

## ISM Awarded Paper

### Reimaginings: Hyphenated Identities and Canons

Pia

Bakshi

Doctorate Candidate (English), Incoming batch at Ashoka University (Monsoon 2020)

#### Abstract

Lauren Elkins's essay in *The White Review* about the End of Francophonie in the *literature monde* movement mentions the Fnac test. I cannot help but link it with Toni Morrison's famous, technocratically overused, but exceedingly relevant statement from *The Guardian's* 1992 interview about hyphenated identities. Colonialism and literary discourses thereof have created a range of hyphenated identities for writers, readers (implied or otherwise), characters et al. The paper studies how the transition of canonical texts from Eurocentric authorial intent to postcolonial renditions from writers of colonised geographies helps reduce the gap elicited by the hyphen to the text in content and form. The paper makes a case for texts originating more from language than from the author's origin, thus creating an equaliser that does not have the shadowed halo of colonial history and prejudice. I will be studying Shakespeare's *Othello* and Tyeb Salih's *Seasons of Migration to the North* as an illustration of this transition. The paper examines the redundancy of categorization of literature into geographical identities, making a case for the assimilation of the hyphen (in African-French Literature, India English Literature, etc.) in a definitive understanding of 'World 'in World Literature and elevating the critical status of reimaginings for their ability to perpetuate political, social and cultural significance to the original texts beyond limitations of time and place.

**Keywords:** Reimaginings, Translation, World Literature, Post-Colonialism, Canons

Sandro Botticelli created the *Birth of Venus* in 1485 and elicited a model of classical beauty and aesthetics for the depiction of the female body for posterity to emulate. Venus emerges out of an oyster- gloriously naked and smooth like a pearl- with an eager Goddess of Spring waiting to cover her. In 1534, Titian created *Venus of Urbino*, evoking the Goddess in a human setting retaining the beauty and composition sanctioned by Botticelli. But the rest of posterity had other plans. In 1863, Manet created *Olympia* modeled on Titian's *Venus of Urbino* but substantially altered in form, figure, and content. The nude female looks into the viewer's eyes with a penetrating gaze as her hand covers her genitalia. A woman of African origin tends to Olympia, and a cat replaces Venus 'dog in the frame. Olympia, with her slender frame, replaced the voluptuous frame popularised in the practice

of nude art by the likes of Botticelli and Titian. A step ahead was Paul Cezanne's 1874 evocative piece, *A Modern Olympia*, where Olympia is rendered in an expressionist fashion where she is just a blur of colours. Olympia is disfigured to be recreated. Through four centuries Venus or her modern persona, Olympia, have been reimagined and recreated by prominent artists across social and economic demography. Venus transitioned into Olympia at a time when breaking away from tradition became the norm in creative realms and heralded modernism in the depiction of the female nude. Venus' travel in the forms of reimaginings has made her relevant to discussions on society and perception through a study of feminism, racism, and agency. Suddenly a piece of work depicting the birth of a Goddess just adorned a political cloak, a lot more powerful than the one the Goddess of Spring wanted to wrap her in.

I wanted to begin the paper with the artistic journey of Venus as it holistically illustrates the point the paper is attempting to make- reimaginings have the ability to assist the process of continuity of canonical artwork through the extension of its relevance in contemporary political scenarios. This organic consequence should automatically accord a congruent status to the reimagined text as that of the original for the purposes of consistency in the evaluation of significance. However, here I want to introduce the idea that reclaiming literature seems like a more potent reason to execute reimaginings than a mere attempt at continuity- while continuity can be read as an incentive for the recreational reader, reclamation can be read as an incentive for a writer and a reader spurred on by the purposes of ownership and agency. Reimaginings exist in polarity as a means to return significance to the European masters while subverting their work through a contemporary narrative. It is this polarity that has found literary significance in hyphenated identities adorning book racks and computer screens. I was fortunate to have been introduced to Laurel Elkin's article in *The White Review*, where she talks about the Fnac test and how that informed her idea of the *literature monde* movement:

