

# Return to the (*M*)otherland: Reading Ginu Kamani's "Ciphers" as an Allegory of the Return to the Wound

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**Abstract** This article is based on the premise that one of the crucial aspects of the diasporic subjectivity is that its negotiation depends on an acknowledgement of the presence of an enigmatic desire to return to the homeland (in the present case, Mother India). This overwhelming desire, if not a compelling need, to return to roots, though, is highly aporetic since it is structured by an urge to reunite with but also, paradoxically, to abandon the *motherland* as an object of desire. To address the literary representation of this enigmatic desire as well as its possible transmutation and ramification in the life of the diasporic subject, the present article reads "Ciphers," the opening story of Ginu Kamani's debut collection of short stories *Jungle Girl* (1995), in the light of the mother/child trope developed within the context of Jean Laplanche's "General Theory of Seduction." It then posits that Kamani's story, if read allegorically, seems to enact not only the enigmatic urge to return to the traumatic wound of the initial departure-as-rupture but also the desperate attempt on the part of the diasporic subject, to re-translate and to suture the trauma of displacement which structures all various modalities of the diasporic subjectivity.

**Key words** The Indian Diaspora; The Trauma of Displacement; The Enigmatic Signifier; Laplanche's General Theory of Seduction; Ginu Kamani

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### Introduction: The Trope of Return

For Diasporic Subjects, despite all attempts to adapt to change, there is always something left to desire: an overwhelming longing to return to the homeland. This desire is, in fact, so deep that a (longing for a) journey back to the ancestral *motherland*—also referred to as (a desire for) “roots-seeking quest” (Hirsch and Miller 16)—is the most common trope of a large section of diasporic short fiction, in general, and Ginu Kamani’s “Ciphers,” in particular. Undeniably, such a chief preoccupation with the question of return suggests that the desire to recover a lost-yet-not-dead *motherland*, whose enduring “absent presence” (Munos 6)<sup>1</sup> haunts all diasporic subjects, must be placed at the core of any talk of the diasporic experience as well as any attempt to formulate the diasporic subjectivity. Sudesh Mishra, for instance, in his explanation of William Safran’s representative model of diasporas, posits that an attachment to an “ancestral homeland as ... [a] true, ideal home” and, typically, an excessive indulgence in a fantasy of return to that original *motherland* is one of the six major definitive markers of all diasporic formations (16-17). Mishra further indicates that in Safran’s model a strong desire to return defines not only the first-generation diasporic subjects but also their second-generation descendents who, in order to work through a loss gone unmourned and to satisfy a desire gone unfulfilled, wittingly or unwittingly engage in their ancestors’ project of being reconciled with roots.<sup>2</sup> This, however, by no means implies that roots are simply

1 In the present text, the term “absent presence” is used in the sense in which it is exploited by Delphine Munos to refer to the disembodied and haunting presence of absent entities (either concrete or abstract) who/which, despite their absence, are fully present by the intrusion of their memories.

2 In their general introduction to *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandra, and Sarah Lawson Welsh claim that “the notions of rooting in and routing through are now so widespread in diasporic and postcolonial discourse as to sometimes seem voided of meaning” (4). In the present paper, though, as in the title of the same book, the term is invoked (both in the roots/routes dichotomy and on its own) to mean re-rooting and re-connecting to the past while moving towards new directions.

some fixed entities to be recovered. Rather, any discussion of roots is inextricably bound up with the notion of routes: that is to suggest, reconnecting to the past and moving on towards new directions are the recto-verso of the same sheet of paper.

Diasporic desire to return, thus, can be seen, above all, as the diasporic subjects' Janus-like effort to move forward by taking up new routes via the detour of a return to roots—all done in the hope of embracing an unclaimed history and, if possible, to suture a traumatic wound at the site of the primal injury of having been psychically ripped from the *motherland*. Return, after all, is never a one-way linear movement back to the roots; nor is it necessarily physical or literal. Rather, it is often a roaming about within a psychic liminal space created by the chiasmic back-and-forth movements between the imbricate spaces and the intricate forces of the diasporic existence, on the one hand, and the desire to be reconciled with roots, on the other hand. It is only via an acknowledgement of and a confrontation with the fierce push-and-pull forces of such a dialectic that the first-, second-, third-, and n-generation subjects' struggle to appropriate, to resist, and to negotiate the diasporic subjectivity can be waged. All this implies that any kind of envisioning seems to depend on a number of revisionings: that is, for the hope of a full arrival and complete assimilation in the host community to become even a possibility, there must be on the agenda, first and foremost, a psychic act of return.

The present paper's focus on the trope of return in Kamani's "Ciphers," hence, is neither in its nostalgic sense (like the homesick looking-back of a melancholic subject prevalent in the diasporic narratives of nostalgia) nor in its vicious ghostly compulsive sense (like the phantasmal returns *of* the phantom of an unclaimed past to a distressed and haunted subject prevalent in the diasporic narratives of haunting), but in a very different sense and mode. Rather than being a disguised compulsion-to-repeat of the traumatic loss of the *motherland*; an excessive formation of melancholic attachments to that loss; or an indulgence in "nostalgic fantasies about homecoming" (Hirsch and Miller 11), the present article's trope of return is a figurative or a metaphoric "attempt to return that instead departs" (Caruth, "After the End" 54). In other words, the trope of return, here, is used as a means to an end: a conscious attempt on the part of the diasporic subject to revisit the site of the originary trauma for the purpose of not only decoding a hitherto silenced story of loss but also suturing a/an (transgenerational) untreated wound of departure-as-rupture. It is in the light of this same notion of return that, as we shall shortly see, the present paper aims to utilize Jean Laplanche's translation model of psychic functioning in reading Kamani's "Ciphers"—a text which is marked, above all, by the awakening of a/an c/overt sense of loss, pain, shame, guilt, anxiety, fear,

and otherness in an unnamed narrator who, upon arrival at her cultural and ethnic *motherland*, is impelled to confront the exquisite pain of (un-)belonging to a place now “transformed by ravages of time and transfigured through lenses of loss and nostalgia” (Hirsch and Miller 18).

