

Genres of Modernity

Contemporary Indian Novels in English



Dirk Wiemann

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120

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Allgemeinen und
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Dirk Wiemann



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For Tania

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Introduction

Encountering Indian Novels in English

“Never again shall a single story be told as though it were the only one.” Arundhati Roy, when choosing to overcode *The God of Small Things* (1995) with this quote from John Berger’s *G.* (1972), will probably have been aware of the fact that another postcolonial writer with a South Asian background, Michael Ondaatje, had already in 1986 used that very same epigraph for his novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*. Of course there are no rules against the multiple employment of epigraphs, nor against one author’s quoting another author’s quoting yet another author. These might in fact be common practices that have merely escaped me for lack of erudition. However, I am at this point not primarily interested in the (para)textual politics involved in such cross-referential manoeuvres – the tricky subversion-cum-reconfirmation of author/ity; the further obscuring of the original as it comes as a hand-me-down; not even the possibly transgressive implications of a gesture in which the postcolonial writer appropriates the metropolitan as always already appropriated by the postcolonial. My interest is, instead, naively content-based: What could be the possible relation(s) between texts and paratext, *these* texts and *this* paratext (and the text the latter stems from)? Why should, after Bakhtin and Kristeva, and in the heyday of hybridity, an indictment against ‘an only story’ still be appealing as more than a platitude to postcolonial writers?

It would be tempting to assume that Berger’s axiomatic dictum asserts a poetics of the porous text that Roy’s and Ondaatje’s novels seem to practice: a decentring programmatics of breaking narrative unilaterality and closure that repress the presence of all the other stories any text has to take on board. Do not *The God of Small Things* and *In the Skin of a Lion* present themselves as highly polymorphous, fragmented narratives that allow for the coexistence, within their folds, of multiple stories? Does not the same hold true for Berger’s *G.* that brings the formulaic constraints of the biographical novel to the point of explosion into ever more diversifying narrative splinters? No attentive reading can, however, ignore the centripetal forces at

work in these texts: Roy's pervasive employment of a distinct idiosyncratic style gives her text an eccentric homogeneity, an off-centre centredness that, following Fredric Jameson's logic, would locate *The God of Small Things* safely in the protocols of High Modernism with its obsession with the autonomous, self-centred work of art¹; furthermore, Roy's mode of emplotment appears to be loosely knit and 'open' but in actuality plays craftily on the hiatus between fabula and sjuzet, effectively reconfirming the power of a deep narrative structure. Ondaatje's narrator zooms in on the contingencies of lived experience on the margins, only to insert these fragments both into the vast political panoramas of 1930s Canada (and a specific wave of modernisation in general) and into a subterranean narrative pattern. Thus the apparent "chaos and tumble of events" is counterbalanced by the promise that "there is order here, very faint, very human".² Similarly, Berger's novel does not fundamentally violate the formulaic rules of biography inasmuch as Giovanni's life-story, though shot through with a plethora of subnarratives and authorial reflections, gets related from A to Z, and even rounded up with a fully fledged conclusion in the protagonist's death, that privileged moment of a "divinatory realization of the meaning of life";³ meanwhile, the authoritative voice of the author-narrator ensures, throughout the text, the cohesion and unity of the whole.

Berger's commandment, when summoned as an epigraph in Ondaatje and Roy, is obviously not meant to be read primarily as a poetics of decentering. Rather it calls for a politics of disclaiming the universalist pretensions of a single story that poses as the only one. In Indian writing, both critical and literary, this single story tends to go under the name of 'modernity': a narrative that, in light of the novels and theoretical texts at issue in this study, has historically been codified in one allegedly universally valid form against whose monopoly these texts intervene. Instead of docilely reproducing one received narrative of modernity, then, postcolonial writing – whether as theory or fiction – enacts a pluralisation into multiple genres of modernity. Though this manoeuvre requires that the stance of absolute singularity be exposed as fictitious ("as though it *were* the only one"), it does not stop short

¹ See Fredric Jameson's reflections on the vanishing of "the modernists' 'inimitable' styles" in postmodernism; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London (Verso) 1991: 16.

² Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*. London (Picador) 1987: 146.

³ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov". *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed & intr. Hannah Arendt. Tr. Harry Zohn. New York (Schocken) 1968: 83–109; 100. – The moment of closure in the death of the protagonist as a moment of discharge of meaning figures strongly in narratological descriptions of well-shaped plots; see Frank Kermode [1966], *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford (OUP) 2000; Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York (Clarendon Press) 1984: esp. 90–112.

at a gesture of critique or debunking. At any rate, the three novels in question clearly go beyond this 'negative' labour by figuring fragile and temporary positivities that stand outside the domain of the only story. Yet even while affirming the existence of alternatives to the "smug, ordered world",⁴ these alternatives (have to) remain peculiarly underdetermined.

In Roy, the fictitious yet effective only story appears as "History" and the "Love Laws" it prescribes; in Ondaatje, as an unstoppable iron-cage modernisation and the class divisions it intensifies; in Berger, as a late-Victorian hegemonic formation articulated in terms of classist and sexist discrimination. Such discursive regimes present themselves as totalities, "proposing", as Berger's narrator reflects in *G.*, "a continuous present",⁵ that allows for no alternatives on its own terrain.

The mode of subversion that these texts advocate does not, however, exhaust itself in de-essentialising the (binary) parameters of the hegemonic formation and replacing them with their radical simple negation, pure difference. It is the real existence of other stories that drives their assault on discursive monopolies. Therefore, the site of subversion is the utopian, even epiphanic encounter in which an alternative ontology is produced collaboratively: one that does not precede the event, and that cannot be contained within the script and measures of the dominant. Here, subversion ceases to function simply as an 'against' but as the figuration of impossible modes of recognition foreclosed by the dominant imposition of humanity as divided by caste (Roy), class (Ondaatje), or gender (Berger). Without denying the persistence of power relations and the ensuing necessity of "the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative",⁶ the productive encounter in these texts opens up an ethico-political horizon that clearly transcends the dialectic model of a struggle for recognition, Hegelian or otherwise, as well as the structuralist mechanism of interpellation: The ultimate telos lies not in the dialectical sublation of the struggle in a superior synthesis, nor in the suspension of the system's parameters by way of deconstruction, de-essentialisation or hybridisation. Part of the programme of these texts seems to rest with the radical disarticulation – the explosion – of the dominant system as 'working dynamite'⁷ figures strongly in all the texts involved here: Berger's Giovanni with his militant affiliations ends up carrying explosives in the service of anti-Habsburg guerrilla warfare; Roy's Ammu gets first assigned "the reckless rage of a suicide bomber," and is

⁴ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*. London (Flamingo) 1997: 176.

⁵ John Berger, *G. A Novel*. London (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) 1972: 72.

⁶ Hegel's formula of "*der Ernst, der Schmerz, die Geduld und Arbeit des Negativen*" in *Phenomenology of Spirit*; G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes. Werke 3*. Frankfurt/Main (Suhrkamp) 1986: 24.

⁷ Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*, 114.

herself later equated to “a bomb waiting to go off”;⁸ Ondaatje’s Patrick lends his expertise as a ‘searcher’ to the anarchist plot on the water supply system of Toronto.

Yet beyond these *disarticulatory* fantasies of a “struggle unto death against what is”,⁹ the three texts involve the genuinely *articulatory* dimension of figuring new relations between elements hitherto held apart; they culminate in moments of encounters that appear to mark radical discontinuities, conjuring up a plurality in heterogeneous time, presented and experienced as “the turning of a corner in which *an altogether different present* happens, which was not foreseen”.¹⁰ The universalism of the dominant is thus not contested qua universalism but by way of questioning its monopoly through the assertion (to recall Etienne Balibar’s formula) “that there are in history a great number of universalities”.¹¹ The crucial encounters in Berger, Ondaatje and Roy do not only articulate the apparently incompatible into unforeseen and unforeseeable new affiliations; moreover, they mark these new affiliations as relations that are impossible within the parameters of the existing real universality of the system. By staking “rights-claims that cannot be circumscribed to any pre-established domain”,¹² they require, in short, that the political itself be radically redefined.

There is certainly something epiphanic, and also something eminently political about such an ‘altogether different present’, some Benjaminian “weak messianic power”¹³ in the sudden apocalyptic disclosure of an alternative world that exceeds and disrupts the measures of the established reality. What is dramatised in such fictional productive encounters are moments of non-Being, or, as Alain Badiou would have it, “Truth-Events” that break out of the self-enclosed field of ontology as a description of the positive universe. Such events do not simply puncture a continuous order but make legible its inconsistencies and limitations: they are “the Truth of a specific situation”,¹⁴ a truth that remains invisible from any perspective

⁸ Roy, *God of Small Things*, 44; 119.

⁹ Berger, *G.*, 80.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter”. *Ghostly Demarcations. A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s ‘Specters of Marx’*. Ed. Michael Sprinker. London & New York (Verso) 1999: 26-67; 62 (my emphasis).

¹¹ Etienne Balibar, “Preface”. Etienne Balibar & Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London & New York (Verso) 1991: 5.

¹² Etienne Balibar, “What is a Politics of the Rights of Man?”. *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*. London & New York (Routledge) 1994: 205—225; 213.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 253—264; 254.

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London & New York (Verso) 1999: 130.

located inside the system. What Badiou calls the 'Knowledge of Being' is precisely that knowledge that refers to, is established within, and reconfirms the established reality; the Truth-Event, however, occurs like a miracle, and is as rare: it "can only be something that *happens to you*".¹⁵ Belonging to the wholly different dimension of 'non-Being', it posits that which cannot be foreseen. For Jacques Derrida, however, human social existence takes place principally in the horizon of the Truth-Event. Not the event (which remains exceptional) but its expectation forms a universal structure of experience captured in the phrase of a 'messianicity without messianism': "*Anything but Utopian*, messianicity mandates that we interrupt the ordinary course of things, time and history *here-now*; it is inseparable from the affirmation of otherness and justice".¹⁶ Similarly, Badiou is not only interested in the ephemeral event/encounter as such but in the ensuing, truly ethical imperative of the "truth-process" – a persevering fidelity to the event even after this latter has become a mere memory.

Berger, Ondaatje and Roy write as if to illustrate this ethico-political figure of the event: It is not just against, but *beyond* the measures of casteism and History that Ammu and Velutha 'recognise' each other in *The God of Small Things*, just as the climactic encounter of Patrick, the unemployed saboteur, and Harris, the municipal entrepreneur, in Ondaatje's novel exceeds the measures of the class struggle as the 'naming of the enemy' gets perplexed by the possibility that "he is your friend".¹⁷ In *G.*, Giovanni's and Camille's illicit love relation stands outside the parameters of hegemonic patriarchy as a "new, profoundly surprising fact [that] cannot be accommodated by morality"; it takes on all the characteristics of an event that is prior to the agents involved: "I am not the sum of my parts. [...] It is not myself I give you, it is the meeting of the two of us that I offer you. What you offer me is the opportunity for me to offer this".¹⁸ In all these instances, newness enters an ossified world not primarily by way of hybridisation that substitutes fluid subject positions for systemic interpellation or unambiguous identity; instead it comes as a productive close encounter that is "ontologically prior to the question of ontology (the question of the being who encounters)".¹⁹ It is precisely such visionary terms, embarrassingly

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay in the Understanding of Evil*. Tr. & intr. Peter Hallward. London & New York (Verso) 2001: 51.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Marx & Sons". *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's 'Specters of Marx'*. Ed. Michael Sprinker. London & New York (Verso) 1999: 213–269; 249.

¹⁷ Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*, 124.

¹⁸ Berger, *G.*, 200; 202.

¹⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*. London & New York (Routledge) 2000: 7.

high-strung as they may ring, that I would like to make productive in my readings of a selected sample of texts from the field of contemporary Indian writing in English. I am interested in that particular moment at which texts exceed the labour of the negative – hence are forced to abandon the (relatively) firm ground of the ‘critical’ mode – and switch to prophecy and sermonising in order to affirmatively figure the impossible.

This latter, to be sure, is not exhausted in the potentials of productive individual encounters but refers to the field of political articulation in general: What the productivity of the encounter sets in motion is a translocational passage toward the immeasurable that finds its analogy in “the passage from the virtual through the possible to the real” that Hardt and Negri call “the fundamental act of creation”.²⁰ Like Derrida’s notion of justice, Balibar’s central concept of “equaliberty” as a historically unrealised yet irrepressible thrust toward the “right to difference in equality” operates within the domain of the unprecedented, the as yet unformed: “not as a restoration of an original identity or as the neutralization of differences in the equality of rights, but as the production of an equality without precedents or models”.²¹ Balibar insists that a politics in the name of the “ideal universality” of equaliberty necessarily has to take recourse to the strictly counterfactual, in the final instance, to the “fiction of a unified humanity”²² – a figure that runs through much postcolonial thought from the concluding programmatic of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* to Paul Gilroy’s recent plea for a “planetary humanism” in his *Postcolonial Melancholia*.

Berger’s imperative and its application in Ondaatje and Roy thus tie in with a specific counter-universalism that has informed, and keeps informing, an important strand of postcolonialist writing and theory: one that is not only – like probably all postcolonialisms – opposed to a Western model of modernity posing and imposing itself ‘as though it were the only one’ but that critically engages with this universalism in a manner structurally akin to the procedures at work in Roy, Ondaatje and Berger. In a tripartite move, these critiques first expose the physical, political, juridical, epistemic violence that modernity entails; then “trace the itinerary of the silencing”²³ of that which is excluded from the folds of the (allegedly) universally modern; and finally – in the sermon mode – take positive recourse to that which was silenced and cannot be spoken within the folds of the dominant. The basic

²⁰ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire*. Cambridge & London (Harvard UP) 2000: 357.

²¹ Etienne Balibar, “‘Rights of Man’ and ‘Rights of the Citizen’: The Modern Dialectic of Equality and Freedom”. *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 39–59; 56.

²² Balibar, “What is a Politics of the Rights of Man?”, 221.

