# The Poetics and Stylistics of Nirmal Verma

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# The Poetics and Stylistics of Nirmal Verma: from the grammar of indefiniteness to the subversion of gender oppositions

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Nirmal Verma, who spent his youth in Shimla and the Summer Hill, before later becoming a fellow of the IIAS, has explained in numerous essays the specific function and intrinsic quality of art and, especially, literature, in particular Indian literature[1]. His theories have in the past repeatedly been discarded as an artificial desire to invent roots for himself in the Indian tradition in order to legitimate a novelistic style that is largely made up of foreign influences.[2] The view that Nirmal Verma's novelistic art is an adaptation of European technics and notions is indeed quite widespread in the Indian literary establishment.[3] These numerous evaluations leave behind the impression that Verma is a Hindi writer who writes in Hindi about Western (English) themes, structuring contents and characters according to Western literary principles,[4] particularly the new novel, where "characters often do not have names, and their motivations and feelings remain shadowy".[5]

The reputation of the author now (he was awarded the Jnanpith distinction in 1999 has certainly made the judgments about his work less critical and has even led to some sort of admiration for his ideology of art, making him into a kind of Sartre or 'maître à penser' of his generation. Yet, such enthusiasm is often of dubious origin as the wish to reinforce a Hindu perspective is an important motif for some of his supporters. However, reasoned comparisons of the theoretical essays and the text of his novels have been rare and restricted to two recent papers, both from 2000 (Prasenjit Gupta and Annie Montaut). The latter is mainly devoted to matters of form and, like the former, deals with the contents and narrative structure of the text rather than with its style in the phrastic

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meaning of the term. What will be at stake here, as is has been in these two papers, is the resolution of the implicit or explicit contradiction between the essays as a purely Hindu worldview and Verma's fiction as a Western form invested on westernized figures and westernized intrigues or, to phrase it more adequately in a western guise: the absence of a proper story.

A sample of a theoretical program within the narrative offers even more insight since it is both, implicitly, a philosophical/theoretical program and a practical illustration of that program involving the material (here scriptural) devices implicated in the concrete realization of the artist's program. Such a sample can be found in *Ek cithṛā sukh* (further on ECS, *A Rag called Happiness* in English translation).

I will therefore start with an explanation of the content and formal explanation of this short sample, then develop its main formal devices by analyzing some crucial extracts of the novels, eventually relating the results of the analyses to the "philosophical" background displayed in Nirmal's essays.

## 1. Still life: a lesson in 'gazing'

In the novel mentioned above, the episode of the lesson of « how to see » is introduced by a project, if not a full fledged program, of being a writer: "I will remember, I will write it in my dairy". This is followed by an outline of a scene observed from the room on the *barsati*: "Bitti was hanging the clothes (…) and I.".[6] It is quite striking how the three dots (quite frequent in Nirmal Verma's fictional writing) link both first the observed scene to the "I", and then the "I" to his favorite game (*khel*) which triggers the memory of the drawing lesson. This punctuation also has another effect: it makes the word to stand in isolation, like an island suspended between two silences, cut off from what precedes and what follows, while at the same time connected to the neighboring sequences as an iconic announcement of what will follow. Knowing that the whole structure of the novel is made to disclose, within the main protagonist, the inner "I" (*maiN*) who observes the events in the third person ("he", *vah*) and is transformed into a writer by writing from memory and by reliving the events, having left the deserted scene at the end of the novel in a Proustian structure,[7] we cannot overestimate the impact of this short piece of poetics within the overall economy of the novel. Such a meta-narrative

injunction to « see » describes the writer's stance in a novel aimed, among other goals, at describing the genesis of the writer. Let us first re-read the passage, which carries on with the third person right after the quote mentioned above, and right before taking us into the « lesson »[8] :

> *vah apne bistar par leṭā thā. Kitnī bār vah yah khel apne se kheltā thā, jaise vah duniyā se kahī̃ bāhar se dekh rahā hai, shām, chhat, biṭṭī aur ḍairī – ab unhẽ nahī̃ jāntā. Vah unhẽ pahlī bār dekh rahā hai. Uske Drāing māst ar klās men kahte the –*

> he was lying on his bed. How many times had not he played this game with himself, as if he was looking at the world from outside, evening, roof-top, Bitti and Dairy – now he does not know them. He is looking at them for the first time. His drawing master used to say in the classroom --

> *dekho, yah seb hai, yah seb ṭebul par rahtā hai. Ise dhyān se dekho. Sīdhī ā̃khõ se — ek sunn nigāh sūī kī nok–sī seb par bī̃dh jātī  Vah dhīre-dhīre havā mẽ ghulne lagtā, gāyab ho jātā. Phir, phir, acānak patā caltā – seb vahī̃ hai, mez par, jaise-kā taisā – sirf vah alag ho gayā hai, kamre se, dūsre laṛkõ se, mez aur kursiyõ se – aur pahlī bār seb ko naī nigāhõ se dekh rahā hai. Nãgā, sābut, sampūrṇ ... itnā sampūrṇ ki vah bhaybhīt-sā ho jātā, bhaybhīt bhī nahī̃ – sirf ek ajīb-sā vismay pakaṛ letā, jaise kisīne uskī ānkhon se paṭṭī khol dī hai* (p. 19).

> look, this is an apple, this apple is on the table. Look at it with attention. With right eyes – an empty look pierced the apple like the head of a needle. It/he began to slowly dissolve in the air, disappeared. Then, then, suddenly became aware – the apple is exactly there, such as itself – only he/it has got separated, from the room, from the other children, from the table and the chairs – and for the first time looks at the apple with new eyes (a new look). Naked, entire, complete … In such a wholeness (completion) that he became kind of frightened, not even frightened – only a somewhat strange wonder seized (him), as if someone had lifted a bandage from his eyes.

What strikes the reader about the formal structure of this short passage, of the whole writing process, is the density of specific stylistic devices making it a microcosm: the shifting reference in the pronominal system, the repetitions, the use of the so-called short (truncated) imperfect sometimes called indefinite or poetic imperfect, the very peculiar system of punctuation, the linking of « independent » clauses or sentences with dashes

rather than with commas or full stops, an abundance of markers of indefiniteness (comparisons, the approximation suffix –*sā*, rectifications such as "frightening, not even frightening"), a number of formal devices which all contribute to create the position of standing aloof (*dunyā se bāhar*, *alag*) and the empathy described in this fragment as the correct attitude to look at things in order to write about them/describe them.[9] It is significant that the passage occurs in the novel immediately after the decision to transform the experienced feeling into a written experience through the use of diary which is given to the boy by his dead mother as a tool for precisely seeing and remembering and thereby transcending death. It is therefore all the more obvious that the right vision, which makes remembering possible and allows a memory to be written, has to do with life and death, as art generally has in Nirmal's perception.

Along with the formal structures of this paragraph, which are in a way seminal throughout Nirmal's writing, some highly loaded words deserve a more detailed comment, in order to locate the whole « lesson » in the global body of the author's philosophical/aesthetical statements mentioned in the introduction (before coming back to it in conclusion). Among these are *dhyān* and *sīdhī*. *dhyān*, which literally means « attention », is also the word used from medieval times till today to indicate the concentration a devotee seeks in order to meditate on a deity and reach a further state of union with the divine. As for *sīdhī*, a feminine adjective, it literally means « straight, right » but is also is related to the yogic powers (cf. the noun *siddha*, which indicates an utterly accomplished person or some sort of saint endowed with spiritual powers) or the inner realization of the self and of true knowledge.[10] This makes it obvious that the type of perception involved in the lesson appeal to a specific way of looking, whether it is named *nigāh*, *ākh* or *dekh* in Hindi. Perhaps we can relate it to the ritualized *darshan*, but the text makes no use of the word *darshan*, neither in this passage nor elsewhere, as it avoids direct explicit analogies with the religious or philosophical vocabularies. Attempting to get at the sacred is not done through of ready-made categories in the novel but is the result of the very immanent acts and words as they get transcended into their bare intrinsic self. That is also hinted at in the frequent use of the word *sunn* (empty, dumb) and is further emphasized by the use of words with a rich alliteration such as *sūī* the needle, *sī* the approximative suffix, or *seb* the apple.

