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Introduction

> *When I was outside yesterday at the meeting with groups of young women and they were talking about imperfect solidarities, I said "Do you know that is the best kind of solidarity? Because the perfect solidarity can end up being a tyranny." So we have to also learn how to be in solidarity when we disagree with each other about certain things, or agree with each other about certain things—we have to be in solidarity which is not completely anarchic, which is useless, but also not completely hierarchical* [...]
>
> **"Arundhati Roy: Imperfect Solidarities!" 2019**

If anglophone literatures and cultures worldwide once sprang from a contested terrain of solidarities emerging in the shadow of colonialism, many of them have been struggling with the legacies of these solidarities, with ideals of liberation that have turned into new forms of oppression, and with the clamorous or muted appeals of old and new victimhoods for more than half a century now. Ethnic, racial, or national victimhood and solidarity have been invoked in a cynical politics of exclusion all over the globe—from an aggressive assertion of Hindu hegemony in India to a militant Buddhism in the guise of nationalism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar or the abuse of anticolonialism as an ideology of oppression in Zimbabwe. In a quite different setting, victimhood has also become a mainspring of the anxiety-infested xenophobia spawned by right-wing populism in contemporary Europe and North America. At the same time, the oppression of minorities and the plight and agency of political, economic, and environmental refugees has generated new forms of sociality as well as solidarity.

While the twenty-first century has seen the exhaustion of 'enchanted' or 'unconditional' solidarities rallying around idealized images of oppressed 'postcolonial' or 'third world' collectivities, sections of academia continue to see 'resistance' as a form of catharsis, or even a panacea for a myriad of victimhoods and grievances. Yet anglophone literary texts and cultural

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productions themselves have long since engaged in self-reflexive encounters that have undermined trite formulations of perpetrators and victims and have explored the tribulations of what Michael Rothberg (2019) has called 'implicated subjects': all modern subjects are involuntarily implicated both in the history of oppression and victimhood, often simultaneously—not only in the formerly colonizing, but also in the formerly colonized regions of the world. More often than not, these implications, which call for a 'disenchanted' or 'conditional' solidarity that holds the abuses of victimhood in the name of agency accountable, cut across habitual East/West or North/South divides: as large parts of the world are rightly admiring civil resistance against the current military rulers of Myanmar and deploring the overthrow of Aung San Suu Kyi, the memory of how her own government was complicit with the persecution of the Rohingya minority in Burma seems to be waning. At the same time, European admonitions to respect democracy and protect the Rohingya (and other) refugees are timely but hardly beyond reproof, given the background of calculated misery in its refugee camps in the Mediterranean, unceasing daily deaths at its external frontiers, and the seemingly inexorable rise of a rabid anti-migrant populism promising a return to ethnocultural purity in many parts of Europe. More recently—after most essays assembled in this volume were written—the deadly Hamas attack on Israeli civilians in 2023 and the ensuing Israeli war in Gaza killing tens of thousands of non-combatants have given rise to a flurry of solidarities that, often enough, demand an unconditional commitment either to the liberation struggle of the Palestinian people or the right of the Israeli people to defend themselves and suspect diverging positions of condoning, if not supporting, either Islamophobia or antisemitism.

In this complex situation, the humanities and social sciences worldwide are facing a new round of clamours for relevance and witnessing a re-emergence of various forms of "enchanted solidarity" based on "the identification of a group of people to whom unconditional support is due on the part of an academic field that believes it needs to transform itself into a form of activism" (Schulze-Engler 2015, 20). Yet, amidst the torrents of misery channeled through global mediascapes into every home and lecture hall, there is arguably work to be done in cultural and literary studies in general, and in World Anglophone Studies in particular, that addresses the multiple forms of oppression and their manifold casualties in past and present worlds without taking recourse to a preemptive normativity promising instant identification of victims and perpetrators; that explores critical, self-reflexive, and disenchanted rather than organic, blanket, or mesmerized forms of solidarity; and that investigates literature and culture

beyond habitual victimological frameworks as sites of unruly, unexpected, and unpredictable agency.

