

“Infantilism by Loss”: The Ghostly Child, Loss, and Embodied Witnessing
in Padma Viswanathan’s *The Ever After of Ashwin Rao*

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Engaging with the pejorative effects following the traumatic bombing of Air India Flight 182, this presentation seeks to provide a critical response to the nostalgic presence of children after moments of loss in Padma Viswanathan’s *The Ever After of Ashwin Rao*. Narrated by Ashwin Rao, a psychotherapist collecting trauma narratives and studying comparative grief, the novel explores the melancholic affects that emerged after the Air India tragedy, specifically addressing the ways in which the racialization of trauma may disrupt and challenge feelings of belonging inside the host nation. Compelled to interact with Venkat, a physics professor who lost his family on the flight, Ashwin attempts to re-discover his narrative—with the help of Seth—and offer ways to reduce the severity of his loss and transgenerational trauma. With this in mind, I will establish my reading of children and the traumas that unfold after loss, providing particular attention to Venkat’s narrative and the loss of his son, Sundar. By focusing on discourses of “infantilism by loss,” I contend that the manifestations of ghostly children—as an extension of recollected memories—illuminates a promising understanding of the politics of loss, since the death of the child not only provokes the performativity of loss in their parents, but also enables the embodiment of an inevitable trauma.

Grounding my argument in Kathryn Bond Stockton’s examination of the birthing effects of children, I argue that the loss of a child conceives a moment of re-birth, a moment which births grief and melancholia within their parents. Throughout her chapter, “Oedipus Raced, or the Child Queered by Color,” Bond Stockton illuminates the

reciprocity between racialized children and their parents, arguing how “children [...] birth their parents, as if parents, in a crazy kind of lateral, are newly made when their children turn against them” (184). This “turning against,” in her analysis, is largely contingent on the enactment of violence by the child, which consequently not only fosters the destruction of familial lines, but also enables the suspension of futurity. I would like to situate Bond Stockton’s concept of “turning against” by applying it directly to discourses of death, loss, and grief. Instead of examining the child inflicting this violence on other bodies, and the possibility of a suspended and violent future, I will examine how the violence inflicted on the child—in other words, death—disrupts and erases the progression of familial futures. This is precisely where the ghostly apparition of the child takes form: the death of the child takes on another form, thereby birthing the performativity of loss, with the specter of the child embodied within the parent. With this framework, I will explore how Sundar’s death in the Air India tragedy perpetuates a birthing effect in his father, Ventkat, arguing that bearing witness to this trauma becomes an embodied experience of witnessing.

In order to understand my analysis of the death of the child and its effects on the parent more aptly, I need to discuss the role of the male child in the creation of new ties with the host nation. Second-generational children in migrant families often embody the tensions between the home and host nations, insofar as adults posit both relations of “pastness” and futurity onto the child. Yet, these tensions between “pastness” and futurity, I argue, are reliant on discourses of (re)productivity not only culturally assigned by the home nation, but also those highly influenced by the host nation. Migrant children, especially boys, are trying to navigate the reproductive tenors of “brown” masculinity

within a predominantly white nationalist discourse. Although they are often directed by their parents to align themselves towards a traditional masculine performance, they are also compelled to entrench hybridized familial roots into a Canadian narrative. Thus, the binaries between pastness/futurity, children/adults are always at odds, asserting the need for first and second-generation migrants to negotiate discourses of (re)productivity in the host nation. More pertinent to my discussion, children, according to Stockton, have always been, “specter[s] of who we were when there was nothing yet behind us” (30). I would like to argue further that the child, as representative of the parent, occupies the potential of looking “behind us” while also constituting the recognition of the future. In other words, I am suggesting that the past manifests itself in the child through the possibility of a future. Therefore, the (re)production of the child, through its various interpretations, attempts to create new memories within a national narrative, employing an imperative connection between migrant bodies and the national spaces they occupy.

Through the use of my methodological approach, I would like to investigate a quote from the novel that inspired my argument:

Venkat was staring out the window, hunched and small-looking. It was strange to see him reduced to infantilism by loss, needing to be told to eat and bathe, and occasionally making demands he knew everyone would run to fulfill. Maybe the adult Venkat would return when they hit the Irish shore; with his family in the vicinity, perhaps he would be restored to his old bossiness, which Seth was almost starting to miss. (2014: 128)

Here, Venkat, following the loss of his son, Sundar, and wife, Sita, on Air India Flight 182, embodies an “infantilism” that manifests as a response to acknowledging and witnessing his loss. This becomes an excellent entry point from which to contextualize the exhibition of the ghostly child and transgenerational trauma. In focusing on the manifestations of memories and ghosts, I am suggesting that Sundar’s ghost directly

haunts Venkat—that is, he finds himself unable to comprehend the extent of his loss and, therefore, begins to perform a “childish” and “infantilized” identity. It is precisely this moment in which ghosts become an extension of loss. The migrant body, which has already experienced the inevitability of loss through migration and other moments of physical and psychological injuries, must learn to accept the loss of the child, familial bonds, and the connections made with the host nation. This loss, I propose, enables the haunting effects of the past, through the enactment of (re)collected memories and the suspension of a possible future.

