



Displacing Conflict: Work, the Self and the City in Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen*

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Towards the end of Monica Ali's novel *In the Kitchen* (2009), the protagonist, Gabriel Lightfoot, a chef in a hotel kitchen, has a somewhat surreal workplace encounter with Ernie, the hotel's delivery boy. Ernie is also an amateur poet and sells occasional poems, for which he has drawn up a business plan. Gabriel asks him how it is 'going with the business targets and everything', and Ernie dutifully explains:

'It was going quite badly, actually, Ah was missing every target, you know. But Ah've fixed it OK now.'

'Have you? how'd you manage that?'

'Simple,' said Ernie. 'Changed the figures so they matched. Matched the forecasts with what Ah'd sold. Revision, it's called, like *re-vision*, to see again.'

'Brilliant,' said Gabriel, 'you just changed what you wanted to happen, the plan, to fit what's really happened.'

'Ach,' said Ernie, modestly. 'Aye. Exactly right.' (460)

It is interesting that Ernie draws up a business plan in the first place for something that is, after all, his hobby, not his job. I will come back to this point below. What is even more noteworthy, though, is the way in which he subsequently deals with this business plan. By revising it like he might revise one of his poems – by simply treating the plan as a text which can be rewritten – he defuses a potential conflict between his business targets and the actual outcome.

This conflict between goal and results is a marginal running gag in the novel, but it is also symptomatic of the way in which its characters deal with conflict. It is, after all, one of a number of conflicts that this novel addresses, along with various individual and structural conflicts of interest, and the internalisation of conflict on the part of Gabriel. The characters of the novel are certainly aware of these conflicts. But they do not have any way of confronting, much less resolving them. In the following, I would like to suggest that in *In the Kitchen* conflicts are continually displaced rather than resolved, until the socio-political issues behind them have been consigned to near-invisibility – an invisibility which the novel, however, paradoxically renders visible. The novel's working environments in particular have no viable, legitimate 'language of contention': no symbolic way of performing conflict (a concept I take from Sidney Tarrow's *Language of Contention*). Instead, they displace conflict to the self, and dramatize it in a 'language of emotions' ('langage de passions') in the sense in which Alain Ehrenberg uses the term. The novel can thus be read as an illustration of Ehrenberg's dictum that 'la santé mentale est devenue le langage contemporain non seulement du bien-être ou du mal-être, mais aussi de conflits' (Ehrenberg 207).¹ I want to pursue the implications of this shift in the meaning accorded to psychological suffering in a novel in which it is only the conflicted self that finds a way to engage in conflict with others.

Therefore, I will show how the novel's social, economic and political conflicts are displaced, first, from the city to the eponymous kitchen of the Imperial Hotel, Gabriel's workplace, which, as critics have noted (Perfect 131), serves as a stand-in for Britain. And second, and even more crucially, they are displaced from the outside world to Gabriel's mind, which inevitably comes into focus as the protagonist's mental state deteriorates. To make this nexus even more interesting, it is only because of his delusions that Gabriel discovers anything at all in the novel's detective subplot, which eventually uncovers not a murder (the dead body on page one notwithstanding) but the stark realities of exploitation behind and around the hotel business. However, in the novel these realities, which Gabriel can only uncover because of his breakdown, are also consigned to near invisibility by the same breakdown. In reading this novel as replacing political contention with a therapeutic biography, my reading follows Sarah Brouillette's in her article 'The Pathology of Flexibility'. However, I would argue that what Brouillette calls the novel's 'domestic' ending (544) does not cancel out its political critique. Instead, Gabriel internalises the novel's socio-political fault lines and conflicts to such an extent that they do, in the end, become visible – and threatening – realities again.

¹ 'Mental health has become the contemporary language, not only of well-being and of suffering, but also of conflict' (My translation, R.R.).

The novel's concern with social and economic conflict ties in with the fact that *In the Kitchen* has also been read, by Brouillette and others, as a modern-day State of England novel for its concern with big, sociologically inspired questions. (Brouillette 535; Perfect 135; Tournay-Theodotou 11). It certainly is a text in which the characters are made to stand for the social groups they belong to, to such an extent that they have all been identified as walking clichés (Perfect 136–7; Döring 61). There is Gabriel's father, a retired former weaving mill worker, whose favourite topic is the past grandeur of the British manufacturing industries as opposed to the perils of present-day consumerism and of the finance and service economies. There are Gabriel's co-workers from all over the world, who represent a kaleidoscope of national and regional stereotypes, and who, taken together, clearly stand for multicultural London. There is Gabriel's girlfriend Charlie, a singer in her late 30s, who is constantly worried about her age and the direction her life and career are taking or not taking. There is also, and significantly, Lena, a Belarussian woman who is brought to London under false pretences and forced into prostitution, and who escapes only to be at the mercy of the men who give her shelter, Gabriel among them.