The essays assembled in this volume provide impressive examples of such work engaging with a wide array of narrative forms—from novels, short fiction, life writing, and poetry to performance, documentary, film, and museum exhibitions—cutting across an equally wide array of contexts ranging from Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, and India to Kenya, the Middle East, Poland, Sri Lanka, South Africa, the UK, the USA, and Zimbabwe. They also testify to the challenges such work has to face in these engagements with regard to key concepts and critical vocabularies, many of which seem at least as contested as the solidarities announced in the title of this volume, and all of which need to be adapted or translated to make them usable for the work of cultural or textual analysis.

This is certainly true for the very term 'solidarity' itself. While there is a long tradition in philosophy and the social sciences—persisting to the present day—of scrutinizing solidarity as a principle, norm, or ideal in a singular mode,[1] there are excellent reasons to shift to 'solidarities' in trying to come to terms with social dispositions, political alignments, aesthetic allegiances, or the more-than-human world (Bridle 2022) in cultural and literary studies. If Marxist visions of 'internationalism' or anticolonial invocations of 'the wretched of the earth' were once able to espouse singular stories of 'the working class' or 'the colonized' as unshakeable pillars of 'solidarity,' "these allegiances' ephemerality [and] imperfections" (Lahiri 2020, 15) have largely undermined the credibility of single stories of global solidarity. This can be read as a story of loss, transforming solidarity from "an ethics of pity" to "an ethics of irony" and giving rise to "the ironic spectator," an "impure and ambivalent figure that stands, at once, as sceptical towards any moral appeal towards solidary action and, yet, open to doing something about those who suffer" (Chouliaraki 2013, 2–3). Yet, similar to Rothberg's 'implicated subject,' such stories—while critical of "the global division of power that, in unequally distributing resources along the West–South axis, reproduces the prosperity of the former whilst perpetuating the poverty of the latter" (2–3)—risk perpetuating the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle by focussing primarily—or even exclusively—on 'the West' or 'the North.' Taking solidarity (as well as victimhood and agency) seriously in a globalized world arguably cannot be achieved without "Provincializing Europe" (Chakrabarty 2008)—or, indeed, "the West"—and overcoming "the simple binary that opposes the colonial power (the West and

1 See DuFord 2022; Inouye et al. 2023; Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor 2024; Hunter 2024; or Hilal and Varatharajah 2024 for recent examples.

their local allies and accomplices) to the subaltern non-West (colonized societies)" (Sajed and Seidel 2023, 8). This entails paying "close attention to internal tensions, contradictions and hierarchies that are not reducible to West/non-West, colonizer/colonized" (Sajed and Seidel 2023, 8) and delving deeply into the contested histories, ideals, and practices of solidarity in what was once branded as the 'Third World' and today is often called the 'Global South.' Once these histories, ideals, and practices (as well as their entanglements with 'Northern' or 'Western' contexts) move centre-stage (rather than being considered peripheral objects of 'pity'), wider vistas of 'impure,' 'ambivalent,' 'messy' (Sajed and Seidel 2023, 7) and 'imperfect' solidarities (Lahiri 2021; D'Souza 2024) become visible that cut across a wide variety of social, political, cultural, religious, and ethnic locations and identities.