You walk into a French bookshop—the Fnac, La Hune, your local bookseller, whatever—armed with a list of writers: Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Nancy Huston, Alain Mabanckou, Marie N'Diaye, Dany Laferrière. Pre-2007, you would find Beckett, Camus, and Huston in the 'littérature française' section, and Mabanckou, N'Diaye, and Laferrière in the 'littérature francophone' section. They all write in French. Camus was born in North Africa but is considered French, not francophone. Beckett was born in Ireland, Huston in Canada: English is their native language. Both appear in 'French literature'

because at a certain moment in their lives they began to write in French. If a writer is white then he can produce 'French literature. 'If not—he's 'francophone'. (Elkins)

The idea of World Literature is to move away from redundant labels in a cosmopolitan tapestry of the new world and move towards a more inclusive definition of what constitutes literature in The first place. Reimaginings with their ability to relate the European canon with 'oriental 'reality is integral to this inevitable transition marked by the emergence of the discourse on World Literature.

When Alfred Nobel conceived the idea of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1895, a stage was accorded to non-continental literary creations that were marked by the canonical win of Rabindranath Tagore in 1913. Tagore's acceptance speech embodied the essence of a syncretic literary tradition. "I beg to convey to the Swedish Academy my grateful appreciation of the breadth of understanding which has brought the distant near, and has made a stranger a brother" (qtd. in Mani 138). It was Tagore's Shanti Niketan with its pervasive motto of *Yatra Vishwam Bhavatekyanidam—a place where the world becomes home in one nest*—that inspired Romain Rolland's idea of the House of Friendship as a place for intellectuals from across the world to share thoughts. Rolland further initiated the idea of a world library to create a place for literature from the East and the West. (Mani 139) Herman Hesse subverted the political influence on literary assimilation in the years leading up to the World War by suggesting that people indulge in private libraries, thus democratizing the space for literary appreciation. As elucidated in B Venkat Mani's *Recoding World Literatures*, the genesis of the movement is fraught with political unrest representative of the nature of the work and its reception in the world—a metanarrative to the explosive nature of fission that assimilates more than it disintegrates.

In Jefferson Humphries' *The Otherness Within*, he states that "art—whether language, words or of images—is the self-conscious experience of that differential otherness" that being an internal struggle of the self and the other (8). Humphries suggests that any act of creation is inherent indifference either as an investigation or as a mirror. A discussion on internal difference would be incomplete without the mention of language and translation in the attempt to universalise a literary text. Here I will offer an interlude to discuss the pivotal role played by translation in establishing the practical realm of the idea of accessible literature.

The Cochin Biennale 2017 hosted an immersive installation by Slovenian poet and translator Ales Steger, called *The Pyramid of Exiled Poets*. The pyramid made of mud, wood, matting, and dung is an immersive walk with the artist where the audience enters a pyramid to meet darkness and the vocal remains and testimonies of Ovid, Dante Alighieri, Bertolt Brecht, Czesław Miłosz, Mahmoud Darwish, Yang Lian, Joseph Brodsky, Ivan Blatný and César Vallejo- poets exiled from their homelands for saying things in their native tongue that did not suit those in power. Apart from the shock of darkness, the pyramid also disconcerted its audience with a concoction of languages (some or all) that they did not understand. Even if the audience did not understand the incomprehensible languages landing on their ears in a space lit only by exiled tongues, they understood the essence of the language- a hurried and desperate clenched fist hold of identity rested on the tongue of the speaker. The essence of World Literature is encapsulated in this pyramid, where the clarity of hyphens is replaced by the cacophony of chaos. I am aware of the dangers of a word like essence, but here, I am using it to comment upon the inclusivity that it is often accused of ignoring. In the Pyramid, translation is a step in the direction of making the voices clearer, a thought I have borrowed from Walter Benjamin's mention of the kinship of language in his essay, *The Task of the Translator* when he says, " as for the posited kinship of languages, it is marked by a peculiar convergence. This special kinship holds because languages are not strangers to one another, but are a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express".(255)

As much as language can be an equaliser, it can also be a vessel to perpetrate or question epistemic power. The latter becomes a powerful statement in the works of Postcolonial writers or writers from British or American colonies. The acknowledgment of Tagore's "English words "(Mani 138) receiving the same stage as English writers is seen as a reclamation of language by B. Venkat Mani. Even Chinua Achebe in *The African Writer and the English Language* says, " I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings". (103)

