

Pick a particular narrative of colonialism and analyse its effects as a narrative. For instance, you might consider the way your chosen narrative distributes attention (what does it foreground, and how?), or how it shapes the ways people understand the legacies of colonialism today (including how to remember and/or address those legacies). Potential narratives could include a historical story told about colonialism or a novelistic, poetic, or cinematic depiction of colonialism and/or its legacies.

Academic Discipline: Music history

How effectively is the legacy of colonialism explored in *Remain the Sea*?

*Remain the Sea* by Anouska Shankar explores the legacy of colonialism through the performance of a poem written by Pavana Reddy, which she accompanies with her sitar playing and fusion music. Shankar conveys both beneficial and devastating impacts of colonialism, capturing certain nuances of colonial legacy. The narrative she creates is heavily informed by personal experience, a characteristic that is inevitable in any art form. Colonial legacy is as complex and multifaceted as colonialism itself and can be most effectively understood through an exploration of a collection of experiences at different times and places during the colonial period. Shankar's exploration of colonial legacy through *Remain the Sea* fittingly offers a specific perspective that outlines the musical success she has found through the integration of culture while acknowledging the damage Empire has caused.

The poem provides a momentary glimpse into the story of unnamed migrants, escaping a country they had occupied for a long time. Reddy chooses to keep the characters unnamed and the details of their situation ambiguous, drawing attention to migration as something universal. Reddy

highlights the inherent link between the modern migration crisis and British Empire through the descriptions of the world as “split”, and with parts having been “taken.” This encourages the reader to find connections and similarities between migration - where an individual changes their location - and colonialism - where locations themselves are changed through occupation and control. The ambiguity of these descriptions permits their application to both concepts, reinforcing their connection. Herbst identified geographical alterations as being the greatest lasting consequence of colonialism due to the weak and artificial nature of the borders that were created (Herbst 2014) and, through these parallels that Reddy draws between colonialism and migration, she highlights that the modern migration crisis is a product of these flaws. Furthermore, through her undefined characters, the listener is forced to face a challenge in picturing them and their background. This in turn encourages them to realise the stigma surrounding different migrant groups and how they are perceived. This is an idea that is present not just in British society but in Britain’s migration policies which are “artefacts of European colonial governance” that have “enforced a racial hierarchy of the world’s people with whiteness at its top.” (Tyerman 2024).

Another portrayal of colonialism’s legacy in the poem is the way Indian people’s relationship with nature has changed, due to the rapacious behaviours of the British that influenced them. The central character of “mother” is often described to be larger or more powerful than any individual human making it unclear whether “mother,” refers to a real mother or mother nature. This intentional vagueness creates a sense of unity between the two ideas, merging humanity and nature. This reflects the attitudes of the indigenous Indian communities who believed that the two could co-exist as one and placed a large emphasis on living reliantly off nature in a sustainable way (Kala 2010). As the poem progresses, the idyllic portrayal of nature is disrupted as Reddy contrastingly describes how mother “crashes her body against the shore.” The shift to a more violent tone evokes the changed relationship India now has with nature. In 1865, Britain introduced the Indian Forest Act, claiming to be an initiative which

would focus on the conservation of India's natural world. However, there was a steady shift in departmental purpose away from conservation-oriented activity to extractive and commercial activity and it is apparent today that the idea of conservation was no more than a disguise that allowed Britain to exploit the natural world that indigenous Indians had existed alongside for hundreds of years (Weil 2006). This attitude can now be seen through many post-colonial Indian policies that have favoured economic growth over restoring traditional, sustainable practices, revealing the influential legacy of the British Empire. For example, the Narmada dam, built in 1987 to generate hydropower, was critiqued for a range of environmental risks including submerging large amounts of forest and wildlife, disrupting sedimentation patterns (which would lead to flooding) and causing water logging which would destroy crops (Wood 2010). These risks of ecological damage meant that the project benefited few and was at the expense of the poor, a characteristic reminiscent of colonial policies. The direct causal connection made by the poet between colonialism and the destruction of nature reinforces and shapes the modern narrative of colonial legacy. The poet's storytelling leaves out a rounded consideration of the alternative impacts that a slower journey towards industrialisation would have had without the catalyst of colonial growth. John Strachey argued that Britain, through integrating India into global trade and introducing infrastructure development projects, helped Indian industrialise more efficiently (Strachey 1903). However, this argument fails to justify the vast damage India endured through British introduction of cash crop farming and the millions who died in famines as a result and, therefore, while there is more complexity to the legacy of the British empire than Readdy suggests, she is justified in her portrayal of colonialism as leaving a trail of destruction and harm done to nature.