Thus, the novel offers a plausible panorama of British society. In conjunction with that, Gabriel's workplace, the Imperial Hotel and its kitchen have also been read as a synecdoche: as a pars pro toto for the postcolonial geography of London, or for the position of Britain within the global market, or for Britain in the present (Esteves-Pereira; Perfect, 130–1; Tournay-Theodotou, 13). The hotel kitchen is part of the service economy, to which, Gabriel believes, the future of the British economy belongs. It has a high staff turnover and, just like neighbours in London, its employees hardly know each other, and people disappear without anyone noticing. And like the streets of London, the kitchen is international. Gabriel thinks of 'his brigade' as 'a United Nations task force' (129). The novel also makes it clear that the kitchen attracts cheap labour, and that there is a hierarchy between those who work in the kitchen and the hotel's British management, American shareholders and international hotel guests. Gabriel's image of the kitchen as multicultural utopia is thus contrasted with a reality of exploitation and economic hardship.

In addition to that, many of the novel's characters analyse British society in the dialogues, discussing, for instance, the state of the economy, and the individual's place in it in the past and present. In these dialogues, they make observations which clearly resonate with some of the books the author mentions in the novel's acknowledgements section, which is in fact a bibliography, and which includes, among others, two books by Richard Sennett and one by Zygmunt Bauman. The characters in the novel can serve as examples for developments such as those described in Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character* and Bauman's *The Individualized Society*, and they themselves also analyse these

developments in ways which are markedly influenced by Sennett and Bauman, despite the fact that most of these characters are unlikely to have read these books. This novel is very much a novel of ideas.

Converted School Buildings and 'Invisibles': A Conflicted London

London functions as the primary setting for (potential) conflict in the novel. There are clear conflicts of interest within London as well as between the city and its others, the countryside and the small town: Nut Tree Farm and Blantwistle. However, these conflicts of interest are made invisible rather than leading to actual contention. The dead body which is discovered at the beginning of the novel illustrates this procedure. It is the body of Yuri the kitchen porter, who is then found to have lived as well as died in the hotel's basement. The coroner rules Yuri's death an accident, and there remains no doubt that it was one. In the wake of this accident, though, the hotel management's as well as the chef's attention is directed to the basement in a figurative sense, too: they want to uncover what goes on beneath the surface of the hotel business. What Gabriel finds out during this inquiry is rather more than he bargained for. It is not minor wrongdoings on the part of other hotel employees; it is a London he did not know anything about, but which always existed in close proximity to his own – a London inhabited by immigrants with doubtful papers or none at all, by those who sell their bodies for sex or for hard and badly paid work, and by those, such as the hotel's restaurant manager and the housekeeper, who profit from these transactions. None of this is much of a secret, but normally it remains unacknowledged. No one wants to know what happens in the basement.

Until then, Gabriel inhabits a different London: a multicultural London, to be sure, which he passionately defends against his small-town relatives' casual racism. But his is also a London of the relatively privileged, to whom a working-class London that exists side by side with theirs remains just as alien as the East End would have been for West End Londoners in the Victorian age. Gabriel and his girlfriend Charlie, a singer, both live in tastefully furnished apartments; his is in a former school building, and 'he sometimes wondered how many schoolchildren had fitted into this space which now was his alone' (45). Neither Gabriel nor Charlie can in fact be too sure of their own social status. She is constantly worried whether she is 'really a musician' and that her career as a singer might be going nowhere, and she considers, but ultimately rejects, becoming a teacher instead (183). He manages, by the end of the novel, to have lost his savings, his job and his prospects of opening a restaurant of his own. But as long as these middle-class professionals are successful, they inhabit their city accordingly. The London of people like Lena and Yuri the dead porter is invisible to them. Gabriel may share a workplace with people who live in the hotel's basement, but under normal circumstances he is not interested in them. It takes

exceptional circumstances to make the other London visible to Gabriel and, consequently, to the reader.