What is of special interest is of course the effect of this intense, absolute gaze, literally piercing (*bhī̃d*) the apple to reach at its inner nature: the apple begins to dissolve in the emptiness, while the pronoun which replaces it (*vah*) is also the form used for the boy, making both viewer and viewed interchangeable for a moment in a first reading. Once dissolved, the apple suddenly appears in its absolute wholeness, which is paradigmatically equivalent to its nakedness, its integrity and firmness, while again the ambiguity of the pronoun *vah* temporarily connects the viewed object and the viewer. A special gaze is thus required for the object to appear in its very self and in its own being (i.e.: undistorted by the observer), and this specific perception can only come about when someone is himself detached (*alag*) from all the present contingencies (other pupils, table and chairs). The viewer looks from nowhere or from outside the world (free from worldly contingencies), and thus perceives the object for the first time because he has freed his vision from the attachments that are socially or psychologically or historically conditioned, like a "blindfold" (*paṭṭī*) before one's eyes. This kind of perception is also described as almost frightening; an emotion that is immediately corrected into another fundamental aesthetic emotion: amazement.[11] The seeing for the first time, "playing" as if one is not aware of what has previously been seen in the observed scene is then a "game" which is as childish as it is philosophical.

As for the object that is put before the pupils to observe, the apple, it too belongs to the well known tradition in the training of western still-life painters[12], but this tradition is here renewed (nativized ?) by the words that are used to describe it. The apple, while disclosing its pure object-ness in a literally wonderful way, becomes part of a process. This process, the perception that units the perceived object and the perceiver through the act of perception itself, is a classic reference in the theory of meaning and grammar as well as in the theory of aesthetics in Sanskrit. Besides, the way the object has to be perceived echoes the pictorial perception of Raza (2002, 2004) in his theory of *bindu*, the focal point, which amounts to reaching the inner spiritual truth of an object once the ocular, superficial perception is transcended by the artist's concentration (*dhyān*). In Nirmal Verma's novel, this happens once things are perceived correctly. Then the 'still life' is subtly distorted into a vibrating life, things becoming living entities and active participants, again a subdued reference to the classical vision of the cosmic world in

Indian philosophy.[13] Further on in *Ek Cithṛā Sukh*, after the suicide of an important character in one of the last chapters, when the boy is already becoming an adult and a writer, and when the fusion of his "I" and his "he",[14] allows a "you" to appear in the shifting process of (de)identification, objects are also described as active entities endowed with a consciousness of their own, a crucial feature for this world of inter-relatedness to connect "I", "he" "it", the self, the other, the world.

> *vahẫ ab koī nahī̃ thā. Koī nahī̃ thā. Sirf vah thā, jo ab maĩ hū̃...*
>
> *Durghaṭnā kī bhī ek ātmā hotī hai. Yah maĩne dekhā thā. Dekhā thā, maĩ ṭhīk kahtā hū̃, kyõki uskī gandh āpas kī cīzõ ko bhī patā cal jātī hai aur ve apnī-apnī jagah se uṭhkar tumhẽ gher letī haĩ... aur tum unhẽ hakkī-bakkī nigāhõ se aise dekh rahe ho jaise unhẽ pahle kabhī nahī̃ dekhā* (p. 140)
>
> Now there was nobody there. Nobody was there. He only was there, who is now I…
>
> Catastrophies have their own soul. This I have seen. I have seen, I say it, because even the things around become aware of their smell and get up from their place to circle around you… And you look at them with dumbfounded eyes as if you had never seen them before

## 2. The central episode of ECS: approximation and comparison

The scene of the Allahabad fair takes place at the beginning of the last third of the novel (pp. 98-100) and features just one reminiscence among many others, but this small piece gives the book its title. There is also another reason to consider this scene as vital in the global economy of the novel (and use it to observe its stylistic texture): it explicitly raises the question of rebirth, being cut off from family and social support, and, concerning its form, it mixes short dialogues with « poetical » sequences that are equally short, which reflect a perception that is strongly reminiscent of the one depicted just before the lesson in perception.

The boy, who has already been staying with his cousin Bitti for a few months in her *barsati* at Nizamuddin, sometimes feverish and sometimes better, observing Bitti's friends in their theatrical activities as amateurs, spends his time reading a book about a missionary and a panther. He wanders around in the neighborhood and remembers his days in Allahabad, his home town that he left because of a persistent fever. Among the memories that continue to recur, is that of his mother's death in the hospital in Allahabad,

that of the fair with his cousin, Bitti when both visited the strange spectacle of a dwarf who was stripped of all his clothes except a few rags as a result of his walking and running in the cold wind of the fan in the circus tent. This spectacle was shown to them as an answer to a question asked by Bitti: "what is happiness like?". Right after that, just before leaving the fair ground, they step in for the last round on the giant wheel and are forgotten by the manager, who has not seen them when he stops the machine.

> *koī unhẽ nahī̃ dekh saktā ? ve adrishya haĩ...ve kahī̃ ūpar haĩ, havā aur andhere mẽ, ek dūsre ke andhere mẽ jakr e hue, shahar kī roshniyō̃, gharō̃, aur ādmiyō̃ ke ūpar jahā̃ kabhī ve rahte the, bahut pahle, kisī dūsre janm mẽ [...] vah bīc andhere mẽ baiThā thā, na nīce, na ūpar, samūcī duniyā se kat ā huā*
>
> *- Biṭṭī, kyā t̃ kartī... tum karte ho?*
>
> *- mujhe patā nahī̃... lekin aisā samay zarūr rahā hogā jab hamẽ koī nahī̃ jāntā hogā, merā matlab hai...*

> Nobody can see them? They are invisible… They are somewhere above, in the wind and the dark, frozen in each other's darkness, above the lights of the city, the houses, the men, where the have once lived, long ago, in some other life (…). He was sitting in the middle, in the darkness, neither below nor above, cut off from the whole world.
>
> - Bitti, do you believe in previous birth?
>
> - No, I don't… Do you?
>
> - I don't know… but there must sure be a moment when nobody knows you,       I

mean...

A long (one page) dialogue follows, on the question whether people who are reborn in one single life can change identity and life in this rebirth, in order to "leave/quit themselves". Then the boys asks her cousin what she would like to do later and she answers she would like to be like the dwarf – "clad with rags (*cithṛe*)!" exclaims the boy, and his cousin answers – "they were not rags, they were happiness".

The description following the dialogue belongs to the often mentioned poetic suggestiveness of Nirmal's style and particularly this "controlled epiphany, impressionistic evocation of setting (…) virtually impossible to emulate.[15] Let us try to analyze first how the "evocation of setting" is produced at the phrastic level at least, since it is the level most commonly ignored when commenting on Nirmal's poetic virtuosity. Part of it occurs before the dialogue sequence, part of it between the two main dialogued

sequences. In the first setting of the frame (the first lines quoted above), "high" in the sky (*ūpar*), one expression is repeated three times: *andhere mẽ* "in the dark". The third occurrence, which at the first reading seems to occur as a precision (*bīc andhere mẽ*), in fact opens on a more precise indication of the location that apparently contradicts the very first setting ("*ūpar*"), since it is now specified as being "neither low nor high". The notion of "middle" (*bīc*) then appears as a trigger for the creation of an inter-space, both high and not high, a space where contradictions are suspended since it is itself transcending the differential categories ("*na…na*") in a distinctly advaitin formulation (*neti…neti*). It is from this position that the required detachment ("cut off from the whole world") is obtained, along with the "invisibility": the two kids in the empty space are *adrishya* "invisible", and what they can still see (city, houses, men) appears to them as belonging to a previous life, while at the same time the outside darkness changes into a shared inner darkness (*ek dūrsre ke andhere mẽ*), transforming and balancing the outside and the inside. Repetitions are not just a pattern that is used to musicalize the narrative, they induce a subtle twisting of notional categories which is further developed in the second attempt of "setting the frame", half way through the dialogue:

> *use kuch samajh mẽ nahī̃ āyā, kintu us rāt bīc havā mẽ baiṭhe hue use sab kuch sac lagā thā, asambhav lekin sac, candnī rāt mẽ peṛõ ke nīce ek khel jaisā, jismẽ jo dikhāī detā hai, vah nahī̃ hai, jo sacmuc mẽ hai vah dikhāī nahī̃ detā.*
>
> he did not understand anything, but sitting in the air of that night he felt as if everything was true, impossible but true, like a play under the trees in the silvery (moon-lighted) night, in which what is visible does not exist, what does exist is not visible.