It is, thus, not by coincidence that HARSHANA RAMBUKWELLA uses 'disenchanted solidarity' as a key category in his opening chapter on "Postcolonial Solidarities in a Moment of National and Global Crisis" in Sri Lanka. Contrasting a "geopolitical solidarity" driven by "instrumental self-interests of nation states" with "a less instrumental and more human-scale solidarity" that emerged during the *aragalaya* (or "struggle"), "the spectacular people's uprising that got rid of a sitting president, a prime minister, and a cabinet of ministers" in 2022 (14), the chapter enquires into the rapid and unforeseen dynamics that enabled "a rare moment of collective action which transcended ethnic, religious, and class divisions" and the equally rapid and unforeseen demise of the *aragalaya* and "the swift resurgence of the corrupt political culture" (14). The "post-colonial solidarities" scrutinized in this chapter were neither based on grand narratives of socialist internationalism, global anticapitalism, or anti- or decolonial struggles (although some of the participants of the *aragalaya* championed such narratives), nor on an identitarian model of a "vertical alignment" of (socially, ethnically, culturally, or religiously defined) groups that "fought side-by-side but had little 'lateral' connection with each other" (20). What turned these solidarities into "an important moment in the history of the country," RAMBUKWELLA argues, was their ability "to transcend long-standing ethnic and religious differences" and their adoption of "a kind of postcolonial ethics where complex, and at times contradictory, positions and subjectivities can be held in balance," which provided "a momentary glimpse into a different political imaginary" (22). The ultimate failure of the *aragalaya* thus coincided with "the failure of such a postcolonial ethics": "When the imminent precarity that held diverse groups of people with antagonistic histories together lessened, people's sense of solidarity shifted from a position which could accommodate difference, to a more

conventional sense of solidarity that was delimited by what they were familiar with" (22). The role of literature in such a scenario, RAMBUKWELLA concludes in his reading of Ambalavaner Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* (1997), does not primarily lie in an 'activist' solidarity with specific social movements. If "the key challenge for Sri Lanka remains how the energy and political hope of the *aragalaya* and its inclusive solidarity can be nurtured and protected for a more enlightened and emancipated future," self-reflexive novels such as *When Memory Dies*—that invite us "to see both the potential but also the tenuous nature of disenchanted solidarity"—can provide direly needed resources for the shaping of political imaginaries capable of transcending "deeply entrenched social and cultural divisions" (24).

A further facet of contemporary solidarities is explored in MARIAN OFORI-AMOAFO's chapter "Beyond 'Victim Diaspora(s)': Post-Soul, the Afropolitan, and Aesthetic Solidarity in Contemporary Anglophone (Im) migrant Novels." Responding to widespread practices of casting Afrodiasporic lifeworlds and cultures as "victim diasporas" ("a legacy of transatlantic slavery and colonialism imposed on its descendants [that] often delimits reference frames for examining Afrodiasporic migratory experiences," 27), the chapter prospects "fresh pathways for envisioning and understanding migrant complex identities, transnational belongings, cosmopolitanism, solidarity, and agency" (28). Scrutinizing similarities between 'post-soul/postblack' scholarship produced in an African-American context and 'Afropolitan' visions generated from contemporary Africa, the chapter presents readings of three novels (NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2017) "that subvert simplistic readings through victimhood, dispossession, and abjection" (29). What emerges from this new wave of Afrodiasporic writers, the chapter concludes, is "a significant expansion to aesthetic agency and solidarities across the Black Atlantic world [...] positioning the figure of Africa and African descendants as already belonging to a globalised world" (47).

'Aesthetic solidarities' (albeit of a very different kind) are also a major concern of ROBERT KUSEK's chapter "Unlikely Comrades? South Africa, Poland, and the Solidarity of 'Implicated Subjects'." The solidarities investigated in this chapter are neither based on shared histories nor on common enemies, but on an "anti-identitarian comradeship" (71) emerging from a shared state of 'implication.' Drawing on Michael Rothberg's concept of the 'implicated subject'—"one which, according to Rothberg, occupies an 'ambiguous space [...] between and beyond the victim/perpetrator binary' (Rothberg 2019, 33), as well as remains entangled in both historical and

present-day forms and mechanisms of injustice and violence" (56)—the chapter highlights a peculiar mode of "unlikely literary comradeship" between Polish writers such as Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz, who wrestled with their state of implicatedness in Stalinist and post-Stalinist authoritarianism, and white South African writers such as J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, and Dan Jacobson, who "by reading, studying, and commenting on the works of selected Polish writers entangled in their own histories of injustice and past/present systems of oppression […] attempted to negotiate their own subject positions and forms of implication in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa" (59).