²³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “The Post-modern Condition: The End of Politics?” *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Ed. Sarah Harasym. New York & London (Routledge) 1990: 17–34; 31.

gesture, in other words, is not to deny but “to finally locate modernity in the present [of India], in all its contradictoriness and messiness”.²⁴

This study reads a sample of contemporary Indian English novels as involved in the project of ‘locating modernity in the present’. Chapter 1 takes a first preliminary step, in which I will try to delineate some of the crucial moments of the intense and controversial debate of modernity in contemporary Indian critical social and political theory, historiography, and postcolonial feminism. As opposed to the ‘historicist’ notion of an incomplete, not-yet-fully-achieved condition of being modern in India, the texts I will draw on engage in a re-evaluation of the here-and-now of the Indian palimpsest as very much part of the modern, it being understood that ‘modern’ now can no longer be conceived as ‘Western’. What is at stake in this body of work could then be described as a re-figuring of the present: “not an originary gesture, not a re-founding or a return to true origins, but a call for transforming the contemporary moment and forging the conceptual and political instruments adequate to this task”.²⁵

Chapters 2 to 6 address various figurations of one of the key components of modernity: time. The notion of homogeneous empty time, first critically introduced by Walter Benjamin, and then picked up by Benedict Anderson as one of the conditions of possibility for the modern nation to emerge as an imagined community, takes centre stage, I will argue, in a wide range of novels that lend themselves to a reading in terms of ‘national allegory’. Analyses of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*, Vikram Chandra’s *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Kiran Nagarkar’s *Cuckold*, and Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* are intended to demonstrate a multiplicity of aesthetic strategies of disclaiming/de-claiming Indian standard time as well as the nexus of homogeneous empty time, nation and novel that Anderson postulates.

The second half of this study addresses critical interventions, in theory and fiction, in the representation and ideological functions of the category of the domestic. As part of the grand dichotomy of private and public, domesticity and intimacy form constitutive moments of the classically

²⁴ Kalpana Ram, “Uneven Modernities and Ambivalent Sexualities: Women’s Constructions of Puberty in Coastal Kanyakumari, Tamilnadu”. *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*. Ed. Mary E. John & Janaki Nair. New Delhi (Kali for Women) 1998: 269—303; 273.

²⁵ Satish Poduval, “Re-Figuring Culture: Introduction”. *Re-Figuring Culture: History, Theory and the Aesthetic in Contemporary India*. Ed. Satish Poduval. New Delhi (Sahitya Akademi) 2005: 1—16; 13.

modern imaginary. The notion of a ‘public domesticity’ that I derive from postcolonial feminism and other critical writing undoes this dichotomy by conflating its alleged opposite numbers. The novels of Amit Chaudhuri and Amitav Ghosh along with Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* point to a variety of ‘domestic fiction’ that is devoted to the representation and problematisation of a private sphere always already, for better or worse, inserted into the public.

It will be obvious at a first cursory glance that the texts analysed in this book form something like the main corpus of what has been internationally established as “Indian Writing in English”: Writers like Rushdie, Ghosh, Seth, and Roy certainly range among the most highly visible international authors of the day so that the question may arise as to how yet another study of these familiar texts might be of any use for anyone. My agenda is simple and, perhaps for that very reason, risky. I have chosen to discuss these texts precisely because of their international circulation, assuming somewhat naively that such dissemination cannot be owed to the powerful workings of a well-oiled transnational culture industry alone, nor to the strategic palatability of the texts in question for the “Western reader”. Such considerations, indispensable as they are for any critical assessment of contemporary writing in general and hence also of Indian writing in English, can stand only at the beginning of an engagement with what these texts actually *do* – it being understood that texts, as Edward Said puts it, “to some degree [...] are events”²⁶ themselves.

At the most basic and general level – one that has nothing whatsoever specifically postcolonial about it – textuality itself is here conceived of as *articulation*. This term is here used in the sense of a displacement (or rather: re-implacement) of the concept of articulation as proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.”²⁷ When I mark my recourse to Laclau and Mouffe as a “re-implacement” of the term ‘articulation’, I call attention to the metaphoricity of its usage in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, where an originally linguistic (and, by extension, textual) category is displaced onto the political labour of forging alliances and affiliations, and, ideally, the production of that composite subjectivity that Gramsci called “the collective man”: a “cultural-social” unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous

²⁶ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Cambridge /Ma. (Harvard UP) 1983: 4.

²⁷ Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London & New York (Verso) 2001: 105.

aims, are welded together with a single aim”.²⁸ Thus Laclau and Mouffe discuss articulation as a process at the heart of political interventions into the dynamics of the social text: a persistent reconfiguration of power blocs metaphorised as rewriting, or reinscription. If this engenders a conceptualisation of politics in terms of de- and re-textualisation, the model lends itself of course to its chiasmic reversal, the politicisation of textuality. In this perspective, concrete and circumscribed literary texts result from literally articulatory practices in the course of which any number of ‘elements’ from an open and differentiated discursive space are being selected and reconfigured in such a way that ‘their identity is modified’. Literature, then, enacts a recombination/reintegration of otherwise distinct and separated discourses: It opens interdiscursive spaces to the effect of a rewriting of the historical situation (i.e., the uncircumscribed discursive space from which the respective text stems) and in the same go, an intervention into this situation as soon as the text feeds back into this latter. This is more than merely stating that texts are produced by, and productive of, history. The notion of text-as-articulation both emphasises the analogy of literature and politics and allows for a distinction between the two, for the articulatory potentials of the literary text are significantly less restricted than those of political actors: While the latter have to operate within the field of the possible, the former, though bound to the historically available discursive repertoire, is free to engage with the virtual. Far from disappearing from view in the operation of such a discursive contextualisation, the specificity of the literary text now becomes identifiable as an interdiscursive arrangement that allows for the articulation of otherwise (or rather: everywhere else) disjunct discursive elements – not only in the sense of some general Bakhtinian dialogicity but, more importantly, in the manner of a historically significant rewriting of the situation itself from which the text emerges, of which it partakes, and to whose dynamic reinvention it contributes. Following Fredric Jameson, the situation (‘raw’ history as such) is “inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, [...] it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization”.²⁹ Underlying the composition of the concrete individual text at hand, there is then the prior operation of textualising the non-textual situation into some sort of subtext that consequently informs the syntactic macro-structure and semantic economy of the literary text, which then again feeds itself back into the open but power-structured arena of a virtually global public discursive space.

²⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed & tr. Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith. Hyderabad (Orient Longman) 1996: 349.

²⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London (Methuen) 1981: 82.

From the outset, my hypothesis concerning the novels under discussion in this study is that they figure *transmodern interventions* into the global manifold, and that this is why they exceed any predictable reading in terms of Western postcolonial orthodoxies. In other words, they need to be re-encountered as already encountered: Neither do they stop short at a gesture of “writing back”, nor can they be adequately described as glossy cultural commodities in the mode of Indo-chic; neither do they exhaust themselves in the celebration of an allegedly subversive hybridity, nor can they be fully deciphered as so many variations of the ideal national allegory. This catalogue of negations could be extended as far as the immense body of work on how to read the postcolonial would take us: very far indeed. What I would wish to suggest, however, is a slightly different politics of reading: To conceive of the postcolonial text as transmodern intervention expressed through articulatory processes, I claim, means first of all to acknowledge its global relevance as a description of entrenched modernity from outside the West but not outside modernity;³⁰ and secondly, to overcome the ultimately relativistic notion of coexisting alternative versions of modernity in favour of a modernity that is singular but not one.³¹ What is called for, then, is a framework that accounts for historical difference in order to explode the myth of a universal and unilateral modernity while at the same time retaining the insight that all difference by definition involves a relationality, hence some degree of commensurability. The texts in question here are read as interrogations of modernity from *differently modern* perspectives: They do not so much urge for a notion of plurally coexistent modernities but for the concept of an internally fissured and differentiated modernity that is global but not universal. It is in this light that the texts in question here immediately interest *me* precisely as one located ‘in the West’ but for all that by no means entirely determined by that location. The productivity of the encounter – a loose articulation in the widest sense – will have to rely on an ethico-political acknowledgement of the distance between ‘us’ that yet remains open to the possibility that any narrative, even if it comes from the remotest location, may “make sense, allegorically, *for another*”.³²

³⁰ This is Enrique Dussel’s definition of transmodernity – a widely neglected term recently reactivated by Paul Gilroy who distinguishes transmodernity as “a geopolitical project with a longer reach and more profound consequences than is customarily appreciated”; Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York (Columbia UP) 2004: 44.

³¹ See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London & New York (Verso) 2002: 12.

³² James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory”. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Ed. James Clifford & George E. Marcus. Berkeley (U of California P) 1986: 98—121; 107.

As the well-worn Marxian/Jamesonian imperative, “Always historicize!”, seems to have given way to its (more postmodern) spatialising successor, “Always locate!”, it appears mandatory to specify the position from which one writes, lest one make oneself suspicious of assuming an aspectival, impossible view from nowhere. In its guise of modesty, however, locational criticism can exert its own variety of absolutism by reifying historically evolved subject positions as defining and arresting identity. I propose right at the outset of this study that what I offer is a reading of some exemplary novels from the corpus of Indian writing in English *not simply* from a white male European perspective, even though this is actually and undeniably the location I happen to inhabit. I am not trying to disavow that privileged position but I wish to question it as the ultimate and insurmountable horizon of my reading: Whiteness and masculinity involve choices whose foreclosure in the name of a determinist locationism would result in the chromatist and genitalist self-denial of agency as such.³³ Fredric Jameson’s programme of “cognitive mapping” – often misread as a solipsistic epistemological manoeuvre – crucially involves the re-figuring of the subject’s relation to the “(unrepresentable, imaginary) global social totality that was to have been mapped”.³⁴ not a mimetic but a reflexive procedure in the course of which the subject, in the very process of (re)locating itself on the grid prepared for it, positions but also posits itself. Location thus becomes a category that implies its own excess, or, the potential for its own transcendence, endowing the subject not with ‘identity’ but, as Giorgio Agamben puts it, with “potentiality itself, which is the most proper mode of human existence”.³⁵ This, of course, requires a rethinking of cognitive mapping, not so much as a solipsistic operation of ideological self-assertion, but as constitutively underwritten by a dimension of sociality: Instead of a poetics of the subject in relation to the ‘structure’, cognitive mapping, on my reading, names the art of self-placement in an open field of (possible and impossible) productive encounters with others, it being understood that neither the self nor the Other precede the encounter. In this scenario, the crucial category of the encounter provides “a *temporal* movement from the now to the not yet”.³⁶ This notion of the productive encounter prior to the ontology of both self and Other is derived from Sara Ahmed’s critical reading of Lévinas. Ahmed applies her

³³ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Questions of Multi-Culturalism”. *The Post-Colonial Critic*, 59–66; esp. 62.

³⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping”. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana & Chicago (U of Illinois P) 1988: 347–360; 356. – I will discuss ‘cognitive mapping’ more extensively in chs. 6 and 7.

³⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*. Tr. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis (U of Minnesota P) 1993: 44.

³⁶ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 145.

reflections explicitly to the postcolonial feminist problem of challenging *both* the universality of the homogenising figure of ‘woman’ *and* the notion that radical incommensurabilities between the different locations of women in the globalised division of labour categorically foreclose all options to acts of alignment. Instead of taking location as an alibi for one’s non-presence in other worlds, Ahmed calls attention to the fact that in postcolonialism and globalisation, all ‘other worlds’ are always already assimilated *as strange, as different*, in a planetary capitalist economy of difference. The first imperative of a translocational politics lies hence in “(re)encountering what has already been encountered”:³⁷ breaking with the appropriation of the global Other as labour or sign of difference. This, roughly, is the agenda that underlies this study, itself a series of engagements with (postcolonial) texts that I wish, and hope, to (re)encounter translocally.

³⁷ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 178.

1 A Modernity That Is not One

Situating Indian Writing in English

Contemporary Indian writing in English abounds with manifold figurations of time and home, or rather, times and homes. Both these themes, I will argue in the following, serve for critical engagements with that complex and contested formation, modernity, in some of its constitutive aspects: the implementation of historical-progressivist thought, the nation as an enumerable community in homogeneous empty time, and the dichotomy of public and private. At the same time, the conspicuous preoccupation with ‘time’ and ‘home’ helps to situate these texts in a discursive environment that has, at least in the context of India, produced some of the most influential theoretical propositions concerning postcoloniality. I deliberately use the slightly pedestrian phrase, “in the context of India”, in order to mark that the literary and critical texts discussed in this study do not necessarily originate empirically (bio-geographically) from India but partake of a discursive context that is being produced in India itself by resident intellectuals as well as abroad by translocated scholars and writers with a South Asian background. Even if this context is without any doubt a transnational one today,¹ it is marked by an astonishingly strong emphasis on the contested category of the national as a defining point of reference.

1.1 The ‘national/modern’ and transmodernity

India’s modernity, according to art theorist Geeta Kapur, evolves through the “paradigm of the national / modern” – “the double discourse of the national and the modern”.² Kapur insists on the centrality of this ‘double discourse’ in contemporary Indian visual art and, more generally, cultural and political

¹ See Jackie Assayag & Véronique Bénéï, “At Home in Diaspora: South Asia, Europe, and America”. *At Home in Diaspora: South Asian Scholars in the West*. Ed. Jackie Assayag & Véronique Bénéï. New Delhi (Permanent Black) 2003: 1—27.

² Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*. New Delhi (Tulika) 2000: 288.

expressions as it enables “a politics that refuses to be restricted to a simple localism based on questions of ethnic identity or to be subsumed by the maw of globalism”.³ It is within this discursive field of the ‘national/modern’ that the concrete theoretical and fictional figurations of time and home of contemporary Indian writing need to be situated. If the insistence on the articulation of modernity with the national is introduced as *descriptive* of the Indian palimpsest, it yet might entail the risk of suggesting separatist, parochial or nativist narratives of the modern that would produce *programmatic* fantasies of some independent ‘Indian’ modernity. Kapur’s paradigm – useful as a shorthand for the general thrust of the most productive and reflexive contributions to the postcolonial Indian critique of modernity – does however preclude such separatist fallacies by inserting the national/modern categorically within the global, by constructing it as a phenomenon that emerges only in relation to, and on the condition of, a globalising world. The notion of the national/modern presupposes a world-systemic interdependence of concretely evolved articulations of modernity and thus aligns with the figure of the transmodern, that other critical horizon within which Indian writing in English takes place today.