Again the in-between position, this time, in-between the air, is used to create the place where intellectual incomprehension changes into the feeling (*lagā*) of truth, a realization comparable to the wonder at the dissolved apple. This feeling, involving only un-referential pronouns (*kuch nahī̃, sab kuch, jo* "nothing, everything, which"), hence relying on a basis of indefiniteness, amounts to shifting and opposing the categories of the visible and the truth (words each repeated several times), so as to convey a deliberate turning of the focalized view-point, just like the boy's usual game (as if he did not know, as if he had never seen). The comparative expression *ek khel jaisā*, "as in a game", emphasizes the other devices for approximation (*aisā lagā*), building the scenario of a

game which is not really a game, and more generally posits blurred categories in order to dissolve the very notion of clear-cut categories and to suggest the inter-space as the only point from which to observe truth. It has long been observed that Nirmal Verma makes a profuse use of such expressions as "X *ko* or *aisā lagā* (*jaisā*)", X felt like / as if", "had the impression that", or "it was like". The psychological interpretation of hesitation, indeterminacy, while focalizing on the inner subjectivity, is a secondary effect of the high frequency of similar expressions, which mainly create the space for an adjacent category or notion. Whether it is a metaphor or a comparison (introduced by *lagā* or *māno*) or a comparative clause, all these devices present the referent as double (one signified for two signifiers), inaccessible by means of a single clear-cut wording, requiring to be hinted at (suggested) by other representations, questioning therefore its sheer referentiality and direct intelligibility. In a distinct yet similar way, the approximation affix –*sā*, originally a contraction of *jaisā* (< Sk *sadrishya* "looking as > resembling" < verbal root DRSH/DARSH), which in Hindi can be suffixed to nouns, adjectives, participles, with an attenuative or approximate meaning (Montaut 2004b: 254-6), transforms a notional category into a wider and vaguer one with blurred contours, that is, a notion which is not precisely categorizable.

This is a kind of re-birth within this birth which opens the way to a different, clairvoyant life, linked to the quality of being invisible and unknown to the others, detached, beyond the secure parameters of measure, society, time and space (*ghar chor kar* "having left home").

And then right after this piece of dialogue already set in such a specifically "evocating" frame, occurs a short piece of poetic description:

> *vah bhaybhīt-sā hāsne lagā (…) [Biṭṭī] kā svar itnā halkā thā ki andhere mẽ jān paṛā, jaise vah kisī svapn kā chilkā hai, jo uske hāth rah gayā hai… tārõ kī pīlī chā̃h mẽ kāmptā huā – use nice kī taraf khı̃ctā huā, jahā̃ Illāhābād ke itne varṣ bekār tukṛõ kī tarah havā mẽ uṛ rahe the…*

kind of frightened, he started laughing (…). Bitti's voice was so light that it seemed in the darkness as some peeling of a dream which had remained in his hand… shivering in the yellow/pale shadow of the stars – pulling him down, where all the many Allahabad years were flying in the air like useless bits and pieces…

How ṭis the poetic dimension obtained here? No particularly poetic word except the vagueness of the "dream" in its Sanskrit equivalent (*svapn*), no great metaphor, no elaborate phraseology or metaphor. But this single sentence, further de-articulated by the punctuation (suspensive marks, dashes), is right from the beginning framed /lit on the background created by the boy's state of mind: *bhaybhīt-sā*, the very word associated with the feeling of wonder, which creates an expectation for what follows. What follows is in the dialogue Bitti's answer regarding "happiness" and rags, and the way it is reverberated in the narrative by the boy's reaction. This single sentence, describing the boy's emotions at his cousin's answer, is both a comment on the last, crucial words, as well as a projection of this truth onto the boy's relationship with the world outside and the narrator's writing. We remain in the repeated location of "in the dark" with the recurring use of comparative clause (*jān paṛā jaise* "looked like") and nominal expressions (*kī tarah* "like"). The voice, made the outer shell of some dream, then made immaterial, further recovers materiality when described as shivering or trembling in the boy's hand, and this trembling is in a way taken from the twinkling light of stars by means of a chiasm. The whole scene becomes strange (a suggestion of the metaphysical / aesthetical wonder) because words are slightly displaced, either by a trope or by an apparent inadequacy (*chilkā* "peeling"*, chə̃h* "shadow"): the selection of the improper word is a well-known impressionist device (the French symbolist poet Verlaine claimed it, along with unbalanced prosody), and this "*anaucitya*" so to speak, is handled by Nirmal Verma with great mastery. A dream has no *chilkā*, but the *chilkā* makes it physically sensible that the boy is left with a *sheṣ*, a remaining (?), a left over in both psycho-analytical and physical (the echo, *dhvani* of the voice) meanings. Similarly the "pieces" (*tukṛā*) are deliberately presented as a bizar metaphor for years, by means of the most undefined segmentable object and a very banal word which has practically no meaning except that of 'broken object'. The very notion of brokenness, unconnectedness, uselessness is what matters here to re-create and give fresh life to the worn out metaphor of "gone with the wind". To distort it too, since they are not exactly gone with the wind and forgotten, they are half forgotten half part of the surrounding wind, as is the contingent pieces of the past for the detached person.

Last but not least, as far as formal devices are concerned, the punctuation of this sentence prevents the reader from operating hierarchies in the syntactic levels and clauses; on the contrary, flat pauses, which oppose the logical demarcations between clauses and especially the lowering tone of end marks, create here not only a rhythm but also a melodic line with almost no peaks and mainly silences (…, —), a silent breathing, a space for internal echoes to reverberate. Assuming that standard punctuation in a written text is a marker of logical junctures and helps in interpreting logical dependencies, we are dealing here with a process of de-intellectualization, allowing for a parallel reading with a non-logical interpretation, a relation of equivalence and not of dependence and hierarchy which best suits the register of feelings than that of intellect.

**3. The incipit of *Lāl Tīn kī chat* (now on LTC, *The Red Tin Roof*): the "atonal" punctuation and the de-temporalized imperfect**

The one and a half page incipit of LTC is particular in many respects: the formal division of the book makes it an incipit of the first section ("In one breathe", *ek sā̃s mẽ*) rather than of the whole novel, before chapter one among the seven which make this first section, none of them bearing a title. But section two ("Above the town", *shahar se ūpar*) has no title (it consists in seven chapters, with, again, no title), and section three ("Beyond consolation", *tasallī se pare*), has only one chapter[16]. Yet this incipit bears the title of the novel itself, *Lāl Tīn kī chat*. Another peculiarity is the use of the tenses and punctuation: 16 dashes (among which 6 in the first six lines), 3 suspensive marks, 1 question mark, 1 exclamation mark, for only 24 full stops. An opening in the imperfect is in no way strange for a novel, nor is the interruption of such a static and descriptive frame or background by an event in the preterit (simple past), which  also appear in the novel: such preterit forms occur in paragraphs 4, 6, 8, 10, 11. The dominance of the imperfect, however, has two particularities, both related to the Hindi language itself. The first one is not stylistically marked since it is the regular habitual and progressive imperfects which are formed with the imperfect of the verb can be used as an auxiliary (*thā, the, thī, thī̃* are gender and number variations). If such a form  itself  is unmarked, combined with the massive use of the copula or existential verb (with the same form), as is the case right from the first sentence (*sab taiyār thā* "everything was ready"), the result is a particular

emphasis on  the static aspect. Both copula and auxiliary polarize each other, and both are polarized also by the same auxiliary *thā* used with a past participle to denote a resultant state: *mũh khulā thā* "his mouth was open".

The second peculiarity, this one stylistically marked and occurring almost only in written texts, is the alternative form of the imperfect, without copula: *phail jātī* "expanded, extended" (instead of *phail jātī thī*), *lagtā* "seemed" (instead of *lagtā thā*). Some authors use it less (Alka Saraogi for instance) than others, but none use it more than Nirmal Verma does. Given the craftsmanship and controlled mastery of his writing, this is very likely  to have some meaning.