Rothberg's reflections on the "implicated subject" also play a major role in JULIA WURR's chapter on "The Implicated Poetics of Social Reproduction and Neoliberal Diversity: Natasha Brown's *Assembly*" and in JAINE CHEMMACHERY's chapter on "Reclaiming Victimhood and Agency in Shailja Patel's *Migritude* (2010) and Sunjeev Sahota's *Year of the Runaways* (2015)." WURR carries the notion of 'implicated subject' over to a Black British context, where the protagonist of *Assembly* "suffers terribly from racial capitalist discrimination while at the same time successfully working in London high finance" (76). Her reading of Brown's novel highlights how "*Assembly* foregoes dichotomies of victims and perpetrators," "narrativises tensions of implication without defusing them," and "defies disambiguation and narrative closure" (77). 'Implicatedness,' the chapter suggests, is not only a thematic concern of a novel critical of neoliberal "diversity management" that "shows how solidarity is undermined when understandings of solidarity are limited to shared experiences of discrimination" without a firm base in a "shared aim of overcoming injustice and oppression" (77) but also a question of literary form, as *Assembly* "raises awareness of the potential implication of narrative and language in upholding systemic injustice" (77). CHEMMACHERY's chapter on *Migritude* and *Year of the Runaways* shows "how both works complicate notions of victimhood and agency by depicting complex precarious subjects who question the categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'" (95). While all Indian migrants in Sahota's novel face racist ostracization in Britain, some of them engage in casteist discrimination against their Dalit compatriots, highlighting that "one may be a victim of systemic racism on the one hand, and a perpetrator of gendered oppression on the other" (111). Patel's performance accentuates the long-term effects of British racism in East Africa on South Asian African migrant women but also emphasizes the racist expulsion of South Asians from Idi Amin's Uganda in 1972, thus complicating "too simplistic a scheme which would equate perpetration with Western power and victimhood with a country from the Global South"

(101). Both texts thus draw attention to "everyone's role as more or less distant 'implicated subject,' making us all witnesses of entangled histories in the continuation of which we participate in various degrees" (111). At the same time, the chapter avers, both texts also engage in countering blanket ascriptions of 'victimhood' to migrants (and, in Patel's case, particularly to migrant women) by highlighting their agency.

'Victimhood' and 'agency' are, thus, two further key concepts that feature prominently in this collection and that are adapted from more general usages to the specific work of anglophone cultural and literary studies. 'Victimhood' in particular has turned out to be a highly controversial category, being apostrophied by some as cornerstone of a left-wing academic "victimhood culture" that "maximizes conflicts," "encourages chains of unending recrimination," and is "rife with animosities, with ethnic conflict even more pronounced" (Campell and Manning 2018, 258), while being seen by others as a pivotal strategy of right-wing attempts to bolster up white supremacy as "the proliferation of claims to victimhood produces its own victims by obfuscating truth—that is, by populating public discourse with too many voices of pain while selectively amplifying the voices of the already powerful over those of the underprivileged" (Chouliaraki 2024, 6). Significantly, both positions base their understanding of 'victimhood' exclusively on "the New Culture Wars" in the USA (Campell and Manning) or "the Anglo-American world" (Chouliaraki) and show little proclivity towards considering any other contexts in their argument. Given the disproportionate influence, if not hegemony, of Americocentric scholarship in global academia, it seems timely to move beyond the confines of such debates and explore wider vistas of victimhood and agency represented, contested and redefined in contemporary anglophone literatures and cultures. As Sean James Bosman observes, far from accentuating "victimhood and passivity,"

> anglophone authors often appeal to their readers to recognise that migrants should be treated as fully ethical subjects. […] most migrants, even refugees, are not necessarily powerless or helpless, despite what mainstream humanitarian and other narratives may assert. Rather, the amount of power available to them is limited and variable. (Bosman 2021, 4)

