

“These Things Don’t Go Away”: Jeffrey Eugenides’s “Fresh Complaint” - a Postcolonial Reading

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“These Things Don’t Go Away”: Jeffrey Eugenides’s “Fresh Complaint” - a Postcolonial Reading

Following a six year publishing break in the aftermath of his novel *The Marriage Plot* that appeared in 2011, the story collection *Fresh Complaint* was published in 2017 and contains ten stories focusing on Jeffrey Eugenides’ core topics of interest: the impossibility of coherent identity construction, personal and social loneliness and isolation, and the frailness and ephemerality of human connections. “Fresh Complaint”, the story that gives the collection its title, offers a postcolonial image of twenty-first century America, India and England, while keeping with the theme dearest to Eugenides’ heart: the gasping void that fills all human interaction and communication. The story masterfully thematizes one of postcolonialism’s central concerns, the one of the generational and cultural gap between first and second generation immigrants. The present paper’s attempt is to offer a postcolonial reading of Eugenides’ text, while also placing it in relation to his previous writings and main thematic concerns.

Keywords: Jeffrey Eugenides, “Fresh Complaint”, postcolonial, identity, colonialism, white guilt, first- and second-generation immigrants



Following a six year publishing break in the aftermath of his novel *The Marriage Plot* that appeared in 2011, the story collection *Fresh Complaint* was published in 2017 and contains ten stories focusing on Eugenides’ core topics of interest: the impossibility of coherent identity construction, personal and social loneliness and isolation, and the frailness and ephemerality of human connections. “Fresh Complaint”, the story that gives the collection its title, is the story of the middle-aged (in the full mid-life crisis sense of the term) university professor Matthew, caught in the loneliness and despair of both monotonous married life and intellectual work, and the equally desperate Prakrti, an Indian-American teenage girl, who plots an elaborate plan to seduce and accuse Matthew of rape in order

to avoid the arranged marriage to an Indian boy her family plans for her. The story abounds in colonial and postcolonial imagery, symbolism and discourse, and takes up one of Eugenides’ preferred topics: the one of the possibility and impossibility of coherent, stable, identity construction, especially for immigrants and individuals of mixed cultural background. The story makes for an inspiring and challenging read, especially in the context of present-day concerns such as migration, cultural appropriation, white guilt, or the #metoo movement.

“Fresh Complaint” opens in England, and navigates between the British Isles, America and India, offering leaps back and forth in time and from one main character to the other, in a whirlwind of contradictory

impressions, emotions and realizations. When the story opens, Matthew has already been accused of rape and is hiding in England in order to avoid prosecution in America, where his wife and children are eagerly, and angrily, waiting for his return. England is succinctly sketched with obvious white colonial undertones: “By the time that Matthew learns that the charges have been dropped (...) he’s been back in England for four months. (...) Ruth and Jim have bought a house in Dorset (...) it’s full of things that Matthew remembers from his London childhood (...) familiar objects leap out at him: the carved figurine of the Alpine hiker, in lederhosen, purchased on a family trip to Switzerland” (*Fresh Complaint*, 239). The colonial imagery and symbolism are obvious in this scene: Matthew’s orientation in space is aided by familiar objects which bear obvious white colonial connotations: London, the Alps, Switzerland, the lederhosen. Matthew is placed from the very beginning clearly in a colonial, white supremacist context - a runaway from the law stranded in England, the only objects which offer him comfort and solace are those obviously tied to Europe’s colonial past. England is further pictured through the narrator’s lens as a space characterized by claustrophobia, death and decay: the cobblestone lane winding down to the cemetery, the moorlands Matthew walks on, the lyrics of the song *Let England Shake* taking about “the English dead, dark places of sacred memory” - it seems almost as if England, and Europe implicitly, are a dreamland in which Matthew is desperately searching for points of stability and orientation (240)¹.