Re-conceptualizing Laplanche’s notion of (de-/re-)translation within a diasporic context, of course, opens the way for a psychoanalytically-oriented reading of diasporic return narratives as represented by Kamani’s “Ciphers.” More importantly, though, by raising the trauma of the loss of the *motherland* and the ambivalent bond that it fosters between the diasporic subject and the homeland to the plane of metaphor; such a reconceptualization not only expands the theoretical scope of the Laplanchean psychoanalytic theory, but also offers an opportunity for rewriting the diasporic subjectivity in the light of what the present paper comes to call a Laplanchean conception of the trauma of displacement (or the diasporic trauma).<sup>1</sup> As we will witness in the following two sections, it is the same affinity between the ambivalence that structures the diasporic subjects’ relation to their absent present *motherland* and the ambivalence that haunts all seductive-yet-traumatizing mother/child relations that endows the present Laplanchean reading of Kamani’s “Ciphers” with the power to uncover the infusion of allegory into the fabric of a tale which, as a narrative of return, is encrypted with the desire, if not need, to confront the traumatic wound of departure: the initial moment of being torn asunder from the *motherland*.

It is, thus, the present paper’s contention that it is via the allegory of the return to the wound that Kamani’s “Ciphers” captures, externalizes, and represents (while simultaneously occluding) the inner turmoil and the compelling need of a female diasporic subject to return to, if not to reunite with, her cultural and ethnic homeland. In what amounts to an attempt to (re-) translate a hitherto de-signified enigmatic message unwittingly implanted at the moment of departure from the *motherland* as the site of the original rupture, the unnamed narrator of “Ciphers” has no choice but to engage with an apparently never-ending process of deciphering “heap[s] of ruins” (Benjamin 232), and layers of confusing signals and emptied signifiers. In order to give a more vivid portrayal of the diasporic subject in the image of such a probing investigator/translator, though, it is best if we start by offering a brief overview of the major axes of Laplanche’s work, namely his notion

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1 Only recently (especially, since the 2015 refugee crisis) has this particular type of trauma, being fully recognized, come to the forefront of literary-critical discourse. There, thus, was (and still is) no consensus over what it could (can) be called. It has, yet, been randomly called the “diasporic trauma,” the “trauma of dislocation,” and the “trauma of displacement.”

of translation as “a fundamental model of the constitution and functioning of the psychic apparatus” (Scarfone, 552). It is the re-conceptualization of such a notion of translation within a diasporic context which underpins the major line of argument in the Laplanchean reading to be given in the penultimate section of the present paper.

### **Rerouting Jean Laplanche’s Theory of Translation: Return as Re-translation**

One of the main axes of Laplanche’s work, which will also frame our present reading of Ginu Kamani’s “Ciphers,” is his “translation” model“ of psychic functioning. In order to grasp such a model, though, a basic familiarity with two other deeply interrelated theoretical concepts and ideas discussed in Laplanche’s oeuvre seems necessary: firstly, his “General Theory of Primal Seduction”; secondly, his related notion of an “Enigmatic Signifier.” It is only after a clear and concise discussion of both Laplanchean terms is conducted that an in-depth analysis of his “translation model of [primal] repression” can then begin.

Laplanche advances his general theory of primal seduction by a return to Freud’s by-then discarded theory of seduction. Preferring Freud’s pre-1897 trauma-based model of sexuality to his post-1897 more developmental drive-based model, Laplanche underlines the intrusive role of the (m)other in the formation of infantile sexuality, hence putting forward a more (m)other-oriented (rather than a self-oriented) theory of subjectivity. Finding the origin of sexuality and subjectivity in the “exogenous, traumatic, and intrusive” impact of the (m)other (Fletcher 5), he thus develops a more general theory about the formation of human psychic life—a theory which, unlike Freud’s theory of primal seduction, is not restricted in its application only to certain psycho-pathological cases where neurotic symptoms are present, but is rather general and universal in a proper sense. This universality, of course, is solidified by Laplanche’s insistence that his general theory of primal seduction is, in fact, a general law governing intergenerational relationships and that it is firmly rooted in what he refers to as the “fundamental anthropological situation:” a situation characterized by a state of radical neediness in a human infant born into an adult world to which he/she is inevitably belated (Scarfone 545).

It is, in fact, due to this very belatedness and helplessness that the human infant instantly becomes dependent on a nurturing supportive adult (m)other with a repressed unconscious, a fully-formed ego, a pre-constituted sexuality, and a repressed infantile sexuality all of which are awakened and reactivated by her relationship to the infant. Laplanche describes this child/(m)other bonding in the following excerpt:

In the primal situation we have, then, a child whose ability to adapt is real but limited, weak, and waiting to be perverted, and a deviant adult (deviant with regard to any sexual norms ... deviant or split with regard to himself) ... given that the child lives on in the adult, an adult faced with a child is particularly likely to be deviant and inclined to perform bungled or even symbolic actions because he is involved in a relationship with his other self, with the other he once was. The child in front of him brings out the child within him ... we have a “Traviata”, someone who has been led astray and “seduced.” (*New Foundations* 103)

As witnessed by Laplanche’s analysis of the child/(m)other mutual dependency, there exists an apparently “fundamental asymmetry in action” between the psychic structures of the two sides of this enigmatic interaction. (Scarfone 553). On the one hand, there is a desiring adult (m)other—a sexual being whose excitation of libidinal desires by the highly-intense experience of tending to the needs of an infant cannot by any means be discounted. On the other hand, there is a little baby whose psychic structure is not yet fully formed—an asexual being who is devoid of both a pre-constructed operating unconscious and a pre-constituted functioning sexual drive. What sharply distinguishes Laplanche’s seduction theory from that of Freud’s, though, is not simply Laplanche’s attentiveness to this fundamental asymmetry, but his insistence on what has been totally absent in the latter’s meta-psychological thought about the scene of the primal seduction: that is, the new psychic “reality of the message” (Laplanche, *Essays* 92).

