

**Sonora Jha's Campus Novel *The Laughter* as an Example
of Minor Literature: a Deleuzoguattarian Reading.**

By

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Abstract

This analytically descriptive study reads *The laughter* (2023) by the Indian/American novelist Sonora Jha as a campus novel preoccupied with the present-day world deterritorialization/reterritorialization. The study uses Deleuze's concepts about the physical/ psychological/cultural process of deterritorialization/reterritorialization that happens to the characters against a supposedly liberal and free academic background: the university. It also examines the argument that the novel belongs to Deleuzoguattarian minor literature. The novel in question does not only satirize academia and its hypocritical ethics, but harshly criticizes the society that allows those power structures to form and affect others as well. Findings point out that the third world characters in *The Laughter* are forced to deterritorialize from their homelands, strain themselves to reterritorialize in the supposedly liberal world of the US academia, but end up either frustrated or dead. The intricate complex narrative, heavy intertextuality, and the fact that the novel subverts the existing power structures from within, all these factors categorize *The Laughter* in the category of minor literature in the Deleuzoguattarian way.

Keywords: Jha, *The Laughter*, Deleuze, deterritorialization/reterritorialization, Campus novel.

Introduction

This paper argues that Sonora Jhha's novel *The Laughter* belongs to what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call "minor literature" and that it subverts the Western canonical campus novel from inside. The paper also claims that the Deleuzoguattarian concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization can be clearly assessed in the lives of Pakistani Professor Ruhaba Khan, and her adolescent nephew Adil Allam whose migrations to the US mark leaving familiar troubled territories, and reaching to new territories; that is to say deterritorializing and reterritorializing. Moreover, the events begin on the eve of 2016 presidential elections in the US with Trump's harsh migration policies, a politically debatable and charged background. As a campus novel, this intricate narrative is intensified because the university becomes a concentrated microcosm of the world; the writer, then, finds no better technique than using satire to show how academic and social pretensions are fragile, reflecting the societal chaos following Trump's rise.¹

Indian Pakistani writer Dr Sonora Jha started as a journalist and is now an academic in Settle University, USA. In her 2023 novel, oddly enough named *The Laughter*, she traces Oliver Harding, a divorcee tenured white professor of English literature whose quiet life is turned upside down by the appearance of an attractively vibrant Pakistani Muslim law professor, Ruhaba Khan. Khan's life is complicated by an extended visit from her France-born teen age nephew Adil Alam whose parents send him to live with his aunt in order to keep him away from Islamically sympathetic associates. Harding uses Adil as a tool to get closer to Khan; however, the entire situation is further complicated by student protests demanding more diversity and less whiteness in the university campus and curricula. To professor Harding's dislike, Dr Khan, a liberal adopting feminism and human rights, takes the side of the students which pushes her relation with

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/29/protest-trump-travel-ban-muslims-airports>

Harding to a dangerous edge. Sexually frustrated by her refusal and terribly frightened by the intellectual changes taking place in the university, Harding shoots Khan dead in his office and accuses Adil, who accidentally appears at his door, of honour crime. The novel is narrated by professor Harding himself in the form of confessional memoir which is part of its satiric nature because it is the white male aggressor's point of view that the readers see and it is the same narrative that incriminates him at the end. Harding's narrative interestingly takes two levels: the mere confessional diary leading to the moment of murder and Harding's attempts to conceal the truth, all mixed with quotations from GK Chesterton, Fahmiza Riad and Khan's newly discovered unsent emails that uncover her inner life.

As Rafael Frumkin thinks of the relation between Ruhaba Khan and Oliver Harding, "Ruhaba is curious, vivacious and compassionate, the kind of woman who Oliver feels can give him the joy he lacks, and whose imperfections he overlooks in service of his lust." (Frumkin, no p.) To Harding, she is the exotic orient, the deliciously "covered" beauty that contains the magic missing from his life, "I stared at her. Her eyes were inky-black and frank. Some sort of evolutionary thing in her genes, perhaps, to render themselves penetratingly human behind a burka. Even though her traditional dress had been minimized to a headscarf, old manners die hard." (Jha, *Laughter*, 8,9) The image of the Oriental woman as has been stereotypically depicted in literature and public culture is obsessing Harding's mind to the point of being unable to see any other human potential in Ruhaba rather than sexual temptation.