Though a problematisation of the categories of ‘time’ and ‘home’ does not add up to an exhaustive description of the ‘national/modern’ nor of modernity at large, it comprises some of the crucial issues raised in both historical and recent Indian cultural debates from the inception of anti-colonial nationalism to *Subaltern Studies* and beyond. Time and home, then, figure as privileged metonymies of modernity. This study does not ask what modernity *is* nor does it depart from a thorough and/or comprehensive definition of ‘modernity’; as a second-order analysis,⁴ it rather focuses on how modernity emerges as an object of description, analysis and critique from the theoretical and literary texts under consideration here. In these pages, to put it starkly, modernity is that to which Indian writers apply that name. If, as constructivism has it, no object of a theory exists independently and in its fullness prior to its theorisation, one cannot expect to depart from the firm ground of a modernity already given (neither in the sense of some verifiable referent ‘out there’ nor as a consensual concept) which then, in a litmus test procedure, could be confronted to its more or less appropriate description by the texts at hand. Rather the other way around, modernity is being produced in the course of its description and/or interrogation.

³ Geeta Kapur, “SubTerrain: Artists Dig the Contemporary”. *Body.City: Siting Contemporary Culture in India*. Ed. Indira Chandrashekar & Peter C. See. New Delhi (Tulika) & Berlin (House of World Cultures) 2003: 46–83; 53.

⁴ See John Gunnell, “Desperately Seeking Wittgenstein”. *European Journal of Political Theory* 3.1 (2004): 77–98; 88.

However, as a discursively pre-constituted object it does of course not emerge, in the analysed texts, from a *creatio ex nihilo* but from the rearticulation of historically available discursive material. Accordingly, the instances of a critique of modernity in Indian social/political theory and literary writing have other, precedent constructions of modernity inscribed into them: They are best understood as contributions to an ongoing struggle, already in place prior to the texts themselves, over a contested concept. Since, in other words, these texts articulate position-takings in a field already structured by previously taken positions, they will have to share some amount of discursive moments with these precedent positions, even in order to engage polemically with them. They have to be themselves constituted within the discursive field of the modern that can apparently not be addressed other than in its own terms:

An important aspect of modernity is the fact that it is also the source of the conceptual tools that have been used to understand it. In this sense, therefore, modernity defines our intellectual horizon rather like commonsense – there is no place to stand outside of it.⁵

As a consequence, Indian critiques of modernity also relate to moments of entrenched modernity's self-description from Descartes via Hegel and Marx to Freud and beyond. Even this canonised corpus, however influential, does not provide a normative source of modernity's originally founding texts. Instead these canonical texts require to be read and reinscribed as so many moments of a particular (and particularly powerful) *narrative of modernity*. It is in this vein that Fredric Jameson, stoutly Eurocentric in his exclusive focusing on Western thought from Descartes to Heidegger, asserts that "[m]odernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category" that implements its own myth of origin as the plot element of an absolute beginning.⁶ It is from this founding myth that Western modernity begins to narrate itself as an autonomous, strictly European development, and then as a globally transparent norm.

It is this narrative of "the self-sufficiency of European modernity"⁷ that gets reconstructed and questioned in Indian critical conceptualisations of the 'national/modern'. In these writings, the term 'modernity' itself gets hardly ever defined as "it is only at the highest level of abstraction that one can speak of something simply called 'modernity'";⁸ instead, the term is often, as in an exemplary article by Tejaswini Niranjana,

⁵ Satish Deshpande, *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*. New Delhi (Viking India) 2003: 30.

⁶ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 40.

⁷ Kalpana Ram, "Uneven Modernities and Ambivalent Sexualities", 270.

⁸ Satish Deshpande, *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*, 29.

used as a shorthand for global processes such as industrialization, the expansion of colonialism, the creation of democracy, of postcolonial nation-states, the growth of mass communication, the rise of mass social movements; and also for many fine-grained processes of the transformation of everyday life, such as, for instance, the creation of new subjectivities.⁹

Such inventories of ‘the modern’ may vary with respect to the components they include; other critics highlight, for instance, capital, sovereignty and citizenship, homogeneous empty time, the bourgeois self, or rationalism as key moments of modernity, or rather, as plot elements articulated into a coherent pattern of progressive linearity. At the risk of repetition I wish to emphasise one last time that what is at stake in this study is *not* (primarily) the question whether this reconstruction is appropriate but rather *how* the representation operates: What does it emphasise, what does it omit, what does it recuperate, what does it polemicise against, how does it articulate the elements it includes? This emphasis on the poetics (“the *how*”) of representation of course immediately implies the analysis of its politics, i.e. “its effects and consequences”.¹⁰ In fact, as James Clifford points out, “the poetic and the political are inseparable”.¹¹ Most generally, the politics of the texts in question here consists in their transmodernity. This status is always already *implicit* in their constitution as modern utterances emanating from locations defined by classical modernity as pre-modern, and (more often than not) *explicit* in their programmatic as critical interventions – strong rewritings in the Jamesonian sense – into the received narrative of modernity. In this vein, Niranjana’s article programmatically concludes on the note that “what is being interrogated is the hegemonic notion of the modern itself, clearing a space for alternative narratives of modernity”.¹²

Enrique Dussel grasps the transmodern as the “other face” of modernity: a description from both within and without which uncovers the dark underbelly of the lofty self-description of the modern West. The duplicity of modernity persists, according to Dussel, “even to this day by upholding liberty [...] *within* Western nations, while at the same time encouraging enslavement *outside* them”.¹³ Dussel’s concept of the ‘other face’ moreover questions the

⁹ Tejaswini Niranjana, “Whose Culture is It? Contesting the Modern”. *Careers of Modernity. Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25–26 (1993): 139–151; 139.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the poetics in contradistinction to the politics of representation in general, see Stuart Hall, “Introduction”. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London (Sage) 1997: 1–11; 6.

¹¹ James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths”. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Ed. James Clifford & George E. Marcus. Berkeley (U of California P) 1986: 1–26; 2.

¹² Niranjana, “Whose Culture is It?”, 148.

¹³ Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of ‘the Other’ and the Myth of Modernity*. Tr. Michael D. Barber. New York (Continuum) 1995: 123.

fallible notion that modernity, mistaken for “a phenomenon of Europe as an *independent* system”,¹⁴ should have evolved autonomously in a Europe imagined as a hermetically sealed off laboratory relying exclusively on its own resources – an assumption that renders most other critical perspectives on modernity residually Eurocentric. Thus, to name but one example, even Shmuel Eisenstadt (certainly one of the most prominent proponents of a theory of globally diverse patterns of modernity) relies on a Eurocentric narrative of origin when he asserts that, “within the Western European setting modernity [...] has largely developed from within, ‘indigenously’, through the fruition of the inherent potential of some of its groups”.¹⁵

As a contrast, Dussel proposes that the allegedly non-modern has always been a constitutive element of modernity itself, which now can no longer be conceived as a process internal to Europe alone. In principle, this argument is well known at least since the publication of *Orientalism*, in which Edward Said claims right from the start that ‘Europe’ emerges in history through figures of contrast and difference: in the form of “the idea of a European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures”.¹⁶ A similar relational collective identity formation of ‘Europe’ versus ‘the Rest’ is posited by Stuart Hall who maintains that “the West’s sense of itself – its identity – was formed, not only by the internal processes that gradually moulded Western European countries into a distinct type of society, but also through Europe’s sense of difference from other worlds”.¹⁷ With Chandra Talpade Mohanty this relationality of the West’s purportedly self-sufficient identity gets explicitly applied to the present: “Without the overdetermined discourse that creates the Third World, there would be no (singular and privileged) First World”.¹⁸

Though by and large in tune with such considerations on Western collective identity as hinging on the indispensable Other, the notion of transmodernity implies more than the acknowledgement of a principal constellation of identity and difference; crucial to the transmodernity thesis is the assumption, asserted by Susheila Nasta, that the “narrative of ‘modernity’ has never been a straightforward one; nor have its multiple origins ever been

¹⁴ Enrique Dussel, “Beyond Eurocentrism: The World-System and the Limits of Modernity”. *The Cultures of Globalization*. Ed. Fredric Jameson & Masao Miyoshi. Durham & London (Duke UP) 1999: 3–31; 4.

¹⁵ S.N. Eisenstadt, “Introduction”. *Patterns of Modernity*. Vol. 1: *The West*. Ed. S.N. Eisenstadt. New York (New York UP) 1987: 1–11; 8.

¹⁶ Edward W. Said [1978], *Orientalism*, New York (Vintage) 1994: 7.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power”. *Formations of Modernity*. Ed. Stuart Hall & Bram Gieben. Cambridge (Polity) 1992: 275–320; 279.

¹⁸ Chandra Talpade Mohanty [1986], “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory – Practicing Solidarity*. New Delhi (Zubaan) 2003: 17–42; 42.

contained solely within the European body”.¹⁹ In this vein, Dussel is interested in the ways in which European expansionism provided the scene on which specifically modern cultural technologies and institutions were developed, tested and refined in direct interaction with, and often on the territory of, the non-Western Other, and then brought back to Europe in what Foucault has called the “boomerang effect colonial practice can have”.²⁰ Dussel insists that this global traffic begins with the *conquista*, which inaugurates Spain’s ‘golden age’ as the first wave of modernity. Hence the entire project of European modernity immediately depends, right from its inception, on the rapidly intensifying network of transcontinental interactions. What Said reconstructs as Orientalism’s constitutive role in the consolidation of European selfhood is thus projected even further back into the early modern period of the humanist turn itself: It is not only the image of the Other that circumscribes the Renaissance figure of ‘the human’ ideologically; moreover, the extra-European terrain now becomes a testing ground for the self-fashionings of the modern European subject as an actor endowed with the capacity to ‘understand’ and ‘know’ the world, him/herself and the Other: empathy as a prerequisite of conquest, an early modern form of power/knowledge. If empathy is the key for Cortés in Tzvetan Todorov’s account of the destruction of the Aztec empire, then this capacity of knowing the Other gets rarefied only in the process of conquest itself.²¹ Similarly, Stephen Greenblatt suggests that what we call “‘empathy,’ Shakespeare calls ‘Iago’”:²² less cryptically, what appears as a purely ‘European’ development of modern subjectivity (and passes for “sympathetic appreciation of the situation of the other fellow”), is in fact inextricably entangled, as power/knowledge, in colonial trafficking. Consequently Greenblatt frames his reading of *Othello* as a paradigmatic dramatisation of Renaissance self-fashioning with an apparently misplaced account of ‘empathy’ wielded as a political weapon of the *conquista*.²³ Only inasmuch as the Spaniards refine their skills in anticipating the position of the Other – the Amerindian systems of values and beliefs – do they gain those strategic advantages that make the

¹⁹ Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain*. Houndmills (Palgrave) 2002: 15.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*. Ed. Mauro Bertani & Alessandro Fontana. Tr. David Macey. New York (Picador) 2003: 103.

²¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. Tr. Richard Howard. New York (Harper & Row) 1984.

²² Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago & London (U of Chicago P) 1980: 225.

²³ Greenblatt’s example is the luring of the population of an outlying island into slavery in the goldmines of Hispaniola by the promising to lead them into the ‘paradise’ projected in their own eschatological system; see Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 226.

conquest possible. Improvisation and dissimulation thus form the crucial elements of “the Europeans’ ability again and again to insinuate themselves into the preexisting political, religious, even psychic structures of the natives and to turn those structures to their advantage”.²⁴ What is important in the context of our argument is the insight that these ‘modern’ characteristics of the self-fashioned/self-fashioning subject do not precede the proto-colonial encounter in the Caribbean but emerge along with, and to some extent through it.

The non-European ‘Rest’, in other words, was functional both as the necessary imaginary Other *and* as the concrete interlocutor of the modern West ever since the *conquista*. Hence this Other was not only relationally inserted into but literally constitutive of modernity as its *te-ixtli* (Dussel’s recuperation of an Amerindian term for ‘the other face’) – the historical subjects and rationalities that the hegemonic discursive regime of Eurocentrism excludes or reconstructs as knowable objects. No utterance from the erstwhile colonies of Europe, then, was ever actually non-modern but, rather to the opposite, part and parcel of modernity. Not only does “Amerindia form part of ‘modernity’ since the moment of the conquest and colonization [...] for it contained the first ‘barbarian’ that modernity needed in its definition”. More crucially, it is from the allegedly pre/non-modern worlds of the (former) colonies that “those moments of a ‘planetary’ description of the phenomenon of modernity”²⁵ emerge that make up the discourses of transmodernity. In principle, I situate the texts I am going to discuss in the following chapters in this discursive frame of an ongoing production of transmodernity.

In the following section, I would like to demonstrate how, in theory, a particular set of notions get first identified as typically ‘modern’ and then disclaimed. For this I will turn in particular to Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. According to historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, the “denial, or at least contestation, of the bourgeois private and, equally important, the denial of historical time”²⁶ provided one of the most potent reservoirs for national self-assertion in late nineteenth-century India. These two ‘denials, or at least contestations’, resurface, in multiple formulations, time and again in contemporary Indian cultural theory and criticism (not least, in Chakrabarty’s own polemics). The historical task of nationalism in nineteenth-century India consists, in Partha Chatterjee’s by

²⁴ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 227.

²⁵ Dussel, “Beyond Eurocentrism”, 18.

²⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for Indian Pasts?” *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Padmini Mongia. New Delhi (OUP) 1996: 223–247; 237; 236; more extensively discussed in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. New Delhi (OUP) 2001.

now canonised account, in the production of a different discourse: the articulation of the dominant universalised European model of the nation with Indian culture as an “invented tradition”²⁷ of spirituality. In this process, Chatterjee argues, “nationalist thought cannot remain only a negation; it is also a *positive* discourse which seeks to replace the structure of colonial power with a new order”.²⁸ It is precisely those *positive* elements of the nationalist discourse that tend to leave the Western reader of Chatterjee baffled with the experience of cultural difference or, at best, with an insight into what Fredric Jameson, with cautious locationism, has in another context aptly called “the weakness in our imaginations”.²⁹ For what Chatterjee presents as Indian nationalism’s positive discourse does indeed go against the grain of entrenched modern presuppositions of nationhood, particularly when he reinvokes the reservoir of invented traditions articulated by anti-colonial nationalism as a platform for *present* contestations of the embodied Indian state or the current international division of labour. His recourse to ‘fuzzy’ communities grounded in ‘love and kinship’ as a universal category beyond the measure of both nation-state and capital provides the most dramatic instance of such invocations.³⁰ It also breaks with the conventions of acceptable historical discourse analysis and pushes the text towards a genre I will occasionally (and for want of a better term) refer to as sermon. This designation is not intended to denigrate such rhetorical manoeuvres as lapses into the pre-critical, but rather to underscore the necessary difference they produce: The affirmation, even the very naming, of positive reference points will smack of undertheorisation and prophetic enthusiasm precisely because these reference points are systematically “untheorized, relegated to the primordial zone of the natural”³¹ by the normalised discursive regime within and against which the text is produced. Therefore, at the limits of the possible, where the critique of modernity struggles for a positive discourse, the glimpse of the ‘new order’ seems to require a genre switching from

²⁷ As Eric Hobsbawm points out, the “term ‘invented tradition’ [...] includes both ‘traditions’ actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period”; “Introduction: Inventing Traditions”. *The Invention of Tradition*. Ed. Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger. Cambridge (CUP) 1983: 1—14; 1.

²⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* New Delhi (OUP) 1986: 42.

²⁹ Fredric Jameson, “The Antinomies of Postmodernity”. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983—1998*. London & New York (Verso) 1998: 50—72; 50.

³⁰ I here refer to the conclusion to *The Nations and Its Fragments*, which I will discuss in more detail below.

³¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. New Delhi (OUP) 1993: 239.

analysis to sermon in order to formulate its claims to a multilateral and polyphonic modernity that is not one but many.

1.2 Debating modernity

In various ways, the texts I will address formulate variations on this theme as a strategy for a postcolonialist engagement with modernity – this latter arguably figuring as *the* keyword for a wide range of critical assessments of colonial and postcolonial developments in South Asia. Any cursory glance at the titles of critical scripture from this field will immediately yield rich findings – from Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* to Dipankar Gupta’s *Mistaken Modernity*, from the collection of essays, *Interrogating Modernity*, edited by Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir and Vivek Dhareshwar to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Habitations of Modernity*; from Sanjay Joshi’s account of nineteenth-century Lucknow as *Fractured Modernity* to Vasant Kaiwar and Sucheta Mazumdar’s recent collection of essays, *Antinomies of Modernity*. Chakrabarty in fact speaks of “a ‘critique of modernity’ debate in India”, whose protagonists, he claims, are devoted to the exploration of the blind spots that traditional critical theory had (allegedly) never questioned – in particular “Enlightenment rationalism and the metanarratives of progress/emancipation”³² which provide in his view the common ground shared by liberalism and Marxism alike. At the same time, however, modernity comes into focus as an object of critical (self)interrogation on the side of precisely such ‘traditional’ leftists as Sumit Sarkar, Javeed Alam, or Aijaz Ahmad who, according to Chakrabarty, had remained myopic to their own perspectival implication in, and epistemic dependence on, the project of modernity.³³ The major difference between the ‘radical’ critique of modernity on the one hand and the (Whiggish) Marxist on the other clearly lies in the fundamental assessment of modernity as a legacy of colonialism.

Though nobody appears to deny that modernity in India (as in other erstwhile colonies) was historically worked out and experienced through massive colonial interpellations (and not imagined as a unilinear triumphant conquest over the old), the evaluation of the vicissitudes and outcomes of this process remain heavily contested. Social scientists like Dipankar Gupta continue to diagnose (from an unrepentant Nehruvian/“Western” perspective)

³² Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Modernity and Ethnicity in India”. *Multicultural States: Rethinking Identity and Difference*. Ed. David Bennett. London & New York (Routledge) 1998: 91–110; 91.

³³ See, e.g., Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History*. Delhi (Permanent Black) 2002; Javeed Alam, *India: Living With Modernity*. New Delhi (OUP) 1999; and Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present: Political Essays*. New Delhi (Tulika) 1996.

a “lack of modernity” in a contemporary Indian society still distorted by caste divisions, corrupt/despotic power structures, and incomplete secularisation – all of which are summoned as instances “to demonstrate how our past tenaciously clings to our present”.³⁴ One of the possible extreme opposite poles of such modernist assertions consists in Ashis Nandy’s reclamation of a contemporary India “which is neither pre-modern nor anti-modern but only non-modern”: Projected as a *longue durée*, ‘genuine’ Indian civilisation “sees the Westernized India as a subtradition which [...] is a ‘digested’ form of another civilization that had once gate-crashed into India” like so many other invasions of the subcontinent before.³⁵ Obviously both Gupta and Nandy share the assumption of contemporary Indian society as *different* from the Western model, which in both analyses is inserted as a non-dominant component into the complex assemblage of India. The difference between the two positions consists in the evaluation of this diagnosis: For Gupta, the relative weakness of Western-style modernity within the Indian patchwork spells out the damaged, ‘mistaken’ condition of not being modern enough; meanwhile, for Nandy, it is precisely the strength of Indian civilisation to partially absorb and ‘digest’ Western modernity without submitting to it. In-between these polar positions, the ‘critique of modernity’ debate unfolds.

Javeed Alam’s position may serve as a paradigmatic shorthand in this context: In his analysis, the destructive historical effects of European modernity do not necessarily taint modernity as such; rather, Alam would wish to distinguish the embodied or “*entrenched* modernity” that has historically and internationally materialised, with devastating consequences, in institutions and power relations, from the “*surplus left untapped after what got embodied*”.³⁶ “All that is imaginable under the term modern is not exhausted by what we have as the embodied form”.³⁷ At first sight, this reads almost identical, or at least reconcilable, with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s observation that “shadows fall between the abstract values of modernity and the historical process through which the institutions of modernization come to be built”.³⁸ Both writers construct modernity as split into a materialised / ‘built’ and an unrealised / ‘abstract’ form, but while Alam invokes the latter

³⁴ Dipankar Gupta, *Mistaken Modernity: India Between Worlds*. New Delhi (Harper Collins) 2000: 216; 32.

³⁵ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. New Delhi (OUP) 1988: 76; 77.

³⁶ Javeed Alam, “Modernity and Its Philosophic Visions”. *The Making of History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib*. Ed. K.N. Panikkar, Terence J. Byers & Utsa Patnaik. Delhi (Tulika) 2000: 405–439; 405. The argument is more fully expanded in *India: Living With Modernity*.

³⁷ Alam, *India: Living With Modernity*, 7.

³⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. New Delhi (Permanent Black) 2002: 80.

as a reservoir of untapped resources for rectifying the former, Chakrabarty suggests that the ‘abstract values’ of modernity will always be overshadowed (and ultimately corrupted) by its institutionalised practice.

Not surprisingly, the contributors to the ‘critique of modernity’ debate, Marxist or no, conceive of their subject matter in very different ways and highlight specific aspects of that complex formation, ranging from the introduction of the modern state³⁹ to that of statistics, censuses and demography;⁴⁰ from the entrenchment of a progressivist concept of history⁴¹ to the implementation of homogeneous empty time;⁴² from the normalisation of the public/private split⁴³ to the enforcement of circumscribed fixed identities.⁴⁴ Even though the category of capital plays a vital part in such analyses, it is conspicuous that the focus is primarily on the political, the institutional, and the epistemic. This emphasis has invited a severe critique of the non-Marxist ‘critique of modernity’ as a culturalism effecting the “dematerialization of capitalism, [a] misrecognition of its world-historical significance, [a] construal of it in civilizational terms, as ‘modernity’”.⁴⁵ In this line of argument, Neil Lazarus charges Partha Chatterjee of reducing capitalism to the status of “a discredited narrative mode”,⁴⁶ hence of failing to consistently engage with its contradictions as a mode of production.

³⁹ See, among others, Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. New Delhi (OUP) 1998; Sudipta Kaviraj, “A Critique of the Passive Revolution”. *State and Politics in India*. Ed. Partha Chatterjee. New Delhi (OUP) 1997: 45—87; Ashis Nandy, *The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics*. New Delhi (OUP) 2003. For a Marxist reading: Alam, *India: Living With Modernity*, ch. 6.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*.

⁴¹ See Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History*. New Delhi (OUP) 2003; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

⁴² See Partha Chatterjee, “Anderson’s Utopia”. *Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*. Ed. Jonathan Culler & Pheng Cheah. New York & London (Routledge) 2003: 161—171; Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation”. *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. New York & London (Routledge) 1991: 291—322. For a Marxist critique, Sarkar, “Colonial Times: Clocks and Kali-yuga”. *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History*, 10—37.

⁴³ See among others Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, esp. chs. 1, 5 and 8; Himani Bannerji, *Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism*. New Delhi (Tulika) 2001.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*; Sudipta Kaviraj, “The Imaginary Institution of India”. *Subaltern Studies VII*. Ed Partha Chatterjee & Gyanendra Pandey. New Delhi (OUP) 1992: 1—39.

⁴⁵ Neil Lazarus, “The Fetish of ‘the West’ in Postcolonial Theory”. *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Crystal Bartolovich & Neil Lazarus. Cambridge (CUP) 2002: 43—64; 60. A similar charge is raised by Ahmad against Said’s ‘culturalist’ concept of Orientalism; see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory*, 159—219.

⁴⁶ Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*. Cambridge (CUP) 1999: 132.

Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty is criticised for his (alleged) refusal “to accord the instance of capitalism *within* modernity due centrality”.⁴⁷

However, there seems to prevail at least one consensus which Arjun Appadurai succinctly formulates as the opening sentences of his *Modernity at Large*:

Modernity belongs to that small family of theories that both declares and desires universal applicability for itself. What is new about modernity (or about the idea that its newness is a new kind of newness) follows from this duality. Whatever else the project of Enlightenment may have created, it aspired to create persons who would, after the fact, have wished to become modern.⁴⁸

Appadurai thus not only emphasises the universalising gesture of modernity but goes on to point out the interpellative effects of that essentially proleptic and inconclusive project: The modern subject, it seems, is posited on a permanent deferral of the moment of arrival at the state of being modern. If this continuous postponement, in Appadurai, appears as a general (in contradistinction to a specifically postcolonial) characteristic and effect of modernity, the figure of a permanently withheld achievement of modernity gains a particular impact in postcolonial theory. In his 1992 article, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for Indian Pasts?”, Dipesh Chakrabarty formularises the interpellation of the (formerly) colonised Indian “in terms of a lack, an absence, or an incompleteness that translates into ‘inadequacy’”.⁴⁹ Like Frantz Fanon’s epidermalisation, this stigma does not evaporate with the demise of colonisation: Though originally produced by the gaze of the epistemically violent coloniser, it lives on in subaltern self-representations.

It is precisely the evasiveness and hence unavailability of the state of modernity that, on this reading, imposes a well-nigh Lacanian double-bind on (post)colonial subjectivities, not least since the efficacy of the Eurocentric discursive monopoly continues to dominate practically all fields of symbolic production on a global scale. It therefore makes little difference that Chakrabarty’s ‘Europe’ is essentially hyperreal inasmuch as it does not signify a geopolitical entity but much rather “a certain figure of imagination” which, for all that, remains operative “in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships as the scene of the birth of the modern”.⁵⁰ The scandal that Chakrabarty ventures to expose is that Eurocentrist unilateralism effectively forecloses all possibilities of a diversity of modes of belonging and

⁴⁷ Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice*, 29.

⁴⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis (Minnesota UP) 1997: 1.

⁴⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History”, 227.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 223; 224.

affiliating, even though such “other constructions of self and community [are] documentable in themselves”.⁵¹ Among the main indicators of such ‘other constructions’ range most prominently, in Chakrabarty’s writings, the two denials of the bourgeois private and of historical time (this latter grounded in the “absolute separation of ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ time”).⁵² These two ‘denials, or at least contestations’, of empty homogeneous time and the grand dichotomy of public and private will resurface time and again in contemporary Indian fiction as discussed in this book whose main chapters will focus on figurations of chronodiversity and of the domestic.

Chakrabarty, by taking recourse to ‘other constructions’, concedes an extant plurality that, however, gets suppressed in the name of a normalised master narrative. It is precisely by way of this effacement of plurality that the universalism of modernity becomes visible as a discursive formation that disenables all deviant discourses. This diagnosis of a radical denial of agency recalls Gayatri Spivak’s classical critique of dominant modes of representing the non-Western as Other in an ineluctably Western discursive framework:

The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical [sic!] obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity.⁵³

Such discursive power, Spivak goes on to argue, not simply constitutes the subaltern woman as “the historically muted subject” but furthermore renders this very process invisible so that the “questioning of the unquestioned muting”⁵⁴ becomes the first prerequisite for any critical engagement with both colonialism and modernity (not least its most recent manifestation, globalisation). At this point, it seems, the one and only ethico-political task of the intellectual consists of tracing “the itinerary of the silencing” and thus to expose the violence exerted by the dominant representational regime under which (so Spivak’s famous conclusion) “the subaltern cannot speak”.⁵⁵

A further theorisation of foreclosed agency is provided by Partha Chatterjee’s critique of nationalism as modernity’s ‘only story’ of political affiliation with the nation-state “as *the* political community”.⁵⁶ As Chatterjee points out most succinctly in the conclusion to his *The Nation and Its*

⁵¹ Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History”, 232.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 237; 236; more extensively discussed in *Provincializing Europe*.

⁵³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. and intr. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana & Chicago (Illinois UP) 1988: 271—313; 280—81.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁵⁶ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 234; ; in the following, I will quote from this book in my text with NF + page number.

Fragments, the institutionalisation of the modern state in India depends on the establishment of a monocultural political imaginary that results from “the suppression in modern European social theory of an independent narrative of community” (NF 234). In a thus impoverished imagination, “the state became the nation’s singular representative embodiment, the only legitimate form of community” (NF 236). This political formation, however, derives its monopolistic validity claims from another, more fundamental force: the narrative of capital “that is global in its territorial reach and universal in its conceptual domain” (NF 235). In unison, the two master narratives of capital and nation collaborate in the imposition of a logic according to which – as in Chakrabarty and Spivak – difference is disempowered, effaced, and banished to the discredited domain of the primordial:

community, in the narrative of capital, becomes relegated to the latter’s prehistory, a natural, prepolitical, primordial stage in social evolution that must be superseded for the journey of freedom and progress to begin. (NF 235)

In all these cases, the critique of modernity exposes the universalisation of the parochial experience of the West as it “inscribes the non-West into its privileged *telos*”.⁵⁷ If, in these scenarios, the “West” tends to figure as a monolithic bloc ostensibly without any internal antinomies, then this homogenisation occurs not in order to produce a simplistic image of the West as an empirical entity devoid of inherent contradictions, but in the service of a conceptualisation of the West as an *effect*. It is in this sense that Chakrabarty defines his ‘Europe’ as a hyperreal figure of imagination. Rajagopalam Radhakrishnan, in this vein, underscores how “the West is not one homogeneous formation (there are all kinds of differences within), but [...] during colonialism, the West was orchestrated as a unified effect with telling consequences for the non-West”.⁵⁸

Yet the ‘critique of modernity’ debate does not stop short at the devastating diagnosis of modernity’s universalisation at the expense of its Other (this latter, as Spivak insists, of course being constructed by modernity as its Other). Rather, the main effort goes into the much more difficult task of exposing modernity’s universalism as counterfactual *and* of marking out potential alternative agencies within the script of the dominant. These, then, are by no means outright anti-modern interventions; rather they are attempts to rewrite modernity at large *not* as an ‘only story’ but a coeval polyphony. In the next section, we will revisit the three exemplary writers where we left

⁵⁷ David Scott: *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcolonialism*. Princeton (Princeton UP) 1999: 149.