The same idea is dismissed by Ngugi Wo Thiong'o, who asserts that reclaiming language is a process of translating canonical European texts into African languages (5). World literature exists in the hyphen elicited by a two-way translation. I have only had the fortune of engaging with Tayeb Salih's *Seasons of Migration to the North* because it was made available to me by Denys Johnson-Davies is a language that I can effectively use. But the politics of language exist even in the same language based on the power elicited by the writer's geography. The interest in reimagining Shakespeare's work is indicative of the strong political statement made by postcolonial writers in

the act of reclaiming a Eurocentric narrative making it more egalitarian and representative. As MK Booker notes, "Shakespeare functioned in the nineteenth century as the central icon of a British cultural heritage that itself served as one of the central justifications for British rule over the 'primitive' culture encountered in places like Africa and India" (Booker 93). Therefore, Shakespeare becomes a motif of cultural oppression and supremacy that is prolifically used by writers of a Postcolonial disposition to subvert or control colonial oppression. Tayeb Salih's protagonist in *Seasons of Migration to the North*, Mustafa, has a copy of *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* by Octave Mannoni in his room in Wad Hamid (Salih's imaginary construction of an Arab city). The presence of Shakespeare is as literal in Tayeb Salih's writings as it is implied in the narrative as a specter. In the *Wedding of Zein*, published in 1965 by Tayeb Salih, Zein emerges as an "androgynous animal-like a fool" reminiscent of "Shakespeare's wise fools" (Rogers.) Shakespeare is thus a pervasive albeit obscure presence in Tayeb's work. The connection between Shakespeare and Salih exists beyond the mention of the former in the latter's narrative and intent. It rests in the difference traveled by a Sudanese rendition of a European tale of a Black and Muslim Captain of Venice. Shakespeare, an English playwright, chose to represent the tragedy of the Moor in 1604. Three hundred years later, Tayeb Salih, a Sudanese writer, reimagined the story through Mustafa, an academic in London of Sudanese origin (it is important to note that even Shakespeare's rendition is a retelling of *Un Capitano Moro* by Cinthio, first published in 1565).

A comparison between the texts brings forth the following questions-

Whose voice is more authentic?

Whose text is more original?

Whose text deserves more literary significance?

The questions assume that the space for significance is exclusive. Still, the one outcome of modernity is its celebration of plurality- a heterogenous celebration of homogenous constructs and therefore, the preoccupation with relative significance and the adjective 'more' seems redundant. The paper is unperturbed by the questions above but is more concerned with establishing parallel significance for reimaginings as the original text. If *Othello* was representative of Shakespeare's world, then *Seasons of Migration to the North* (henceforth, *Seasons*) is representative of the contemporary political climate. As both stories are situated at the isthmus of the personal and the political, their individual significance cannot be relegated to an arbitrary concept like time. If *Othello* can be read from a postcolonial lens, *Seasons* can be read from the lens of the Nahda

movement “that sought, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, to rebuild Arab civilisation after centuries of decay under the Ottoman empire and to confront the threat of European imperialism” (Hassan).