It is this newly-introduced Laplanchean “category of the message” as the “*third domain of reality*” which, as he asserts, fully impacts on the psyche-body of the infant in his/her asymmetrical relation with the adult (m)other (*Essays* 175; 172). This message, though, Laplanche argues, is not just a pure concept ready to be transmitted. Rather, it is a material element (including a gesture, a facial expression, a smile, a grimace, a tone of voice or any other subtle forms of bodily contact like a touch or a look) coming as a kind of sign from the adult-as-transmitter and targeting the child-as-recipient. Despite suggesting that this sign can be both verbal and non-verbal (gestural, tonal, tactile, visual, etc.) though, Laplanche lays the greater emphasis on the non-verbality of the message—what, soon leads him to opt for a more laden term in its stead: the “enigmatic signifier.”

To elaborate on his notion of the message, Laplanche thus borrows the term signifier from linguistics and uses it in its semiotic sense, as exploited by (post-) structuralists, to refer to a signifying element (like a word, a gesture, a visual code,

etc.) attempting to deliver a meaning through differentiation. However, unlike his former master and analyst Jacques Lacan who, giving primacy to the notion of the signifier in his theory of subjectivity, exploits the term to mean verbal language tout court; Laplanche uses the term in a much more subtle and fully-fledged manner. For him, a signifier can be obscure, opaque, or “enigmatic” since it “may be de-signified, or lose what it signifies without thereby losing its power to signify (Laplanche, *Foundations* 45). In this famous proposition, Laplanche is, in fact, seizing upon a very subtle and useful distinction between “a signifier *of* [x]—a specific meaning or signified—and a signifier *to* [x]—addressed to and interpellating a specific subject, a subject who may not be able to attribute a specific signified to it but who knows that it is addressed to them” (Fletcher 34). While the former has a conceptual dimension, a meaning, or a signified; the latter is only something that is implemented in a speech act and is addressed to a recipient—what can suggest that a signifier has the capacity to address, target, summon, interpellate, command the attention of, and impact on a recipient without its addressee necessarily knowing what it signifies. A recipient thus sometimes knows that something is signifying but not what is signifying; she/he knows that there is a signifying process going on, but she/he cannot assign it a signified. It is only in the light of such a distinction that Laplanche then outlines his theory of the enigmatic signification in the context of his general theory of seduction.

Laplanche strongly argues that there is an enigmatic dimension to the transmission of designified signifiers from a caregiving adult (m)other to a helpless infant at the scene of the primal seduction—an enigma which is the outcome of the fundamental asymmetry which, as mentioned earlier, constitutes the core of all (m)other/child relations. It is obviously due to this same biological and psychic asymmetry that a needy new-born baby, unlike a nurturing adult—a fully-fledged sexual being with an unconscious filled to the brim with repressed libidinal desires—can have neither understanding nor any means of decoding the highly libidinally-charged transmitted signifiers (the so-called “compromised message”) to which she/he is inevitably exposed (Laplanche, *Essays* 96). This whole process of the transmission of the message from the (m)other to the infant, though, is as enigmatic to the adult (m)other-as-transmitter as it is to the infant-as-recipient: that is to say, in the Laplanchean frame of thought, for seduction to occur, there needs not be a perverted adult consciously involved in the process of seducing an innocent infant. Rather, seduction constitutes the transmission of signifiers as carriers of the pre-verbal affects which, unbeknownst to the adult, target the infant through what is said (or not said) and what is acted-out (or not acted-out). Claiming

that the transmitted signifiers are only unwittingly sent out from the unconscious dimension of the most caring (and not pervert) adult under the most normal (and not pervert) circumstances and in the context of the most normal (and not pervert) relations, Laplanche then contends that it is the repressed sexual unconscious of an adult (m)other, and not any conscious sexual perversion on his/her part, that interferes with the process of mutual bonding. An adult, inadvertently, sends out “a repressed sexual ‘contaminant’ ... [that] passes through as a stowaway passenger on the carrier wave of the relation of attachment” between him/her and an infant who definitely feels the presence of this “stowaway passenger,” but being ill-equipped, fails to understand or appreciate its full presence (Scarfone 550). The infant knows that something is being transmitted, that something is being signified, and that it is summoning him/her in order to do so, but what is being signified to him/her is still opaque, puzzling, and enigmatic at this moment.

This all, however, by no means suggests that the infant can make no sense of the compromised message of the adult (m)other or that he/she can neither process nor interpret it in its entirety since an infant-as-recipient is neither a *tabula rasa* nor a passive container through whom the enigmatic signification can magically and mysteriously work. Rather, she/he is fully and constantly alert to the presence of what she/he receives as an excess, a surplus excitation, or what Scarfone aptly calls “a communication ‘noise’” for which no code is defined (550). Unable to immediately cope with, process, integrate, or bound this provoking and exciting excess of signification into the ego, however, the infant is initially left disturbed and traumatized—what suggests that the process of a premature subject’s entrance into a world saturated with highly-charged enigmatic signifiers is deeply disturbing and highly traumatic. Due to this initial vulnerability and openness to the intrusive and traumatic impact of the adult (m)other, the infant is then highly motivated to belatedly (re-)process and psychically (re-)visit, in the course of his/her interpersonal relations in the future, this originary traumatizing moment of impact made by the (m)other at the core of his/her being. Through getting involved in a process of assimilation/expulsion of the once-implanted enigmatic signifiers at some later points in time, the infant thus attempts to decipher the enigmatic structure of meaning involuntarily laid down by the (m)other at an earlier moment. It is by postulating that this belated implementation of the enigmatic signifiers involves the infant in what amounts to a process of translation that Laplanche opens his theory of general seduction to Freud’s notion of repression as a failure of translation.