This tense is identical in form to the present (rather unaccomplished) participle, except in the feminine plural.[17] This adjective-like form (nominal category)has often been considered to convey more of a habitual sense than the regular  "general" or "habitual" imperfect.[18] However its occurrence in the incipit (p. 8), quite representative of the other occurrences throughout the novel, does not denote particularly habitual processes or states.[19] Its first occurrence in the fifth paragraph (*havā caltī*) is chained directly on actualized imperfects (*let ar-bāks lat ak rahā thā* "the letter box was hanging/dangling", *jaise ... jhūl rahā* ho "as if … was swinging"), which describe the actual situation at a specific moment – the time of departure. The short imperfect then describes a process that may be repeated ("every time when the wind was blowing", "at each wind blow") but within the short span of this specific sequence when everything is getting ready for departure. During this limited duration the door may be repeatedly flapping in the wind (*to vah hilne lagtā*), but not more repeatedly than the previous long imperfects in the above context, and the light sound it diffuses (*ek dhīmī-sī āvāz phail jātī*) inducing the pony to look around with its tired watery eyes (*apnī thakī dabdabāī ānkhõ se dekhne lagtā*), all in the short form of the imperfect, is definitely not connected with a specifically habitual notion.[20]

However, this flapping in the wind introduces a future leitmotiv of the novel and is then the beginning of an indistinct series. Moreover, this initial occurrence, within the syntactic diptych of temporal-dependent and main clause, one clause being located only in relation with the other, therefore none being externally stabilized, marks the process, even if not really habitual, but de-temporalized in a way. The serialization and the de-

temporalization converge here to extract the process out of the actualized temporal frame of the narration. Hence its effect of "vagueness", blurred contours, and poetic impressionism, which is consistent with the formal nature of this tense (a participle, more nominal than verbal). It is consistent, too, with the other participles in collocation with the various imperfects of the text. The first paragraph contains a number of nominal and participle clauses, very loosely related to the main verb, and indeed presented as independent clauses (*Sab taiyār thā. Bistar, poṭliyā̃ – ek sūṭkes* The hold-all, bundles -- a suitcase.),[21] or clauses hanging in a sort of syntactic vacuum due to the dashes (*ṭaṭṭū ko rās thāme* – "holding the reins of a pony"). All such devices converge in producing an interruption of the narrative sequence, introducing a kind of pause, on a flat, atone melodic level, detached from the running course of events. The first chapter (p. 16) gives a more canonical illustration of the use of both imperfects, since the short form occurs there for marking habits. But, similarly, such habits are more habitual than the ones marked by the long form. Both kids Kaya and Chote wait for their father to come at night and kiss them in their bed. The whole page describes his coming and their state of mind. The first paragraph contains two sequences in the short form, each chained on a previous long form. The first centers on the actions performed by the father, the second on Kaya's expectations and fears. In between long forms occur, although the temporal frame is exactly the same, because the viewpoint shifts towards the inner state of the children. This subtle shift (here in the viewpoint, elsewhere in the scenario described, in the focus, the topic, the character or the actions presented in the foreground) is enough to break the continuity created by the short form as an indistinct, quasi nominal, static, theater of blurred events. The short form creates this absolute absence of saliency so specific of Nirmal's gift for representing an impressionistic shadowy suggested world.[22]

One of the most representative poetic passages of the novel, when Kaya comes back at night to her uncle's house and finds the veranda lit like a magic ship, also exhibits a similar mix of nominal clauses, dashes, and short imperfects (along with comparative structures such as mentioned above):

*vah zine ke pās āī, to pā̃v ṭhiṭhak gae. Sab kamrõ kī battiyā̃ jal rahī thī̃.*

*Kāyā ko ek bahut purānī kitāb kī foṭo yād ho āī – andhere pānī se kharʃā jahāz.*

*Navambar kī rātõ mẽ, jab havā sāf **hotī**.[23] vah makān sacmuc jahāz lagtā thā.*

*Lambā galiyārā ḍek-sā **dikhāī detā** – vahā̃ hameshā ek mez aur kuch ārām-kursiyā̃ paṛī rahtī thī̃. Garmī ke dinõ mẽ vahā̃ cācā ke mitr tāsh khelte the, khānā-pīnā bhī vahā̃ hotā thā. Lekin sitambar ke mahīne mẽ ve shahrõ kī taraf **cal dete**. Galiyārā ujāṛ **paṛ jātā**. Mez, kursiyā̃, phūlõ ke gamle bītī huī garmiyõ ke khaṇḍahar-se **dikhāī dete**. Cācā jab kabhī bāhar na **jāte**, to der shām tak vahā̃ **baiṭhe rahte**. Bilkul akele. Mez par ek botal, ek gilās, pānī kā ek jag... aur sāmne Sãjaulī ki battiyā̃... jo do pahārˌõ ke bīc **jagmagātī rahtī̃**.* (p. 135)*

She went near the stairs, and then felt her legs freeze. All the lights in the rooms were lit.

Kaya remembered a picture in a very ancient book – a ship standing in the dark sea. In the nights of November, when the air **was** pure, the house really resembled a ship. The long veranda **looked like** a deck – there were always a few chairs and a table there. In summer, Uncle's friends used to play cards there, eating and drinking was also served there. But in September they **used to leave** for the city. The veranda suddenly **became deserted**. Table, chairs, flower-pots **looked like** the remnants of the gone summer. Whenever Uncle **did not go** out, he **used to sit** there late in the evening. Absolutely alone. A bottle on the table, a glass, a jug of water… and the lights of Sanjauli in front… Which **glimmered** (were glimmering) between two mountains.[24]

The entire end of the sequence is in the short imperfect, as is the evocation of the veranda like a deck in November in the beginning (after its initial location in the long imperfect). In between is the evocation, similarly habitual in a similarly vague past, during summer. The short forms occur right at the time of the exodus of friends down to the city. They are maintained although the topic shifts from the house to its owner and resident and to the landscape far away: what unites the whole sequence is the atmosphere of solitude, emptiness and gravity, the magic beauty of this deserted deck, which makes the house look like a ship in the ocean at night, aloof and luminous (whereas the summer playful atmosphere, although made of serial enumerations of actions and habits, does not fit in the mental frame suggested by the opening comparison).

Such a technique of suspension – which delocalizes the sequence from the temporal frame—is not purely a play of form used to subvert the classical orientation of the narrative time, from a "before" to an "after" by means of articulated steps. What is at stake here is this particular space out of, or beyond the rational and phenomenological

points of reference which build the ordinary time-space frame. The goal in Nirmal's fiction as in Indian classical philosophy, of being a writer, an artist, a "seer" (*rishi*), is to reach this literally extra-ordinary time-space which is outside time-space while proceeding from time-space, echoing Nirmal Verma's obsessive longing for immanent transcendence[25].

The same novel (LTC) contains some passages which almost theorize this kind of longing or at least attach this perception to characters (the protagonist Kaya for instance) who describe such feelings as true knowledge and understanding. One of these occurs just after the death of the dog Ginny, run over by a train in a tunnel under the eyes of both Kaya and her mysterious cousin Lama. The sequence is described in a combination of simple past (narrative preterits) and progressive imperfect, before it suddenly shifts to the short imperfect in describing the running dog toward the tunnel: "she did not look aside, as if she had found (present perfect) this mysterious treasure she was looking for (progressive imperfect). *Vah na udhar dekhtī na idhar, jaise vah jo chipā khazānā dhūndh rahī thī use mil gayā ho* (49).[26] That is already a quite unusual use of the short imperfect, since the dog is obviously not described in a routine activity but only during this single and last run towards the tunnel. And suddenly after this very unusual tense pattern, the narrative shifts to the present: a present uttered by an untemporal (or untemporalized) Kaya, since she is the Kaya remembering for ever the event. *Yah main dekh saktī hū̃, yād kar saktī hūn, duhārā saktī hūn. Ginnī nīce utartī huī rail kī paṭriyõ ke āge*, etc.: " This I can see, I can remember, I can repeat. Ginny going down in front of the rails" (50).[27] Then again the narration uses the regular pattern for the imperfect (*aur main khaṛī thī* "and I was standing"), with an "I" that is dissociated in a way, since the girl listens to her own shriek as if it was not hers (*mujhe kāfī hairānī huī ki maĩ khud bāhar se apnī cīkh sun rahī hūñ khud apne ko apne mẽ bhendte hue:* "I was quite amazed [discovering] that I was myself hearing my own scream from outside, tearing myself in myself").[28] A very long sequence follows, with nominal expansions, describing the sudden silence after the disappearing of the roaring smoking train, after which nothing was left (*kuch bhī shes nahī̃ rahā*), only "a speedless speed/ a motionless move/ goalless goal, where there is no time, no death, no night, no day, only a life running between the rails, a ball of wool" (*ek gatihīn gati, jahã̄ na samay hai, na mrityu, na rāt na*

*din, sirf paṭriyõ ke bīc bhāgtī huī ek jān, ūn kā golā…* (51).[29] Then again, after this speedless speed, directionless direction, leading to emptiness, transcending both the categories of oriented space and time (no day nor night, no time) and death, the description goes on in the present: *jo smriti nahī̃ hai, vah smriti banne se pahle kī smriti hai, jo mere lie ek bahut purānī rāt ka svapn ban gayā*, "which is not memory, it is memory before memory is born, which became for me the dream of a very ancient night".[30]