This limited and variable agency of border-crossing characters is explored in NADIA BUTT and SALEH CHAOUI's chapter "Between Agency and Victimhood: Forms of Self-Assertion in Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (1999) and Wafa Faith Hallam's *The Road from Morocco* (2011)." Highlighting "resilience against political and

cultural hurdles" in Ahmed's and Hallam's memoirs (115), the chapter scrutinizes victimhood as "a contested terrain in the writings of both these authors" (116) and analyzes the "double-edged device" of 'memoir,' a genre long considered a male domain in the Arab world, as a "hybrid genre" that "provides a space where dominant stereotypical representations can be laid bare and challenged" (118). "The transformative act of border-crossing," the chapter concludes, invigorates the authors' agency and "allows them to insightfully and critically engage with both sides of the border, agentially facing the hierarchies of power fixated around them by fundamentalist and Western liberalist discourses alike" (134).

While migration and border-crossing are undeniably important contexts for investigations into changing contours of victimhood and agency in contemporary anglophone literatures, they are certainly not the only ones. Different scenarios of victimhood and agency emerge in two further chapters that investigate representations of groups often considered disenfranchised and powerless: VANESSA GUIGNERY's chapter "Victimhood, Agency, and Vulnerability: Portraits of Delhi Manual Workers in Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* (2011) and Mridula Koshy's *Bicycle Dreaming* (2016)" and ALESSANDRA DI PIETRO's "Reversing Victimology: Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* as a War Narrative of Female Agency." For GUIGNERY, a central issue in literary representations of vulnerability and victimhood of the people living precariously in the Indian informal sector lies in the question of "whether empathy is the appropriate response to such books" (137):

> Both *A Free Man* as literary reportage and *Bicycle Dreaming* as fiction complicate the 'victim versus agent' binary system while interrogating the authors' positionings and the readers' response to the representation of working-class characters. Rather than portray the individuals as victims with whom author and reader may empathize from a safe distance, Sethi and Koshy draw the contours of working-class people's agency without exaggerating it or turning them into heroes, and simultaneously expose their own vulnerability as authors and our vulnerability as readers in their and our limited access to the depicted individuals. (150)

Both authors, the chapter concludes, probe the limits of representation by acknowledging "the flaws and pitfalls of their own literary enterprise" and thus testify to "their ethical concerns about representation" (150).

DI PIETRO's analysis of Mengiste's novel highlights how the same female characters that "appear as victims of a patriarchal society" at the beginning of *The Shadow King* (2019) "actively refuse the submissive role imposed on them by society" once the war between Ethiopia and Mussolini's Italy breaks out in 1935 and take up arms to fight the invaders. These female

characters thus "transition from a condition of victimhood to a politics of agency, defying the constrictions of both their own patriarchal society and of the foreign gaze of the colonisers" (155). Participation in war, usually associated exclusively with suffering and victimhood, thus becomes an avenue of emancipation and agency for the women characters in Mengiste's novel:

> The women in the novel challenge their initial condition of submission through the deconstruction of colonial, patriarchal, and feudal hierarchies that prevent them from speaking up. It is through their active participation in the war as soldiers that these women find their own voices, breaking the transgenerational cycle of gendered violence that relegates them to the role of passive spectators of their own history (171).