When Ruhaba's teenager nephew Adil Alam, arrives from France to stay with his aunt, Oliver Harding becomes a mentor to Adil, using his friendship with the boy to draw closer to his aunt. That is a moment of potential deep human relationship between Harding on one side and Ruhaba and Adil on the other, but it is apparent that not only is Oliver dismayed with the worlds in which Ruhaba and Adil come from, but that he cannot see beyond the

immediate pleasure his physical intimacy with Ruhaba will bring him. The Sexual desire is intensified as he tries to reconcile his fears and quiet his sense of horror at the changes Ruhaba and Adil represent in his life particularly as Ruhaba joins the revolutionary student movements on campus. As a midlife professor of English literature losing any sense of passion or academic focus, the new story of those oriental humans promised a long-lost excitement from his life, "Every cell in my being had strained toward the story, and thereafter, it was all I could do not to stumble like an earnest fool, over and over, into the thrall of Scheherazade, who bid me to sit by her on a rug." (Jha, *Laughter*, 56) From the beginning, Harding is drawn to a lavish narrative of hareem beauty and magic in Ruhaba; the way an Occidentalist is drawn to an Oriental object of beauty that promises sweeping away his previous worries. The accelerating changes that take place in the campus intertwine with Harding's sexual frustration, pressing horrible past of sexual deviations and family violence, and the hate speech of pre-elections Trump, all this together conspire to get the worst out of him to the point of murdering Ruhaba and accusing Adil of the crime. The white rage instantly buys his accusation against the unsuspecting troubled teenager; it has been built on centuries of stereotypes about the Orient.

So, the novel is exhilarating on many ways: being a representative of subverting minor literature, being a subverting campus novel, expressing vibrant contemporary concerns specially with the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024, and being an exceptional example of narrative technique with Harding's first-person narrative mixed with the voice of Ruhaba in her unsent emails and the exciting intertextuality of Pakistani and English literature. Harding's scarce self-knowledge creates moments of black comedy when seen against his academic tenured professorship and the slow revelation of his appalling nature.

The Laughter As a Representative of Minor Literature

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are the first to coin this term and explain its characteristics after their study of Kafka's work. To them, Kafka as a Jew who used the German language for writing literature in the Czech Republic represents the type of literature produced by minority groups in major languages/cultures. In a nutshell, it is the literature written by minority not in their minor language (Hindi in the case of Jha,) in a major culture (American), but it is rather the kind of literature written by minority in a major culture using the major language itself. In light of Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of Kafka's concept of minor literature, there are three characteristics,

The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature. (Deleuze, Minor, 18)

The first characteristic of minor literature is the deterioration of language. Minor literature works on a major literature/culture from inside and starts to change it causing a noticeable difference; that is to say it subverts it. In *The Laughter*, both writer and characters face linguistic difficulties and go through reterritorialization in a remarkable way. The several Pakistani or religious intertexts in the novel reflect different territorial, temporal and spatial dimensions better able to represent both writer and minor characters rather than actual American ones. Ruhaba and Adil, though relatives, are differently originated; Ruhaba leaves Pakistan after a never-explained violent family incident and settles in the US as a racial law professor defending minorities while Adil is born and raised in France as a second-

generation Moslem teen-ager. Despite these differences, Ruhaba and Adil share a sense of estrangement from the new territory

How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language? Kafka answers: steal the baby from its crib, walk the tightrope.” (Deleuze, Minor, 19)

Language and territories are inseparable; they affect each other and challenge or stabilize one another. With each phase, new social and physical realities emerge. Likely, language is a key word in *The Laughter*. With the conscious usage of the hosting country language, the endless intertexts at the heart of the novel, the glaring satire, and the contrasting levels of narratives which have the chauvinist masculine first person narrative on one level juxtaposed to the subverting feminist one in the emails, the readers of *The Laughter* are never at ease with language. They are always reminded that they need more than one reading to decipher the text. The interrogations around Adil's involvement with terrorists, murder or the ironically self-incriminating narrative of the white male professor, suffuse the whole context with a need to read even more carefully. Language becomes a dangerous area where one word, email, or a statement may endanger the characters and force them into new reterritorialization. Ruhaba says to Harding that “she had to imagine her sentences in her head.... before campus meetings. She had to take a breath before any response to a student question, no matter how quotidian....She had begun to avoid social situations where she would not be able to predict conversation or, worse, banter.” (Jha, *Laughter*, 108) Interestingly enough, the

difficulty to fathom the language or the culture is reciprocal; Harding finds Ruhaba and Adil "serious and unfathomable as the Koran." (28) Adil, whose mother languages are French and Urdu, is at a loss at the beginning when it comes to what to say and how to answer it; this is why he finds himself drawn to Harding in the hope of finding a trustworthy mentor. Adil and Ruhaba seem to push Harding to a complex dichotomous relationship. On the one hand, he is awed by their presence; they intimidate him in a way because they threaten to change his old world ordered to suit his superiority as a white male. "I bristled at the boy's words, his presence here, on this soil, and there, on French soil." (27) He misunderstands many of Adil's words and mishears them as stereotypically intimidating words, "Allahu Akbar!" the boy said. I startled and spilled my drink," (27) while what the boy actually said was "Khala Ruhaba" pronouncing the "r" in a French way. The idea is that Harding's intimidation is somehow translated into an obsessive sexual desire.