Building upon Freud’s combination of the notion of repression and the mechanism of translation in the context of his general theory of seduction,



Laplanche thus reformulates repression as an infant's response to the implantations coming from the adult (m)other. His major contention is that such a response which constitutes, above all, the infant's belated-yet-undying attempt to make sense of the compromised message of the (m)other, to read "the enigma of the [m]other's desire," to bind the enigmatic signifier to its lost signified, and to assimilate what is too over-exciting or too traumatic amounts to an act of translation (Fletcher 2). This suggests that the originary traumatic impact of the implantation of the enigmatic signifier by the adult (m)other never dissolves away; but that, demanding to be known, it belatedly prompts the subject to make attempts at translation. It is in a "visceral defensive reaction" to this belated evocation of what has become "an inner event, an inner 'foreign body,' which now breaks from within the subject" and emanates a surplus of excitation that the act of translation then begins (Laplanche and Pontalis 10).

Being caught off-guard by reactivated highly-charged material, the subject has no choice but to confront it all head-on in the hope of integrating that which once could not have been understood; that which was once obscure, enigmatic, and puzzling. Translation, yet, is always an unfinished business: there certainly exist some easily carried-across, processed and integrated elements, but there are also always some residual "*à traduire*" (to-be-translated) elements which, being too excessive, overexciting, troubling, painful or traumatizing, resist being known or metabolized. Whereas the former (the translated material) contributes to the process of building up "a progressively developing ego" (Browning 1039), the latter (the non-translated remainder) contributes to the formation of the unconscious at a moment of, what Laplanche calls, "primal repression"—a moment when a fixation which will permanently mark the psyche-body is laid down. According to Laplanche, the coming into being of the ego and the emergence of the unconscious (or the internal other) are two sides of the same coin: that is, the by-products of a subject's entry into an interpersonal relationship with an external (m)other who, actively though inadvertently implants, excites, and traumatizes—hence giving rise to a defensive process of either translation or non-translation.

It is such a notion of translation (or failure of it) at the core of Laplanche's general theory of primal seduction that paves the way for a metaphoric conception of the diasporic displacements (in all their shapes or forms) and the structural trauma that frames them in a Laplanchean sense. From the starting-point of leaving (or separation from) the *motherland* and anchoring in the *other-land*, the diasporic subject is forced into an asymmetrical inter-subjective field and is inevitably involved in a long (if not traumatizing) process of translation, de-translation, re-

translation, and non-translation all which are fuelled by the implantation of the enigmatic message by the seductive *motherland*, on the one hand, and by the diasporic subject's constant attempt at metabolizing that message, on the other. A diasporic subject, thus, is consumed from the moment of his/her departure with a never-ending process of translation during which not only is he/she forced to translate the enigmatic message of the *motherland* but that she/he is simultaneously translated by it, hence the need for constant (re-)negotiations of her/his subjectivity-in-process. This all suggests that the diasporic experience—marked by an endless threatening, contesting, and bending of the borders between there/here, then/now, absence/presence, and self/(m)other—leads the subject into a new phase of mental development in which he/she is incessantly provoked by what Laplanche calls “the enigma of the [m]other” (Laplanche, *Essays* 113). It is only within such a Laplanchean frame of thought, that a diasporic subject's literal/psychic return *to* the *motherland* (as exemplified, in what follows, by the return of the unnamed narrator of Kamani's “Ciphers” to India) can be read as an allegorical attempt, on the part of the diasporic subject, to re-imagine, to re-work, and to re-translate his/her relation to the primal seduction by the *motherland* for the purpose of issuing, if possible, new translations of an otherwise de-signified maternal enigma.

### **Replaying the Scene of the Seduction by the (*M*)otherland in “Ciphers”**

“Ciphers,” the first story of Ginu Kamani's *Jungle Girl* (1995), is one of the two stories (out of the eleven tales that together comprise this debut collection of short stories) which directly address the disquieting-but-empowering diasporic experience of the female characters of Indian descent in the U. S. Like the penultimate story of the collection “Just Between Indians,” which can be read as an eerie portrayal of a second-generation female diasporic subject's confrontation and reconciliation with her Indian culture via her first spontaneous erotic encounter with an Indian man; “Ciphers” too can be seen as a poignant depiction of the conciliatory effect of a second-generation female diasporic subject's belated return to and (re-) encounter with Mother India. Interestingly, the eerie sexual frisson which marks “Just Between Indians” is also present in “Ciphers,” yet in a different way. If there, it is the trope of the *return of* the haunting phantom of a dead-yet-living biological mother that, opening up the dialectic between the death of the *mother(land)* and the desire for her, alleviates the diasporic subject's “so many years of [pent-up] anger” towards her Indian-ness (Kamani 183); here it is the physical act of the *return to* the *motherland* which, rekindling the overflow of a hitherto dormant libido at the site of the originary wound of departure-as-rupture, reconciles a desiring diasporic subject

with her long desired-but-repressed Indian identity. If in “Just Between Indians” it is a displaced version of the mother/child incest which reawakens the desire for the *motherland*, in “Ciphers,” it is what amounts to an imaginary libidinal encounter with *Mother India*, a source of ambivalence at the core of any Indian-American diasporic subjectivity, that builds towards the final outbreak of an enigmatic desire (surrounded with certain homosexual undertones) for and reconciliation with the *motherland*.