Fredric Jameson remarked that all third-world narratives are “national allegories” (86) in the most basic form of their creation. As we move into a political climate where the personal is always political and cultural hybridity informs the social fabric, it is imperative to understand the monumental role of reimaginings in returning the epistemic power or, more appropriately, equality, earlier, lost to the colonised. *Othello* is a discourse on European hegemony, and *Seasons* can read as a response to the “Arab liberal discourse on Europe” (Hassan). In the intent and the content, the remaining mirrors the original text. Shakespeare’s *Othello* introduces himself to Desdemona as an honourable murderer and enchants the white-skinned female protagonist of Shakespeare’s tragedy. Salih’s Mustafa uses the ‘exotic’ appeal of his origin to seduce women of English origin- a phenomenon Franz Fanon connected to the depriving influence of colonization on men as colonial subjects (Fanon). Sexual domination is a form of subversion practiced by Mustafa to claim his intellectual and cultural identity in London. Similarly, desire plays out in dangerous but passionate ways for Desdemona and Othello (an idea evoked viscerally in Nabi Kaslo’s series of paintings called *Othello* that suffered censorship and condemnation for reflecting explicitly sexual images of an African man with a white woman). Othello is posited as a lone warrior who has suffered alienation and estrangement. At the same time, Mustafa is portrayed as a character who has imposed an exile unto himself for the purposes of intellectual growth and cultural upgradation. The distinct point of Mustafa’s trajectory is how he transitions from a Sudanese in London to a Londoner in Wad Hamid. Both host a passion that results in fatality for their female partners. Othello’s passion is one of ownership, whereas Mustafa’s passion is that of reclamation and agency. Desdemona dies at the hands of the Moor for his false belief in her infidelity. Jean Morris dies for reasons beyond infidelity but for a tendency of Mustafa to reclaim the dignity lost to Sudan at the hands of the British. Even the titles of the text seem to be talking to each other while moving in opposite directions. While Shakespeare centralises Othello as the protagonist and encapsulates his entire story in the title through the use of the word ‘tragedy’ and the byline through the word ‘moor,’ Salih indicates a geographical displacement towards the land of the coloniser. Othello is revealed as a victim of his insecurity incumbent on his origin as fuelled by Iago. Mustafa is revealed as a victim of colonisation and consequent education- a phenomenon that deterred him from reconciling the

two worlds he represented. His trial for the murder of his wife, Jean Morris, substantiates this point. He evokes Othello by saying, "I am no Othello. Othello was a lie" (Salih 95).

Through this statement, Salih comments upon the appropriation of the African Moors in Shakespeare's depiction. Here, it is important to understand the role of Oriental exoticisation by the Occidental and how the Postcolonial writer interacts with this exoticisation. Shakespeare's Moor is a 'valiant' and 'honourable killer' with a past that has seen pain and brutality venerating him to a space of exotic appeal within the protected walls of Desdemona's existence. Salih uses the same exoticisation to mock essentialism while accepting the importance of its performance to the colonised in an attempt to hold onto an idea of self. Fanon is as recurrent a motif in *Seasons* as Shakespeare, and here it is befitting to evoke Fanon's romantic hold on negritude in *The Fact of Blackness* wherein he says, "And when I tried on the level of ideas and intellectual activity, to reclaim my negritude, it was snatched away from me" (101).

Here, a question comes to the fore- How does the Oriental interact with the exotic? Are they different or the same? It could be argued that they are similar in their pervasive depiction of the characters of the colonised world. However, the difference lies in the purposes of their use. Here, the Oriental and the exotic exist at the fine line between representation and appropriation or, more accurately, misappropriation. Reimaginings at the hands of Postcolonial writers can help reconcile the limitations elicited by the colonizer's eye in the depiction of the experience of the colonised with a rendering informed by closeness to origin and experience. Essentialism, revisiting a contentious word explored earlier on in the paper, in the writings of the postcolonial is at the helm of survival of culture as against a representation of a collective as conceived by the Occidental imagination. When Mustafa claims Othello to be a lie, he is reclaiming his right to differ from a European canon because of his closeness in origin and experience to a character conceived by a European literary genius. Globalisation has introduced a plurality in literary discourses that eluded texts in times of limited connectivity. Therefore, reimaginings like these are potent ways to revisit texts that have informed literary practices and blanket them in egalitarian and inclusive experiences.

World literature is an attempt to create an inclusive space for literary creation where pedestals of language and authorship are compromised in the quest for representative expression. Reimaginings can also be understood as a modern phenomenon where the preoccupation with the canon is dismissed for authorial and societal integrity. Mona Lisa's transition from Da Vinci's woman with an elusive smile to Duchamp's LHOQQ, From Warhol's quotidian diptychs to Dali's moustache

embedded self-portrait, allows the canon to be challenged to become more accommodating of sexualities, ethnicities, and other cultural expressions on social fringes, gentrified from the mainstream artistic discourse. Modernity celebrates the plurality that the hyphen has reduced to a duality.

