*The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* (2024), 1–7;
doi:10.1017/pli.2023.38

BOOK FORUM

# *In Other Theories: Colonial Reason, Language, And Literature in Ankhi Mukherjee's* Unseen City

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## Abstract

The colonial reason at the heart of psychoanalysis is increasingly acknowledged, but literature scholars still work with it as an instrument for decolonizing. This essay examines thepossibilities of postcolonial literature itself as a source of epistemological intervention into psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** epistemology; colonialism; psychoanalytic theory; postcolonial literature; psychosocial; racism

The question of just how much to compromise with the imperial logic of psychoanalysis is a difficult one for a critic of coloniality to decide. From the early colonized and anticolonial psychoanalysts, like Bose and Fanon, who boldly reshaped psychoanalysis in the image of the colonized, to more recent interventions by critical psychology and psychosocial studies scholars, the question of how to bend psychoanalysis to do something that speaks to the needs of the racialized, colonized, and marginalized has remained unsettled. Ankhi Mukherjee's *Unseen City* comes to that question with the desire to see what psychoanalysis can do for the urban poor, those people suspended between the categories of human and animal because of the ways we do and do not make space for them in the social, political, and cultural life of the city. Her project is a notably deconstructive one, which aims to find something that can be made useful to the Other in the history and practices of psychoanalysis.

As Mukherjee reminds us, material traces of a ghost psychoanalysis are there to be found in the tradition of the free clinic, which Freud advocated for as early as 1918. In keeping with the spirit of social uplift prevalent in the early twentieth-century, Freud argued that a man [*sic*] should have just as much right

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to mental health care as physical health care. This led to a short period in which Freud's followers across Europe opened twelve cooperative clinics to provide psychoanalysis to the urban poor for free. Mukherjee's project follows in their footsteps, examining contemporary experiments in free clinics for refugees in London, slum-dwellers in Mumbai, and homeless people in New York. Even if the idea of the free clinics is found in Freud's work, however, his aim and that of his followers is still squarely on reaching and curing the individual. The conceptual traces of the genuinely social and global psychoanalysis Mukherjee theorizes, one that speaks to the urban poor, have to be picked up from elsewhere because Freud's understanding of the social is saturated in late-nineteenth-century logics that see the individual as a superior, psychological formation in comparison with the social being (the primitive who is member of a tribe or a swarm). Rethinking the relationship between the individual and the social is where anticolonial and postcolonial psychoanalysis has made some of its most important interventions into the Freudian tradition, notably in the work of Fanon, but also in Bose and Nandy. In this anticolonial psychoanalytic tradition, there is a substantive effort to understand the subject as socially constituted that forcefully contradicts the Freudian impulse to see the individual as under threat from collectives. Accordingly, when Fanon coins the idea of sociogeny in *Black Skin, White Masks*, it is to insist that any meaningful psychoanalysis of the colonized subject must begin by seeing them in the fullness of their social relations. Mukherjee demonstrates that the body of anticolonial psychoanalysis should take its place in the mainstream tradition, not as something that is of interest only to those who study the historical and colonial contexts of psychoanalysis but as a crucial intellectual resource for a fully twenty-first-century psychoanalysis that can speak to the marginalized subject.

Although Mukherjee draws substantively on the anticolonial tradition of psychoanalysis, her deconstructive orientation maintains a definite connection to established psychoanalytic theory and practice. Psychoanalysis is still imagined as having the conceptual and linguistic resources to do something that its own history of colonial, and colonizing, practice has not been able to extinguish. And yet, what we think it is possible to do with that colonial history is the heart of the matter, and, crucially, this seems to depend on our willingness to see value in, learn, and use the language of psychoanalysis first, *before* we bend it toward the colonized or racialized subject. The anticolonial tradition found in theory by Fanon, Bose, and Nandy is possible because each of them was thoroughly disciplined in the language of psychoanalysis; Fanon and Bose as practicing clinicians and theorists, and Nandy as a social psychologist by training. In thinking through the matter of language, I want to turn for a moment to a recent critique by Paul Preciado, not only because he, too, has learned the language of psychoanalysis, but because his critique comes from one who has formally been an analysand, not just an analyst of the Other, as anticolonial and postcolonial psychoanalytic critics overwhelmingly are.

Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?* makes a strong case that there is nothing left to retrieve in a psychoanalytic epistemology that remains faithful to colonial reason.[1] His 2019 lecture to the contemporary core of Lacanian psychoanalysis was met with a powerful reaction, in which the audience of psychoanalysts booed him off the stage before he could complete his lecture. The dramatic nature of the response itself is indicative because, for anyone familiar with the critical histories of psychoanalysis and colonial psychiatry, there ought not to be anything especially new or controversial about simply stating the psy disciplines are implicated in the colonial and racial order of things. Preciado notes that in order to launch his polemic, it was, for many years, necessary to learn the language of psychoanalysis carefully himself,[2] not only as an academic but as the subject of his own analysis. As he emphasizes, learning psychoanalytic language meant not simply adapting a language not made for him, but actively deforming his body because "instead of changing the epistemology, they [psychoanalysts] decide to modify the body, to normalize sexualities, to rectify identifications."[3] In this case psychoanalytic language continues to make bodies and subjects in its own image because the language of the analysand cannot speak back to the epistemology of psychoanalysis. In *Radical Psychoanalysis and Anti-Capitalist Action*,[4] Ian Parker makes a passing observation that, in fact, it is not the "analyst," but the analysand who does the analysis. Whereas, commonsensically, we might assume it is the psychoanalyst who possesses the language to guide the analysis, Parker, in keeping with a radical orientation, says that it is the analysand who is doing the work of understanding their own condition. But what happens to this knowledge? How is it captured, and in what ways is it allowed to alter the epistemology of psychoanalysis?

