, as they saw it, by earlier anti-colonial scholarship) which sharply separated the writings of coloniser from colonised. Instead, they wanted to show how colonial administration, education and infrastructure had shaped even the way that anti-colonial dissent could be articulated. Within literary studies specifically, this involved moving beyond the analysis of how colonial events and subjects were represented, towards an analysis of how, and under what circumstances, representation happened in colonial and postcolonial contexts (see Bhabha [1984]) for a foundational instance of this scholarship).

*Rhetoric* shared both the ambitions described above. It described a rhetorical tradition running from Burke to Rushdie, in which the colonial encounter had shaped the writing of both “English” writers and their “Indian” interlocutors. Indeed, it insisted that these categories were themselves a shorthand which masked further histories of colonial movement and mixing (Burke was Anglo-Irish, Rushdie a Kashmiri Muslim from Mumbai, Naipaul a Bhojpuri Brahmin from Trinidad). It was also a deeply formalist work, showing how the deployment and development of prose forms both responded to the overt political pressures of the era and registered the psychological tensions that colonial life occasioned. More uniquely, *Rhetoric* was self-conscious about its own participation in the tradition it described. “The readings that follow”, Suleri writes, “are as much a part of the rhetoric of English India as are the texts upon which my reading focusses” (*Rhetoric*, p.21). In this light, these “readings” themselves – like Burke’s digressive descriptions – constitute collateral forms which both re-write and re-imagine their originals. These chapters on Burke, Kipling, and Naipaul, are themselves pictures, acts of remembrance and projection, which continue a rhetorical tradition and, in the process, explore what it means to inherit a language, an expressive repertoire, and a literature.

There is a revealing moment in *Rhetoric*'s introductory chapter in which Suleri uses two phrases, "the idiom of postcolonialism" and "the rhetoric of English India" as if the former were a sub-category of the latter (21). Here, she calls "postcolonialism" a "reactive" "idiom", shaped by and "implicated" in the colonial history and rhetorical tradition to which it is both inheritor and respondent (21). The slippage between "the idiom of postcolonialism" and "the rhetoric of English India" anticipates many criticisms that postcolonial theory has faced. It has been said that, though it promises to theorise the effects of colonialism very broadly, the evidence base on which postcolonial theory draws is predominantly South Asian, tends to focus on Anglophone texts, and privileges the encounter between a British administrative class and a South Asian bourgeoisie. For Marxists, as we have seen, it is too engrossed in theories of literary evolution, and not concerned enough with material change. I suggest, however, that we read this slippage from "the idiom of postcolonialism" to "the rhetoric of English India", not as an error, but as a qualification, demarking the scope of the geographical, social, and historical reach of postcolonial analysis as Suleri presents it. The "idiom" or "rhetoric" Suleri describes is specific to a place, language, and – allowing for internal diversity – class of highly literate intellectuals. The stance it adopts is critical of the material violence of the colonial encounter (a point she underlines in a 1992 essay, "Women Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition"), but its stated aims are limited to providing a better understanding of the effects of this encounter on writing and texts.

Modern critiques of postcolonial theory, such as those of Lazarus, focus on its contemporary use-value, both as a model of literary scholarship, and as critical lens for analysing extra-literary phenomena. Lazarus's title, "What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say", is phrased in the present tense. It is right, in this context, to draw attention to the limitations of much postcolonial theory from the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, reading Suleri

only ratifies the critiques of postcolonialism made by Lazarus, and – behind him – figures like Benita Parry, Aijaz Ahmed and Timothy Brennan. Suleri's work is bourgeois. It is basically concerned with the history of rhetoric, and only secondarily with material inequality. It subtly parodies the rhetoric of the colonial past, rather than bluntly critiquing it. In addition, its dense, allusive style is shaped by the institution – Yale – in which it was written.

But we should also think about her work as an historical body of writing. This writing was not detached from the history of decolonisation, nor from literary creation. Suleri's acts of "picturing" – both the stories she tells about Pakistan and the stories she tells about literature and language – are social performances, taking place in concrete historical settings. Her theories of literature, voiced both in her memoirs and her criticism, were themselves verbal experiments, responses to her migrations and to her moment. Postcolonial scholarship formed part of a literary ecosystem which produced such works as *Meatless Days*.<sup>12</sup> This account of Suleri should prompt a wider revision. The corpus of postcolonial theory of which her work formed a central part should not only be assessed as a limited, faddish or superannuated picture of literary language or literary history. It should be read and remembered as a rhetorical performance emerging from its intellectual-historical moment: a register of a history of migration and intellectual encounter, and a scholarly manifesto about influence and the imagination that was shaped and circumscribed by this context.