From this point, the story leaps back in time eleven months to Matthew’s lecture in America, ahead of which he is sitting in a small cafe in Delaware. This is the moment of the encounter between Matthew and the sixteen-year-old Prakrti, who makes use of a fake identity she had been jokingly indulging in with her friend Kylie during their spare time (Jasmine, the college student from Queens) to lure Matthew into a conversation. The encounter exposes strong colonial undertones, not only through the lens of Matthew, the middle-aged white male intellectual’s, implied ‘superiority’ towards the brown immigrant undergrad, but also and primarily when considering Matthew’s first impressions of the girl, delivered through powerful colonialist language: “A dark-haired girl in a baggy sweatshirt, carrying a backpack (...)” (241). The dark hair is the first element the narrator uses to describe Prakrti. The more detailed description that follows bears not only colonialist, but also sexist undertones: “She pushed out her chest to show off the college seal on her sweatshirt” (241). The colonialist, white supremacist discourse reaches its peak in the final lines on Prakrti’s description, where Matthew perceives her as “unclean” (“a general sense that clung to her of undergraduate uncleanliness”, 241), while projecting

all classic stereotypes of the Indian woman unto her: “The girl reminded him of a figure in a Hindu miniature. Her dark lips, her arching nose with its flared nostrils, and most of all her starting eyes, which were a color that might only exist in a painting (...) made the girl look like (...) a dancing gopi, or a child saint venerated by the masses.” (241-242). Matthew’s perception of Prakrti bears all the signs of colonial prejudice, superiority and objectification. He reduces the girl to her mere physicality, looking up from his laptop only to see “what she looked like from behind” (244), ignoring her desire for an intellectual discussion (“Matthew was away from home on business, with free time on his hands. He didn’t want to spend it serving as an undergraduate advisor.”, 243), and categorizing her yet again according to his prejudiced, intellectually biased views: “Every class he taught had at least one pushy kid in it. (...) This girl’s intensity (...) was a thing he recognized.” (243). Thus, from the beginning of the story, Prakrti is reduced to her race, ethnicity and sexuality and regarded as an academic impostor, all within the few minutes of her brief first encounter with Matthew. She is basically invisible to Matthew, who only looks up to her out of sexual curiosity.²

That Prakrti is or indirectly perceives herself as a victim of racist and colonialist views is evident also in the story’s second episode, which details the girl’s situation at school (where all religious holidays except Diwali are observed (“It wasn’t fair. Even though a third of the kids at her school were Indian, Diwali wasn’t an official holiday.”, 244), and at home, where her parents plan a surprise trip to India to arrange her marriage to an Indian boy she has never met. It is in this episode that the identity construction issue, the topic dearest to Eugenides’ heart³, surfaces strongly. As a second-generation immigrant, Prakrti finds herself caught between her mother’s love and longing for India and Indian traditions, and her own desire to blend in with American culture. Like most second-generation immigrants, she is neither entirely American, nor entirely Indian, and exposes a fractured, contradictory, conflictual identity⁴. During her trip to India, Prakrti often feels out of place and cannot connect in any way to the customs, traditions and people she encounters: “It wasn’t Prakrti’s fault that her grandparents seemed strange and attenuated, and yet she knew that to publicize this fact would put her in a bad light.” (245). A highly symbolic moment is the one when, observing the Diwali tradition, Prakrti, her sister and her cousin, are given the task of making the goddess Lakshmi’s footprints, by stepping into trays of moistened powder laid at the front door and then stepping inside, creating two sets of footprints throughout all rooms, in order to bring prosperity to the house. Past and future meet and intertwine in this scene, with the young generation recreating the footsteps of the old one - but

Eugenides makes it painfully clear that the young girls, especially the Americanized Prakrti, feel no connection whatsoever to the traditions and mechanically perform a ritual they neither understand nor are truly interested in. They may physically walk the same path, but mentally, emotionally and culturally, their steps lead in a different direction⁵. The gasping abyss between the young and the old, between past and future, is evident also in the scene where Prakrti is harassed by her elderly female relatives, whom she cannot even properly understand, let alone relate to: "A group of old women, white-haired and loud, wanted a piece of her, too. They clustered around her with their sagging breasts and bellies, and shouted questions in Bengali. Whenever Prakrti didn't understand something - which was most of the time - they shouted louder, only to give up, finally, and shake their heads, amused and appalled by her American ignorance." (246-247). Not even the Diwali nighttime celebrations can impress Prakrti, who reduces the entire event to a "glittery nonsense" (247). She is briefly impressed by the sheer number of attendees, stating that "the unity was impressive" (247) - but even this impression fleets quickly when she realizes that "everything that was going into the water (...) would decompose by tomorrow morning, the entire blazing ritual winking out and leaving no trace." (247). The ephemerality of it all hits Prakrti with full force: "You lived, you burned, you spread your little light - then poof." (247). Hit by this disillusioning realization, the girl finds herself drawn to the Western idea of living life to the fullest and taking control of her own existence: "She didn't plan on dying for a long time. Before she did, she wanted to do something with her life." (247-248)⁶. The Indian episode of the story ends with the scene of Prakrti's mother attempting an arranged marriage for her daughter. The scene is ripe with colonial imagery: the man sitting cross-legged in the corner of the room is described as 'the kind of man you expected to encounter in India. A guru. Or a politician.' (249). Prakrti is offered Indian sweets and is "sick of them. But she ate them to be polite." (249), while secretly wishing she could text her American friend Kylie to describe the psychological torture she is undergoing.