The musicality of *Remain the Sea* vastly accentuates contrasting themes of positivity towards colonial legacy through Anoushka Shankar's varied musical influences that are referenced throughout the song. This feels more personal to her experiences. The song combines the western genre of

ambient electronic music with classical Indian music. An electric drum kit is used along with a synthesized pad drone and piano chords that use typical western cadences of dissonance and resolution. The musical space created by this minimalism allows for the heavily contrasting melody played on the sitar using Indian modal scales (ragas) with microtonal inflections. The contrast, while initially shocking, creates a unique sound that slowly crescendos throughout the song. *Remain the Sea* ends with an almost two minute long instrumental, allowing the song to reach its climax through polyphonic, multi-layered melodies. Throughout the instrumental, there is a change in rhythm - favouring syncopated drumming patterns. This is a feature common in both western electronic music and Indian drumming music, and through this musical convergence, the identity of the cultural influence Shankar is referencing becomes indiscernible. This choice of musicality emphasises the nuance within Shankar's narrative as, while she places the hardship and suffering caused by colonialism at the forefront of *Remain the Sea* (being the main theme of the poem), there is a contrasting acknowledgement of the positive social and cultural integration achieved through these blended musical influences.

Inherently, Anoushka Shankar's exploration of Empire's legacy is influenced by personal experiences and the shaping of her own identity. Her father, Ravi Shankar was a sitar virtuoso, who single-handedly introduced Western audiences to the centuries-old classical tradition of Indian Ragas. (NPR 2012) He was born in British administered India and under this regime, he studied dance and was encouraged to travel to America and Europe to perform. Here, he was influenced by western culture and when he later began to study sitar, these experiences encouraged him to integrate aspects of both western and Indian classical music into his playing (GAC 2020). Ravi Shankar only became popularised to the extreme extent he was for the rest of his life after touring the western world and making connections with artists such as George Harrison and John Coltrane, returning to India as a cultural icon. The fact that his broader popular success in India only came after receiving the endorsement of western Europeans points to an internalised racial hierarchy that is a further legacy

of colonialism. Due to the unprecedented nature of his musical fusion, he received a backlash from Indian traditionalists who argued that it was important to keep the art form of the sitar “pure.” However, there was an equally strong group of Indian intellectuals who celebrated his efforts in embracing and catalysing cultural fusion. Ravi Shankar found himself at the centre of a debate regarding the role of tradition in Indian culture, often having to defend his work - claiming he was “educating the west” about Indian classical music, not diluting Indian tradition. (Stockhill 2013)

Anoushka Shankar admired her father’s work, saying she saw him as her “teacher,” and “guru.” (The Guardian, 2011) Her sitar playing, consisting of a fluid, improvisational melody that organically unfolds throughout the song as well as her use of soundscape and atmosphere is reminiscent of her father’s. The choice to musically reference her father in this song is clearly intentional - other songs in the album such as “boat to nowhere,” are more stylistically unique through her jazz influence. Her sitar playing in this song amplifies ideas of colonial legacy, highlighting her esteem for the cultural blend she embodied and which her father helped create as a result of his upbringing in a British colony. The existence of this new fusion formed and shaped by the colonial experience, contrasts with the themes of destruction and damage that appear in the poem. She acknowledges the reshaping effect of the colonial experience and the idiosyncratic nature of colonial legacy. While colonialism has left a painful mark on India, Anoushka Shankar acknowledges that its role in shaping her as a musician has been a contrastingly positive one.