This includes Gabriel listening to the harrowing life stories of Lena and of the Liberian chef Benny, and getting a glimpse of the difficulties they and other immigrants face in London. He listens to these stories unwillingly; when Lena talks about her life as a prostitute, he finds that 'now that she was talking he wished that she would stop [...] He did not wish to hear any more' (306). And he is relieved when Benny confines his explanation of what brought him to London to 'There was fighting. I ran away', and then proceeds to tell someone else's story instead (154). Weeks after this conversation, Gabriel has a realisation 'that he had misunderstood everything about Benny' and that the 'friend' whose life story Benny had told him was in fact Benny himself (457–8). This realisation is neither confirmed nor denied in the novel, just like the exact circumstances of Yuri's life and death in the hotel's basement remain somewhat unclear. The novel indicates that there are realities which neither Gabriel nor the reader has access to. In fact, these incomplete stories are part of the novel's choice of perspective: the reader sees the other characters through Gabriel's eyes, and Gabriel's experience is clearly very far away from most of their experiences. Here, the novel's consistent use of Gabriel (either his adult self or Gabriel as a child) as a focaliser emphasises his avoidance of conflict.

Another conflict of interests in the novel takes place not within London but between London and the countryside, which turns out to be anything but idyllic when regarded as part of the supply chain for the London hotel. The place which exemplifies the countryside is Nut Tree Farm, an illegally run farm just outside the city, in which migrant workers are exploited, picking spring onions for small wages, or for none at all if they complain. The owner of the farm takes their passports away, and they have no chance to claim their rights. Gabriel discovers this farm by accident, at a time when he is somewhat confused. He ends up picking spring onions for a few days until he tries to argue with the owner of the farm on behalf of a fellow worker. When Gabriel is discovered to be English, he is sent back to his life in London. Two things are particularly troubling about this incident. The connection to the hotel via the bus and the restaurant manager's brother, who owns the farm, is more or less accidental, but the fact that the farm produces spring onions directs the reader's (though not Gabriel's) attention to the fact that the food prepared in the London hotel kitchen may also have been produced by workers who are virtually slaves (Brouillette 542). Also, Gabriel himself experiences work on the farm as therapeutic. Working with his hands is thus cast as a positive counterpart to his work supervising the hotel kitchen. This is despite the fact that his real job is high-prestige, well-paid and creative, and work on the farm is high-pressure, exploitative and low-paid (sometimes unpaid), as well as low-prestige. The

workers on the farm and their living conditions are ignored even by those Londoners who are aware that such farms exist. The workers themselves are in no position to claim their rights, and their concerns are consistently ignored by those with a voice that might be heard.

London has a second Other in the small town of Blantwistle, and here, too, there are potential conflicts of interest between the world London represents and the one Blantwistle stands for. Before his encounters with the unknown world in and around the hotel's basement, Gabriel's London is, above all, not Blantwistle: not the northern industrial town which his sister never manages to leave, and which shapes his father's and grandmother's prejudices. Gabriel clearly prefers the big city. Even he finds London an uncomfortably unreliable place, though. Pubs that he used to visit regularly disappear without warning (292). He is also discontented with not knowing his neighbours even by name (46). Conversely, for Gabriel's family, Blantwistle is precisely not London: Blantwistle is a place where stability is valued; it is also a place where neighbours know each other and talk to each other in the street. For Gabriel's father, London is the epitome of instability, both economic and personal. Gabriel frequently discusses the economy with his father, who believes that it is all a bubble because it is not based on the production of tangible goods anymore. Gabriel contends that it is the service and finance economies on which the wealth of the nation now depends – that the London restaurants are packed, and that it is 'invisibles' which make that possible: here he is not thinking of people like Yuri, but of 'banking and finance and advertising. All that stuff' (261). As long as it is primarily conceived of as the opposite of Blantwistle, London stands for the modern world, whereas Blantwistle then stands for a certain part of the not-too-recent past in which both the community and the workplace are said to have followed stricter rules and therefore to have been more reliable.