“Ciphers” is the first-person account of the identity-crisis of a young first-and-a-half generation<sup>1</sup> diasporic woman aboard an Indian train during a return-journey from the U.S. to her hometown after a lapse of ten years. The unnamed narrator is sitting on a Bombay train for the first time since childhood, when she encounters a married Gujarati woman who is the same age as her, but looks older and “more self-important” with her three young children on her side (Kamani 1). This traditionally-dressed young mother, however, not only scowls at the unnamed narrator’s outlandish look and outfit (i. e. her “ringless third finger,” her “short hair,” and her “knee-length dress” [Kamani 2])—all of which quickly distinguish her from all *other* long-haired married women in sari or salwar-khameez), but also starts a guessing game about the narrator’s ethnic identity. Despite the narrator’s sense of unease and confusion about the game (a sense which bears a close resemblance to Daya’s sense of discomfort during the quizzing hot-dog vendor’s questions on her ethnic origins in “Just Between Indians”), however, the young curious mother sneeringly and tauntingly continues making random guesses in an effort to locate her fellow Indian.

Yet, upon the sudden realization that the dress-clad short-haired woman sitting before her is also a Gujarati, she, unwilling to accept the truth, expresses not only her disbelief regarding the validity of such a stark revelation but also her rage and repulsion by insisting that it is her and her children, and not the narrator, who “are the *real* Gujaratis” (Kamani 5, emphasis added). It is, in fact, in a desperate attempt to decipher the demeaning gaze and the haughty disdain of her more traditional counterpart or *other* self (the woman she might have become if she had not left India) that the unnamed narrator is then led, through a process of identification, to psychically cross the “invisible line” between Gujaratis and non-Gujaratis for which the inquisitive young mother seems to be a self-appointed guardian (Kamani 7). In a rather dreamy and epiphanic scene by the end of Kamani’s story, however, the difference between the two women is reflected upon and challenged, and the invisible line between them is negated and even displaced by the powerful force

1 The term “first-and-a-half generation” is often used to refer to a diasporic subject who has immigrated to the hostland before or during his/her early adolescence.

of an enigmatic desire that overwhelms them both—a desire metonymically represented by the visually stunning and emotionally uplifting sensuality of an Indian woman’s long thick dark hair. It is only when this desire, which amounts to an “unsaid and unspoken sexual intimacy” (Diaz 186), takes centre stage that the dividing effect of all other cultural markers (including class, caste, dress, marital status) is offset, hence ending the narrative on a positive note of accord, unity and reconciliation with the *motherland*.

What exactly the essence of this enabling and binding enigmatic desire is, what truly triggers it, how it comes to have an impact on the psyche-body of the narrator, and what ends are to be achieved by its ambivalent presence in the logic of the narrative are to be answered, of course, when the young mother’s final gesture, its effect on the narrator, and the whole final epiphanic scene is read in the light of the narrator’s earlier attempts to decipher, digest, and relate to her current condition—a condition which is defined, above all, by a sense of diasporic otherness to which she is exposed even in the place she calls home. It is, in fact, in response to what marks her “as other, outsider, oblique” (Kamani 8) that she constantly gets engaged in the process of Benjaminian “constellation”: pulling the threads of her present condition through the loops of her absent-present past and vice versa—what is, of course, showcased, from the outset of the story, in the narrator’s constant attempts to translate the present events around her in terms of their equivalents in her mythical past. On numerous occasions in Kamai’s story, for instance, taking a trip down memory lane through the foggy lens of a sense of nostalgia becomes the only means of filtering the otherwise dead fragments of the present. Thus, in response to the smug mother and her children’s silent treatment and prolonged stares, she simply dwells upon the time when she also, as a child, used to stare at strangers “in that same fascinated way, knowing that they were humans like us, but knowing that they were not from our family” (Kamani 2). In another instance, the strange terms of endearment which the young mother uses to address her children propels her back to the time when “English insults: You stupid! You idiot! Fool! Crackpot!” would quickly tire her out, but her “reservoir of delicious Gujarati insults Pig! Monkey! Cockroach! Elephant!” would always elevate her mood and put her in the best of humours (Kamani 3). Still, what best helps her to ease the dull pain of otherness she is made to feel by the inquisitive mother’s insistence on pinning down her ethnicity (aggravated by her follow-up rage, scowls, and sneers) is the narrator’s tacit identification with her reminiscences of three *othered* women whom she had a liking for or a physical attraction to as a child.

Interestingly, all three women had been “Junglee girls” (wild, untamed, and

uncontrollable girls/women) who, either for being non-Gujarati or belonging to a less privileged class, were cast as outsiders by the Gujarati community in which they lived. The first *othered* woman whose memories flood back to her is Lajinder, a Punjabi woman married to the narrator's oldest cousin, whose taste in unconventional clothes ("the low-cut blouses, the tightest dresses, and the flimsiest nightgowns") and short hair had long drawn "an invisible line" between her and other Gujarati women to such an extent that her name was changed to Lakshmi and "she was always referred to as 'that Punjabi'" (Kamani 6; 7). The second woman she remembers is her childhood Maharashtrian ayah or bai whose sensual way of wearing the sari had stood in her way of becoming a real Gujarati "no matter that in some Gujarati households the Maharashtrian bais had worked ... for decades and spoke only Gujarati, ate only Gujarati food, and regaled their gods with only Gujarati bhajans" (Kamani 8; 9). At last comes her playmate Radha, a fair-skinned Kashmiri girl who looked "exactly like a doll, a foreign doll"—an "alert but quiet" girl whose exotic pliant body had fascinated the narrator by becoming a source of her childhood sensual pleasure (Kamani 9; 10) It is, in fact, in relation to her reminiscences of these outcast desiring and desirable women in the context of her constant back-and-forth psychic movements between past and present that the narrator gradually comes to realize that her mark of difference from a typical Gujarati woman like the smug mother is not "the unconventionality of her hair and dress, but ... the overtness of her desire" (Bow 21): "being sexual has reshaped my knowledge, my feelings, my very breath. *That is* what fools you; that is what you turn away from in *yourself* when you turn away from me" (Kamani 12).