⁵⁸ R. Radhakrishnan, “Postmodernism and the Rest of the World”. *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Fawzia Afzal-Khan & Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks. Durham & London (Duke UP) 2000: 37–70; 55.

them: Chakrabarty ranting against the epistemic monopoly of 'Europe', Spivak insisting on the impossibility of subaltern agency, and Chatterjee critiquing the nation-state for its universalist pretensions.

1.3 Sermons on modernity

Starkly generalising, a tripartite narrative pattern emerges from these texts that first construct modernity as an expansive Western cultural formation whose universalist pretensions get, in the second step, disclaimed by way of a confrontation with marginalised 'local' alternatives that cannot be retrieved but whose silencing can be traced. From this juxtaposition, the demand for a heterogeneous modernity ensues: one which could no longer be grasped in terms of a monolithic formation prescribed by the West. Instead of positing one Eurocentric "prime modernity"⁵⁹ which then gets globally exported and refracted into so many derivatives, such interventions reconceive a modernity that, categorically, is not one.

The texts in question here engage in a discursive practice that to some extent resembles the rhetorics of anticolonial Indian nationalism in the nineteenth century as delineated by Partha Chatterjee. In analogy to that historical precedent, whose task it was (according to Chatterjee) to produce a *different* discourse of nation, the critical and fictional texts I am focusing on here could be said to engage in the project of producing a different discourse of the postcolonial and postnational present.

Chatterjee's own description of this present proceeds from his discussion of anticolonial elite nationalism as a discourse that keeps influencing the Indian polity in its modernist aspirations even today. Historically, this discourse was articulated, according to Chatterjee, not as the obedient reproduction of a given model. Instead, the inception of nationalism in India implies a partial rejection of its European precedent on which it, at the same time, has to remain fixated. Not simply a 'derivative discourse', anti-colonial nationalism thrives on the selective appropriation of the "world-conquering Western thought"⁶⁰ of European nationalism on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the simultaneous insistence on *difference* from the "modular" form institutionalised in and by the West:

The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a *difference* with the 'modular' forms of their national society propagated by the modern West. (NF 5)

⁵⁹ Peter J. Taylor, *Modernities: A Geohistorical Interpretation*, Cambridge (Polity Press) 1999: 29.

⁶⁰ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 41.

Nationalism in India, therefore, “succeeds in producing a *different* discourse”⁶¹ by challenging and interrogating the presuppositions that underwrite its precedent Other, Western colonialism, on which it has to remain fixated, however, in order to be able to combat it. Even if it was forced to adopt “the modes of thought characteristic of rational knowledge in the post-Enlightenment age”, Indian nationalism can therefore not be grasped as a discursive event “wholly derived from another framework of knowledge – that of modern Western rational thought”.⁶² Much of Chatterjee’s historiography is devoted to the tracing of those elements of Indian nationalism that part company with the European role model; it is especially the “spiritual domain [in which] the East was superior to the West” (NF 120) that functions as a site of differentiation. At that conjuncture, Indian nationalism articulates the Western model of the modern state with its own creation of the distinctly ‘Indian’ cultural domain predicated on a rhetorics of “love, kinship, austerity, sacrifice” (NF 237). In its historical context, that notion of community according to Chatterjee served to counter the colonial transformation of Indians into the enumerable entity of a ‘population’ and the “unambiguous classification [...] to locate and fix the identity of the colonial subject” (NF 220). As against the colonialist-modern notion of enumerable communities, then, Indian nationalism insisted on a fuzzy sense of community, according to which communal affiliations never informed the individual’s identity entirely so that “a community did not claim to represent or exhaust all the layers of selfhood of its members” (NF 223). Not only does this fuzzy notion of community allow for flexible and ambiguous identity formations and hence obstruct the disciplinary demands of the colonial state; it furthermore is averse to the genuinely modern idea of compartmentalising society into a collection of clearly circumscribed quantifiable subgroups defined by such criteria as religion, ethnicity, or caste (which is precisely the politics of the Raj with its censuses and quotas).⁶³ The fuzziness of community does not point to a “lack of rationality in some transcendent political sense” but attests to “the operation of a rationality which had hitherto proved adequate”.⁶⁴

The agonistic interplay of the ‘modular’ Western form, posing as universally valid, with its complex appropriation abroad (involving both selective adoption and rejection) forms the fundamental conflict from which the high drama of Indian nationalism springs: Its first act comprising the

⁶¹ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 42.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶³ See Chakrabarty, “Modernity and Ethnicity”, 102.

⁶⁴ Sudipta Kaviraj, “On the Construction of Colonial Power: Structure, Discourse, Hegemony”. *Politics in India*. Ed. Sudipta Kaviraj. New Delhi (OUP) 1997: 141—158; 148.

imposition of the universal narrative of the nation in the image of the West; its second the interrogation of that universality in the name of Indian 'culture'; finally, the evolution of an Indian nation-state that both conforms and deviates from the 'modular' form. Chatterjee's outstanding historical investigations into the shaping of a distinctly nationalist Indian modernity and "the numerous fragmented resistances to that normalizing project" (NF 13) culminate in an assault on the universality of the Western model of the modern state encompassing political and civil society, the public sphere and the individual normalised as citizen/subject. In this critique, Chatterjee is not alone: From a Gandhian angle, cultural critic Vinay Lal complains that "[w]e have become incapable of thinking beyond the nation-state, as if any other form of community is inconceivable",⁶⁵ in a Marxist argument (as proposed by Aijaz Ahmad), "one may indeed connect one's personal experience to a 'collectivity' [...] without involving the category of 'the nation'".⁶⁶ Amitav Ghosh has his narrator reflect, on the last pages of his novel *The Shadow Lines*, how in the West, "there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all".⁶⁷

For Chatterjee, the imposition of a world of states and citizens but no people depends on the discursive hegemony of a particular genre of modernity that leaves every possible independent "narrative of community [...] untheorized, relegated to the primordial zone of the natural, denied any subjectivity that is not domesticated to the requirements of the modern state" (NF 238—239). The postcolonial Indian nation-state, in its constitutional self-description an embodiment of the modern state that formally "grants equality and freedom to all citizens irrespective of biological or cultural difference",⁶⁸ finds its own limits precisely in the figure of the citizen, given that vast sections of the Indian population have remained economically, socially, culturally and, for all practical purposes, politically disenfranchised:

Most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution. They are not, therefore, proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Vinay Lal, *Cricket, Guinness and Gandhi: Essays on Indian History and Culture*. Calcutta (Seagull) 2003: 206.

⁶⁶ Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. Delhi (OUP) 1992: 109—110.

⁶⁷ Amitav Ghosh [1988], *The Shadow Lines*. Educational ed. New Delhi (OUP) 1995: 233.

⁶⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New Delhi (Permanent Black) 2004: 32.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 38; see also 135. "Given the available resources, it was unrealistic to insist that [the majority] first mend their ways and turn into proper citizens before they become eligible for governmental benefits."

If civil society in India, therefore, remains largely fictitious (more precisely, restricted to the scandalously small section of the economically and culturally empowered), the state and the majority of its subjects have to engage with one another in an arena that Chatterjee calls “political society”: a non-normalised interplay of governmental policies and popular pressure for entitlements. This pressure, it has to be emphasised, is not exerted by already empowered citizens (whether as individuals or affiliations) through institutionally normalised channels as envisaged in the model of the state/civil society relation that Indian elite nationalism had appropriated from the modular form; rather it is a subaltern politics that addresses the state as the institution officially designed to establish equality and welfare, but that simultaneously tries to counter the project of turning subaltern subjects into national citizens. “This [Chatterjee claims] is the stuff of democratic politics as it takes place on the ground in India. It involves what appears to be a constantly shifting compromise between the normative values of modernity and the moral assertion of popular demands”.⁷⁰

If Chatterjee’s account of the genealogy of a distinctive Indian modernity seems to function as a counter-narrative to the dominant only story of the universalised modern nation-state, it does by no means involve a romantic full-scale rejection of the state: Political society as a contested and at the same time mediating arena fulfils the paradoxical task of loosely articulating the apparently incommensurate elements of the modern state on one hand, and the non-citizen subject on the other. This model of description, to be sure, is not intended to “abandon the project of enlightenment [...] but accepts that the legal arm of the state in a country like India cannot reach into a vast range of social practices that continue to be regulated by other beliefs and administered by other authorities”.⁷¹

What Chatterjee derives, for such diagnoses of the present, from his historiographical interventions into the narratives of Indian nationalism, is the concept of the “unresolved struggle between the narratives of capital and community” (NF 239). He does not stop short at the interrogation of the dominant, ‘universal’ discourse, nor does he ‘radically’ reject totalising narratives *tout court*; rather, he hints at *another* narrative grounded in “the true categories of universal history” (NF 239), namely the occluded narrative of community that he elsewhere sharply distinguishes from any possible affiliation with Benedict Anderson’s highly influential concept of the nation as an imagined community.⁷² Community as a “true category” now figures as the normative foundation for the adequate articulation of what Chatterjee

⁷⁰ Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 41.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷² For Chatterjee’s critique of Anderson, see ch. 2.

calls “our modernity” – an unfulfilled political project⁷³ that has to be redefined under changed conditions:

to fashion the forms of our modernity, we need to have the courage at times to reject the modernities established by others. In the age of nationalism, there were many such efforts which reflected both courage and inventiveness. Not all were, of course, equally successful. Today, in the age of globalization, perhaps the time has come once more to mobilize that courage.⁷⁴

What Chatterjee is invoking here is a shift of attention from the historical (“the age of nationalism”, that is of course deeply embroiled in colonialism) to the immediate present (“the age of globalization”), i.e. from the analysis of both colonial discourses and national-liberation narratives to the task of remapping postcoloniality under the aegis of economic liberalisation. In this context, it is the national horizon that circumscribes the crucial arena of political struggle – just as it, in Geeta Kapur’s paradigm of the ‘national / modern’, is formative of the cultural and political (self)representation of contemporary India. In Chatterjee, the triadic structure of the argument is repeated: the identification of the (hegemonic) Other, now as a triumphalist neo-liberalism amplified by the universalisation of postmodern discourses; the (utopian, or virtual) counter-scenario of a radically pluralistic and heterogeneous world conceived in terms of a multilateral universalism; and finally the (strategic) conception of a counter-hegemonic collective subjectivity that would translate the virtual into the real – an agency embodied in a multitudinal and decentered subaltern collectivity.

As demonstrated above, Dipesh Chakrabarty problematises the silencing of ‘other formations of self and belonging’ in a framework of epistemic hierarchies according to Europe’s monologic protocols that render any non-Western knowledge insufficient. As in Partha Chatterjee’s interrogation of modernity, it is Hegelian political theory (i.e. the nation state with its division into political and civil society as the ‘only story’) and the capitalist mode of production that have been imposed as not transcendable horizons of universal history, leaving all possible alternatives systematically undertheorised. Nevertheless, the marginalised *is*, and its very existence spells out a disclaimer to the universal validity claims of ‘Europe’. It also effects a revision of Chakrabarty’s own earlier proposition according to which the

⁷³ In order to fully articulate that version of modernity, “[t]here is no alternative for us but to undertake a search, both theoretical and practical, for the concrete forms of democratic community which are based neither on the principles of hierarchy nor on those of bourgeois equality”; Partha Chatterjee, “Caste and Subaltern Consciousness”. *Subaltern Studies VI. Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. New Delhi (OUP) 1989: 169–209; 208.

⁷⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism*. New Delhi (OUP) 1997: 281.

longevity of the imposition of Europe could only be responded to by a “politics of despair”. This latter is a bitterly ironic intervention that erases itself by permanently pointing at its own impossibility⁷⁵ under the aegis of the global dominant: The project of provincialising Europe is “impossible within the knowledge protocols of academic history, for the globality of academia is not independent of the globality that the European modern has created” (PE 46). Given that Chakrabarty’s international reputation is primarily based on exactly this pessimism,⁷⁶ readers might be slightly astonished to find, in conclusion to *Provincializing Europe*, the statement that “at the end of European imperialism, European thought is a gift to us all. We can talk of provincializing it only in an anticolonial spirit of gratitude” (PE 255). Such reconciliatory overtones are obviously due to a revision of ‘Europe’, and in fact much of Chakrabarty’s book reads like a mollification of the more polemical, more ‘radical’ 1992 article. What has been changed? In the 1999 version, Europe itself becomes a site of diversity: Marx, in 1992, had appeared basically as a collaborator in the consolidation of the metanarrative of universal history by way of elevating capital to the status of “a philosophical and universal category” (PE 30). Despite Marx’s own “vision of emancipation [...] beyond the rule of capital” (PE 30), the idea of capital-as-universal effectively implemented a systematic historicism spurning Eurocentrist narratives “around the theme of ‘historical transition’” (PE 31) – the most elaborate form of “historicism, the metanarrative of progress” (PE 88). It is precisely through this progressivist reading that Marx(ism) gets inserted into, and complicit with, that allochronic discourse “by which relations between the West and its Other [...] were conceived not only as difference, but as distance in space *and* Time”.⁷⁷ In 1999, however, Chakrabarty provides a selective reading of Marx that turns the Hegelianism of orthodox Marxist historicism inside out. In the apocryphal sections of Marxian scripture – those scattered observations on surplus value that were supposed to form the fourth volume of *Capital* – Chakrabarty excavates a Marx who proposes a multiplicity of pasts beyond the teleology of capital and modernity, in other words: a world that exceeds the universal history of

⁷⁵ Chakrabarty does not omit the programme of a politics of despair from the first chapter of his book but adds in a supplement that “the ‘politics of despair’ I once proposed with some passion does not any longer drive the larger argument presented here”; *Provincializing Europe*, 46; in the following quoted in my text as PE + page number.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., David Punter’s appropriation of Chakrabarty’s ‘politics of despair’ for his own privileging of “melancholy, [...] defeat and loss”; *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order*. Edinburgh (Edinburgh UP) 2000: 188; the direct reference to Chakrabarty opens the book (vii), selectively quoting from the 1992 article.