This memory which is beyond memory since it is before the making of memory, building for the girl a primeval night beyond the very concept of beginning, before any process, before temporality itself which transforms the things experienced into the memory of them, introduces a distinctly non narrative dimension in the text. If the first occurrence of the present may be explained by the grammar of comparison, this is not the case in the second clause, which is not relative but independent (*vah smriti banne se pahle kī smriti hai*). The relative clauses that follow this equation (*na...na*: beyond time and death), although they seem to link up with the narration in the long imperfect ("where I came back often and often, sat down, waiting": *jahā̃ maĩ bār-bār laut ātī thī, baiṭh jātī thī, pratīkṣā kartī huī*), in fact evoke a Kaya born after this traumatic experience and out of its transcendence in the *na... na* space of "beyond". Immediately after the sequence of these two regular imperfects (habitual in the strong meaning since the routine is a life long one for Kaya), short imperfects occur, disclosing the content of the repeated drama, demarcated by a simple comma from the preceding sequence: "the mouth of tunnel remained open, first came the smoke then the noise of the wheels, then the anxious call coming from behind the bushes, Ginny, Ginny, Ginny… which slowly changed into a dying whisper (*surang kā munh khulā rahtā, pahle dhuā̃ ātā, phir pahiyon kā shor, phir jhaṛiyõ ke pīche se ātā huā becain kātar bulāvā, Ginnī, Ginnī... jo dhīre-dhīre martī huī phusphusāhaṭ mẽ badal jātā.*)

This rewriting, rehearsing or repeating the whole episode in a de-temporalized way echoes the initial present: *maĩ dekh saktī hū̃, yād kar saktī hū̃*, "I can see, I can remember", in a quasi-performative way since this particular remembering which is beyond memory amounts to the very act of writing this precise sequence commented above. Performing the process of remembering is describing the "remembered" event in

the way it is described by the de-temporalized and de-localized Kaya. Ordinary (psychological) memory indeed requires a sequence, a first occurrence of the event, and a second 'visit' of the event. A thing happens, and then is revisited, within the oriented sequence of time. In contrast with this view, there is no first occurrence of the event here that could be a beginning for the process of memory. This is why memory is said to be before the making of memory. This is also why the clause is in the present, obviously not a narrative present nor a general present. If there is a name for such a tense in Nirmal, it would be the present of eternity, or the absolute present, as he himself repeatedly names it in his essays on culture and art (*cirantan vartamān*).

Memory, therefore writing (since Kaya, like Munnu, is, at times, speaking in the first person and in the present of discourse when she becomes a philosopher), is transforming the event which previously 'happened' within an ordered sequence with a before and an after, into a non event, a never happened because it was always already there. In other words, the contingent accident is converted into absolute truth and eternity. It gives the impression of a "presentification" of facts in the mode of the absolute. So that we could call this type of short imperfect the imperfect of eternity or of pure present (*cirantam* in Nirmal's terms). [31]

Interestingly, the next paragraph after the remembering of the "accident" leads to another conclusion of this metaphysical (or physioiologica?)l experience: "then it seemed to me that on that afternoon I had seen Lama for the first time" (*tab mujhe lagā jaise us dupahar ko maĩne pahlī bār Lāmā ko dekhā hai*).[32] And this vision of a familiar person "as if" it was the first time she was seen, as if we had never seen her, of course echoes the lesson of seeing described in the beginning or the paper.

## 4. The background: cognitive frame in Nirmal Verma's essays

A writer who writes a narrative but discards the chaining of events as meaningless in front of the primeval memory, memory before memory, time which allows no day no night, equated to non-time, in the same way as motion can be equated to motionlessness (*gatihīn gati*), looking till the point of evanescence of the object seen in the seer, is discovering the "I" up to the point where it stops being "I" and identifies with "he". He cuts himself off from the world and becomes a nonseparate part of the whole world. This

clearly sounds like a series of unsolvable paradoxes, proceeding from an unsustainable stand if looked at from the "western" rational and logical framework.[33] And clearly not from the traditional "Indian" viewpoint. What is this viewpoint like, according to Nirmal Verma?

Let us start with the first paradoxes, dealing with time. The contemporaneousness (*samkālīntā*) of past within present, says Nirmal, is an intrinsic part of traditional cultures, and has been particularly preserved in the Indian ethos.[34] Those societies which are traditional in nature have absolutely no need for the past. My feeling of being part (*ansh*) of the Indian culture does not only rely on being linked with a piece of ground which is called India, but rather derives from the fact that I live in a time (*samay*) which is eternally contemporaneous to me"[35]: whereas cultural identity has been "given" to the West with historical conscience, as the realization of culture as a collective historical culture objectivable in churches, museums, dates, etc.. This uneasiness to separate past from present and future is in fact a typical manifestation of what some call a mythical mentality (*mithakīya bodh*). In another essay devoted to the relation of "time, myth and reality", Nirmal criticizes this vision of a time oriented and progressing from past to future, which values change, and substitutes a natural process like a never ending wheel (*cakrākār, anavarat silsilā*) "which past and future are both intertwined with the eternal/never-ending present.

This does not mean that the distinct categories of time do not exist but they do not move from a beginning to an end, their motion takes both within a smooth global vision – a motion (*gati*) that we can call a pause (*virām*), where there remains no longer any difference between motion (*gati*) and motionlessness (*gatihīntā*). This 'eternal present' is not something like a playful dream, nor is its consciousness limited to prehistoric populations (*adi-manus ya*). This consciousness of time has always been present in man (as the consciousness of nature: *prakriti kā bodh*), but historical time (*aithihāsik samay*) tries to suppress (*dabne*) and crush (*kucalne*), *bodh*), although it never completely succeeded in crushing it. Man always kept it alive as a dream and memory buried in his intimate self, where distinctions of time, melt in the mystery and miracle of death and rebirth", (SH:. 191-1); and this echoes what Freud has called the suppressed impressions (*dabe hue prabhāv*) hidden in the layers of subconsiousness.[36] It also reminds Nirmal

Verma of the concept of memory in Proust, where the flow of events condensed into a never ending present (*nirantar vartamān*) where there is no beginning and no end. Such a conception of time can be called the time consciousness of nature, that is especially strong in Hindu myth but in no way the exclusive property of Indian culture. It is now the role of art in mythless societies to fulfill this part, *kalā mithak kī bhūmikā kamobesh adā kar saktī hai* (SH: 192).

These reflections can help as the philosophical background for the conceptions alluded to in the novel in the form of some formulations like "*gatihīn gati*" or the negative definition of "memory before memory". They make evocations of prehistoric, primeval times intelligible in the context of locating past in relation to present (Kaya's meditation).They also confirm that the classical framework of space-time so indispensable for a rational thinking no longer holds true, nor does the very notion of category (*shren ī*), distinction (*bhed*) and limit (*sīmā*), the latter two obviously constitutive of the first.[37]

Moreover, if we try to understand this feeling of "being part (*ansh*) of the Indian culture", and read for instance the essays on colonization and postcolonization entitled *D halān se utarte hue* (Going down the Slope), we find a clear opposition between a Western(ized) objective rational concept of culture and an Indian subjective empathic conception, which resisted to some extent the imposition of rational objectivity with British cultural domination over India. First starting with the classical metaphor of the body as a window that opens for the soul on the knowable world in western philosophy, Nirmal brings against it the Indian viewpoint, where the world is not seen through a window, but rather the window is the world, as well as the soul. This means that the visible object (world) is not distinct from the viewer (the soul) and the instrument (window). "The difference between body and soul is as artificial in the Indian tradition as is the contradiction (*antarvirodh*) between outside and inside. What our ancestors had seen from the window centuries ago – trees, rivers, a vast unchanging landscape of animals and men, is the same that I see, and I discover that I am not simply a spectator (*darshak*) of this surroundings (*paridrishya*), rather am I in the middle of them (*unke bīc*), an indifferentiate part (*abhinn ãsh*) of them. There was a feeling of union (*sanlagnatā kā bhāv*) which naturally conjoined me to the time and the world (*kāl aur vishv ke sāth*).

What matters is that this inner relation (*andrūnī sambandh*) between the various components of the external surroundings is as important as the feeling of oneness / onesoulness (*ekātmā kī bhāvnā*) between the viewer (*driṣṭā*) and the viewed (*drishya*). The person who sees and the object which is seen, their mutual relation (…) is a better key of alacrity (*sphurtidāyak*) and empathy or sympathy (*ātmīyatā*) than the separation of viewer, viewed, man and landscape into distinct fragments as does European culture (*alag-alag khandõ mẽ vibhājit karke*) (DH, p. 72). This is this whole mental state which has been challenged by the British colonization.

With this kind of background we can now accept as "natural" (*sahaj*) the lesson of seeing commented in section 1.[38] The dissolution of the object viewed (apple), allowing for a possible ambiguity (*vah*) of viewer and viewed, points to this *ekātmatā* which is more philosophically expounded in the essays, and echoes classical texts on knowledge and language (from Bhartrhari to Abhinavagupta).