The second characteristic of minor literature is its close connection to politics, "Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it." (Deleuze, Minor, 17) Ruhaba's existence in the US is on a green card while Adil's visa is for one year provided that he proves himself clear of any connections with radical Islam as well as all the FBI interest in their existence and cases prove the immediacy of politics in the lives of *The Laughter* as minor literature characters. The beginning of *The Laughter* throws the reader into the pre 2016 elections in the house of a white provost who is worried that the party may turn into a fight between those who are for Hillary Clinton and those who are for Trump. In addition to that, the heated atmosphere created by the migration laws forced on society by Donald Trump increase the clashes during the student demonstrations and create a tense atmosphere for all sides to act violently. Part of Harding's violent

reaction to Ruhaba's words is not only his sexual frustration, but also his heightened fear of how rapidly his old comfortable world is shrinking. His cunning tango with the Federal agents investigating the murder reflects his deep understanding of the Islamophobic mind of his folks. Misleading them to believe that Adil is the real murderer depends on understanding the societal fears of the Moslem migrants and highlights the typical stereotypes specially as Adil primarily crashes into Ruhaba's life after he has had sympathies with radical Islam youth as a result of seeing his mother humiliated and forced to take off her veil in one of the French parks. That is to say; politics caused Adil's temporary migration to the US and his eventual break down at the end. While Ruhaba and Adil turn to Harding as a friend and a mentor, Harding feeds them to the public mind using his intellectual and linguistic capacities for he knows that the federal agents' minds "were made up.... Perhaps if I looked in the agents' notebook, I'd see a template with predetermined lines to fill out, questions that were predetermined, answers even more so." (Jha, Laughter, 243) Harding knows that the federal agents are eager to appear as terrorism fighters, for their own professional promotion. He realizes that the nation wants him to appear as victim/hero because it would be a shame "in the nation's sense of all that was right as rain if I didn't play my part." (243) In another place he says that the people who believe his intricate narrative about the two migrants, "...have been calling me a sane man, a hero. Do I have a choice? No." (293) The irony here is that the readers have been ascertained from his own confessional memoirs that he is deeply disturbed; far from being sane hadn't it been for his inherent talent for telling a good story, "This story needs me to be a hero. The rapidity with which the American imagination has filled in the blanks in my story has left even me astonished. Look how neatly my narratives fall into a deeply etched template of immutable truths." (Ibid) As a widely read professor of literature, Harding knows how to fabricate a story that fits the stereotypes comfort the public opinion. "They need me to tell it like they already know it happened. This story needs my voice to bring comfort." (Ibid)

The third characteristic of minor literature, the expression of collective enunciation is well manifested in *The Laughter*. In its ability to deteriorize itself from major language and culture, minor literature can “really become a collective machine of expression and really be able to treat and develop its contents.” (Deleuze, Minor, 19) This collective expression or what in other places is called the “collective assemblage of enunciation” means that minor literature expresses collective not individual experiences or lives. It re-enacts the complex process of deterritorialization and reterritorializes itself changing the canonical genre from inside. The novel highlights the effects of “minor literature” by the fact that both novelist and two of the major characters are minority in a major culture using major language. The lives of Ruhaba and Adil keep repeating themselves in many Western cultures in an age where millions of individuals are being deterritorialized and reterritorialized, willingly or forcibly, around the world because of wars or the pressing mechanisms of globalization. This is what is meant by the collective or communal narratives. Jha, in *The Laughter*, uses the campus as a suitable place to widen the lens of minority, and to include other marginalized individuals like women, coloured people and the sexually different. The purpose of the students’ demonstrations starts in the college of humanities by a desire to have more inclusive curricula, or surprisingly enough, more of the minor literature this novel brilliantly represents. This is Jha’s way of intertwining the collective experiences of minorities and the marginalized together in her novel. Interestingly, what the students protest against in the novel; that is to say “Eurocentrism in the learning being handed down to them.” (Jha, *Laughter*, 163) is being accomplished by this very narrative written by a white professor. Harding is surely against the demonstrations but takes the students’ side in order to win Ruhaba to his bed, “They sought to “decentralize whiteness.” They were wailing for “a critical focus on the evolution of systems of oppression such as racism, capitalism, colonialism, etc. Across America, young people want to

take down all that is good and wise and learned. They wanted to topple statues.” (Ibid, 163-164)

According to Sinan Kılıç, minor literature “is related to differences as immanence. Minor is to be different, and being different is to be opposed to the general laws” (269) This includes changing the way of seeing things, causing a shift in the canonical structural major that has been controlling the world or what Kılıç names “tyranny”. Thus, he believes that “minor writing is the counter to the language of tyranny, or the tyranny of the major law in language and writing.” (269) One can see Jha’s creative project as manifesting this minority in the way she handles the migratory experience of Ruhaba and Adil with what it contains of physical/cultural and linguistic deterritorialization/reterritorialization, connecting it to a wider scene of hostility against all that is different from the white man’s rules or appearance, showing the effects of political immediacy by having the immigration policies of Donald Trump looming in the background. “In today’s world, since many people do not use their own language, they are forced to use another language. This is a problem of minority, and a problem of the minor writing and literature.” (Delueze, Minor, 272) But isn’t it the only way to change things? By addressing the tyrant few in their own language? If Jha writes in Hindi, how many Americans would be enlightened about the lives of Ruhaba and Adil? Or the dangers of superficial inclusion and fake diversity in society? Or about the hypocrisy abundant at universities?