⁷⁷ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York (Columbia UP) 1983: 147.

transitions to the capitalist mode (and thereafter to socialism and the classless society). There is, then, in Marx himself the concession that not all history is one long teleological transition to capitalism and beyond; that not all pasts can be reduced to antecedents of the present (capitalist-modern) mode; “that the total universe of pasts that capital encounters is larger than the sum of those elements in which are worked out the logical presuppositions of capital” (PE 64).⁷⁸

All the same, in Marx (and more surprisingly so, in Chakrabarty) the universal history of capital (i.e. the conceptualisation of history in terms of subsequent modes of production) remains intact with the proviso that it be supplemented by those elements that capital does “not [encounter] as antecedents established by itself, not as forms of its own life-process”.⁷⁹ Again, modernity is split into two and thence fragmented into many. The familiar terrain of the transition narrative constitutes what Chakrabarty labels “History 1”, whereas those pasts “that do not lend themselves to the reproduction of the logic of capital” (PE 64) constitute “History 2”: “a category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1” (PE 66). The unilateral narrative of transition, the ‘only story’ of historicism, is thus replaced by a principal pluralism, given that History 2s are not misused “for writing histories that are alternatives to the narratives of capital” (PE 66) which would again relegate them to the status of the dialectical Other of capital. Instead,

[t]he idea of History 2 allows us to make room, in Marx’s own analytic of capital, for the politics of human belonging and diversity. It gives us a ground on which to situate our thoughts about multiple ways of being human and their relationship to global capital. (PE 67)

The notion of a coeval synchronicity of capital and other forms of ‘human belonging’ “in intimate and plural relationships” (PE 66) could easily be dismissed as harmonistic, or a wishful thinking, that stops short at a description of the status quo as inherently heterogeneous without taking full cognisance of the power relations and antinomies these relations imply.

⁷⁸ Already in 1992 had Sudipta Kaviraj, Chakrabarty’s fellow Subaltern Studies historian, critiqued the presentism that modernity as such entails: “The conceit of the present, the precarious privilege that it enjoys over other times, is expressed often in another, subtler and more fundamental fault of historical vision. This is the temptation to believe that the only function of the past, its only conceivable justification, was to produce the present”; Kaviraj, “The Imaginary Institution of India”, 6.

⁷⁹ Marx quoted in Chakrabarty from *Theories of Surplus Value*; for the German original, see MEW 26.3, *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, Berlin/GDR (Dietz) 1968: 460: “Diese älteren Formen findet es [das industrielle Kapital] vor in der Epoche seiner Bildung und seines Entstehens. Es findet sie als *Voraussetzungen* vor, aber nicht als von ihm selbst gesetzte Voraussetzungen, nicht als Formen seines eigenen Lebensprozesses.”

Chakrabarty is, however, primarily interested in a principal rewriting of the narrative of capital, a rewriting in which the notion of a 'universal' capital would be foreclosed; more generally speaking, his objective is the heterogenisation of a concept ('capital') that claims universality.⁸⁰ After the 'discovery' of the category of History 2, the "globalization of capital is not the same as capital's universalization" (PE 71). Readers of *Subaltern Studies* will recall that Ranajit Guha had, as early as 1989, performed the very same feat of taking recourse to Marx for disclaiming the myth of capital's universality; in "Dominance Without Hegemony and Its Historiography" (later expanded as *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*), Guha interprets the *Grundrisse* as a "devastating [...] critique of the universalist pretensions of capital", revealing the "discrepancy between the universalizing tendency of capital as an ideal and the frustration of that ideal in reality".⁸¹ Already for Guha, then, the present is shot through with historical difference since – as Chakrabarty picks up the thread – "no global (or even local, for that matter) capital can ever represent the universal logic of capital, for any historically available form of capital is a provisional compromise made up of History 1 modified by somebody's History 2s" (PE 70). Even though introduced as a repository of the incommensurate ("could be entirely immeasurable" [PE 93]), historical difference does not figure as 'pure' difference but guarantees the very possibility of the emergence of "diverse ways of being human, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle – *perennially*, precariously, but unavoidably – to 'world the earth'" (PE 254, second emphasis mine). In spite of Chakrabarty's own self-declared anti-totalistic agenda emphasising 'infinite incommensurabilities', his text, at a more fundamental level, produces a reconciliation of the universal and the particular, History 1 and History 2s: While an acknowledgement of the latter is the prerequisite for a recognition of the actual plural modes of human belonging, the former, precisely in its abstracting tendency, remains indispensable for any critical reading of modernity in the light of its own official script, "the Enlightenment promise of an abstract, universal, never-to-be-realized humanity" (PE 254). If any melancholia is still left in Chakrabarty, it is certainly not anymore about the monoculture of the mind under the aegis of a hyperreal 'Europe' but rather

⁸⁰ In a later section of the book, Chakrabarty performs a structurally similar dissociation of the notion of the present in homogeneous time, proposing, with Heidegger, "not-being-a-totality [as] a constitutional characteristic of the 'now'" (PE 250). I am not going to discuss this particular section since it merely repeats the discursive heterogenisation applied to 'capital' in the section under scrutiny here.

⁸¹ Ranajit Guha, "Dominance Without Hegemony and Its Historiography". *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. New Delhi (OUP) 1989: 210–309; 224; 225.

about the incompleteness of the project of modernity, i.e. the necessary impossibility of ‘universal humanity’.

Chatterjee’s historiographical revision of the Indian nation-state’s genealogy provides insight into the production of a different discourse in the shadow of a dominant model with universalist claims. With far-reaching consequences, Chakrabarty disclaims the homogeneity and universality of the category at the heart of both modernity itself and its most consistent critical analysis: capital. Both theorists take pains to disinter the actual manifold muted by the discursive regime of modernity, but the difficulty of going beyond the mere “tracing of the itinerary of the silencing” cannot be denied: All too awkwardly do their hymnically invoked positive reference points – ‘community’; ‘different ways of being’ – fit in the protocols of the critical theory that constitutes the main corpora of their texts. Such, of course, are the effects of the very asymmetrical discursive relations that Chatterjee and Chakrabarty describe: That which has persistently been stigmatised as the primordial Other of modernity can hardly be named in ‘rational’ terms but catapults the text towards utopian sermonising. Thus Chakrabarty is forced to locate his highly political concept of ‘time-knots’ and temporal diversity emphatically outside the domain of the scientifically acceptable and to seriously discuss ‘gods and spirits’:

as we social scientists often forget, gods and spirits are not dependent on human beliefs for their own existence; what brings them to presence are our practices. They are parts of the different ways of being through which we make the present manifold; it is precisely the disjunctures in the present that allow us to be with them. (PE 111—112)

Similarly, Chatterjee’s concept of community takes on, in the unfolding of his argument, an ontology that it initially lacks. It comes into the text of *The Nation and Its Fragments* as a historical object, namely the central category of Indian nationalism in its struggle for a different discourse. The distinctly ‘Indian’ cultural domain predicated on “the rhetorics of love and kinship” (NF 239) gets increasingly elevated to the status of a, if not *the*, ‘true category of universal history’.

When turning from an exploration of the conditions of impossibility to that of the conditions of possibility of subaltern agency, Spivak faces the same obstacles, perhaps most blatantly documented in an interesting aside in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*: “After I spoke of the destruction of a centuries-old ecological culture in Bangladesh [...], Andrew Steer, deputy director of the Department of Environment at the World Bank, remarked that I had been ‘giving a sermon’”.⁸² Again, the move from lecturing to

⁸² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge/Ma. & London (Harvard UP) 1999: 383, n97; in the following quoted in my text as C + page number.

sermonising, first of all, denotes a switch of genres: One that the World Bank representative no doubt attempts to deride; one that Spivak, on the other hand, embraces in a defiant gesture of disregard for the constraints of a script that would not allow her to name, “without anthropologicistic contamination”, her positive reference point – the indigenous “sacrificial tradition” of the rural peoples in question.

Spivak’s work increasingly departs from the agenda of postcolonial theory, which on her reading runs the risk of remaining fixated on the lost object of old-style colonialism while unwittingly collaborating in the recent “attempt to impose unification on the world by and through the ‘market’” (C 375). It takes, of course, an actually plural world which alone can become subject to homogenisation in the first place. In fact, when compared to Chakrabarty, Spivak’s argument seems to head exactly in the opposite direction: Her objective is not to instil the notion of a recuperated heterogeneous real (this is anyway taken for granted) but the critique of its erasure in the ‘New World Order’ that substitutes itself for that plurality: “In today’s atmosphere of triumphalist globalization” (C 148), the imposed unification closes in on itself as an entire “system – micro-electronic post-industrialist world capitalism – [which] is the ‘real’ of the situation” (C 84). Consequently, the *Critique* primarily gravitates around the question of limited agency within this ‘real’ of globalised capital: Not only is the metropolitan postcolonial critic, “romanticizing hybridity” (C 398–99) as an end in itself, rendered a “postcolonial informant” (C 360) complicit in the “financialization of the globe”; even “the interest of the [underclass] migrant, however remote, is in global capital” (C 382).⁸³ Spivak had cautiously ensured herself against economic determinism as early as 1985 in her engagement with the works of the Subaltern Studies group, and in 1987 in her “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value”: Of interest are in this context her considerations on the semiotic or textual ‘essence’ of the social structure as a whole, and of the economic in particular. The “entire socius [...] is what Nietzsche would call a *fortgesetzte Zeichenkette*, a ‘continuous sign-chain’”.⁸⁴ Spivak is here not so much after the de-essentialising effects implied in the concept-metaphor of the ‘social text’; her concern is rather to derive, from the notion of the social text, a theory of social change and agency which then would necessarily have to be a politics of “reading in the

⁸³ Readers of Spivak will recognise this problematisation of “Eurocentric economic migraton” with its subtext of a “hope in justice under capitalism”; for an extensive discussion, see e.g. “Teaching for the Times”. *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*. Ed. Jan Nederveen Pieterse & Bhikhu Parekh. New Delhi (OUP) 1997: 177–202; esp. 194–96.

⁸⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography”. In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York & London (Methuen) 1987: 197–221; 198.

strongest possible general sense”.⁸⁵ Social change (i.e. change of, or within, the social text) occurs by way of discursive displacements, it being understood that any potential agent of such change is himself, necessarily, constituted within the parameters of the social text and thus has to operate within that given script. Reconciling Derridean deconstruction, especially its emphasis on “borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure”,⁸⁶ with the Marxian dialectics of the agent as “mak[ing] their own history, but not of their own free will”,⁸⁷ Spivak arrives at a concept of agency as “the creative performance of a given script” (C 78). Economy itself is emphatically and elaborately integrated into the semiotic chain of the social text in Spivak’s reflections on the category of value. Here, the “chain” from value, via representation as money, to transformation into capital is conceptualised in terms of textuality and then subjected to the operation of putting “under erasure” (“as much an affirmative as a negative gesture”) in order to demonstrate “the unavoidable and pervasive *importance* of its operation and yet to question it as a concept of the *last resort*”.⁸⁸ This operation of textualising the economic is of course another variation of the theme of de-essentialising an ‘only story’; the dual move of “keeping it visible under erasure”, then, takes cognizance of the effective formative power of the economic without acknowledging it as ontologically given. Kept visible under erasure, the text of current global capital operates as the ‘real’ of the situation in the sense of a script: It prescribes modes of production and exchange, as well as spaces of identity, agency, and subject positions.

If agency is the “creative performance of a given script”, then it is necessarily determined (though not fully) by that pre-existent script, the ‘text’ of economy. Within the parameters of globalised capital, therefore, only those agencies can be performed that the script of global capital, the structure one inhabits, permits. All the same, agency (as *creative*) remains open to negotiation.⁸⁹ It becomes possible to “want a different agency” (C 358), or, more precisely put in an older text, to “develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are

⁸⁵ Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography”, 198.

⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Delhi (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers) 1994: 24.

⁸⁷ Karl Marx [1853], “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”. *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings. Vol.2*. Ed. David Fernbach. Harmondsworth (Penguin) 1973: 143—249; 146.

⁸⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value”. In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, 154—175; 168.

⁸⁹ “[A]ll I mean by negotiation here is that one tries to change something that one is obliged to inhabit, since one is not working from the outside. [...] You inhabit the structures of violence and violation, here defined [...] as Western liberalism”; Spivak, *Post-Colonial Critic*, 72.

silenced”.⁹⁰ It is important to recall that this is an invitation to the “well-meaning” white, male, middle-class subject under the self-imposed constraints of ‘chromatism’ and ‘genitalism’. Tracing “the itinerary of the silencing” is therefore not a privilege of the subaltern alone but an imperative for the empowered metropolitan citizen/subject as well: Structural overdetermination cannot serve as an alibi for complacency or complicity. In the vanishing present, any claim for agency has to take into account “what transnational script drives, writes and operates it” (C 397), it being understood that the ‘transnational script’ is the economic text in the first place, “as it imbricates and constitutes the political as palimpsest”.⁹¹ An ethically sustainable mode of agency cannot do without the visibility of the economic text under erasure; which is why mere (multi)culturalism would be as distorting as, say, straight racism. Instead, it becomes urgent to “broaden our perspective into greater transnational literacy” (C 399), conceived as the “command [...] of a diversified historical and geographical information system; a little more than cognitive mapping” (C 398).⁹² This dismissal of ‘cognitive mapping’ – Fredric Jameson’s key metaphor for his own epistemological programme – is not just a facile sideswipe at an academic competitor;⁹³ it is grounded in the substantial critique of the lack of a collective horizon inherent in a procedure that basically aims at connecting the individual with broader political structures without accounting for encounters, therefore without enabling new solidarities and ‘responsibilities’. Spivak’s political agenda for the metropolitan citizen is therefore an extension of her earlier reflections, in one of her interventions into international feminism, on responsible translation that attempts to “track commonalities”. It is helpful for an understanding of ‘transnational literacy’ to refer to that earlier, less complex campaign:

It is good to think that women have something in common, when one is approaching women with whom a relationship would not otherwise be possible. [...] But, if your interest is in learning if there *is* women’s solidarity, how about stepping forth from this assumption, appropriate as a means to an end like local or global social work, and trying a second step? Rather than imagining that women automatically have something identifiable in common, why not say, humbly and practically, my first obligation in

⁹⁰ Spivak, *Post-Colonial Critic*, 62.