The third episode switches to Matthew's lecture about gravitational waves, that he delivers to a half full auditorium made up primarily of seventy- and eighty-year olds who are attending merely in order to have "something to talk about afterward at dinner" (250). The decay and degradation of the white western world are evident in this scene, and manifest themselves through the obvious lack of interest of the attendees, who only want to have their books signed. The old age of the participants, the general atmosphere of boredom and disinterest, as well as Matthew's fatigue ("(...) drained by the procession of old, haggard faces", 251)

and chronic loneliness, contrast sharply with Prakrti's exotic charm, youth, and vitality. The girl appears at the book signing and a sexually charged scene occurs between her and Matthew, when she bends over with her notebook to have it signed by him, with her long black hair flooding the table, and her suggestively telling him: "Oh, God! Why don't you just sign my body?" (252). Her request recalls the colonial depersonalization and appropriation of the colonial subject's bodies⁷, and also bears undertones of the torture device in Franz Kafka's "The Penal Colony". Colonialism and white supremacy have left their deep imprint on the colonized's bodies, minds and souls - like a tattoo, the colonial experience remains forever etched in the existence of the individuals and nations subjected to it. Prakrti's tragedy is that she is subjected to colonialist violence from both sides: Matthew, who reduces her to the status of an attractive but dumb and pushy brown college girl, and her family who in their turn reduce her to a mere merchandise to be traded off to an unknown family in India. In both cases the woman is reduced to her body, which is 'marked', traded with, and ultimately owned by those around her. The body symbolism appears also in the awkward seduction scene at the hotel, where Prakrti's body language obviously points to a lack of consent on the girl's part - Matthew however consciously chooses to ignore the obvious and indirectly tries to persuade her: "She didn't meet his eyes or say a word, merely unshouldered her backpack onto the floor and stood with her head down. She didn't even take off her coat. Matthew asked if she wanted something to drink. She said no. Her nervousness, her possible reluctance to be there, had the effect of making him want to reassure or persuade her." (270). In the end of the scene, Prakrti listens to her body and tells Matthew: "I can't do this" (...) I changed my mind." (271). Once again, the girl is reduced to her body, to her corporality - Matthew sees her as a body only, and she listens to the voice of her body which tells her not to go further in her attempt.

Twice in the story Prakrti is shown reading or writing an essay on *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel she cannot really connect with ideologically - one of the story's greatest ironies, considering that both Prakrti and Hester Prynne are victims of the patriarchal, oppressive communities they live in. So is Prakrti's mother - at least this is what her daughter envisions her to be when imagining her mother's wedding night, forced to have intercourse with a stranger, to submit to "an accounting student (...) [with] his breath still smelling of the American fast food he'd wolfed down before getting on the plane to fly to India." (261). The American fast food breath is a symbol of all immigrants' impossibility to decide between their two backgrounds and their two conflicting identities. Furthermore, it is apparent from Dev's letters and emails that what he is

actually interested in is not Prakrti, but the possibility of moving to the US, of owning a car there, etc. While Prakrti's mother dreams of returning to India with the help of her daughter's arranged marriage, the husband she picked actually dreams about using his future wife in order to seek a better life in America.