A conversation on hyphenated identities is initiated only with the technocratically overused but culturally significant statement by Toni Morrison where she says that in America “American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate” (qt. in Jacolbe). Toni Morrison’s discomfort with dual identities, as revealed in a 1992 interview for *The Guardian* was acknowledged by the Associated Press in the initial months of 2019 with the sole purpose of uniting identities as against creating polarities within a nation by foregoing the use of the hyphen. Using the United States of America as an example to talk of multiplicity is appropriate in light of the present political climate and the multiple ethnicities that have informed its origin. Ramanujam questions if there is an Indian way of thinking in his ‘informal’ essay published in 1989 and I have wondered if a question like this holds relevance today, 30 years later. In the literary world, the advent of World Literature has extended the idea of lexical density to national identity of the writers by containing it in the word ‘world’. The homogenising of literary identity that was heralded by Nobel, perpetuated by the likes of Rolland and Tagore, supported by postcolonial writers like Mabanckou, Coetzee, Salih, Manto, Achebe, Maryse Conde, and their translators have been realised in the relinquishing of the hyphen to bring identities closer to their origin. A relinquishing envisioned by the likes of Toni Morrison.

A canon is a symbol of privilege and elitism. The inclusion of minority languages into the canon reduces the social power and accompanying inequality elicited by language. Colonised nations were known to exhibit an oral and performative tradition of literature dominated by print in the Western world. Economic advantage born out of colonisation is an inadequate premise to establish literary significance- a baseless endeavour to quantify the abstraction acknowledged even by Western consciousness. When I was 16, I found Neruda. At 21, I lost him again because I learned that all that I had read from him was in the form of translations. I felt an inexplicable distance from the work I had almost memorised from obsessive reading. I could not understand if Neruda’s English work would inform the canon or his work in Spanish. It was only through an academic interaction with reimaginings that binary questions seemed redundant to a discourse that consumes the world, whether that is through dropping the hyphen by AP or libraries hosting a Maryse Conde right text to Mallarme. World literature is an attempt to use universal ideas of categorisation against

segregationist ideas, and that is why it embraces the modern disposition of plurality that has perpetuated its way into contemporary consciousness.

Returning to Herman Hesse's idea of private libraries, I will conclude with a reading of a personal library. Anne Fadiman, in her collection of autobiographical essays *Ex Libris*, remembers the process of assimilating her library with her husband's:

His books commingled democratically, united under the all-inclusive flag of Literature. Some were vertical, some horizontal and some actually placed behind others. Mine were balkanized by nationality and subject matter...My books, therefore, have always been rigidly regimented...It was unclear, however, how we were to find a meeting point between his English garden approach and my French garden...We agreed to sort by topic (Fadiman 11).

*We agreed to sort by topic.* I can see Shakespeare's *Othello* right next to Tayeb Salih's *Seasons of Migration to the North* in their book rack reconciling reimaginings with the canon, national literatures to World Literature, singular to plural, individual to collective, beyond elitism, privilege of language and access- an assimilation that believes in and makes space for the heterogeneity of universally experienced thoughts and emotions.

### Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "The African Writer and the English Language." *Morning Yet on Creation*

Day. 1975, pp. 103.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Selected Writings Volume 1 (1913-1926)*.

Harvard UP, 2002, pp. 255.

Booker, MK. *Ulysses, Capitalism and Colonialism: Reading Joyce After the Cold War*.

Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000, pp. 93.

Elkins, Laurel. "The End of Francophonie: The Politics of French Literature." *The White*

*Review*. [www.thewhitereview.org/feature/the-end-of-francophonie-the-politics-of-french-literature-2](http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/the-end-of-francophonie-the-politics-of-french-literature-2).

Fadiman, Anne. "Marrying Libraries." *Ex Libris-Confessions of a Common Reader*. Penguin

UK, 2000, pp.11.

Fanon, Frantz. *Wretched of the Earth (Penguin Modern Classic)*. Penguin UK, 2001.

Fanon, Franz. "The Fact of Blackness." *Black Skin, White Masks*. Pluto Press, 2008, pp.101.

Hassan, Wai S. "Introduction." Salih, Tayeb. *Season of Migration to the North*. NYRB Classics, 2009.

Humphries, Jefferson. *The Otherness Within*. Louisiana State UP, 1983, pp. 8.

Jacolbe, Jessica. "Of Hyphens and Racial Indicators." *Jstor Daily*.  
daily.jstor.org/on-hyphens-and-racial-indicators.

Jameson, Fredrich. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke UP, 1991, pp. 8.