⁹¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York and London (Routledge) 1993: 243—254; 244.

⁹² The concept of ‘transnational literacy’ is to be found in earlier Spivak texts, such as “Teaching for the Times” or “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”.

⁹³ Spivak’s book includes a full-length devastating critique of Jameson’s arguments on postmodernism (312—336).

understanding solidarity is to learn her mother-tongue. [...] This is preparation for the intimacy of cultural translation.⁹⁴

Only by this labour, Spivak argues, can plural and differentiated commonalities be tracked that are not dogmatically superimposed by some abstracting and homogenising universalism, in this case a metropolitan feminist one. As in the invitation to rage against the script, also here the focus is not so much on the structure but the (potential) agent: the metropolitan citizen/subject confronted with the obligation to get prepared for cultural translation. Transnational literacy therefore is the imperative and at the same time the limited terrain of potential agency for the privileged Western subject. Cultural translation is the event, prior to ontology, of a “mind-changing one-on-one responsible contact” (C 383), the encounter that possibly (or impossibly?) re-figures new solidarities. Though emphatically rejecting any stagist, ‘mode-of-production’ analytical totalisation of the present (e.g. as “late capitalism” in the wake of Mandel or Jameson),⁹⁵ Spivak all the same, and with equal emphasis, deals with a normative totality,⁹⁶ albeit a fully virtual one: As against the imposed unification orchestrated by finance capital, the ultimate *telos* of the *Critique* is “to make the globe a world” (C 381) – a utopia apparently resonant with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “worlding the earth”. The horizon of the *Critique* is “that impossible, undivided world of which one must dream, in view of the impossibility of which one must work, obsessively” (C 382). This is not just another unacknowledged Spivakian self-quotation, but an expanded revision of “that impossible undivided world” that had – surprisingly in such a hypercritical thinker – already surfaced in her discussion, 1993, of Mahasveta Devi’s *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*.⁹⁷ Like that earlier text, so does the *Critique* relate this utopia to the unlearned ethico-political faculties of responsibility and love and the concrete practices of local Southern movements that embody and perform “the real front against globalization” (C 413). It is this perspective that drives Spivak’s verdict against metropolitan postcolonialism for establishing the elite Eurocentrist migrant as “the norm, thus occluding the native once again” (C 256): “Elite ‘postcolonialism’ seems

⁹⁴ Spivak, “The Politics of Translation”. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 179–200; here 191–92.

⁹⁵ Interestingly, Fredric Jameson, in his defence of totalisation, mentions Spivak’s conceptualisation of the social structure as a ‘continuous sign-chain’ as an example for a “specific (and non-dialectic) form of ‘totalizing’”; “Marxism and Postmodernism”. *The Cultural Turn*, 33–49; 40.

⁹⁶ For the distinction between ‘normative’ and ‘analytical’ totalities, cf. Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. Berkeley (U of California P) 1984: 23.

⁹⁷ Cf. Mahasveta Devi, *Imaginary Maps*. Calcutta (Thema) 1993: 203.

to be as much a strategy of differentiating oneself from the racial underclass as it is to speak in its name” (C 358). Both the (elite) postcolonial informant and the underclass migrant are, however, bound up in the discourse of the diasporic, which in orthodox postcolonialism is “so taken for granted these days as the historically necessary ground of resistance [that it] marks the forgetting of this name. Friday?” (C 402) This forgotten ‘name’ refers of course to the stayed-in-place ‘native’, or the Southern subaltern, as the “other of the question of diaspora” (C 402). It is here that Spivak, reorchestrating her influential interrogation of the subaltern’s representation as structured disarticulation in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, cautiously attempts to communicate the glimpse of a fundamental otherness outside the script: “Is there an alternative vision of the human here?” (C 402) Yet ‘outside the script’ does not indicate a romantic, impossible position beyond appropriation or co-optation; it marks in the first place a radical and silencing exclusion from the script. Though paradoxical at face value, the political demands of the subaltern therefore include a degree of integration into “mainstream education, insertion into civil society” (C 404) as a prerequisite for basic empowerment vis-à-vis the ‘real’ of the situation, or, in other words, for the acquisition of a performative competence in order to *practice* resistance: It is not accidentally that Spivak locates “the real front against globalization [...] in the countless local *theaters* of the globe-girdling movements” (C 413, my emphasis), i.e. in sites of *performance*. Resistance, conceived as work in the utopian horizon of an undivided world, is not exhausted in the postulate of radical ontological difference. Even if the native really embodied ‘an alternative vision of the human’, this very alternative would require a performative practice in order to acquire an interventionist force. In that respect, the globe-girdling subaltern movements are necessarily involved in a complex politics of renegotiating difference: In order to achieve performativity, they have to relate to the global dominant, partly by way of demanding insertion; this integration, however, is the very ground for the articulation of a *different* discourse – one that, like the discourse produced by Indian cultural nationalism according to Partha Chatterjee, would always have to take into account that it emerges in the shadow of a precedent and universalist formation. Spivak’s theatres of resistance, then, would rerun the “fascinating story of the encounter between a world-conquering Western thought and the intellectual modes of non-Western cultures”.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 41.

1.4 Genres of modernity

If literature, as Spivak formularises, “figures the impossible” (C 112), then theory at times must write literature, too, particularly when it is committed to the re-figuring of the present: Produced in the horizon of “a waiting without expectation”⁹⁹ for/of that ‘impossible, undivided world’ (a figure carried even closer to literature proper in Balibar’s notion of a “*fiction* of a unified humanity”), theory contributes to the articulation of discursive spaces, thus to the emergence of alternative concepts of the new postcolonial globality, and to the non-coercive re-arrangement of those “imagined worlds” that people, under conditions of globalisation, increasingly inhabit.¹⁰⁰ Like all literature, it is not only *produced by*, but also, in whatever miniscule manner, *productive of* history. The following chapters are going to engage with texts that, from the adjacent, at times overlapping, field of fiction, take part in that particular effort of non-coercively rearranging the “imagined worlds” of a modernity that is not one. What remains to be framed is the specific status of the literary text – that is, the contemporary Indian novel in English – at this conjuncture.

In terms of both poetics and politics, these texts formulate genres of modernity: As novels, and more specifically: historical novels and/or domestic fiction, they obviously partake of, arise from, and feed back into, pre-established fields of possibilities of language use, commonsensically called genre. As institutions organising the “historically attested codification of discursive properties”, literary as well as non-literary genres possess, according to Tzvetan Todorov, both “historical reality and discursive reality”.¹⁰¹ With Stephen Heath, genre can be grasped as “a characteristic mobilisation of one or more of those possibilities [of language use] to some specific end”, hence as a set of “socio-historical operations of language by speakers and listeners, writers and readers: orders of discourse that change, shift, travel, lose force, come and go over time and cultures”.¹⁰² Heath’s working definition, general as it is, has the advantage of locating genre neither in the nomenclature of some prescriptive Aristotelian programmatics of the text, nor – as cognitive-turn theorists tend to do – with a dehistoricised

⁹⁹ Derrida; “Marx & Sons”, 249.

¹⁰⁰ See Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 33.

¹⁰¹ Tzvetan Todorov [1978], “The Origin of Genres”. Repr. *Modern Genre Theory*. Ed. & intr. David Duff. Harlow (Longman) 2000: 193–209; 200.

¹⁰² Stephen Heath, “The Politics of Genre”. *Debating World Literature*. Ed. Christopher Prendergast. London & New York (Verso) 2004: 163–174; 167, 168–9.

reader.¹⁰³ Genres for Heath instead occur at the conjuncture of reader and text in the socio-historical arena; they are, in Fredric Jameson's formulation, first of all "literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact".¹⁰⁴

Both Jameson and Heath argue in favour of a *political* reading of genre. Interestingly, Heath brings up the issue of genre in the context of a debate over how to read 'world literature': a debate which, needless to state, is highly pertinent to the study of Indian writing in English, after all one among the most prominent 'branches' in the vast area of the 'New English Literatures'. 'World literature', according to Heath, arises not simply from some new corpus of transnational texts but, as crucially, from reading practices and critical procedures alert to the politics of genre, that is, to the intersectional and transtextual tendencies involved in global writing today. 'World literature' then emerges, as novelty, from "*the newness its study makes*".¹⁰⁵ Such a constitutive practice of studying world literature would have to include the theorisation of the migration of genres with the proviso that reconstructions of this kind should be safeguarded against the all-too-easy relapse into a residual Eurocentrism according to which 'European forms' (paradigmatically, 'the novel') have, along with their purportedly inherent 'values', become globally normative in the course of Western expansion from colonisation to neoliberal globalisation. This is, as Susie Tharu points out, still the tacit consensus that "mainstream critical and pedagogical practices take for granted [assuming] a literary aesthetic that is universal and a humanism equally global in scope".¹⁰⁶ To supersede this universalism takes more than the assertion of locally diverse modes of appropriating the globally dispersed 'input' from the centre; it requires, instead, to subject the notion of the centre itself to a strong *transmodern* rewriting.

Even emphatically critical accounts of the processes of genre migration tend to stop short at the theorisation of diversified local appropriations of already consolidated Western genres. Franco Moretti's highly stimulating

¹⁰³ See, e.g., Monika Fludernick, who conceives of genres as "large-scale cognitive frames" operative in the process of decoding the text; Monika Fludernick, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. London & New York (Routledge) 1996: 44.

¹⁰⁴ Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 104.

¹⁰⁵ Heath, "Politics of Genre", 174. The allusion to Rushdie's programme of impurity as the entry point of "newness" is obvious and not coincidental: Heath takes *The Satanic Verses* for a model for his politics of genre conceived of as "reading with a migrant's-eye view" (174).

¹⁰⁶ Susie Tharu, "Government, Binding and Unbinding: Alienation and the Teaching of Literature". *Subject to Change: Teaching Literature in the Nineties*. Ed. Susie Tharu. Hyderabad (Orient Longman) 1998: 1—32; 21.

discussion of the literary world-system is a case in point: If, as Moretti has it, “the literature around us is now a planetary system”, then this system is not uniform but “a system of variations”¹⁰⁷ that operates, in the mode of a “unified and uneven market”,¹⁰⁸ on a dichotomy of centre and peripheries. With due precaution, Moretti proposes a cluster of laws of literary evolution resulting from the itineraries of genres from the centre to the margins. Here is his formula for the peripheral ‘rise of the novel’ as a glocalised ‘compromise’:

in cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system (which means: almost *all* cultures, inside and outside Europe), the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development, but as a compromise between a Western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials.¹⁰⁹

On this account, then, the novel, having first ‘risen’ autonomously in some parts of Europe, gets exported to the intra- and extra-European peripheries where it is ‘locally’ modified in the process of its appropriation.¹¹⁰ This is emphatically not the same as suggesting that the global career of the novel occurred as the universalisation of a local West European form in such a way that its proliferation had to result in merely imitative reproductions of the modular form at the receiving end; in the Indian context, it is obvious that the emergence of the novel in the second half of the nineteenth century exemplifies a complex ‘compromise’ instead of mere derivation. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her classical study of the emergence of the novel in Indian writing, speaks of the “synthesis of a borrowed literary form and indigenous aesthetic – as well as cultural expectations”:¹¹¹ Many of the classical determinations of what gave rise to the Western novel – the Hegelian/Lukácsian gulf between individual and social totality; the ‘formal realism’ hypothesis powerfully proposed by Ian Watt; the suturing of the modern subject, first as woman, in the domestic fiction at the hands of Nancy Armstrong – appear, on Mukherjee’s account, to be largely inapplicable to the colonial rise of the Indian novel; this latter, instead, appears to function –

¹⁰⁷ Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”. *Debating World Literature*, 148–162; 148; 157.

¹⁰⁸ Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900*. London & New York (Verso) 1998: 158.

¹⁰⁹ Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”, 152.

¹¹⁰ That this process can actually be retraced for cross-cultural encounters *within* Europe itself is exemplified, e.g., in Silvia Mergenthal’s reconstruction of the appropriation of the modular form of the English historical novel in nineteenth-century Germany; see Silvia Mergenthal, “Translating the Historical Novel: The Scott Formula in Nineteenth-Century German Literature”. *Anglistentag München 2003: Proceedings*. Ed. Christoph Bode, Sebastian Domsch & Hans Sauer. Trier (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag) 2004: 225–234.

¹¹¹ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*. Delhi (OUP) 1985: 18.

precisely by being *informed* by the ‘problems’ arising from the power-structured cross-cultural colonial encounter – as the site of mediation of those very problems: As attempts to “graft a new form on existing fictional traditions”,¹¹² mid-nineteenth-century Indian novels act as go-betweens for an emerging Indian middle class educated in English, and ‘English values’, in the spirit of Macaulay’s 1835 minutes.

While Mukherjee has little to say about the function of the early Indian novel in the context of an emergent anti-colonial nationalism, Shivarama Padikkal locates the advent of the Indian novel precisely at that conjuncture where a germinating colonial elite begins to appropriate the genre of nationalism as “a discourse which constructs its own narrative”, and he goes on to assert that “the novel is an inextricable part of this process”.¹¹³ In this argument, Benedict Anderson’s account of the novel-nation nexus¹¹⁴ is crucially important. This is not surprising given that Anderson primarily focuses on colonial novels as articulations of the imagined community to achieve the nation-form. It is in this Andersonian vein that Padikkal delineates how early Indian novels appropriate a genuinely European (i.e. British colonial) epistemology encapsulated in the realist novel in order to be “used by Indians to ‘know’ India as a nation, to critically examine it, and to envision futures for it”.¹¹⁵

Yet genre migration, of course, does not necessarily imply imitation but transformation through incorporation, appropriation, abrogation, re-articulation. The novel as a genre is not simply reproduced but also ‘produced anew’ as it were in the non-European world. Magic realism as the internationally most visible of such ‘indigenous’ rearticulations of the novel has been widely discussed as a transformation of the genre in the course of its application to tricontinental realities,¹¹⁶ deemed to mark a “transition from the order of law and consensus to the disorder of guerilla warfare [...], and from the Third World in India or Somalia to the Third World within London”.¹¹⁷ Kumkum Sangari’s discussion of magic realism is particularly alert to the figure of the heterochronic composition of postcolonial societies

¹¹² Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, 37.

¹¹³ Shivarama Padikkal, “Inventing Modernity: The Emergence of the Novel in India”. *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*. Ed. Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir & Vivek Dhreshwar. Calcutta (Seagull) 1993: 220–241; 222.