The story Suleri tells in *Rhetoric* is an historical one, running from Burke's 1783 orations to Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*. Her readings are grounded in her understanding of texts as written performances in time, formed under the pressure of historical circumstance. Her own writings, *Meatless Days*, *Rhetoric*, and *Boys Will Be Boys*, can themselves be seen in this light. This would show them to be a register of, and a

reflection on, the creative encounter between the Anglo-American academy and a middle-class South Asian diaspora dispersed by the chaos of subcontinental history, on the losses wrought by that history, and the intellectual fruits of the new communities that were formed. The theories of literature that emerged from this encounter informed the creation of a body of life writing whose character is specified, not obscured, by the name “postcolonial”, whilst these life narratives reveal the biographical contexts of a innovative and influential critical oeuvre.

### Notes on contributor

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<sup>1</sup> Criticism on Suleri tends to discuss *Meatless Days* alone. Lovesey (1997) discusses Suleri's work as a model for “postcolonial self-fashioning” whilst Ray (1993), in a less admiring portrait, draws attention to how Suleri's elite background shapes her vision of Pakistani womanhood.

<sup>2</sup> The editors' introduction in Bernard et. al (2015) gives a lucid history of the rise and decline of postcolonial theory, and of responses to Lazarus's work after 2011 (1–10).

<sup>3</sup> M.A. Jinnah, the so-called “father of the nation”, was a key advocate for the creation of Pakistan, and the country's first Governor General. The Suleris arrived in Pakistan following Partition in 1947. As a *mohajir* (an immigrant from India) Z.A. Suleri was vulnerable as well as prominent. Feudal power lay with landowning families, like the Bhuttos.

<sup>4</sup> Suleri (1992) reads in Kipling a sense of the “novelty” of “imperial time”, which for Kipling “demand[ed] to be read less as a recognizable chronology of historic events than as a contiguous chain of surprise effects” (113). Both Kim and her father are boyish or “adolescen[t]” in their attraction to these spontaneous, historically deficient narratives. Suleri draws attention to the relation between “novelty” and “the news” in her discussion of Salman Rushdie's collusion with an “imperial scheme of journalism” in *Shame* (113). (176–178; see also 112–117).

<sup>5</sup> The surname is sometimes spelt, and catalogued, “Parkes”. Suleri spells it without the “e”.

<sup>6</sup> The *OED* describes “bevy” as “the proper term for a company of maidens or ladies, of roes, of quails, or of larks”.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon (1994) notes that, for irony to “happen”, the reader must find meaning in what is not said. “The ‘ironic’ meaning,” however, “is not [ ... ] simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid is not always a simple inversion or opposite of the said: it is always different – *other than* and more than the said” (12–13). Furthermore, “there is an affective ‘charge’ to irony that cannot be ignored and that cannot be separated from its politics of use” (15).

<sup>8</sup> “Autobiography as De/acement”, which principally draws on Wordsworth’s *Essays on Epitaphs*, was first published in *Modern Language Notes* in 1979. Though de Man himself would have been gravely ill by the time Suleri arrived at Yale, Suleri’s work was shaped by working among colleagues, like Hartman, profoundly influenced by de Man’s ideas. It is also highly likely that Suleri, whose PhD focussed in large part on Wordsworth, knew the essay well.

<sup>9</sup> I quote the transliteration given by Suleri and Raza (2017, xv). In *Boys Will Be Boys* the *sher* in its entirety is quoted only in Urdu script.

<sup>10</sup> Suleri’s transliteration of the single word *goyah* includes a terminal “h” in *Boys Will Be Boys*.

<sup>11</sup> Young (2001) discusses the historical origins of anglophone postcolonial theory and the centrality of South Asian migrant scholars in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (61–63). In her essay on Sara Suleri, Sangeeta Ray (1993) describes “the reification of India as *the* postcolonial site” and its “unique status in postcolonial theoretical debates in American institutions of higher learning” (38; my emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> A comparison might be drawn here with the work of, say, Amitav Ghosh, whose historically self-conscious fictions emerge from a literary and theoretical ecosystem informed by Subaltern Studies historiography.

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