Conflict and the Workplace

The kind of father-son conversation which Gabriel and his father have in this novel is, to an extent, a cultural cliché of generational conflict. More recently, it recurs for instance in more openly conflictual form in Jonathan Coe's satirical Brexit novel *Middle England*, in which a leave-voting father has his remain-voting son take him to his former factory, which has been demolished. Here, the father pretends to be shocked by the transformation in order to make the same point that Gabriel's father also makes, namely that he cannot imagine how an economy that does not '*make* anything any more' can be sustainable (Coe 266). Only in that case the father follows the sentiment up with a confused paranoia about 'the rest of the world' 'laughing at us' for having 'gone soft' (267). The conversation about the loss of British industry becomes an openly xenophobic lecture on the part of the father.

By contrast, in *In the Kitchen*, the question of work is much less charged with xenophobic sentiment, and more about individual working biographies. The work of Gabriel's father in the mill at Blantwistle mainly functions as a foil for Gabriel's work in London, and very much in the manner of one of Sennett's case studies in *The Corrosion of Character*. Ted, Gabriel's father, spends all his working life in the same weaving mill, bringing his son along with him to show him the workplace, and clearly identifying with his work there, and deriving pride and meaning from it. On the other hand, Gabriel only wants to use his work at the Imperial as a stepping stone before opening his own restaurant. When his father hears that Gabriel is planning to leave the job at the hotel, he is uncomprehending: 'Leaving? You've only been there five minutes' (209). The two frequently have such conversations, which illustrate to them as well as to the reader that they live in different worlds and cannot understand each other, just like Sennett picks a father and son as examples of those who cannot understand each other's values any longer because their values had been determined by their work. The previous generation's workplace valued stability and reliability; in the present it is flexibility (Sennett 15–31). Nonetheless, Gabriel attributes his own unsteady working biography to himself only, believing, when a restaurant he was involved in fails and he has to find another job, 'that this was what he was like: weak-willed, unfocused, spineless. Unable to commit' (349). In such moments, *In the Kitchen* appears like a fictionalised case study from Sennett's book, with Gabriel and his father as stereotypical representatives of their generations. The real conflict would, for a reader who takes the sociological titles from the acknowledgments as a guide for reading such scenes, not be the one between father and son as individuals, or indeed Gabriel's internalised version of it. Instead, these attitudes would appear as the product of larger developments in society which the characters themselves misread.

In a similar vein, the novel also takes up the critical impetus of Bauman's *Individualized Society* (2001): there, the assumption that social, economic and political conditions are beyond the individual's control is identified as a means of displacing responsibility: if the ways in which people live and work are accepted as virtual facts of nature, then responsibility for one's success or failure can only be ascribed to oneself (Bauman 7–12). Consequently, Bauman argues, conflicts are displaced to the self, to the formerly private realm, instead of being read—and narrated—as public concerns (Bauman 13–14). In *In the Kitchen* it is Nikolai, one of the chefs, who voices such sentiments, for instance when he explains to Gabriel that in contemporary Western society '[u]nhappiness is normal but if we are unhappy we think that we have failed', and that this is an example of ideology (442). Interestingly, there is a significant shift of pronouns between the previous sentence and this one: Just before, Nikolai has been telling a story about his home town, which had a 'Happiness Day Parade' in his youth

(441). Nikolai calls this '[c]rude ideology, easy to laugh at it'. By contrast, he tells Gabriel, '[y]ours is more sophisticated and so dominant that it has been internalized and it works much better that way' (442). The ideology is 'yours', but then Nikolai implicitly includes himself in the following diagnosis that 'if we are unhappy we think that we have failed.' This Londoner from Eastern Europe styles himself as both insider and outsider, as a dispassionate observer and as a participant in the society he observes. The notion of failure he evokes is very much bound up with the notion of a career, in particular since Gabriel's question which prompts this whole reflection was whether Nikolai is happy despite the fact that the work he is doing in London is not what he 'expected to do' (441). The internalised attitudes towards happiness that Nikolai thinks about are also attitudes towards work.