Such perceptions result in a very particular conception, too, of the self and the other. To start with, the self in the traditional indian mental framework is both ego (*aham*) and its wider form the self (*ātman*), and since this wider form (*brihattar rūp*) is an all-encompassing form, including nature, animals, human beings, trees and rivers, history and society,[39] there can be no conflict between self and other: "the other is not in a relation of opposition (*virodh*) with the Indian self, the others are part of its "I", of its existence" (*uske astitva, uske 'maĩ' mẽ shāmil haĩ*" (Dh p. 74). The world resulting from this assumingly 'Indian' tradition is indeed a world of inter-relation where everything is linked to and intertwined with the whole universe, is part of it, is in a way it and radically differs from the assumingly western world such as shown in the modern western novel dynamic motion but no orientation and no center. [40]

This world-view is inseparable from a state of detachment, again a word and concept loosely related by the West to the traditional Indian way of life and thought, most commonly with the sadhus who are its popular embodiment. Characterizing this state, Nirmal uses two words, both traditionally specialized in the description of such modes of life (or rather stages of life, namely the last two ashramas, the eremitic *vanaspratha* and the ultimate detachment) aiming at the most desired achievement, *moks a* (*mukti*),[41] the freeing of the self from worldly boundaries, and from the very consciousness of such

boundaries. The words used by Nirmal are *nirvaiyaktik*, detached, and *tat asth*, indifferent, along with their nominal derivation *nirvaiyaktitva, tat  asthtā*. The first word is derived from *vyakti*, individual, singular person. In Nirmal's world, *vyakti* belongs to the world of separate entities (monadic beings) and therefore is the opposite of *manus  ya*, man, human being. *Vyakti* looks towards *aham* (ego), whereas *manus  ya* looks towards *ātmam*,[42] and *manus  yatā* "humanness" only, enables one to reach *sampūrn  tā*, with the feeling of wholeness or holism**.** Achieving the *nirvaiyaktik* state, literally disindividualized, means transcending the boundaries of *vyakti* (egocentered), leaving the worldly distinctive limits and social structures responsible for distinctive differences and categories. It means reaching the world of connectedness where *manus   ya*, humanity in a holistic sense (see below) is available.  From this viewpoint, the creator, creation and creature are no longer distinct entities, in the same way as the viewer, viewed thing and process of vision are fused in oneness.[43] There is no longer a contradiction between the cutting off from the world as in the episode of Allahabad fair or of the drawing lesson, and getting united to the whole universe, a seemingly paradoxical path which is in fact deeply rooted in the high and low Indian traditions of saintliness since the medieval *bhakti* traditions. Similarly, *tat  asthtā*, often translated by "indifference", impartiality, is derived from the word *tat*  , shore, bank of a river or seacoast, and being *tat   asth* means standing on the bank of the river, being on the shore, between earth and sea, on the limit therefore neither in this nor that part of a divided space, connected with both. That is how in Nirmal (as well as in the many various implicit traditions nourishing his world-view, detachment becomes equal to non-separateness and connectedness. [44] This process is obviously made more difficult to grasp in a translated language, such concepts as *aham/ātman, vyakti/manus  ya, nirvaiyaktik, sampūrn  , akhan  d  it,* being ill-rendered by English equivalents such as "I" ou "ego", "self" or "soul", individual/man or human, detached, complete or holistic. As rightly pointed by Nirmal Verma in *Bhārat and Europe* (2000: 72-3), after Coomaraswamy whom he often quotes, such "seminal concepts" are "untranslatable", and their English translation has often been the cause of deep misunderstandings.

Nirmal precisely defines such an opposition (*vyakti / manus  ya, ikāī / sampūrn  tā*) in relation with the two mental attitudes he associates to respectively the

Western novel and specially Saul Bellow on one side, and Indian literature on the other side. If we turn our back to the individualistic mentality of the Western new novel, he says, "we will suddenly feel as if we leave the world of units and arrive into the world of relations. Here all living creatures and animate beings are intertwined, inter-related, and not only those animate beings who breath but also the objects which externally/superficially seem to be inanimate. In this intertwined world, the things are linked with the men, the men with the trees, the trees with the animals, the animals with the flora /vegetation, the flora with the sky, with the rain, with the air. A creation which is living, animate, breathing at every second, vibrating – a creation complete within itself, within which humanity too exists, but the important fact is that humanity is not in the center, is not superior to everything, the measure of everything; it is only related and in its relation(hood) it is not the autonomous unit which the individual has been considered to be till now, on the contrary, it is complete in exactly the same way as the other living beings are complete in their relations, and in the same way as man is not the support of creation, similarly the individual is not the support of man; we leave the world of ends and means and enter the world of holism".[45]

If Nirmal assigns such a potential to literature, and more generally to art, as opposed to the philosopher or the mystic, it is because art in a modern society may assume a function similar to that of myth in a traditional society. This is especially true for the conception of time and motion, so different in the non modern and in the modern mentalities (*cf. supra*). Contemplating the stone sculptures in Elephanta, Nirmal says: "in art there is this immobile speed (*sthir āveg*) where we live in a single time / together, simultaneously, in time and past, life and death, history and eternity (…). It is as if Shiv had centered on his face the male power and the beauty of Shakti, both (centered) on a peaceful, detached, fixed point – in an extraordinary fusion[46] -- which is not simply a halt, but it is such an invisible point (*bindu*) where all motions stop moving"[47]. As the mythic view-point, the aesthetic view-point for Nirmal is connected with the wish for worldly life and desire, made as much precious as the abstract path of the philosopher or the mystic. Hence his protagonists, very much human, suffering and soothing their pain by the discovery of contemplation, but never totally relinquishing the world of humanity, pain and happiness, memory, events and forms (ie: the world of maya). This passion of

life (*āveg*) is simply transcended, by decantation through the fixed gaze of contemplation, into its stable, ultimate or focal, point (*aṭal bindu*).

Now, the last question is how much Indian is this world-view, and symmetrically how much Western is the opposite one (the world of segmentation, units, distinctive categories, logical oppositions, positive orientation, history, etc.). In other words, how solid is the opposition East/West, terms that Nirmal keeps using as commodities although he repeatedly suggests that the holistic view may not be a unique property of India (DH. p.24). It is obvious that "Western" values have to a considerable degree been integrated in the Indian way of looking – leading to a kind of schizophrenic stand, which the author illustrates in a striking way when describing his visit to Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal: on one side the tribal art displaying myth-like creations, on the other the avant-gardist wing displaying modernity quite similar to western contemporary art. A tentative answer to this last question will serve as a conclusion for this stylistic study.

**Conclusion: a genderly ambivalent "orientalism"**

Now coming back to the type of negative statements quoted in the introduction, we may see something else than existential doubt and westernization behind the "vagueness" and shallowness of the characters. Superficially, this disregard for strongly marked figures and rich individualities against an equally rich and significant social landscape, echoes the Western Nouveau Roman or New Wave style, as well as the Indian *Nai Kahānī*, which has been blamed for its westernization. Yet, the specific contextualization of these fuzzy contours disclosed above changes the meaning of this "vagueness" obtained from the low characterization (lack of name, motivations, feelings) of the characters.

"The effect of all this vagueness is a langorous passivity", says trhe Weekly Publisher review (1991). And this term is rightly emphasized by Prasenjit Gupta (2002) in his introduction: "this langorous passivity sounds orientalist in its overtones". However, the way Gupta himself develops "orientalist", by emphasizing the "restraint" as a "manifestation of some essential Indianness",[48] may surprise the reader familiar with Said's notion of "orientalist", but the end of the quote he uses to illustrate this essential indianness makes it clearer: "Restraint is the keynote of Verma's fiction, reflecting the

paradoxical nature of the Indian character: emotional and often volatile, yet diffident to the point of repression".[49] Diffidence, emotionality, volatility (unreliability) indeed fit the conventional stereotype of the oriental nature.

