

Sanchez, M.G. (2015). *Solitude House*. Huntingdon: Rock Scorpion Books, pp. 292

Esterino Adami

(Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia)

An area in the postcolonial literary context that tends to receive little critical attention is the Mediterranean, which nonetheless offers important insights into a variety of discourses and issues through English-language narrative. With his new novel, M.G. Sanchez not only brings to the fore the theme of Gibraltar identity and society, but he also widens his gaze and considers the historical interconnections with another Anglophone territory in the Mediterranean: Malta. The protagonist of this novel, in fact, is a Maltese doctor named John Aloysius Seracino, who settles in Gibraltar in 1977 and starts working as a general practitioner until the day when he retires, and looks for an isolated property in order to be away from the mob and the chaos of modernity. It is worth remembering that the theme of the house, and the search for a house, can be a referential token in the postcolonial literary world, notably with the example of V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961). Seracino finally decides to buy an old house, a kind of Edwardian folly suggestively called 'Solitude House' and perched on an impervious cliff top, almost impossible to reach.

From the very beginning of the text, we are shown a character that seems to be represented in provoking and unfriendly terms: a selfish womaniser and a misanthrope, who is full of himself and does not care much about his numerous affairs, although sexuality was an important emotional facet of his past experience. Even his political characterisation is curiously old-fashioned and *ante litteram* because, being a fervent monarchist and supporter of English rule in the ex Empire, when his native country gains independence he feels «robbed at a stroke both of my Anglo-Maltese identity and the place I used to call home» (p. 21). The articulations of the novel, however, will show a much more complex vision in Seracino, who will have to reconsider his beliefs and certainties by dealing not only with the tensions between Spain and Gibraltar, the resising of British power in the world, as well as the changing global scenario, but also with the irruption of the supernatural. Indeed, the novel, especially in the second part, adopts the dark tones of the gothic, with the trope of the haunted house.

It is interesting to note how in a broader critical prospective, as suggest-

ed by Tabish Khair some years ago,¹ the gothic and the postcolonial share some traits since they strive – through different styles and modalities – to embody forms of otherness, and therefore their alliance is significant and productive, as this novel too demonstrates. Drawing on the tradition of much horror fiction (from Poe to Lovecraft), the uncanny house that becomes Seracino's home turns out to be a sort of hellish place at the edge between worlds, but I will not detail this in order not to spoil suspense and reveal the novel's secrets; in a metaphorical sense, the house can also be regarded as a site of identity, a frontier of the self, or a former colonial bungalow in which one has to come to terms with their own deeds and visions. Naturally, the protagonist does not rationally accept the hallucinatory experience he has to cope with in his new mansion because he is a doctor, thus someone who believes in logics and who observes the world in an almost scientific way. His mental puzzlement however suggests once again the peculiarity of life and identity in Gibraltar, with its sense of insularity, distance and isolation: «Did it mean that I was going mad? That I was slowly losing my sanity? Could I perhaps be suffering from some kind of delusional psychosis, I wondered. That sense of siege mentality which Gibraltarians, thanks to years and years of continual Spanish harassment, are supposed to possess?» (p. 200). Incidentally, some of these characteristics are also present in other ex colonies, in which physical and mental distance from Britain has often encapsulated an array of contrasting feelings and perceptions.

By evoking the colonial past of both Gibraltar and Malta, Sanchez questions the sense of history and its legacies, or transformations: if the latter develops a national consciousness, the former displays more entangled and ambiguous sentiments in its relation with Britain. However, the colonial question is particularly striking with regard to the relation with neighbouring Spain, with the border between the two countries as a kind of imagined fault line dividing places and people. Significantly, we can notice that Seracino's professional activities and amorous adventures often take place in 'La Línea de la Concepción', the Spanish border town that represents a sort of mediating world and metamorphoses the protagonist into a liminal figure. The tension that derives from the opposition between Spain and Gibraltar is so dramatic that it generates plenty of psychological distress and Seracino himself witnesses such atmosphere of suffering in his patients who «came asking for Valium and Ativan, sleeping tablets like Zopiclone and Zolpidem, beta blockers like Propanolol and Matoprolol – anything, basically, that would help them cope with their daily commute» (p. 112). The tongue-twister list of medicines here mentioned actually renders, in

1 See Khair, Tabish (2009). *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

aseptic terms, a metaphor for anguish that in reality sums up the network of social and cultural relations between Spain and Gibraltar, in which many issues are at stake.

From a narratological point of view, the book presents some interesting features: first of all, the textual architecture proposed by the autodiegetic narrator (i.e., the narrator is the protagonist who relates his own vicissitude and whose focalisation guides the reader), which eventually turns full circle and which introduces a kind of meta-reflection on the idea of writing, with the very first sentence of the novel referring to the most simple tool of writers («A pen... they gave me a pen...», p. 1). Writing of course is a practical action, but it also refers to a mental process of elaboration of memories, expectations, fears that have to be cogently translated into signs to craft narrative material, a procedure which is not always linear and easy:

Stories are strange in that way, aren't they? You know exactly what you want to say, yet you can't quite uncork the words until you find the right beginning, the correct point of entry, that elusive and hard-to-find lever that will magically open your creative sluice gates. You can spend hours searching for this slippery opening. Days. Weeks. Months. Years. (p. 270)

In considering the difficulties and complexities of building up a coherent and cohesive story, Seracino starts with a plain object, a pen, which he defines «postmodern, almost» (p. 270) and thanks to which words are written on the page and which create a bond between author and reader (in this novel the first person narrator often addresses directly the reader). In their written dimension, words will then function as a device to record and understand life, and to ponder on its meanings, in Gibraltar, in the postcolonial world and elsewhere.