Nevertheless, no sooner has the narrator identified and acknowledged her overt desire and sexual expressiveness as a marker of otherness in the apparently stigmatizing space she calls home that the young mother's next desirable move or gesture not only subverts the narrator's assessment but also, as we shall see, reconciles her with her Indian-ness, in general, and the young mother, in particular. It is this reconciliation which, by the end of the story, alleviates the narrator's sense of otherness and prepares the ground for the re-negotiation of her subjectivity through what comes close to a belated mourning. What effects this reconciliation, of course, is the enabling mental space made amidst the fierce push-and-pull forces of the dialectic between the pull of roots and the allure of routes. It is in this liminal space, opened up initially by the physical act of return, that the diasporic narrator can then get involved in the high psychic tension between diasporic struggles to be freed from the snares of Indian mores (those like the traditional class-and-caste considerations, the racial discourse, and the repressive sexual codes of conduct) and

a constant desire to be bound up with those same roots—a paradoxical positioning best summed up in the Gujarati mother’s ambiguous general attitude towards her: “she has steeled herself against both my strangeness and my familiarity” (Kamani 11). The psychic space of return, hence, will allow the narrator to extol (and even to preach for) an ideally fluid and transnational identity forged beyond the snares of nativism or racism while, paradoxically, enabling her to reconcile, in a final flight of fancy, with her Indian roots. The most potent representation of this simultaneous affiliation with and loyalties towards her “chameleon identity” (Kamani 13) on the one hand and her ethnic (Indian) identity on the other is best embodied in a scene right before the climactic moment of the story, when the narrator’s enigmatically sensuous reconciliation with her Indian-ness is, paradoxically enough, preceded by a lengthy ardent rumination on the necessity of living free from the snares of ethnic, regional, national, and linguistic boundaries:

I could have told the Gujarati woman that I was Brazilian, Mexican, or even Ethiopian, just a few of the identities commonly ascribed to me by hopeful strangers in the U. S. I could have claimed to be Israeli, Egyptian or Turkish; even Italian, Spanish, Portuguese. That is the beauty of being Gujarati. The ports of Gujarat have been active centers of trade for millennia, and have attracted not only Arabs, Turks, Mongols, Persians, Greeks Romans, and Africans, but then later also English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese, all of whose genes have mingled over the centuries with the original inhabitants of Gujarat so that even we Gujaratis are fooled by each other.

I want to take the face of the woman between my hands and tell her gently, so as not to scare her: Don’t you know that there are Gujaratis in every country on earth now? Don’t you know that there our culture has caused subtle shifts in every community, and in turn, every community is subtly shifting the Gujaratis?

I intensify my stare and try to blaze a telepathic message into her frowning brow: *It doesn’t matter anymore what identity I was.* (Kamani 11)

Ironically, it is right after this emancipatory imaginary speech on the significance of (re-) fashioning transnational identities that the young mother, as if in response to the narrator’s “telepathic message,” “undoes the tightly coiled bun at the nape of her neck ... shakes free her long hair and runs her fingers slowly down the length of it, head bowed to one side” (Kamani 11; 12)—a gesture that, seen through the nostalgic lens of the narrator, “becomes an act of seduction that psychically

reconnects her to the erotic, nostalgic pull of the women of her youth” (Bow 326). It is this same gesture that opens the way for the climactic moment of the story and sets the stage for an epiphanic moment of redemption and reconciliation with the motherland:

An old familiar longing rushes into my throat, hammering at my vocal chords, drying me out with desire. I know this woman. I know her well. She is part of my recurring dream of coming home to India to be greeted by thousands of women running down a hill with their long hair swooping behind them like black garlands of welcome, like black birds released from captivity to honor my return. (Kamani 12)

In Kamani’s text, then, over a few lines and through what, at least initially, seems like a benign act “the righteous guardian of tradition” turns into “the epitome of sensuality” (Kamak 72) and an otherwise simple act of loosening one’s hair becomes an enigmatic scene of seduction brimming with highly-charged signifiers. In what amounts to a replay of a displaced dreamy version of the scene of primal seduction; the now desiring and desirable young mother makes a gesture and murmurs words which, as opposed to her earlier divisive taunts, sneers, and enraged stares, are shockingly consolatory and consoling:

I am shocked, as I always am to see how sensuality abruptly descends on the sternest of Indian women when they loosen their thick dark hair. With her hair down, this smug judgmental mother of three is suddenly so breathtakingly beautiful that I want to cry. *She looks at me slyly, conspiratorially, savoring the feel of her long tresses between her fingers.*

“Why don’t you grow your hair,” she murmurs. “Long hair looks so good on us, don’t you think?”