What is generally assumed under the tag « oriental », along with a « langorous passivity », is indeed the feminine, or childish, or both, component in a male subject, therefore weak, self-contradictory, unreliable, deceptive, illogic, unfit for manly pursuits and unaware or not interested in the principle of reality, displaying no ability for mastership and no interest in it. This negative image, strongly present in the nineteenth century colonial discourse, but also internalized in the native reactions to it, relates in fact to a simplified polar opposition. The masculine principle, polarized as superior, is identified with colonial domination, and its « other » with the subjugated weaker principle (female principle, or eventually child world). This construction is in no way specific to the Indian scenery, as Ashish Nandy strongly demonstrates: from times immemorial, the drive for mastery over men proceeds from « a world view which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over the nonhuman and the subhuman, the masculine over the feminine, the adult over the child, the historical over the ahistorical, and the modern or progressive over the traditional or the savage » (Nandy 1998: VI). What may be more specifically Indian is the complex reference in both colonial and colonialized discourse and in the post-colonial reactions to the various layers of the Hindu scriptures and traditions. Kshatriyahood has for instance served as an image of masculinity to be contrasted with the general "regression" and weakness of nineteenth century India.[50] The wish to regain male strength in some of the nineteenth century reformist models is a clear evidence of this internalization of the « oriental » stereotype as well as the opposite attempt to acquire a suitable image according to western values, that is, a more « manly » image : this whole process of redefining Indianness is based on "the perception that the loss of masculinity and cultural regression of the Hindus was due to the loss of the original Aryan qualities which they shared with the Westerners" (Nandy 1998 : 25), which amounts to acknowledge the superiority of the « Western » model.[51] This model ranks first manhood on the hierarchy then womanhood and last effemination in man (*klībatva*).

But the more interesting (and the really specifically « Indian ») reaction to the colonial construction at that time is the Gandhian model. As noted by almost all observers –Nandy quotes mainly Lannoy but others too – Gandhi had in his physical aspect and use of images or symbols a strikingly childlike appearance. His emphasis on passive disobedience too is more on the child/woman side than on the man's side of the colonial polar opposition mentioned above. Instead of opposing the colonial image by asserting the manly values in Indian culture, he subverts it in a double way: within the polar opposition woman/man, he grants superiority to womanhood (*nāritva*) on manhood (*purus atva*), adding a third term at the bottom of the hierarchy, which is *kāpurus atva*, the lack of masculinity or cowardice. The second and for our purpose the more interesting subversion is the second model, which makes both *purushatva* and *nāritva* (equal on the hierarchy) inferior to androgyny, the ability to transcend the man/woman dichotomy. This construction, being borrowed from the great and little traditions of saintliness in India, was really fit to the requirements of Indians in the early twentieth century, hence its strength (Nandy 1998: 52).[52]

This is the model that we find subtly enacted in Nirmal's protagonists and main characters, none of them belonging to the clear-cut categories of adulthood,[53] all of them diffusing this oft noticed « passivity ». It is a striking evidence that both Gandhi and Nirmal in his essays display a very similar world-view in their non modernity: for Gandhi too, time is an all embracing present rather than a succession of clearly oriented events, memory is a collective memory grounded on a diffuse feeling of belonging, rather than on a clearly preserved collection of facts and things "of the past". For him too, myth is indistinct from or superior to historical chronology, "circuminventing, Nandy comments, the unilinear pathway from primitivism to modernity, and from political immaturity to political adulthood". For him too, a certain vagueness, as opposed to the clear objectivity of rationality, characterizes the belonging to a traditional culture, Indian in fact.[54]

Although coined in distinctively Indian words and notions, the general concepts of what is better called non-modernity than pre-modernity are certainly not exclusively Indian nor even Eastern. As Said has shown, this « other » which the colonial discourse has constructed into the image of the non-west has once been part of the medieval European consciousness. Although it is far more present and still vivacious in India than

in Europe in spite of the internalization of the Western model of modernity there, it may not have completely been uprooted in Europe itself, and this is why reading and translating Nirmal to-day in Europe is also maintaining alive this part of our non modern selves: reading our own story against the grain of the modernist revolution and postmodernist market hegemony.

## Notes

[1] See section 4.  A significant selection of these essays has been translated in English under the suggestive title *India and Europe* (Verma 2000).

[2] In a conference in Paris by Alok Rai during the festival Belles Etrangères in 2002, who saw this radical opposition between Premchand, naturally rooted in the traditions of India yet writing in a « progressive » style inspired by the Western social realism, et Nirmal Verma, uprooted and therefore in need of inventing roots.

[3] Ranging from Indranath Madan (1966: 136-38), Lakshmisagar Varshneya (1970: 69 sq), Chandrakanta Bandivadekar (1977: 399) to, more recently, Jaidev (1993: 48-49).

[4] Similarly the German critic Gaeffke, a classic reference, speaks of a « language of the existentialist post-war jargon » (1978: 69).

[5] Review of *The Crows of Deliverance*, *Publishers Weekly* 238.36: 53, August 8, 1991.

[6] p. 19. My own translation, in order to keep a very literal and almost word-to-word equivalent, including punctuation, which is generally never kept in the translations (an exception is the French *Le Toit de tôle rouge / Lāl Tīn kī chat* at Actes Sud, 2004, but not *Un Bonheur en lambeaux / Ek chithrā sukh*, Actes Sud, 2000). Kuldip Singh's translation gives: "Bitty was hanging clothes out to dry (…)", the '*aur maĩ*' sequence is skipped.

[7] See the analysis of the structure of the novel in Montaut (2000). One of the threads linking memory, death, rebirth and vision with writing (and art) is the diary given by the young boy's mother, whose death he repeatedly sees again and again.

[8] Note on the transcription of Hindi sounds: *ā, ī, ū* transcribes long vowels, underscibed dots transcribe retroflex consonants and the tilde ( ˜ ) is for nasalization

[9] Most of these devices are omitted in the English translation: "Lying on his bed, the boy played at his secret game. He imagined that a part of him was outside, looking in at Bitty and Dairy, the diffuse afternoon light, the ceiling, as if he'd seen none of these before. At

school, his art teacher used to say : 'Look, this thing on the table is an apple. Look at it carefully. Look at it straight so you see nothing else whatever.' Slowly, then, he would feel hi seye draw to a needle-point and stick into the apple even as the rest of him seemed to fall away. The other boys in the class, the desks, the chairs – all disappeared. Only the apple remained. In its nakedness, fullness, wholeness. It was all so frightening and wonderful, as if he were seeing an apple for the first time ever, as if a blindfold had come unstuck." (pp. 14-145).

[10] *Sīdhā*, with long first vowel, is the tadbhav for *siddh* (with the classical vowel lengthening compensating the simplification of medial consonant cluster)

[11] *Cf.* the eight, later nine and eleven, fundamental emotions in the classical theories of rasa, in the most clearly presented synthesis of Kunjuni Raja.

[12] Nirmal Verma has always had a special interest in painting, partly out of a personal taste, and partly out of a family surrounding since his brother is the well-known painter Ram Kumar.

[13] Fully explicit in Nirmal's essays (see section 4), but showing without metadiscourse in his fiction.

[14] The writing alternately focuses on the same character as a first person narrator or as a third person observer in the sequence.

[15] "His mastery of succinct details, controlled epiphany, and impressionistic evocation of setting is virtually impossible to emulate" (Aamer Hussein 1991: 22).

[16] There is a definite decrescendo in the structure, the first section occupying about half of the book and the last one a bare fifteenth of it.

[17] Where there is an additional nasalization (*thī̃* vs participle *thī*), similar to the simple past form compared with the past (accomplished) participle. As a predicate, the form is homonymic to the counterfactual mood (Montaut 2003, 2004b).

**[18]** Montaut 2004: 100-104. Van Olphen (1970) after Lienhard (1964) **a**nd Platts (1876 [1967]: 145) makes it a form conveying habits, routine, remote past or duration. Similarly, Nespital (1980) labels it "imperfect habitual" in his 39 "temporal grammemes". "Routine imperfective" in McGregor, the form is according to him used to describe "not actions presented as actually occurring, but actions presented as those which would typically occur in given circumstances" (1976: 171). Kellogg (1876: 233-234) is as often the most perceptive, both in calling the form an "indefinite imperfect" and emphasizing the lack of "reference to any particular time", with no equivalent in English, so that "*maĩ ātā hū̃*" means according to his translation as well "I came" as "I would come".

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[19] Which, as is well known, are represented by a specifically marked form, the grammaticalized "frequentative" aspect with *karnā* (« do ») as an auxiliary following the main verb in the past participle.

[20] The printed translation gives: "a tin letter box hung on one nail from the gate, like a dead bird suspended upside down. It creaked rustily, rocked by the wind", p. 4.

[21] Which is not reproduced in the printed translation: "Everything was ready : the hold-all, bundles, and one suitcase", p. 3.

[22] Even within a series of apparently similar reminiscences, as in page 17 when the little boy remembers all the facts related to the autumnal exodus from the hill station, all processes in the short form are in a way inter-changeable, (*utrāī shurū ho jātī, cīṛ kī sūiyā̃ dikhāī detī̃, pīlī paṛ jātī̃, shahar ko dekhtā*), but the one in the long form, closing a quite long enumeration, relates to a very salient fact (*pitā kā cehrā jhā̃ktā thā*): father's face has so much saliency in Chote's imagination that it breaks the continuity and prevents the use of the short forms which blurs differential features. Both sequences are respectively as follows in K. Singh's translation : "[Chote saw what looked like swarms of ants] marching downhill in single files among yellowing pines, away towards distant cities » and « behind which peered one face : his Babuji's", p. 10.