In the workplace itself, as described in the novel, any problems are also thought of as private and thus become, at times comically, unresolvable. No conflict in the hotel kitchen can ever be openly addressed. This is despite the fact that, as Döring has pointed out, Gabriel insists on thinking of his team in military terms (Döring 56–8). Gabriel likes to imagine himself as a general. In his real working life, though, this is not his role. Thus, two employees have regular quarrels, and Gabriel is unable to solve the problem. The pastry chef is clearly somewhat disturbed, and it is an open secret that one of the kitchen workers drinks too much, but Gabriel does not react to these issues, just like most of his co-workers avoid confronting the chef about his own increasingly eccentric behaviour. Gabriel's boss wants him to sack Ernie the delivery boy, but Gabriel cannot bring himself to do that, or to openly refuse, and instead avoids the unpleasant conversation for months. Gabriel himself wants to sack his sous-chef, but cannot come up with reasons that Human Resources would accept. The working day is filled with meetings in which everyone's aim is to 'get out of there having agreed to nothing, while seeming to be "on board" and "part of the team"' (136). Gabriel believes he should 'act, force a confrontation, stop burying his head in the sand', but for much of the novel he does not act on his convictions because he has no idea whom exactly to confront, and about what exactly (430). Technically, Gabriel is in a position of power in the workplace, since he is in charge of his kitchen; in contrast to the workers at Nut Tree Farm, he has a voice that might be heard. Nonetheless, he has no way of influencing his working conditions, and no notion that they could be otherwise.

This depiction of the workplace as a place that does not allow for open conflict ties in with what has been described by Kathi Weeks as 'a depoliticization of work' in the present (Weeks 4). According to Weeks, this depoliticization is the result of an 'effective privatization of work': of the predominant perception that power relations in the workplace are the result of personal choices, 'the product of a series of individual contracts rather than a social structure' (3–4). In

such a workplace, conflict can only be conceived of as a private matter, too, and conflicts that cannot be addressed on this level cannot be resolved at all.

Accordingly, in the Imperial Hotel there are no confrontations with those of higher status, and there is no organised labour. The kitchen employees come through agencies, and not all of them have valid papers. Even if they have interests in common, they cannot go on strike. They have no way of addressing any conflicts with their employers. The only conflicts that are ever acted out happen between employees, and very much behind the scenes: in the basement and behind the nearly closed doors of the hotel's storerooms. Such conflicts concern these employees' involvement in more informal economic structures. These illegal activities also become the occasion for the one confrontation Gabriel actually does force: after he experiences the realities of Nut Tree Farm and after he hears of Lena's experiences as a prostitute, he publicly confronts those whom he believes to be responsible. This is not something he would normally do, though: it is a direct result of a psychological breakdown, and accordingly his revelations can be treated as irrelevant by everyone else (529–34). Instead of a 'language of contention' which would allow the characters to address social injustice, what his audience hears is only a 'language of emotions', which remains ineffective.

On Being 'more than your own self'

This displacement of conflict from the real world of work to Gabriel's psyche is only the culmination of a long process. One part of this process consists in the structure of Gabriel's work, which is ostensibly creative, and therefore desirable. The reality significantly diverges from this ideal. Thus, the higher his own status in the kitchen, the more paperwork and meetings he has to deal with. Meanwhile, the actual cooking is done by others. Instead of kitchen knives and ingredients, he works with such a ludicrous number of to-do lists, that he decides at one point that the thing he requires is 'a list of the lists that were needed' (269). Even the novel's first appearance of food is on a form Gabriel has to fill in (11). Writing to-do lists and filling in forms is clearly not the kind of creativity he initially expected from his work. When Gabriel loses track of his to-do lists, this is an instantly recognisable moment for the reader, though, just like the one in which Gabriel puts 'Call Charlie' on one of these lists only to immediately make the phone call to his by-then ex-girlfriend while ticking the item off the list with the other hand (355). These moments are recognisable because Gabriel creatively misuses a technique intended for heightening the productivity of the self-managing employee, that is, a self-improvement technique designed for a kind of self with which the novel engages on other levels, too.

The 'Call Charlie' scene also highlights the disappearance of boundaries between work and non-work: Calling one's ex-girlfriend has become a task just

like ordering cheese for the kitchen and drawing up a business plan for the new restaurant. In a similar vein, the boundaries between work and non-work are also obliterated when Ernie the delivery boy draws up his business plan for something that is really a hobby, namely his occasional poems. To be sure, Ernie's and Gabriel's adaptations of a business plan and to-do list respectively are comedic moments in the novel. But they also situate these characters within the contradictions inherent in the self they have no choice but to try to be, in the twenty-first century. In the novel, this self is portrayed as an unachievable goal rather than a reality, and the demand to become such a self is a cause of considerable distress and inner conflict. Thus, Gabriel reflects on the politician Fairweather being recognised in public and asked whether he is 'somebody':