Preciado's conclusion is that the psychoanalytic tradition we have now is a fundamentally compromised project because of the subjects it is still creating, echoing Spivak's trenchant observation that "No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self."[5] In fact, Preciado inadvertently underlines this problem himself, in his text, when he too recolonizes the actually racialized or colonized subaltern to make his point. Having noted that colonial reason and the logic of gender difference go hand in hand, he nevertheless describes himself as "Africa," in the sense that psychoanalysis has taken imperial possession of his (white) body. This flicker of the colonial imaginary at the heart of psychoanalysis, even in the hands of an avowedly decolonizing psychoanalyst, should give us pause precisely because colonialism returns, in the psychoanalytic *language*, as an always available metaphor or analogy but seldom as the bare, lived experience of the colonized.

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[1] Paul B. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Fitzcarraldo Edititons, 2020), 15.

[2] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 19.

[3] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 57.

[4] Ian Parker, *Radical Psychoanalysis and Anti-Capitalist Action* (Australia: Resistance Books, 2022).

[5] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 243–61, at 253.

The slip indicates the difficulty of doing otherwise with psychoanalytic language. In addition to incorporating the anticolonial and postcolonial traditions of psychoanalysis, Mukherjee's work acknowledges valuable critiques of psychoanalysis as represented, for example, in the work of scholars like Nikolas Rose. However, here too she is inclined to retrieve something for psychoanalysis, citing Rose's view that, even if he does *not* find psychoanalysis "good to think with," he gives qualified assent to Marxism and psychoanalysis for their "refusal to celebrate the sovereignty of the autonomous and self-identified subject of self-realization and their suspicion of the 'humanist' values that come along with this sovereignty.'"[6] But what does psychoanalysis's supposed suspicion of the autonomous, self-realizing subject mean when the language of the colonial, working class, or trans analysand leaves so few traces on the epistemology of psychoanalysis?

The question that persists, then, is how we can grasp the psychoanalytic language in such a way that it could be used against its own institutional practice, a practice that certainly does continue to construct and reproduce the "autonomous and self-identified subject of self-realization." What I mean by language here is not simply the specialist, technical language that psychoanalysts use to speak to one another about analysands, but also language of analysis that analysands must adopt in order to carry out the task of analysis. Mukherjee deals with the question of how the analysands and analysts wrestle with the problem of psychoanalytic language in various ways and its function in the analytic relationship shifts across each setting. In the case of the first group she discusses, a Turkish migrant group in London, they find that sharing a common spoken language for analysis is sometimes a hindrance and sometimes an important ground of understanding. In the case of the Mumbai groups, the question is not so much shared spoken language, which the analysts and analysands often have, but psychoanalytic language. The Indian free clinics are formed around an idea of lay health practice, which deliberately eschews the language of psychoanalysis and psychology, and attends directly to the practical questions that are faced by the urban poor clients. The lay counselors intervene, for example, in family relationships and living situations rather than pursuing analytic conversations with the clients. In the Indian free clinics, it even appears the psychoanalytic language is not actually very effective, so even though the impulse to offer individual analysis to the poor sets important institutional actions in motion, the analysis *as* analysis does not provide resolution to their mental health issues. In New York, the question of language is heavily overlaid by pharmacology, and we see that it may be not so much a question of finding or adopting common language as it is intervening in the carceral logics of psychiatry that constrain the lives of the urban poor.

These various instances of how the "talking cure" is heavily modified to meet the needs of the urban poor inevitably raises the question, to what degree are we actually dealing with psychoanalysis? Are these, rather, contexts in which the social collective cures itself through the relations it builds and uses to understand its conditions without much recourse to psychoanalytic language? In each free clinic experiment, what is specifically psychoanalytical in each of the free clinic experiments is unclear. This Mukherjee also acknowledges, but generally speaking, does not resolve. Insofar as the contemporary free clinics provide mental health care to people without recourse to the mental health care afforded to those with secure jobs, incomes, and housing, they are remarkable. But, following Freire, it appears as though the urban poor, like all analysands understood in radical traditions, accomplish the cure themselves through their own forms of relationships and inquiry.

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[6] Niklas Rose, *Governing the Soul: Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Free Association Books, 1999), quoted in Ankhi Mukherjee, *Unseen City: Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 71.