She pushes up her window as high as it will go. The wind lifts her hair around her like a lone hawk suspended on a bank of air. Her hair spreads out, shading her, like the flat top of a solitary baobab tree. If only I could climb into those silken branches. (Kamani 12, emphasis added)

The young mother’s alluringly long “thick dark hair”—now a metaphoric stand-in for an overwhelming desire for the motherland—as well as her seductive invitation to the narrator to grow her hair unintentionally rekindle and re- evoke the primal traumatic moment of departure-as-rupture (the moment of psychic severance from

the *motherland* inherent in any act of displacement) when the enigmatic signifiers were implanted on the psyche-body of the emigrating subject. What those enigmatic signifiers meant to signify at the time is, of course, still partly opaque. It is, nonetheless, plainly evident that their belated re-evocation in an auxiliary scene, a scene whose unfolding owes a great deal to the diasporic subject's act of physical and psychic return, offers a space or, as Laplanche sees it, a "hollow" in which the diasporic subject "comes to situate and re-elaborate the hollow of his own originary enigmas" (*Essays* 191).

Laplanche refers to this notion of a "hollow" in his discussion of the two modalities of transference in the analytic situation: 1) *transfert en plain* 'filled-in transference' and 2) *transfert en creux* 'hollowed-out transference.' Distinguishing between the two but specifying their coexistence, he defines the former as that which is associated with the compulsion-to-repeat (i. e. the negative problematic form of repetition of "childhood imagos, scenarios, behaviours and relationships, the positive translations of the past") and the latter as the process of "working through and dismantling, *detranslating* the contents of this 'filled-in' transference" (Fletcher 87). Such a distinction implies, as Scarfone explains, that "if there were nothing but filled-in transference—that is, mere repetition—there would be no resolution in sight" (558). Laplanche's major contention, thus, is that the analytic situation can offer a space or a "hollow" in which the analysand is not always doomed to empty something filled-in (i. e. "his pouch" of compulsive traumatic repetitions) but is rather invited to place another hollow (i.e. "the enigma of his originary situation"). Hollowed-out transference, then, is that modality of transference which facilitates, in the space conferred by the analyst, a re-confrontation with the provoking and traumatizing originary enigma (of the other) in the hope that in the course of such a re-encounter and secondary revision "new translations of the enigma may be issued" (*Essays* 403)

In Kamani's story, also, the significance of the narrator's act of return is not only in reinstating the fundamental enigmatic (m)other/child situation but in providing a mental space in which a re-confrontation with the (m)other's libidinally-charged enigma is facilitated. The narrator, as a diasporic returnee who looks at the present through a pang of nostalgia, forces herself into a state of confused struggle with the push-and-pull forces of the now/then dialectic—a struggle which places her in a state parallel to a state of transference (defined, by essence, as the past/present fusion during which the past moment of rupture comes alive, not in its own terms, but in terms of the present). For her, the young mother's insignificant-but-intense gesture of uncoiling her lush, long, dark hair thus becomes a carrier of an enigmatic



load of excitation which, by creating an intermediary mental hollow, offers a privileged site in which the demand for a renewed attempt at further (re-) translation and possible (re-)integration of the message of the (m)other can be carried out. The young mother's seductive gesture, thus, inadvertently provokes "the enigmatic share in the other's message" (Scarfone 557), thereby reactivating the inassimilable residual *à traduire* 'to-be-translated.' It is in response to such an unintentional provocation in the hollow conferred by the physical/psychic act of return that the narrator then actively, though inadvertently, confronts with the (m)other's enigma and engages with an act of re-translation—an act which, at this point, proves to be reconciliatory and redeeming:

I feel the slow uncoiling in my groin as *the heat of my many tightly held selves burns through me. Resistance I'm not aware of holding suddenly snaps*, and the train compartment, the woman, her sleeping children, the rusted ceiling fan, the tracks, the fields, the hazy sky, spin me so fiercely that I have to lean back and let all rock through me. *The brooding, dreaming girl I had been ten years earlier, wanting to be embraced and ensnared and embodied by these ciphers of women that surrounded me, has become a brooding, dreaming adult, still aching, to decipher, derange, delight. I need to start over:* I require once again a pliant will, a chameleon identity, and the reconfigured time of cycles and sieves that runs me around again and again in a rut of meaningless circumstances, *but then suddenly drops me right down the trap door of surface and superface into the rushing female river below.* (Kamani 13, emphasis added)

As the ending of the story indicates, the reactivated enigmatic signifiers, whose presence is highlighted and intensified by the young mother's seductive gesture, drive the narrator to ache "to decipher, derange, delight" that which has silently resisted translation in the past ten years. What exactly has resisted metabolization while silently circulating in the psyche of the diasporic subject all those years is, of course, not directly named, but only vaguely hinted at since the enigmatic character of the signifiers has to be maintained at any cost. Such signifiers, yet, regardless of their ambiguous signified, are endowed with such an excessive libidinal force that their reactivation can perceptibly disrupt the narrator's "many tightly held selves" and her hitherto imperceptible "resistance." In a brief but epiphanic moment (triggered by the young mother's gesture of uncoiling her hair) and within a psychic space (located beyond the boundaries of present, past, and future), the narrator thus

has to refashion her subjectivity while experiencing the therapeutic effect of being dropped “right down the trap door of surface and superifice into *the rushing female river below*”—a covert tropological evocation of her Indian-ness on a metaphoric plane. Interestingly, no sooner has the previous dysfunctional translations of the still enigmatic signifiers revisited, reinvestigated, dismantled, decomposed, or, in Laplanche’s parlance, “de-translated” that the fault between the self (represented by the narrator) and the (m)other (represented by the young Gujarati mother) is suddenly sutured: “I feel the hair on my head jumping and growing and the hem of my dress lengthening and unfolding, *drawing me closer to home*” (Kamani 13, emphasis added).