Are you somebody? Fairweather had managed to blush and bumble about being a mere *junior* minister of state. He was delighted, of course. He was somebody. What was the alternative? A nobody. If you were more than your own self you were somebody, and if you weren't 'somebody' perhaps being yourself amounted to nothing at all. (145)

This is Gabriel's reflection, not Fairweather's own. And it ties 'being somebody', first, to one's professional status and, second, to being *more* than one's own self – that is, a contradiction in terms. This is one of many instances in which this novel is clearly in dialogue with the sociological theory mentioned in the acknowledgments, in particular with Bauman's *The Individualized Society*, a book which, after all, argues that in our society each individual is held completely responsible for their own biography because socio-economic conditions are read as unchangeable facts of nature. This necessarily results in a sense of the self's inadequacy, Bauman claims (5–8, 106). In these reflections on the necessary inadequacy of the self, Bauman in his turn refers back to Alain Ehrenberg's book *The Weariness of the Self* (*La fatigue d'être soi*, first published in 1998). In this book, Ehrenberg links the expectation that every individual should be active and capable in as well as outside their work, with discourses on mental illness, in a world in which 'nothing is truly forbidden, nothing is truly possible' (7). Ehrenberg also argues that the contemporary paradigm of depression, which centres on capability and incapability, replaces '*conflict as a reference point upon which the nineteenth-century notion of the self was founded*' (10; emphasis in the original). The inadequate self replaces the conflicted self in a discourse which ultimately obliterates conflict altogether.

In conjunction with this, the being somebody/being nobody dualism from Gabriel's reflection can also be read as an example of what the sociologist Ulrich Bröckling has analysed as the entrepreneurial self. This entrepreneurial self describes the continually self-improving employee who flexibly adapts to

working on various projects (248–82). In the novel, even Ernie the delivery boy is required to be such an entrepreneurial self, continually brushing up his skills as well as developing business plans – and he is evidently not at all well-suited to be such a self. Gabriel thinks of Ernie as someone who ‘wasn’t so much employed as in day care’ (459) and assumes that keeping him on is essentially an act of charity, given that Ernie has mild learning difficulties and is frightened of the computer in his office. However, and more prosaically, Gabriel keeps Ernie because he never gets around to sacking him, or, indeed, to completing any of the other tasks on his to-do lists – because he himself suffers from the same contradictions within the entrepreneurial self which also trouble Ernie.

The one thing Gabriel does manage to get done is playing the amateur detective and finding out that Gleeson the restaurant manager tricks female employees without papers into prostitution. When he confronts Gleeson about it, the manager counters the accusation by telling Gabriel that he must be mad, prefiguring the confrontation at end of the novel. After all, the troubling thing about this novel is that Gleeson is not wrong. The scene comes at a point in the novel where Gabriel is no longer able to act professionally either in front of clients or colleagues, has not slept for days, and has developed a marked tendency to jump to sweeping conclusions on the flimsiest evidence. This does not cast any doubt on what he finds out about Gleeson because there is solid evidence against him. But it means that Gabriel’s breakdown, not the situation of those who are exploited by Gleeson, remains at the centre of the plot – so much so that the novel has been read as a case of a ‘therapeutic biography’ taking over from its political concerns (Brouillette 544). The conflicted individual is foregrounded, replacing the social and political conflicts evoked in the novel. The reader gets glimpses of the exploitation and histories of some of the migrant workers in the hotel kitchen and on Nut Tree Farm, but then the text really only dwells on the psychological crisis of one English cook.

This crisis is tinged with elements of a midlife crisis, but mainly it follows the pattern of a manic episode, as it is recognisable from other cultural representations of bipolar disorder – which, it turns out, Gabriel’s mother also had. Initially, Gabriel is not aware that his mother’s episodes of eccentric behaviour might have been anything but rebellion against the boring housework expected from her. On the other hand, his father and sister are both aware that there was a psychiatric diagnosis and treatment. Gabriel’s sister explains to him that his memories of his childhood are partly false because he did not understand that his mother was ill. This revelation also has an effect on the reader, who, like Gabriel, is initially prompted to read Sally Anne as a stereotypically thwarted creative woman unhappy with her role as a housewife – a woman who tells her small daughter, who wants the mother to act normal, ‘Just you wait, madam, it’ll be your turn soon enough. See how *you* like it then’