If it were only a matter of finding a cure, there would be no need to comment further because the fact that the free clinics work is reason enough to build them. But from the perspective of decolonizing the psy disciplines, as I suggested previously, the question of where and how the analysand's language can be made to speak back to the epistemology persists and it needs an answer. Mukherjee's discussions of each experiment in the free clinics are framed by readings of relevant contemporary literature and the priority she gives to the literary, not simply as a representation of reality but an intervention in the world points to a whole other set of possibilities. Mukherjee's conviction that postcolonial literature and film, like the anticolonial tradition of psychoanalysis, has something to offer the psy disciplines is elegantly demonstrated in her acute readings. The chapters that discuss the Indian free clinics, for example, are framed by a discussion of Boyle and Tandan's *Slumdog Millionaire* and the docu-novels *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* by Katherine Boo and *Beautiful Thing* by Sonia Faleiro. Both novels, as Mukherjee shows, critique and reshape the register that the blockbuster film uses to establish the relationship between the urban poor and those who would seek to represent them. Placed beside the work of the clinics, and read in this way, the novels allow us to see the whole human being in their full set of social relation, which is particularly important to Mukherjee's retrieval of a socially informed and responsive psychoanalysis.

But could we not take this further? One of the most compelling aspects of the Deleuzian critique of psychoanalysis is how it turns toward the literatures of the minor people for other epistemologies of mental health and illness. In *Unseen City* literature is offered as a means of seeing how social relations are patterned and might be repatterned, but it does not read that literature as a psychosocial diagnosis of those colonial and postcolonial relations. In this way, even as it readily acknowledges the colonial overtones and undertones of psychoanalytic thought, it stops short of thinking differently about what mental illness might itself be in the postcolony or how the knowledge assembled through literary forms might be unraveling the colonial reason at the heart of psychoanalysis. There is, as Mukherjee's use of literature indicates, a wealth of thought in postcolonial literature about mental illness. Many of the issues she draws attention to in contemporary settings have been present from the first colonial encounters, such as the madness of both Brontë's and Rhys's Bertha Mason through to Doris Lessing's Mary Turner, Tayeb Salih's unnamed narrator, and most recently Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nyasha and Tambudzai. This literary tradition would seem to be one of the few remaining places where anticolonial and postcolonial subjects can speak back to the epistemology in a language they choose and craft themselves that does not have to work with or through the psychoanalytic.

In describing postcolonial literature in these terms, I do not mean to suggest that it could be considered a straightforward epistemological escape route from the psychoanalytic tradition in which Mukherjee finds useful traces. Rather, I want to mark how close Mukherjee's work comes to setting the latent confrontation between psychoanalysis and literature alive. Since its emergence, psychoanalysis has had a close relationship to literary interpretation because of Freud's professional and personal interest in reading the Western literary tradition as a location of deep, diagnostic insights into mental health. But if we consider how psychoanalysis's selective use of Western literature has been used to build its colonial reason, we can see why reading postcolonial literatures as other kinds of theory about mental health and illness might be so important to decolonizing the psy disciplines.

To take one example of what I mean, psychoanalytic readings of *Hamlet*, beginning from Freud himself, have found the eponymous hero to be an archetypal figure of human complexity and fragility; his depression, guilt, and inhibition are all examples of the finest, noblest mind struggling with life itself. Such readings are not detachable from the idea that mental illness itself, the "really interesting kind" that lends itself to literary representation and interpretation, is a property of white or Euro-American human beings. As McCulloch discusses in *Colonial Psychiatry and the African Mind*,[7] the fact that certain kinds of Africans did not exhibit the qualities that came to seem essential for a diagnosis of depression by those educated in reading *Hamlet* meant that Africans were frequently not even understood to suffer from depression. In response, colonized and postcolonial writers have created their own analytic languages, their own nosologies of mental illness, in which their psychosocial diagnoses of racism and colonialism have generated a thousand tiny theories of the subject. Rather than reading their writing as supplements to the psy disciplines, however unsettling, it might be time to follow their theories through to the other side of psychoanalysis.

*Unseen City* invites us to pay much closer and more serious attention to the mental health of the urban poor, which is a remarkable achievement for a book so thoroughly grounded in poststructural traditions of literary and cultural critique. Mukherjee brings the knowledge found in anticolonial psychoanalysis and postcolonial literature right up beside the authoritative tradition of psychoanalysis, and in doing so she provokes us to do the work of decolonizing the psy disciplines still further. At the same time, it leaves me wondering why we continue to play fair with the colonial epistemology of psychoanalysis itself, even as we work to break the disciplinary boundaries that keep colonial knowledges in their place. More importantly, how can we learn to listen to those other theories, dreamed up in languages of their own, making up other minds.

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[7] Jock McCulloch, *Colonial Psychiatry and The African Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

**Author biography.** Mrinalini Greedharry is Associate Professor at Laurentian University. Her research examines how postcolonial studies generate new theories of subject formation. She is the author of *Postcolonial Theory and Psychoanalysis* (2008) and chapters in *Interpreting the Body* (2023), *Racial Dimensions of Life Writing* (2002), and *Subaltern Women's Narratives* (2021).

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**Cite this article:** Greedharry, Mrinalini. 2024. "*In Other Theories: Colonial Reason, Language, And Literature in Ankhi Mukherjee's* Unseen City." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2023.38