In sum, the narrator’s re-confrontation with the enigma of the (m)other (embodied by the young mother’s libidinally-charged gesture) within the liminal hollow warranted by the pull-and-push psychic space of return has significant outcomes. Firstly, it forces the narrator to address, if not refill, the lacuna at the core of her diasporic subjectivity by issuing some new translations for the enigmatic signifiers. Secondly, and more importantly, by provoking a hollowed-out transference, it acts as a therapeutic agent which is apt to break the vicious cycles of the traumatic compulsion-to-repeat (non-translation) and to lead, at least temporarily, to a moment of self/(m)other unification (semi-translation) when “the [divisive] geographic, temporal, and class boundaries of Gujarat and India” (Diaz 186) are threatened by a binding enigmatic longing both to mourn and to (re-)belong. What makes Kamani’s representation of the return journey to the *motherland* effective, if not therapeutic, then, is its ability to reopen the diasporic subject’s relation to the enigma of the (*m*)otherland and to prompt, via an auxiliary scene, a re-encounter with that same enigma—an enigma which is the residue of an initial moment of the implantation of enigmatic signifiers at an apparently traumatic moment of departure-as-rupture. What those signifiers had meant to signify at the time, of course, is still opaque: it is, nonetheless, evident that their belated re-evocation in another scene and in another time (a scene and time whose unfolding owes a great deal to the diasporic subject’s act of return) can offer an intermediary psychic space in which the diasporic subject can be placed—due to his/her constantly called-for acts of (de-/re-) translation—on the verge of a belated process of working-through and mourning for the (*m*)otherland.

## Conclusion

In the light of Laplanche’s translation model of psychic functioning within the context of his general theory of seduction, Ginu Kamani’s “Ciphers” then

constitutes an allegory of the return to the traumatizing maternal enigma which defines and structures every diasporic subject's relation to the absent presence of the *motherland*. It is undoubtedly true that, from within a Laplanchean framework, such a subject seems like "a forever failing translator" (Peeren 6) on the verge of being hoovered back into a state of non-translation. Yet, it must be noted that a diasporic returnee (like the narrator in "Ciphers") is, after all, a privileged translator who—due to her allegorical outlook, her constant engagement in a back-and-forth process of Benjaminian constellation, and her occupation of a liminal psychic space which reopens her relationship to the enigma of the (*m*)otherland—is more apt to carry out "comprehensive and more productive" re-translations rather than "simply 'rehash'[ing] old translations" (Peeren 6; 9). This, of course, is not to claim that a physical/psychic return journey to the *motherland* can warrant the achievement of a full translation or the complete deciphering of its enigma to the extent that mourning a hitherto occluded sense of otherness at its core can be made fully possible in an instant. Rather, it is to claim that physical/psychic acts of return, as facilitators of a state of suspended temporality between there/here, then/now, and (*m*)other/self, carry the seeds of (but not guarantee) the possibility of a belated-yet-fleeting moment of working-through and mourning via the Laplanchean process of (de-/re-) translation.

Mourning, after all, is always looming on the horizon only if the enigma of the partially-translated yet emotionally-charged message of the *mother(land)*—laden with "relations of tenderness affection, attachment, but also, at times, of passion and violence" (Scarfone 563)—is acknowledged, addressed, and encountered: that is, only if (*m*)otherness, rather than being melancholically appropriated and incorporated at the frontier of self, is confronted on its own terms and in its stark naked entirety. Significance of the diasporic return and its fantasy, then, does not simply reside in the fact that it involves a revival or a reopening of the original trauma at the site of the original displacement. Rather, what makes any act of diasporic return significant is its ability to provide the diasporic subject with an abstract psychic space immune to the spatio-temporal logic (a state similar to that of a Laplanchean hollowed-out transference) in which she/he can then be constantly engaged in a process of (de-/re-)translation—a process which brimming with the possibility of new translations, can amount to a kind of suturing, healing, and thus belated mourning for the diasporic subject.

As sites of "potential catching-up with a message *sent out* from the world of origins and continually *travelling* towards meaning, in a way that intersects with Laplanche's 'translation theory'" (Munos 110), literal/psychic returns thus seem

to offer fertile ground for a subsequent series of re-imagining, re-working, and re-translating of the primal scene of seduction (i. e. of the original implantation, of the enigmatic transmission, and of the primal interpellation) and, hence, for a (re-) negotiation of the diasporic subjectivity-in-process. Despite such a primacy of the enigmatic message of the (m)otherland in determining the formation and later (re-) negotiations of diasporic subjectivities, though, it should be reiterated that the process of (de-/re-)translating the message is never an easy task and might rather prove to be a sheer impossibility. In fact, it is out of this same impossibility-cum-longing of/for a full translation of the message that the diasporic subject's inclination to nourish the diasporic fantasy of return is born.

Longing to provide the missing signified at the site of the original rupture and hoping to interpret his/her "maladies of belonging" (Patel) to resolve the enigma of his/her being, and to exorcise phantoms of his/her past in relation to that yet-to-come signified, the diasporic subject, thus, restores to the fantasy of a full return as a means of a reunification with the enigmatic message of the (m)other of the primal seduction. As she/he often comes to learn (often through generations), however, this fantasy of fusion is no more than an illusion since return (like the very act of translation) is always incomplete—not fully assimilable. But what if, as Caruth claims in her interview with Laplanche, "the meaning of it [the message] is partially that you can't assimilate the message fully" (*Listening* 70)? What if all that makes the diasporic subjectivity a paradoxical site of an excessive pain and power is its total dependence on an acknowledgement of the irreducible otherness of self on a daily basis? The diasporic subjectivity, after all, proves, better than any other subjectivity, that certain gaps and lacunas are irrevocable; that the enigma of the other is indelible; and that neither any act of exclusion, repulsion, or repression nor any brutal force of homogenization or any one-size-fits-all policy can by any means obliterate or abolish its irreducible otherness—hence its being a crisis for, if not a source of potential threat to, all present-day totalitarian governments.

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