what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren’t in agreement. The political domain has contaminated every statement....literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation. It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation

allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility." (Ibid, 17)

Jha is outside the culture and language she writes in; she watches, observes, writes from the same distance her characters are at. She even complicates things by making the characters Moslem in a time where Islamophobia has become problematically abounding

Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization

Throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that deterritorialization and reterritorialization are indissoluble processes. Every movement away from a fixed territory ("deterritorialization") unlocks possibilities for new connections and arrangements "reterritorialization",

How could movements of deterritorialization and processes of reterri-torialization not be relative, always connected, caught up in one another? The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen." (Deleuze, Plateaus, 10)

The two steps, nevertheless, occur simultaneously. So, someone might deterritorialize by going against what society expects or immigrating voluntarily or involuntarily (Ruhaba). Not only does the process of reterritorialization involve creating new relationships, systems, and ideas or being forced to do so, but it also means reaching new territories or changing old ones. Consequently, new ways of being, thinking, and acting are born. Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that deterritorialization and

reterritorialization are more of two sides of the same coin rather than separate phenomena. Every act of deterritorialization inevitably leads to some form of reterritorialization, even if it's in unexpected or novel ways.

This paper argues that Sonora Jha's *The Laughter*, as a representative of minor literature, re-enacts the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of books that Deleuze and Guattari mention in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*. *The Laughter* deterritorializes the major language -English- represented in white male American professor of English literature, and reterritorializes the reader into uneasy dangerous experience of two Pakistani immigrants who "have to measure my [their] words all day," (108) and who have been geographically deterritorialized from their homelands and reterritorialized into dangerous territories. This sense of danger is transferred to the reader in professor Harding's close observation of the two Pakistani subjects, in his preying over their lives and stories. With their carefully calculated English, sense of danger and cultural intertexts, Ruhaba and Adil stand as examples of the complex process of territorialization and reterritorialization and force the readers into an uneasy experience. This brings to mind the concept of the objective correlative of T.S.Eliot's *The Wasteland*. The flight created by deterritorialization does not lead to a void but rather to new connections and the emergence of new territories. When people migrate, they deterritorialize from their homeland. They then reterritorialize by forming new communities, adopting new customs, and creating new senses of belonging in their new environment. Literature, in this way, can offer great insights into the complex experiences of migrants; minor literature can, in the DeleuzeGuattarian perspective be a rhizome of the world,

The same applies to the book and the world: contrary to a deeply rooted belief, the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an parallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book,

which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world (if it is capable, if it can) (Deleuze, Plateaus, 11)

As much as the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization seems ancient and natural, in twenty-first century it occurs more rapidly and violently. This is because these two processes explain much of what takes place in the migratory phenomenon. The novel sets action in 2016, on the eve of presidential elections, with Donald Trump's declared hostile immigration policies. The circle tightens around vulnerable deterritorialized characters like Ruhaba and Adil, making their adaptation all the way more difficult, and as it turns out at the end, dangerous. Moreover, because of the constrained nature of the situations where minor literatures take place, all the details are directly tied to politics making personal affairs magnified, "cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it." (Deleuze, Minor, 17)

In her article on geography and literature in several fictional works by Clarice Lispector, Fátima, Velez de Castro argues that what Deleuze and Guattari began was followed by various studies based on the logic of what she calls "Topophilia, which is the affective, emotional and identity relationship that individuals establish with territories. (De Castro, 2) This relation with the place is part of people's continuous efforts to generate a kind of balance and security. Being inserted into new territories and different geography in the new migration point ensures a sense or a degree of character loss with what this might entail of difficulty to interpret, reciprocate or adapt effectively in the new place.

De Castro argues that around the essentially inseparable concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization there are other concepts that must be taken into consideration; namely "the migratory plan" which is rarely a random plan (except for cases of illegal migration or compulsory refuge.) Any deterritorialization is

preceded and accompanied by a set of goals that discusses education, housing, employment, economic levels among others (4) Ruhaba in *The Laughter* migrates for undeclared gender personal reasons that have resulted in constricting social environments. Her migration starts as an education prospect and ends as an attempt to settle down. The minor Adil's plan, as designed by his parents, consists of keeping him away from France, where he was accused of getting close to dangerous Islamic groups. The assumption that Ruhaba's reterritorialization in the US provided her with stability and security enough for her and her nephew is probably based on poor communication or a famous stereotype that America is the land of dreams and freedom. Both Ruhaba and Adil had certain "territorial images" to borrow De Castro's term. Ruhaba had a territorial image of a place to encompass her gender issues and to exercise her freedom regardless of how this is seen by her family,