There is quite a lot of (concealed!) talk of racial and cultural superiority in "Fresh Complaint". Not only Matthew feels superior towards Prakrti, but Prakrti also does towards her Indian cousins and her future husband Dev - in spite of the fact that 2017 India is more developed than her American hometown, her cousins possess gadgets superior to the ones she owns, and the boys in her family dress exactly like the boys in her school, just better. Dev does not manage to escape Prakrti's colonial perception, and her description of him does not fall short of a full-fledged racial slur: "She knew it was him by his pained, overeager expression. Dev stood (...) before the convoluted limbs of a banyan tree. He was skinny in a developing-world way, as though deprived of protein as a child. (...) His smile was crooked and his black hair shiny with oil." (254). In a similar manner, Kylie describes her boyfriend Ziad (the boy's name suggests an immigrant background as well) by comparing him to a dog: "I don't know why I like him", Kylie said. "We used to have this Newfoundland, Bartleby. Ziad sort of reminds me of him." (256). Prakrti herself is compared to an animal by Matthew, when he tries to recall their brief sexual encounter: "Thinking back to that night, the thing he remembers most clearly is the way the girl's stomach quivered when he heaved himself on top of her. It had felt as if a small animal, a gerbil or a hamster, were being crushed between them, and trying to wriggle free." (278).⁸ Prakrti harbors the same feelings of superiority towards her Indian school mates whom she collectively refers to as "the Hymens": the girls from ultra-conservative Indian families who lead a "quarantined existence" and are "totally submissive" (255)⁹. Racial discourse can be identified also in the restaurant scene where Prakrti first texts Matthew and initiates a pseudo-romance with him. Matthew is as usual bored with his white intellectual entourage consisting of feminists, bald economists and a "birdlike woman with pale skin, dressed in a pantsuit" (258). In contrast to these, Prakrti's (virtual) presence creates a "rosiness (...) a slow, flavorful, oozing light invading the restaurant almost like a liquid" (258). The whiteness and paleness of Matthew's western world of cold intellectualism recalls death and decay, while the rosiness he associates with Prakrti symbolizes youth, life and vitality, and last but not least, the eros. While Matthew's world seems entirely desexualized, Prakrti stands in his eyes for the sexual thrill he had lost hope of ever regaining. Once again he reduces the girl to her sexuality - for him she is merely an object meant to break his existential and

sexual fatigue. Colonial depersonalization occurs when Matthew thinks to himself that he cannot even recall how Prakrti looks like, and that she could be "any woman, or all women" (259).

The issue of white guilt is taken up in the story both from Prakrti's, and from Matthew's perspective. For Prakrti, Matthew is the perfect victim for her plan of escaping the arranged marriage her mother has planned for her: he is white, he is old, and he is married: "Finally, an older, married man would deserve what he had coming to him." (274). For the girl, the man's guilt is not even up to debate, it is an existential given: "She was no longer certain what had happened that night at the hotel. She knew the man was guilty. But she was unsure if she had the law on her side." (281). Prakrti's disdain for whites is evident in the scene where she role-plays with her friend Kylie in a cafe, pretending that they are college students and assuming fake identities: "White people can be so dumb, no offense," she said, the first time she'd gotten away with this. "They probably think all Indian girls are named after spices. Maybe I should be Ginger. Or Cilantro." "Or Curry. 'Hi, my name's Curry. I'm hot.'" (265). It is in this scene that the story's title makes most sense: Prakrti's is a chronic, by no means a fresh, complaint. The racism, prejudice, depersonalization and objectification she has encountered throughout her life are what ultimately fuel her desire for revenge - her mother's idea to marry her off to a stranger is merely the last drop in an already overflowing vessel of discontent. For Matthew on the other hand, he is nothing more than the (almost) innocent victim of a mentally and emotionally deranged young woman, and his view is upheld also by other men around him, who either envy him for the exciting sexual encounter, or try to play down his guilt: "Jim waved this away with the smoke from his cigar. "OK, so you're not a saint. But you were a good husband, compared to most. And, in this case, you were enticed." (264). However, after the discussion with Jim, Matthew finds himself wondering if he is truly as innocent as he would like to believe: "Matthew wonders about that word. Enticed. Was it true? (...) In any event, you couldn't be enticed by something you didn't already want. That was the real problem. His concupiscence. That chronic, inflammatory complaint." (264-265). It is in this scene that the reader notices the chronic nature of both character's complaints, Prakrti's and Matthew's. Their ultimate conflict is not due to themselves as individuals, but should rather be seen as a clash of two opposing worlds, world views, life experiences, frustrations, cultures, and last but certainly not least, genders. No complaint in this world is ever truly fresh, is what Eugenides seems to imply. As a postmodern writer who believes that everything that could have been said and done has been said and done in the