Yet another facet of victim-perpetrator relations becomes visible in SILVIA ANASTASIJEVIC's chapter "Beyond the Victim–Perpetrator Paradigm: Overcoming 'Single Stories' through Humor?" Taking its cue from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's warning against "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), the chapter explores "how humor with its inherent transgressiveness can disrupt and overcome single stories" (175) and how selected works of anglophone fiction (a play and two films) provide a "portrayal of a multiplicity of affiliations and perspectives" and offer a "humorous critique of narrow representations of identity" (180). Following a critique of the tendency of academic identity politics to produce "strict and politically motivated identity constructs" and "fixed frontlines that make it difficult to negotiate between seemingly opposing positions or opinions" (177), the chapter delves into the humorous techniques of dismantling identity stereotypes in Drew Hayden Talor's play *alterNatives* (2000) that juggles "possible victim-perpetrator juxtapositions of Natives versus non-Natives, Jews versus Non-Jews, vegetarians versus meat eaters, and activists versus passive bystanders who might as well be oppressors" (180), the maze of intersecting 'Muslim' and 'Jewish' identities which the genetically, culturally, and religiously hybrid protagonist of Josh Appignanesi's *The Infidel* (2010) tries to navigate with uncertain success, and the aporetic attempts of three subway robbers to separate the passengers into identity groups that would indicate the 'right' kind of victim to ransack in Nino Aldi's short film *Tribes* (2020). In all three cases, the chapter concludes, "the entanglements between the various communities and individuals are so immense that, in a sense, the Other might as well be the self" (191).

As SAAMBAVI SIVAJI shows in her chapter on "Archiving the Margins: Art, Memory, and Resistance at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary

Art (MMCA) Sri Lanka," clear-cut distinctions between victims and perpetrators are also difficult in post-conflict scenarios such as contemporary Sri Lanka in the aftermath of a civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan Army that left more than 100,000 dead. Since the victorious government has shown little interest in commemorating this traumatic long-drawn-out conflict in which both sides committed massive human rights violations, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, SIVAJI argues, has become "a significant cultural institution in the preservation and articulation of collective memory" (193) through its inaugural exhibition *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales* (2019–2020). In the absence of an officially sanctioned memory culture, the exhibition presents "multifaceted narratives of the victims" that "mediate, store, and transmit memories" and depict "the collective trauma of the marginalised" (193). The museum and its exhibition, the chapter underlines, thus become "a platform for reconciliation, education, and dialogue" and "a space where the darkness of history and the light of artistic expression converge, fostering a nuanced understanding and contributing to the process of reconciliation and healing" (209).

The final chapter in this collection returns to the question of solidarity with a cautionary tale of how anticolonial nationalism can blunt the critical appreciation of anglophone literature. DURBA MUKHERJEE's "Dom Moraes: A 'Traitor' Who 'Fractured' India or an Anglicized Middle-Class Empathizer Who Felt with the Marginalized?" revisits the work of one of India's most prominent anglophone writers, whose "Anglophilic self-fashioning" was criticized "as a betrayal of his Indian identity" (214) by an earlier generation of Indian critics but whose works have acquired a new urgency in the light of contemporary authoritarianism and the fostering of ethnoreligious conflict in India. Moraes's reluctant identification with his country of origin, the chapter argues, was due not to an insufficiently decolonized mindset, but to a critical stance towards "the very basis of modernity that India claims to have ushered in since its independence and, simultaneously, the Indian government's claim of India as a modern, democratic nation-state" (226/227). This becomes particularly pronounced, MUKHERJEE contends, in Moraes's later travel writings that highlight the violence perpetrated against minorities, depict "marginalized voices/sentiments in India, who feel equally alienated as did Moraes," and seek "to project the pluralities of India as opposed to a majoritarian Hindutva identity" (225). Rather than projecting a traitorous 'Anglophilia,' the chapter concludes, Moraes's writing can thus be read as an idiosyncratic act of literary solidarity: "It is in his association to the numerous other Indians

who feel dissociated from a majoritarian India, therefore, that Moraes reclaims his Indian identity" (228).

Taken together, the essays in this volume explore strengths and weaknesses of solidarity, victimhood, and agency as analytical categories in anglophone literary and cultural studies and present a wide variety of case studies that will hopefully contribute towards making our field more attuned to the new and complicated political, cultural, and literary scenarios of the twenty-first century and more attentive to the specific engagements of individual works of art with these scenarios. They also testify, we believe, to a spirit of self-reflexivity that continues to test theories, models, and methods—irrespective of their current popularity in academia—against a wide canvas of literary and cultural practice.

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