There is an alternative view that Anoushka Shankar’s musical references to her father and the idea of musical fusion could be interpreted as highlighting the damaging legacy of colonialism on individuals, exploring the internal conflict that is created by the complex cultural histories of people who live in countries impacted by Empire. W.E.B Du Bois created the concept of “double-consciousness,” referring to the experience of African Americans feeling they have two identities - one as a black person and one as an American. Though in the sense of geographical location and the laws they had to live by, they were “American people”; the cultural heritage they carry with them and the oppression they were subjected to

(including disenfranchisement and economic oppression) because of this identifies them as “black people.” Du Bois highlighted the suffering this caused, claiming they had to live with “this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others.” Amiri Baraka took this idea further by relating it to the music that developed in America from these oppressed people. He explored the ways in which blues reflected Du Bois’ concept of duality; with a harmonic structure typical of western music (built off of functional 4-5-1 chords) but with ‘blue notes’ and dissonance that had developed in African melodies. Furthermore rhythmic techniques such as syncopation, polyrhythms and call and response sections, were typical of African drumming music. Amiri Baraka argued that blues was used as a form of resistance and protest against the way African Americans were treated like second class citizens. Perhaps Anoushka Shankar’s use of both classical Indian and western influences in her music is intended to highlight that this idea of double consciousness is not just an experience of African Americans but of any group of people whose identities have been infected by ideas of racial superiority and oppression.

Ravi Shankar wrote “When I play the sitar in the traditional gharana learned at the feet of Baba (his teacher), I am very orthodox. On the other hand, when I compose original music, I am daring, radical.” (Shankar 1968) This is reminiscent of Baraka’s connection between double consciousness and music. It highlights the fact that a powerful legacy of colonialism is the fact that it has divided people’s identities, conflicting European influence with their traditional lifestyle. Remain the Sea reflects these ideas through moments of musical tension, as can be seen in the polyphonic instrumental section in which microtonal inflections played on the sitar (a typical feature of Indian Sitar playing) creates dissonance against the chordal structure of the piece reflecting the internal conflict of the characters of the song whose lives have been changed by colonialism. This conveys the effectiveness of Remain the Sea as a narrative. Much like Empire itself, its legacies are best understood through the ongoing process of exploration and examination. It is left to the discretion of the listener (themselves shaped by their engagement with their colonial past) to form a judgement on those

legacies left by the colonial period through the interpretations made available within the song.

It could be argued that the connections that can be drawn between Anoushka Shankar's upbringing and the themes explored in *Remain the Sea* reveal a limitation of this song as a narrative to explore the legacy of colonialism. This is because, as is inherent with any artistic narrative, the portrayal of colonialism is influenced by personal experiences. Despite the controversy created in her father's earlier career, his efforts to introduce Indian music to the western world was a large success. (NPR 2012) John Coltrane famously named his child after Ravi and Sitar began to appear in popular western music, from Stevie Wonder's "Signed Sealed delivered" to Rolling Stone's "Paint it black." Anoushka Shankar is in a position to create space for the listener to decide if her use of fusion music is a positive or negative aspect of colonial legacy but this idea cannot extend to post-colonial music more generally. The idea of an equal coming together of musical traditions does not fit all countries' experiences with colonialism. For example, Zulu musicians from South Africa had the trajectory of their musical development not only vastly altered through forced migration and missionary influence but also appropriated and stolen from them. ("The development of Music in South Africa timeline 1600-2004") In 1939, Solomon Linda, a Zulu musician wrote a song that he named "Mbube," (meaning Lion). As it became popular, western producers and publishers bought the rights from him for 10 shillings and developed the song through many uncopyrighted reworked renditions into the incredibly famous and lucrative song "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." It was because South Africa was a British Dominion that operated under the British Imperial copyright act of 1911 (which took power away from African musicians) that he received such little compensation for his music and he died in poverty in 1962. While this greatly contrasts Anoushka Shankar's experience of colonialism, the fact that "Remain The Sea" is personal to her relationship with colonial legacy emphasises the fact that the British Empire was not a homogeneous state that can be understood from any singular perspective. Instead, it is

these personal stories that should be used to manifest a greater understanding of colonialism's complexities.

To conclude, Anouska Shankar's *Remain The Sea* explores the ongoing shaping of people and place as a legacy of colonialism. The narrative she creates is shaped by personal experience, a characteristic which is not only inevitable but helpful when exploring the idiosyncrasies of colonial legacy. The damage caused by colonialism is recognised in Pavana Reddy's poem while the use of fusion music both examines and manifests the social and cultural integration that it caused. Listeners are invited to and enabled to engage with an aspect of the colonial story, with judgements left to be formed by them, building on their own personal relationship with Britain's colonial past.

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