My sister and her husband don't approve of my ways. You study all the way to a Ph.D. and your family tells you it makes you less marriageable. Then they ask why you live by yourself in your late thirties. Why you move around like this in the Western world. They didn't like that I once had a lover. That was the last straw for them. Oh, wait. Not that. The last straw was that he wasn't a practitioner of Islam." (Jha, *Laughter*, 9)

On the other hand, Adil's territorial image was the "campus shooters"! "The university shooters. Campus shooters? I know, I know, not every day. Not every campus. But we don't know when, yes? Any day could be the shooting, n'est-ce pas?" (26)

Jha is careful to picture Ruhaba larger than her Moslem identity despite the fact that Ruhaba keeps the head scarf as a religious symbol. Ruhaba is pictured as a bitterly angry woman, even in the eyes of her white male predator. The author's insertion of the actual politically racist event of Sandra Balnd 's confrontation with the police and her murder in her cell three days

later is significant to picture the societal stresses Ruhaba is facing in her new territory. The event takes place one year earlier and keeps Ruhaba busy and involved for a whole year conveying Ruhaba's political inclination and her loyalty to bigger human issues than the Muslim issues as well as her rage. Because this is narrated by Harding, the event also shows his inner fear of her powerful rage, presence, and sexuality; a fear that is quietened by murdering her when subjugating her physically fails.

Harding's harsh self-criticism is psychologically interesting and leaks of the satiric technique the narrative is imbued with. The white male professor who is the epitome of freedom and professionalism clearly confesses that he does not care for any of Ruhaba's intellectual/political/gender/ civic concerns. "for all the years of work on her dissertation and on her research agenda as a law professor and scholar of race and police science, for all the murky intersectionality of race and gender and citizenship and policing and justice and profiling and masculinity, and the toxicity of masculinity, especially in policing, Ruhaba was a woman in rage." (107)

As Frumkin notices, Jha sets her novel in the days before the 2016 election, "a fitting choice for a story about resisting the racial and sexual politics of those in power." (Frumkin, no p) Oliver is happy to teach his Chesterton classes and clumsily flirts with Ruhaba until his world is thrown askew by a student protest demanding the decolonization of the curriculum and the hiring of more professors from marginalized backgrounds. Harding's cultural anxiety at the broader cultural scenes emerging is genuine, and the students' demonstrations threaten what is left of his world, "Across America, young people want to take down all that is good and wise and learned. They wanted to topple statues," (Jha,164) ²

² This is a reference to widespread protests during the Black Lives Matter movement, where statues were taken to symbolize colonialism, slavery, or other forms of oppression. By connecting the students'

This is of course a shrewd remark to the conversations about the removal of Confederate statues, a reminder of the US's centuries old of racism as Frumkin argues. (Frumkin, no p)

The narrative technique of Jha's novel enhances the subversive nature of the work as minor literature. Throughout the entire novel, professor Harding is telling two different stories, the confessional analytical one in which he uncovers the racial, gender, academic hypocrisy and prejudices of the while male tenured English literature professor, and the fabricated story through which he means to satisfy the FBI agents' thirst a famous Islamophobic case. Jha forces Harding to outstrip himself and with that he outstrips the entire "major" culture he represents. In doing that, as Cheuk argues, Harding's narrative resembles Lolita

though it's unclear until the end of book what crimes Harding is divulging. Throughout the novel, it's also unclear to whom Harding is confessing, other than to "his conscience" — which has plenty of prejudicial blind spots. If he's writing to the authorities, he doesn't seem to realize he's incriminating himself. If he's writing to someone close to him, perhaps even Ruhaba or Adil, he doesn't seem to realize that he never sees them as more than members of the "Muslim World," separate from and inferior to his own. (Cheuk, no p.)

The Campus Novel

As is clear from the name, the campus novel is one that takes place within the confines of a university campus, involves as its characters professors, students, officials, and tackles themes that

demonstration to statue toppling, the professor is portraying the students as radicals who seek to erase history and tradition. This evokes a sense of cultural destruction and negates the righteousness of the students to change anything.

necessarily start from university regulations and conflicts. (Tierney, 164) Critical books on campus fiction date the beginnings of this genre to the fifties of the 20th century (Showalter 1, Massoud 5, Zidane 4) and it has become a recognizable genre with a considerable number of critical works devoted to it. Showalter gives another title to the genre, namely, "professoroman" (2) as the novel that pictures the formation and struggles of a university professor while Tierney argues that since "many of the authors are members of English departments, a significant number of novels have humanities professors, in general, and English professors, in particular, as primary protagonists." (Tierney, 164)

According to Zidane, the four conventions that make the campus novel a recognizable genre are, "a naïve hero, an episodic plot, a satiric tone and a number of stylized secondary characters." (4) In light of those conventions, one can identify the episodic plot in *The Laughter*, though the episodes are connected by the double levels of narrative. Moreover, the satire tone is quite recognizable in the novel. The pretentious provost who lives off his Google attorney wife's money, the chauvinistic old colleague, Meyers, who is a foil personality to Harding, the ugly tenured female professor, Fugly, are all there. However, *The Laughter* is wider and more complicated and ambitious campus novel that seeks to change the genre from inside and is connected to minor literature as this paper seeks to prove.