With this in mind, it seems that these connections with the host nation are conditional on the reproductive promises assigned to the male child. Throughout Seth’s articulation of Venkat and Sundar, for example, he claims: “I have two girls, no complaints, but I was very attached to Sundar. Different, you know, a boy. Even before I had my daughters, I used to play with him. Venkat is not too much the type to give horsey rides, that kind of thing” (58). This statement not only addresses Venkat’s identity as the strict, patriarchal parent unwilling to give “horsey rides,” but also emphasizes the need to remember loss through processes of storytelling and recollected memories. In addition, there is a line of attachment being drawn between both Sundar and Seth, since they are both male and likely to “play” with one another. In pointing out the differences between Sundar and his daughters, Seth re-affirms the value that “maleness” encompasses in a larger discourse of Canadian nationalism and traditional familial alliances. With this, I propose that the death of the child, along with the lost promises exchanged by their “maleness,” provokes a crisis that forces the parent, and other adults, to transform. Simply put, the haunting ghost of the “male” child is contingent on the

memories Venkat—and Seth, in this particular example—is compelled to recollect and share with others. On the contrary, however, this desire to re-collect memories becomes difficult to negotiate because trauma often forces the suppression of some memories, while also enabling others to emerge to the surface. Thus, the embodiment of past memories, I suggest, significantly effeminizes and, more specifically, infantilizes Venkat, the patriarch, for having failed to protect his family.

From this analysis, I would like to state that the body, through the witnessing of trauma, exceeds the limitations of the performative speech act by adopting a bodily form of communication that becomes a responsibility for Seth and Lakshmi. It is indeed this shift of responsibility that translates this embodied trauma into a feasible narrative, since Seth and Lakshmi are subsequently sharing this narrative with Ashwin Rao. Through enabling this shift of responsibility, Venkat arguably adopts a vulnerability that minimizes his identity as a normative patriarchal figure. Ashwin states further: “Did Venkat say, *Seth, I’m not a baby?* No. As an Indian man and a psychologist, I will attest that there are very few useful generalizations to be made about the Indian male psyche, but this may be one: Indian men are raised to be cared for” (175). Unlike Venkat’s previous “bossy” attitude, he accepts Seth’s orders. Yet, the difference in this particular instance lies in the vulnerabilities that emerge as part of witnessing the death of the child. Ashwin, then, utters that, “One other generalization to be made about Indians—they don’t tiptoe around death” (175). Rather than expressing his grief through performing a violent masculinity, Venkat needs to be given direction in order to settle once again.

Following the difficult news, Venkat, along with Seth, eagerly waits for the retrieval of the bodies in order to confirm the death of his son. Up until this point, Venkat

can only remember Sundar through the fragmentations of re-collected, childhood memories. In fact, Seth describes how, “Venkat looked expectant in the way a child waiting for a dentist, or a teacher, to administer an exam: passive but ready” (122). Although Venkat, in this instance, musters up the strength to bear witness to his son’s trauma, he is still quite hesitant. This is because, as stated by Sara Ahmed, “Mourning would involve at least two deaths: if someone has died, that person must be declared dead for the death to be real” (139). For Venkat, this is precisely why he needs to travel to Ireland; it is not enough to be told his son is dead, since he must actively see Sundar and Sita for himself, and offer them ritualistic burials. Ahmed states further that, “The second death would be the first death for the mourner. The object must be recognized as dead for death to become real” (139). In accordance with Ahmed, I would like to argue further that there are three deaths involved in this process of witnessing: the death of the child, the recognition of his death, and, as I have argued previously, Venkat’s loss of identity as patriarch. Sundar’s death, in this instance, becomes “real” only by virtue of its reciprocity with Venkat. In order to make sense of his loss and, therefore, his “childish” identity, Venkat cannot grieve alone; there must be someone to bear witness to these sudden shifts in Venkat’s identity. Relatedly, they see Sundar’s body in seemingly different ways: although Seth sees nothing but “fear” in Sundar’s face, Venkat claims that he seems, “So peaceful!” (139). The narrative, then, states: “Was Venkat seeing Sundar as he remembered him rather than now as he was? But when did Sundar ever look peaceful?” (139). There is a dissonance at play here, where Venkat rather than acknowledging the visceral trauma inflicted onto his son’s body, chooses to remember a time in which Sundar looked “peaceful.” This statement does not necessarily imply a resistance to his

loss, but might alternatively represent his own method of recognition—that is, Venkat finds comfort in recognizing and remembering his child when he was “merely sleeping” (139). Sleeping, for Venkat, encapsulates the very essence of his son, a moment in which Sundar’s childhood can be best described.

After attempting suicide and subsequently directing his reason for “earning” to his bird, Mandy, Venkat finally decides to migrate back to India. Unfortunately, however, returning to the homeland will not guarantee that he will escape his grief and anger, but might instead, for a moment, suspend it. This desire to return home complicates his position as survivor, since his consciousness has already nonetheless been marked by tragedy and nostalgia for his family. By illuminating processes of embodied witnessing, this paper served to theorize Venkat’s infantilized identity through the birthing effects of loss, death, and grief. Through childhood, trauma, and diasporic studies, I offered an alternative method to conceptualize and investigate Venkat’s survival narrative and loss amidst the Air India tragedy.

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