Mani, B Venkat. "The Shadow of Empty Shelves: Two World Wars and the Rise and Fall of World Literature." *Reading World Literature- Libraries, Print Culture, and Germany's Pact with Books*. Fordham University, 2017, pp. 138-139.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. "Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature." James Curry, 1986, pp. 5.

Rogers, Lynne. "The Season of Tayeb Salih-Crossing the Boundaries." *Al Jadid* (2009): 60.

Salih, Tayeb. *Season of Migration to the North*. NYRB Classics, 2009.

Shakespeare, William, Mowat, Barbara A. Werstine, Paul. *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009, c1993.

**Index of artworks cited in the paper in chronological order**



Fig 1. Botticelli, Sandro. Birth of Venus. 1486. Ufizi Gallery, Florence.



Fig 2. Titian. Venus of Urbino. 1538. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig 3. Manet, Edouard. Olympia. 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Fig 4. Cezanne, Paul. Modern Olympia. 1874. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Fig 5. Steger, Ales. Pyramid of Exiled Poets. 2016. Kochi Muziris Biennale, Kochi.  
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Kochi/A-Pharaonic-abode-for-exile-poets/article16844448.ece>

Fig 6. Da Vinci, Leonardo. *Mona Lisa*. 1503. The Louvre, Paris.



Fig 6. Da Vinci, Leonardo. *Mona Lisa*. 1503. The Louvre, Paris.

Fig 7. Duchamp, Marcel. LHOOQ. 1919.

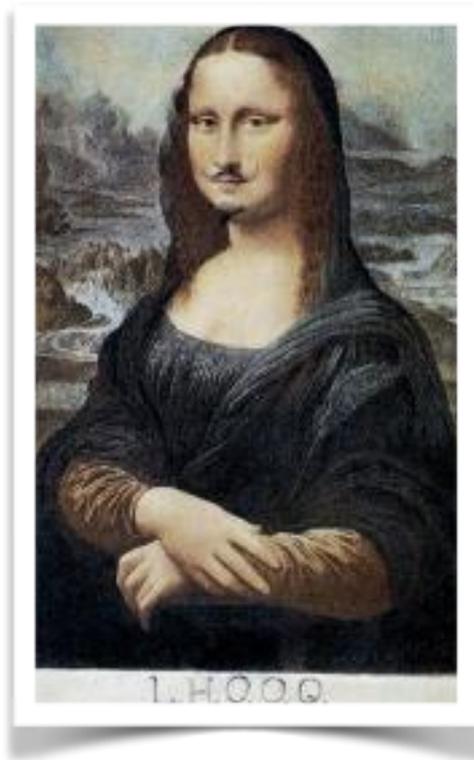


Fig 8. Warhol, Andy. Mona Lisa. 1963.

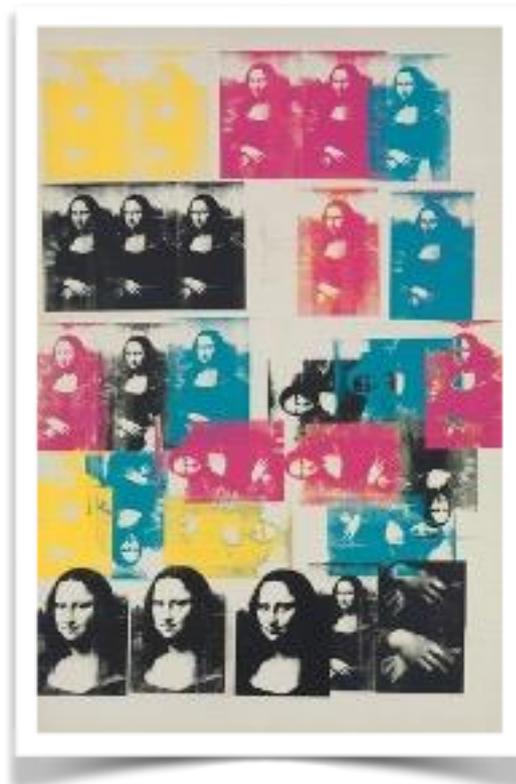


Fig 9. Dali, Salvador. Self Portrait Mona Lisa. 1973