There is irony that manifests itself in the character of Harding; it is a juxtaposition between the analytical confessional form of his narrative and the narratives he gives to the FBI. Told in a chronology that alternates between a present tense in the aftermath of some awful event (the details of which are as yet unclear) and flashbacks to the weeks leading up to that event, the narrative pulses with a sense of growing unease and inevitable tragedy that perfectly reflects its historical moment. Tierney argues that the reality of the academic characters that are revealed in most

academic novels takes place in settings where “absurdities are not supposed to occur, but frequently do,” (165) Moreover, the institution that is supposed to be concerned with the life of the mind eventually “end up in incongruous situations that have little, if anything, to do with the intellect.” (ibid.) More important than all these according to Tierney, there is a sense of double satire that appears on the characters, namely, their self-delusion, “if anyone ought to be able to avoid self-delusion, of course, it should be the intellectual who presumably has in-sight into the self.” (165) Harding confesses his academic and political insecurities the students’ demonstration touch on,

I was a traditionalist, the canon wars were upon us, and my career was deemed to be as dead as the dead white men on my curriculum. My syllabi were a tribute to fossils, some said. Whatever happened to academic freedom? We had made room for everyone, and now they sought to topple us over the edge. Such intolerance was hardly what we'd fought for. My scholarly agenda stood little chance before the marauding bigots who turned education into a battle cry in place of what should be its real motive—the search for a good life.”

(Jha, Laughter, 115)

Edemariam argues that the campus novel is a finite, enclosed space, like a boarding school” where “clear power relationships (teacher/student; tenured professor/scrabbling lecturer) - and thus lots of scope for illicit affairs” exist” against a background of restrictions, “revolutions have been known to begin on campuses” because of the freedom the atmosphere seems to convey, and “it's all set against the life of the mind.” (Edemariam, no p) Dr Sonora Jha positions her campus novel to reveal the historically deteriorating academic scene via this tenured white G.K. Chesterton scholar male professor ‘s sexual obsession with Ruhaba Khan, the Muslim, non-tenured assistant Pakistani law professor living in the US on a green card. All this happens against

a fiery American political scene that reflects tensions, fears and aspirations. Jha, an academic herself in Settle University, makes it clear to her interviewer Moira McDonald that her novel is not about Settle University, and that she finds the campus novel an interesting genre, "Academia is a rich, rich place for writing satire;" (McDonald, no p) however, she could not find anything in the long tradition that spoke to her as a woman of color. "There are so many people of color on campuses now, and we need to tell a story from their point of view." (Ibid) This is where the subverting minor element in the novel manifests itself and adds to the work's complication. Jha knows from a first-hand experience that makes her certain that the university is an establishment by all means: the committees, buzzword-rich statements, and refusal of change. Change in particular is "met with militant disdain" as McDonald argues. (Ibid)

Jha tells McDonald that she started out with the plan of telling the story from three points of view, Ruhaba, Harding and Adil; however, Harding kept interrupting her and finally she gave in and made the "white gaze" take over the story. McDonald sharply notices that Jha does not give Harding redemption, nor a story of spiritual or human growth or recognition. The readers gradually and slowly connect the dots about his disturbed personality, but Jha, even though she makes him the narrator of a confessional first-person narrative, she cares more about what happens to the people around him; namely his family and the Pakistani immigrants. "I'm not writing about this man's journey, and these people of color are his tools to his understanding and his change of heart." (Ibid)

In her seminal work about campus fiction, Showalter argues that critics hold that the campus novel is basically satirical." (Showalter, 2) and because most likely the campus novel is written by professors of humanities, Showalter finds the genre's seriousness /sadness coated in satire most interesting, "Perhaps we professors turn to satire because academic life has so much pain, so

many lives wasted or destroyed.” (Ibid) Reading *The Laughter* proves all Harding’s ironic comments on the students or female colleagues both funny and offensive, his knitting both humorous and sad at the same time, confusing Adel’s French accent with Terroristic Islamic clichés both laughable and dangerously Islamophobic. All the irony ceases to be humorous on second look. However, as William Tierney points out, the use of irony in academic novels highlights the “delusion of the academy.” (169)

Moreover, according to Showalter, a campus novel should not be focused on one thread rather than another, but they seem to “pull together several disparate but related threads: the influence of the power structure within academe and in relation to the world outside” (Showalter, 3) This can be clearly seen in *The Laughter* for the amalgamation of an incredible combination of university, immigration, and wider political issues that the novel grapples with. No twenty-first century novel can be an intricate one without being that diverse and without causing change in the genre itself. “The best academic novels experiment and play with the genre of fiction itself, comment on contemporary issues, satirize professorial stereotypes and educational trends, and convey the pain of intellectuals called upon to measure themselves against each other and against their internalized expectations of brilliance.” (4) In fact, Ruhaba Khan could represent a more liberal university professor that Harding himself. She is true to concepts of humanitarian freedom; she spent an entire year before the events of the novel inspecting the case of Sandra Bland who died in her cell after being accused of assaulting an officer for refusing to put off her cigarette³, she supported the students who want a more inclusive curricula of humanities that permit diversity, and finally exercised her bisexual freedom.

³ Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old African American woman died in a county jail cell on July 13, 2015, three days after a white officer had stopped her and asked her to put out her cigarette. She had been charged with assault on a public servant. Her death, classified as suicide by hanging, caused growing outrage over police interactions with African Americans.

Showalter's argument about university professors' crises representing the dilemma of current universities perfectly applies to Harding, "The professor in the throes of a midlife crisis, realizing that he will never write his great book, that he has lost touch with his field, that he no longer reaches his students, and often that his personal life is just as hollow, is actually an emblem of the academic institution as a whole." (Showalter, 101)

Moreover, considering that most of the campus novels take place in relation to the department of English literature, and in light of the huge demographic changes taking place around the world, as subtly seen in *The Laughter*, "Race, class, gender, the canon of great works, Western culture, multiculturalism, diversity—all these words buzzed around the simplest question of curriculum or faculty recruitment." (122) The decline and fall of English departments in the twenty-first century are serious phenomena indicative of a noticeable demographic, cultural and social changes. The colonial grip that disseminated English literature and culture all over the world has loosened. The world is rapidly changing and multiculturalism is truly happening. More connected to the subject of this novel, with the demise of imperialism, the English departments have lost focus and it is time they found a new one.

The Laughter should not be seen only as a campus novel; the university represents America's changing cultural and political backgrounds, and Trump's winning the elections in 2024 testifies to the intense existence of the same conditions. Here emerges an urgent need to protect the marginalized against Trump's immigration policy which have actually made people's lives harder than ever when visiting, living, or working in the US. Horrifyingly enough, people were not given asylum rights and were forced to return to dangerous situations at their homelands and children were separated from their families at the borders. The US has become a dangerous place regardless of how it propagates itself as the land of dreams.

Oliver Harding tries to carry the “White Man’s Burden” in approaching Adil fatherly, a role that is part of the stereotype he represents: the white American hero. There are moments when it seems there is a hope for genuine feelings of fraternity; Ruhaba realizes, however, that he simply wants to bed her and that no real feelings of humanity ever connect them. In essence, Harding is manipulative, egoistic and pathological; his past life as revealed in bits and pieces affirm this. His own daughter refuses to be delivered to her groom by him, and his past illegal relationships as well as his aggressive marital life testify to this. The white ego becomes more or less a caricature.

The migratory experiences of both Ruhaba and Adil show the extent of psychological and cultural disorientation they face, bearing in mind how privileged they are economically compared to less fortunate migrants. Ruhab's academic achievement and her fervent endeavours to adopt the American culture do not make her less marginalized at her workplace. In Harding’s viewpoint she is there to please—as a woman, and to carry the workload, as a coloured one ,

one of the reasons that women of color are asked to do disproportionately high service on committees on the American campus is that men of pallor like me are no longer asked. We have proved to be obtrusive and resistant to change and have thereby earned ourselves more time sitting back in our offices or getting out to play golf. I, especially, had a system that worked well to make me the least desirable man for committee service: I would passionately argue every position and kick a committee’s decision-making in its bluest balls. “ (6-7) Talking about gender equity and women’s rights to relieve work loads when pregnant, Harding exposes his colleague Meyers to be a woman hater. Sarcastically later in the novel Harding proves to be even worse than Meyers.““I have been recently fucked harder than ever and now you must all bow before my biology

and divide up my work while I go get fat and
distracted. Men like Meyer are increasingly a relic in
academia, thank the heavens.” (6)

Deep inside, Harding believes that he as a white male tenured professor is deeply entitled to having his needs satisfied in his workplace. Ruhaba, thus, faces different kinds of prejudice and abuses pushing her into a space of double marginalization. The campus, then, is dually natured: intellectually liberal but still yet socially oppressive. This schizophrenic nature deeply disturbs the identities of the migrants, and weakens their trials to accomplish any genuine assimilation or acceptance. University life, then, amplifies Harding's sense of unquestioned superiority, Ruhaba's sense of alienation and Adil's sense of insecurity. The new territory—the American university campus—proves severely hazardous for the emigrants.