past, he argues that every present conflict has deep past roots and that in order to understand and possibly heal an individual's present discontent, one needs to familiarize oneself with the past discontent(s) of both this individual and his/her community. There is female frustration due to gender inequality, male frustration due to female rejection, postcolonial frustration due to the West's colonialist and imperialist past, immigrant frustration due to the impossibility of identity construction - and all these come into play in seemingly individual conflicts which actually have nothing to do with the individuals themselves. A fresh complaint in legal terms is a complaint formulated immediately after the offense occurs - but in this story Prakrti postpones her official complaint for a month, which makes her story less credible¹⁰; furthermore the story symbolically alludes to the chronic nature of almost all human complaints, and argues that every present conflict is the result of a past complaint. In addition to this, a postcolonial reading of the story suggests that the 'complaint' of colonialism lingers long after colonialism as a geographical reality has vanished - the wounds are still open, the resentment strong, the desire for revenge ever-present.

In the end of the story, Matthew tries to erase this shameful episode from his life by deleting the texts between Prakrti and himself, but as he does this he feels as if he is "fingering a wound" (284). His, and the narrator's, ultimate conclusion is that "these things don't go away." (284). The colonial legacy will project its dark shadows over many centuries to come, and past oppression will continue to produce future violent resistance and discontent. The only glimpse of hope in the story's end is the image of Matthew's children, Jacob and Hazel, who, in spite of everything, recognize their father in the hotel lobby and run towards him. The west will have to reconcile its present and future to its past if it wants to stand any chance of reconciling itself to the rest of the world. Chronic complaints must be addressed before any fresh ones can be tackled. In the end, the only certainty we have is that we have a moral and historical duty to keep trying.

Notes:

1. See also Gurminder K. Bhambra's argument according to which Europe is less of a concrete physical space and more of an abstract idea: "Europe has often been understood in terms of being more an idea than a place". A similar viewpoint is upheld also by Hayden White who states that "Europe has never existed anywhere except in discourse" (67).

2. Consider also Helen Bradford's discussion of the invisibility of women in imperial historiography: "For a number of years, scholars have been pointing accusing

fingers at (...) imperial historiography for widespread neglect of both women and gender. Female invisibility, it has been argued, is the most dominant trend (...)"

3. Identity construction is at the core of both *Middlesex* and *The Virgin Suicides*, Eugenides' most successful novels.

4. See also Salman Rushdie's brilliant description of the immigrant experience in *Imaginary Homelands*: "We are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions." (12)

5. Let us also recall the final scene in *Middlesex*, where Cal is the one who has to guard the entrance of the house to prevent his father's spirit from entering it - another symbolical encounter between past and present. Cal, who is designated by the family to fulfill this task (that only a man can take on) is however a hermaphrodite, who was born as Calliope, and whose very existence goes against any concept of tradition.

6. A phrase commonly attributed to the notorious terrorist Osama bin Laden is: "We love death as you love life." It is often quoted in order to highlight the West's attachment to earthly existence, as opposed to the Oriental disdain for life and focus on the religious concept of eternal life. Prakrti opposes her love of life with her mother's passive acceptance of it.

7. See also Elleke Boehmer's discussion of the "silent, wounded colonial body": The silenced, wounded body of the colonized is a pervasive figure in colonial and postcolonial discourses, but its valences differ significantly. In the process of postcolonial rewriting the trope of the dumb, oppressed body undergoes significant translations."

8. See also Sune Borkfelt's discussion of the interrelation between the way European colonizers viewed the non-European colonized and animals: "Through history, the differences between human bodies have always been used as a means of defining and justifying unequal power relations between different groups of human beings. Not least, bodily differences such as skin colour, height, facial features, dress and supposed sexual or dietary habits, have been used by European powers seeking to justify colonial expansion and imperialism through centuries. Often overlooked in this connection are the intersections between European descriptions and treatment of Non-European humans on one hand and human, especially European, views on and treatment of non-human animals on the other."

9. See also the case of the Lisbon girls in *The Virgin Suicides*, who finally commit collective suicide due to their mother's Puritanical upbringing and her refusal to allow the girls to lead the life of a normal teenager.

10. It is interesting to read Eugenides' story in light of the recent #metoo movement and the wave of sexual harassment and rape allegations which have flooded Western media - many of these accusations being formulated many years after the supposed sexual assault happened (see also the Blasey-Kavanaugh scandal).



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