(71). After Jenny's explanation, on the other hand, Sally Anne's actions are reclassified as symptoms rather than a justified rebellion, as Gabriel begins to make sense of other memories of his mother, which come back to him. Thus, he hallucinates a rag-and-bone man's cart in the middle of modern-day London, and remembers that there had still been a real rag-and-bone man in his childhood in Blantwistle:

Another picture, another memory, this one without root or reason. What tricks the mind can play. But how clearly he could see, though the angle was oblique, over the steaming haunches, up to the seat behind, a woman, madly staring, tangles in her hair, his mother, his mother, and the old rag-and-bone man, dark as a gypsy, with the devil in his eye, winking and grinning, holding her elbow as she raised and turned and lowered herself, stiff as a candle, to the ground. (170)

As it transpires that this image of disruptive behaviour may not be completely 'without root or reason' after all, Sally Anne is transformed from discontented housewife to something much more problematic. It is apparently no longer the world she lives in that is in the wrong; it is Sally Anne herself.

The 'Re-vision' of the 'Invisibles'

Gabriel's condition, on the other hand, does not make his concerns any less relevant; on the contrary, it uncovers conflicts which did not concern him before, but which the novel makes clear should in fact concern him. It is, after all, his breakdown which enables the novel to send him to places which he would not, under normal circumstances, be aware of. It takes Gabriel's manic episode for him to look beyond his own concerns only. It is then that he comes face to face with the city of the homeless and of those who go to Victoria Station waiting to be hired for low-paid short-term work: he follows a man he believes to be Lena's brother, and ends up on a bus with such workers. It is also as a consequence of his breakdown that he finds out about Nut Tree Farm and about the activities of the hotel's housekeeper, who promises young female employees careers as singers, with the result that these young women are never heard of again. And he is still suffering from delusions when he brings these things to the attention of the authorities when the police is called because he turns up, dishevelled and disoriented, in the middle of a gala at the hotel, and starts hitting Fairweather who, Gabriel is suddenly convinced, must be identical with a man Lena mentioned earlier, and who treated her badly. Fairweather is unlikely to be that man, and the other man on the bus is certainly not Lena's brother. But by going far astray, Gabriel finally finds evidence for his suspicions against the housekeeper and the restaurant manager, which he could not prove before, and

unwittingly manages to alert the police. Thus, he succeeds, partly at least, at making visible to others what has just become visible to him.

Gabriel's journey reveals a London that is normally barely visible: the hotel basement and the city's rural supply chain. And the novel mainly reveals this side of the economy of the city to the reader, not to the characters. It is clear that within the world of the novel the exploitation Gabriel encounters will not be addressed by anyone, or at least not beyond the case of Nut Tree Farm. Indeed, the novel confronts the reader with a number of middle-class British characters who know in principle that working and living conditions like those on the farm exist, and who ignore that they know this. London emerges as a city in which exploitation and the exploited are ignored, and only the glittering surface of both city and hotel are visible to most middle-class Londoners. The novel's attitude towards those who sustain and nourish this city and those who ignore them is related to the sociological gaze evoked in its acknowledgments section. It presents the reader with a panorama of London just before the financial crisis and the dilemmas and unresolved conflicts of this city.

Of course, the characters are all very much constructed as textbook examples of their position in this panorama. In this, the novel's representation of its Eastern European characters in particular is very much the stereotypical representation that Vedrana Veličković notes in other contemporary British novels like John Lanchester's *Capital*: such novels, she argues, include 'numerous New European stock characters', mainly 'low-skilled workers' with 'few distinguishing characteristics' (Veličković 72). In *In the Kitchen*, this is certainly true. Its Eastern European characters are stock characters, and low-skilled or, like Nikolai, de-skilled workers. However, in Nikolai's case in particular, it becomes clear that it is a British perception of what someone like him can do that makes him a low-skilled worker. He is a very educated man, easily the best-educated character in the novel, but earns his living in the hotel kitchen. Even without much nuance, which this character does not have either, his case demonstrates that the stereotypical representation of Eastern Europeans in Britain is self-perpetuating.

The novel itself is thus very much invested in making the fault lines of British society visible, even in its collection of stock characters. Its trajectory goes beyond simply displacing political conflict to the realm of the psychological. Gabriel, a middle-class professional, could easily completely lose his social and economic status through this displacement, although the novel does not quite let that happen. It also does not replace the 'language of emotions' with a new 'language of contention.' But the 're-visions' it offers do suggest that there is a need for one.

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