The two epigraphs that start the novel reflect the nuanced perspectives the novel offers. The first one is a couple of lines by Pakistani feminist poetess Fahmida Riaz's "The Laughter of a Woman: Let the new gods of the earth try as they can/They cannot hear the sob of her ecstasy." Looking the poem up may explain the title of the novel. The laughter in the title of the novel refers to a state of pure ecstasy a woman only reaches if she is deeply fulfilled. In the novel, Ruhaba Khan only reaches this in one short video in which she, her nephew Adil and her student Essence are walking under the Autumn trees, reciting poetry and listening to Adil's mesmerizing flute. However, the first epigraph would be entirely missing if it does not include the other half of the picture, that of Oliver Harding's. By bringing in an epigraph by Chesterton, Jha not only makes the 20th century writer/philosopher and controversial thinker the literary specialization of professor Oliver Harding, but draws the attention of the readers to the elusiveness of truth. This is perhaps Jha's postmodern attempt to point out that truth is such a nuanced and complex issue; something we clearly see in the novel.

Conclusion

The current paper reads Indian/American writer Sonora Jha's novel campus novel *The Laughter* in light of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concepts of "minor literature", and its inherent phenomenon of "deteriorization/reterritorialization." The study claims that Pakistani Moslem Law Professor Ruhaba and her teenager nephew Adil are deterritorialized from their homelands/cultures because of constricting patriarchal family dysfunctions or Islamophobic concerns. When they come to the US hoping to find wider worlds of freedom and justice, they start to reterritorialize into new structures that turn out to be either overwhelming, frightening or constricting in altogether new ways. The characters end up by being frustrated or exterminated. All this takes place under the university umbrella with the close watch of professor Oliver Harding, a disturbed white male seeking intimacy with Ruhaba the symbol of oriental charm. To make things more complicated, the advent of the novel is on the eve of 2016 presidential elections.

In applying the DeleuzoGuattarian concepts to Sonora Jha's *The Laughter*, it becomes obvious that the novel settles within the framework of minor literature. It subtly subverts the canonical literary traditions of the Western campus novel from inside, directly grapples with the contemporary political turbulent scene of 2016 Donald trump's immigration policies, and expresses a collective immigrant experience with its elements of physical, linguistic and cultural deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Moreover, through Ruhaba and Adil's tragic experiences, the concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization underscore subtle critiques of modern Western institutional and cultural prejudices, where new territories can be equally dangerous as the original ones. Thus, Sonora Jha uses satire to uncover disturbing truths about contemporary migratory life, proving minor literature's ability to challenge and deconstruct canonical narratives.

The effect of Jha's creative project is subverting the canonical Western campus novel from inside the genre itself. *The Laughter*, thus, is larger than the individual experiences of Ruhaba Khan, Adil Allam or even Oliver Harding. It touches much larger social anxieties like racism, Islamophobia, gender politics, and the need to change academic perspectives in US universities. Moreover, as a campus novel, *The Laughter* manifests how a minor literature work can subvert and change the "genre" from within and by following the same aesthetics. That is to say, the novel strikes an example of a successful minor novel that expresses collective narrative and rises above individual stories. While Adil and Ruhaba represent marginalization and struggle of migrants in the contemporary multicultural American society, Harding represents even deeper fears and tensions within the white male part of that society. The setting of the novel not only symbolizes the case of all American universities, but is also a microcosm of the entire society as well.

The novel takes the readers directly to the disturbed mind of the hosting territory; a mind that is deeply frightened from but equally obsessed with foreigners. The readers only see the migrants from Professor Harding's lens, and a bit more neutrally from the discovered unsent emails on Ruhaba's computer or Adil's letter to his sweetheart back in France. The novel's chapters alternate between the memoirs which reveal past events and the current moment which shows Harding's self-conscious confession and the FBI agents eager to seal this case in a way as to incriminate the Moslem immigrants and ensure their career promotions.

Since language is key in both minor literature and its major phenomena; namely deterritorialization and reterritorialization, Jha uses the language of the majority, English, to write about the deeply marginalized experiences of Ruhaba Khan and Adil Allam, two Moslem migrants. The narrative, however is articulately and ironically by a self-critical voice, Oliver Harding. The result is a story that exposes the canonical historically inherent biases of the

Western tale about other different people even though those people have tried to reterritorialize and adopt the Western way of living. Moreover, this narrative viewpoint is highly strategic to subvert the traditional voice and language of campus novels which has usually been a space dominated by white male perspectives. So, Jha uses most of the elements of a major literature Western campus novel, and turns it into an inwardly self-critical subverting minor literature.

The university is shown at its worst as a hypocritical place where a male professor may get away with sexual liberty with students and staff, but a female professor is in danger of losing her job for the same reason specially if it happens that she supports non-white student demonstrations that call for diversity and a change of curricula. Sonora Jha's achievement is to use satire and a multi-levelled narrative to subvert all those concepts simultaneously proving her novel a great example of minor literature. Minor literature, as seen in *The Laughter*, reflects hidden life truths that subvert existing structures culturally and literary. The need to reassess the focus of English literature worldwide emerges as the multicultural studies abound and researchers' choices prove to consider other "colors" rather than the color "white" as the current study illustrates.

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