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This extract is a play on contrasts: between the abstract and the specific, the two protagonists, and the inside and outside.

In the opening, Kunzru introduces the theme of contrasts through abstract ruminations on opposite elements – ‘Fire and water. Earth and air’ – and ‘the great unity of things whose name is God’. The origin and context of these ideas is unclear until they are grounded in a character, Amrita, when they are revealed as her thoughts; this contrast between abstract and physical descriptions makes for a jarring opening.

Another key contrast in this extract is between the two protagonists and their circumstances. Amrita travels in a ‘palanquin’, a sign of wealth, yet feels restricted by the air inside, ‘hot and close’ and smelling of ‘stale sweat’. She ‘reaches out for the...box of pills’ for ‘another opium pellet’, evidence of her anxiety at not being able to ‘carry on thinking for ever’. She sardonically rejoices when the vehicle stops, as she’s glad for the delay in her ‘last journey’ – once she is ‘delivered to her uncle’, this ‘will be an end’, and she will get married. The old women had told her to be thankful for her circumstances; as ‘only a woman’, her narrow prospects were the best she could hope for in their patriarchal society. But she resents their ‘advice’, recalling the conversation in brief sentences: ‘she will arrive with a good dowry. So much better off than other girls. She should thank God.’ Evidently, she dreads her impending marriage and the restrictions it will bring – on her travel, and even on her thinking.

In contrast, Englishman Forrester doesn’t travel in luxury but rather is stuck with the ‘grubby Brahmin’ and his ‘chit chat’. Although he is similarly restricted by this man who irritates him – referred to as a ‘bloody fool’ – he is undeniably freer than Amrita, with no prospect of impending restriction or an end to the freedoms he enjoys. This comparison is exaggerated by the writing preceding each character’s description. Before introducing Amrita, Kunzru describes the world inside her head; before he introduces Forrester, he illustrates the chaotic desert landscape and the striking changes happening in nature: ‘the wind has blown steadily...to slap hard against the mountains.’; ‘the rain rolls over foothills, dousing fires’. Forrester is introduced amidst a war of opposing elements, as if he is part of its violent phenomenon. For better or for worse, this is certainly a more dramatic context into which to be introduced than the inside of your own mind.

These contrasts draw the protagonists together; tension mounts as a link, or rather its potential, forms between them. This increases after Forrester learns that she is a young woman rather than ‘ill, or very old’ as he’d presumed. Whilst erecting his tent, he can’t help but think about her until eventually, he can’t stand it any longer. He asks the man, ‘So who exactly is your mistress?’ and receives a telling response.