[23] This short form in a dependant clause is located by the long imperfect in the main clause.

[24] "Seeing the lit house, Kaya recalled a picture she had seen in an old book – of a ship anchored in darkness. In the clear November night the house loooked like that ship. The long veranda with folding chairs set out on it was a deck. In the summer Chacha played card here with his friends and treated them to food and drink, but they left for the plains by September. With their departure, the veranda started looking deserted. The empty chairs, the card table, the flowerpots: the ruins of a lost summer. Chacha now sat among these alone, nursing his drink, looking at the Sanjauli lights glimmering between two hills", in K. Singh's translation (p. 108-9).

[25] *Cf.* conclusion. *Cf.* also Rushdie, in a totally different way, in *Imaginary Homelands*, specially the chapter "Is Nothing sacred?".

[26] "[She moved as if mesmerized], looking neither at her left nor right as though she had picked up … the scent of the cache she had been looking for all her life".

[27] "All this I can see again, recall, repeat to myself. There was Ginny crawling down the slope, stopping short of the railway track" (p. 38 in K. Singh's translation).

[28] "In a daze I realized that I too was screaming – even as that scream tore through me, I felt detached from myself, listening to it from the outside".

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[29] "Leaving behind nothing, a nothingness, time spinning to a standstill, a living creature running for its life between the rails, a little ball of wool", in K. Singh's translation.

[30] "All of which is a memory, a nightmare that keeps returning. I return to this day, and wait again by the gaping tunnel : first there is the smoke, then the roar of the wheels, the impatient panicky call from behind the bushes – Ginny ! Ginny ! Ginny ! But that, too, subsides with the dying whimper" --

[31] Making present in the meaning the French philosopher Levinas gives to the word "presence".

[32] Again a quite different translation in K. Singh's: "A Lama I had not seen before rambled along… ".

[33] If such a thing as "Western" has any meaning.

[34] Even if this ethos may seem vague and more related to feelings than to objectivity (*aspas t   bhāvnā*), undefined (*aparibhāSit*) or at least not allowing historical definitions (*aithihāsik paribhāSāen*). DH, p. 70. DH will now on refer to the Essay "*D  halān se utarte hue*" in Verma 1991, and SH to "*Shatābdī ke ḍhalte hue ḍhalān*" in Verma 1995.

[35] *jo sahaj rūp se paramparāgat hotā hai use atīt kī koī āvashyaktā nahī̃ hai. Merī yah bhāvnā ki main bhārtīya sanskriti kā ãg hū̃, keval islie nahī̃ hai ki maĩ zamīn ke ek ãsh se juṛā hū̃ jise bhārat kahte haĩ balki islie ki main ek aise samay mẽ jītā hū̃ jo cirantan rūp se merā samkālīn hai* (DH, pp. 70-71).

[36] We may add that Freud (1929 / 2002) also, like Nirmal in the end of this essay, explicitly states the analogy between this primitive feeling (oceanic feeling, refusing the limits between inside and outside, here and there, past and present, etc .) and art (also love).

[37] Both time and space perception relate to a form of consciousness (*cetnā*) which is indivisible, unbreakable (*akhaṇḍit*), which sees everything together, tearing through the limits of space and time (*jo kāl aur spes kī sīmāõ ko bhedkar sab kuch eksāth dekhtī hai*, p. 16 "*Kāl aur smriti*").

[38] An exactly similar « lesson » is proposed by the abstract painter Raza (2002, 2004).

[39] In N. Verma's (1991) terms: « but there is a wider, superior form of ego, *aham*, which we can call *ātman*, which is not in a relation of dual opposition with the phenomenal contingent world (*samsār*) : it is, in its intrinsic truth, an element of this supreme absolute (*param*), which is somewhat larger, more diffuse and universal than social reality, to which belongs the entire nature (*prakriti*), the whole of living creatures, time and history ». See also the essay "*Kāl aur srijan*", DH p. 13sq.

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[40] Either socio-historical and cut off from inner realities or ego-centred and cut off from others and the world, a kind of double bind that Nirmal lengthily comments as the dead-end of the modern novel (DH pp. 22-25).

[41] Both words derive from a common root.

[42] In this context, *aham* is defined as "*ego kī chalnāoN aur bhrāntiyoN*" (DH).

[43] Needless to emphasize the difficulties raised by such a view for a rational stand, difficulties echoed by the metaphoric formulations in philosophy and mystics, since the very use of words and sentence implies at least distinctive categories (subject / object, entity / process).

[44] I emphasized the most radical contradiction (depiction of characters cut off from others, the world) but the widely commented solitude (*akelāpan*) favoured by many characters in Nirmal is part of the cutting off too.

[45] *… to hamẽ sahsā lagegā māno ham ikāiyõ kī duniyā se nikalkar sambandhõ kī duniyā mẽ cale āe haĩ. Yahā̃ sab jīv aur prāṇī ek-dūsre mẽ antargumphit haĩ, anyonyāshrit haĩ, na keval ve prāṇī jo prāṇvān haĩ, balki ve cīzẽ bhī jo ūpar se niṣprāṇ (inanimate) dikhāyī detī haĩ. Is antargumphit duniyā mẽ cīzẽ ādmiyõ se juṛī haĩ, ādmī peṛon se, peṛ jānvarõ se, jānvar vansaspati se, aur vanaspati ākāsh se, bārish se, havā se. Ek jīvant, prāṇvān, pratipal sans letī, spandit hotī huī sriṣṭi – apne mẽ sampūrṇ sriṣṭi jiske bhītar manus  ya bhī hai, kintu mahatvapūrṇ bāt yah hai ki manuṣya sriṣṭi ke kendr mẽ nahī hai, sarvopari nahī̃ hai, sab cīzõ kā māpdaṇḍ nahī̃ hai; vah sirf sambandhit hai aur anpne sambandh mẽ vah svāyatt ikāī nahī̃ hai, jise ab tak ham vyakti mānte āe the, balki vah vaise hī sampūrṇ hai jaise dūsre jīv apne sambandhõ mẽ sampūrṇ haĩ, jis tarah manuṣya sriṣṭi kā dhyay nahī̃ hai usī tarah manuṣya kā dhyay vyakti honā nahī̃ hai, ham sādhan aur sādhyõ kī duniyā se nikalkar sampūrṇtā kī duniyā mẽ ā jāte haĩ* (Dh p. 25-6).

[46] Literally "absorption": *tanmaytā*, a technical term and concept in classical aesthetics.

[47] *Kalā mẽ vah sthir āveg hai, jahā̃ ham ek sāth, ek hī samay mẽ kāl aur kālātīt, jīvan aur mrityu, itihās aur shāshvat mẽ bās karte haĩ (…) Shiv ne māno apne chehare par puruṣ ke vaibhav aur shakti ke saundarya donõ ko ek shānt, nirvaiyaktik, aṭal bindu par kendrit kar lyā hai – ek asādhāraṇ tanmayatā mẽ – jo mahaz ṭahahrāv nahī̃ hai, balki vah ek aisā adrishya bindu hai, jahā̃ sab gatiyā̃ nishcal ho jātī haĩ* Dh p. 14.

[48] This "langorous passivity" sounds Orientalist in its undertones; even those who appreciate Nirmal-ji's fiction sometimes connect the "restraint" to some kind of essential "Indianness".

[49] Quoted by P. Gupta from Aamer Hussein, "Visions of India, Voices of Exile", *Times Literary Supplement* 46.19 (Oct. 11, 1991: 22).

[50] Whereas, as is now well-known, the « real » tradition in classical scriptures rather emphasized the power of shakti and the female principle as primary and superior (Malamoud 2005).

[51] See Nandy's account of the « kshatriyazation » of Krishna in Bankimchandra (25sq), of the herioization Ravana for his masculine vigour, his warriorhood, his sense of politics and historicity (20sq), of Dayanand Saraswati's constructs.

[52] While the first one enabled Gandhi to ask his followers to display the courage of the passive resistance and never fear physical or mental authority.

[53] The two novels studied here have child or adolescent protagonists. The last one (*Antim Aranya*, The Last Forest, with a word for forest which specifically points to the forest as the space of eremitic life and detachment, beyond social categories and rules), stages an old dying man, and as the main protagonist, his « governess » who is a young man.

[54] Nirmal's word: *aspaShTtā*. See also Madan 1977 who defines the « quest for hinduism » as an open-ended, fluid, cultural self-definition.

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