¹¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Anderson’s thesis of the nation as a community imagined as an organism evolving and ‘living’ in homogeneous empty time, see ch. 2.

¹¹⁵ Padikkal, “Inventing Modernity”, 238.

¹¹⁶ See Jean-Pierre Durix, *Mimesis, Genres and Post-Colonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism*. Houndmills (Macmillan) 1998.

¹¹⁷ Vinay Dharwadker, “The Internationalization of Literatures”. *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures: An Introduction*. Ed. Bruce King. Oxford (Clarendon Press) 1996: 59–77; 71.

as complex palimpsests of “cultural simultaneity” markedly distinct from “the synchronic time of the modern and the post-modern in the West”.¹¹⁸ In addition, Susie Tharu detects in postcolonial Indian writing “an indigenous, and in many ways different, realism and a naturalised order of things, be it in fiction or film” that departs from “the disciplinary apparatus of identification in the classic form of realist narrative that emerged and was consolidated in Europe”.¹¹⁹ It should be understood that such developments have nothing whatsoever to do with an alleged encounter and fusion of the ‘modern’ European genre with its ‘traditional’ indigenous counterparts; much rather, this encounter “was only *one* of many other and parallel indigenous processes influencing the translation and genesis of new literary forms and genres”.¹²⁰

The discussion of genre and genre migration as proposed by Moretti, Mukherjee and Padikkal still remains to be confronted with a genuinely transmodern unsettling of the myth of the ‘autonomous’ development of the West European, or English, novel, a myth which all three accounts leave conspicuously intact. For Moretti, as we have seen, it is precisely due to its relatively autonomous evolution that the Western novel is located at the centre of the unified-but-uneven world-system of literature; Mukherjee and Padikkal both tend to treat the theme of the arrival of the English novel in India in such a way as if the pioneers of Indian novel writing had been faced with an already consolidated genre, functioning as a ‘given’. Of course, none of these descriptions are manifestly wrong but incomplete: What they fail to take into cognisance is the extent to which the colonial Other is constitutive for the purportedly ‘autonomous’ development of the English novel itself. This problem – a problem of periodisation – pertains even to Stephen Heath’s discussion of genre transformation in general.

Heath, as we have seen, urges for a politics of genre that takes into account the transactional globality of literature and discourses in general. Where, however, does he historically locate the advent of this potential ‘planetary’? Does it belong only to the globalised present, or can it be projected, in a transmodern reading, back onto the early stages of modernity and thus remove the myth of a self-sufficient Europe?

¹¹⁸ Kumkum Sangari, “The Politics of the Possible”. *Interrogating Modernity*: 242—272; 244; 245.

¹¹⁹ Susie Tharu, “Citizenship and Its Discontents”. *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*. Ed. Mary E. John & Janaki Nair. New Delhi (Kali for Women) 1998: 216—242; 224; 220. – Fawzia Afzal-Khan describes the most prominent passages of postcolonial Indian fiction in the past five decades as one from social to magic realism; see Fawzia Afzal-Khan, *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel: Genre and Ideology in R.K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, and Salman Rushdie*. University Park (Pennsylvania State UP) 1993; esp. 143—175.

¹²⁰ Nasta, *Home Truths*, 15.

As socio-historical operations [Heath asserts], genres are open-ended, subject to modification as new utterances change understanding of them (*Paradise Lost* is written in relation to a generic model that it then *newly* exemplifies; the epic is not an essence that Homer's *Iliad* first embodies but the articulation and perception historically of a kind of writing that Milton, as it were, makes up again in his poem).¹²¹

This is a highly useful socio-historical anchoring of the old (German romantic) notion, first proposed by Friedrich Schlegel, that 'every poem is a genre in itself', or in other words, that genres exist nowhere but in their actualisation in concrete individual texts. Yet the case of *Paradise Lost* could have helped to illustrate more than this general axiom; it could in fact have served, like Greenblatt's recourse to Spanish atrocities in the Caribbean for a full genealogy of Renaissance self-fashioning, to enlarge an understanding of the transmodern status of European modernity even in its early, emergent and 'experimental' stages. Contrary to its early reception, *Paradise Lost* is very much about the classical topic of epic – empire – articulated by Milton as the struggle over the possession of the 'new world'. Not only does Milton's "imperial epic" lend itself to a reading as quasi encyclopaedic compendium of the then available geographical, historical and 'cultural' knowledge of the world that it panoptically represents as "an anti-Christian world via the Eurocentric 'Visions of God'",¹²² it more importantly dramatises all the aporiae inherent in the process of re-making the European self as universally humanist *and* imperialist – an antinomy that Milton captures in his ambiguous representation of Adam and Eve as both Other and self, both Amerindian savages and 'our first parents'. Whatever generic shifts and rearticulations it may embody, Milton's epic is indisputably also a document of the constitutive presence of the Other in the texture through which the modern European self emerges.

Among the many studies enabled by Edward Said's pioneering work, Firdous Azim's challenging study of *The Colonial Rise of the Novel* is particularly pertinent to the question of the 'autonomous development' of the genre in Europe. Azim is certainly not alone in her attempt to elaborate a non-parochial genealogy of the novel, but to my knowledge, hers is one of the rarer-than-diamonds attempts to present a narrative of the emergence of the Western novel in relation to the non-European world.¹²³ One of the very

¹²¹ Heath, "Politics of Genre", 170.

¹²² Bruce McLeod, "The 'Lordly Eye': Milton and the Strategic Geography of Empire". *Milton and the Imperial Vision*. Ed. Balachandra Rajan & Elizabeth Sauer. Pittsburgh (Duquesne UP) 1998: 48–66; 57.

¹²³ By contrast, Margaret Anne Doody's avowedly anti-parochial study of the continuities that pertain between 'modern' and 'ancient' novels opens up a wide diachronic perspective but remains largely Europe-centred in its concentration on Greek and Roman antiquity and medieval romance; see Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*. New Brunswick (Rutgers UP) 1997.

few other projects of this sort is certainly Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse's concluding chapter to their *Imaginary Puritan* (1992); here, the emergence of modern English fiction in the late 17th/early 18th centuries is read in conjunction with the colonial experience in North America, and traced back to the genre of the captivity narrative, in which white settlers recounted their abduction and captivity at the hands of Native Americans. If, as Armstrong and Tennenhouse assert, this particular genre had a formative impact on that kind of narrative form that was later to become 'the novel', then this latter can hardly be assigned the status of "first and foremost a European genre, but rather one that simultaneously recorded and recoded the colonial experience".¹²⁴

It is precisely at that interstitial site of 'the colonial experience' where, according to Azim, the 'colonial rise' of the novel occurs. From the moment of its inception in the writings of Aphra Behn or Daniel Defoe, the modern English novel is, as Azim demonstrates, "tied to the historical task of colonial, commercial and cultural expansion":¹²⁵ not only thematically but in terms of the articulation of modern subjectivities as well as the positing of a (colonial) pedagogical subject.¹²⁶ In other words: the presence of the colonial subject, though silenced and structurally disarticulated, is constitutively inscribed into not only the concrete text of, say *Oroonoko*, *Robinson Crusoe*, or *Mansfield Park* (as it had already been inscribed into Milton's epic), but into the genre as such. The analogy to Dussel's notion of the 'other face' of modernity should be self-evident. If, as Nancy Armstrong claims, the modern subject emerges in literature "first and foremost [as] a female",¹²⁷ then this proposition needs to be supplemented with the proviso that the English novel was capable of articulating different and coexisting modern subject positions, and that one of them obviously was the imperialist subject. As Azim points out with respect to the evolution of the generic convention of the unified narrative voice, or the centrality of the narrating subject, it was precisely the "notion of the centrality of this subject and of the homogeneity of its narration [that] had come into being within the colonising enterprise".¹²⁸ The English novel, then, crystallises into a genre that, in the course of its

¹²⁴ Nancy Armstrong & Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labour, and the Origins of Personal Life*. Berkeley (U of California P) 1992: 197.

¹²⁵ Firdous Azim, *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*. London & New York (Routledge) 1993: 7.

¹²⁶ Here, Azim relies primarily on Gauri Viswanathan's magisterial study on the rise of English literary studies and the concomitant pedagogy as a tool in the quest for hegemony in the pursuit of colonial governance in India; see Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. Delhi (OUP) 1989.

¹²⁷ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. Oxford (OUP) 1987: 66.

¹²⁸ Azim, *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, 31.

globalisation, takes on the character traits of a genuinely ‘Western’ form but in fact remains fundamentally dependent on the disavowed presence of the Other. In terms of its poetics and its politics – that is, as a representational apparatus and as an effect – it colludes with the implementation of a particular genre of modernity that could emerge in this form only at the centre of an imperial transcontinental network;¹²⁹ yet at the same time, the obscure presence of the Other ensures the novel’s porosity, its dialogism and ubiquitous hybridity – in short, its openness to a pluralisation into multiple genres of modernity, genre being understood, with Stephen Heath, as entire “orders of discourse”.¹³⁰ This pluralisation, to be sure, is not some prerogative of the colonial or postcolonial text but characteristic of the novel as a genre that is, in multiple ways, produced by and productive of modernity; in this perspective, it would in fact be a futile endeavour to try to construe a sharp demarcation between the “Western novel” and the “Third World novel”.¹³¹ Hence Meenakshi Mukherjee concedes that the drawing of “categorical distinctions between what is Indian and what is Western in literature is fraught with danger”, while Makarand Paranjape suggests that the difference between the “Third World novel” and the “Western novel” is “more strategic than real”.¹³²

Azim’s considerations on the nexus between the modern English novel and imperialism directly ties in with the much vaster terrain of the making of modern (English) culture at large, of which the ‘rise of the novel’ forms only one among many aspects. Enrique Dussel’s project of disclaiming Eurocentrism in the name of a transmodern conceptualisation of modernity is grounded in exactly this revision of the modern Western self that posits itself as autonomous *res cogitans*, that is, in terms of subjectivity as ontology. The specificity of Dussel’s assault on this modern myth of the subject consists in his insistence on this latter’s genealogy in imperialism; this, to be sure, is similar to, but not the same as, delineating the continuities that link the notion of the self-centred subject with the appropriation of the (allegedly non-

¹²⁹ Walter Mignolo proposes to “depart[...] from the world system metaphor [as introduced by Wallerstein]” in favour of “parallel expressions such as modernity/coloniality, or modern/colonial world system”, since “there is no modernity without coloniality”. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton (Princeton UP) 2000: 43.

¹³⁰ Heath, “Politics of Genre”, 169.

¹³¹ At the end of the following chapter, I will address one of the most controversial and by implication most fruitful of such projects, namely Fredric Jameson’s notion of “Third World literature” in terms of “national allegory”.

¹³² Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, 11; Makarand Paranjape, *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*. Shimla (Indian Institute of Advanced Study) 2000: 34.

modern) Other.¹³³ For Dussel, the very inception of the notion of the self-centred subject as *cogito* is a result of large-scale European intervention into other worlds:

The experience not only of discovery, but especially of the conquest [of Latin America], is *essential* to the constitution of the modern ego, not only as a subjectivity, but as subjectivity that takes itself to be the center or end of history.¹³⁴

In a similar vein, Gauri Viswanathan, in her both sympathetic and critical reading of Raymond Williams' cultural materialism, urges "to consider English culture first and foremost in its imperial aspect and then to examine that aspect as itself constitutive of 'national' culture". To "recognize 'Englishness' as an imperial construct"¹³⁵ does not mean to simplistically equate the former with imperialism as such, but to acknowledge that the dynamic evolution of that evasive entity called 'the national culture' was far from self-enclosed and not reducible to domestic dynamics, negotiations, and struggles. Thus, Viswanathan demonstrates how colonial pedagogy in British India anticipated many institutional and methodological 'innovations' (such as the Lancaster and Bell monitorial system of instruction) that were applied 'at home' only after having been introduced and tested in the subject colony. In a similar vein, U. Kalpagam points out how "India became the experimental site for the Benthamite Panopticon"¹³⁶ that, in Foucault's famous rendition in *Discipline and Punish*, figures as a landmark in the emergence of genuinely modern modalities of power whose "perfection [...] should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary".¹³⁷ It is true that Foucault's discussion of the Panopticon does not include the 'colonial rise' of that institution; and yet the Panopticon forms one of the most striking illustrations of what Foucault, addressing early modern England, has called "the boomerang-effect colonial practice can have" inasmuch as a "whole series of colonial models was brought back to the West, and the result was

¹³³ This approach is typically exemplified in Robert Young's sweeping critique of Western philosophy as Hegelian "white mythology" preparing the ground for colonial expansion. For Young, "the construction of knowledges which all operate through forms of expropriation and incorporation of the other mimics at a conceptual level the geographical and economic absorption of the non-European world by the West"; Robert J.C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. 2nd ed. London & New York (Routledge) 2004: 34–35.

¹³⁴ Dussel, *Invention of the Americas*, 25.

¹³⁵ Gauri Viswanathan, "Raymond Williams and British Colonialism". *Subject To Change: Teaching Literature in the Nineties*. Ed. Susie Tharu. Hyderabad (Orient Longman) 1998: 193–218; 195; 218.

¹³⁶ U. Kalpagam, "Temporalities, History and Routines of Rule in Colonial India". *Time & Society* 8.1 (1999): 141–159; 147.

¹³⁷ Michel Foucault [1975], *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Tr. Alan Sheridan. New York (Vintage) 1991: 201.

that the West could practice something resembling colonization, or internal colonialism, on itself".¹³⁸

Given this incompleteness, this porosity of the 'centre' itself to its constitutive entanglements with its alleged Other, any understanding of culture in merely 'national' terms becomes questionable to the extreme. What is at stake, then, is a practice of grasping culture – and, more modestly, of reading cultural documents, genres, and artefacts – in a mode that Edward Said has proposed as "contrapuntal" reading, acutely aware of the interdependence "between the past and the present, the imperializer and the imperialized, culture and imperialism". Contrapuntally, "Dickens and Thackeray as London authors are read also as writers whose historical influence is informed by the colonial enterprises in India and Australia";¹³⁹ more generally, contrapuntal reading contributes to the shaping of a transmodern sensibility as it opens up, without levelling differences and asymmetries, to the translocational experience of imperialism as it articulates

overlapping territories, intertwined histories common to men and women, whites and non-whites, dwellers in the metropolis and on the peripheries, past as well as present and future; these territories and histories can only be seen from the perspective of the whole of secular human history.¹⁴⁰

Imperialism, then, forecloses any culture-specific analysis as it constitutes a condition in which, as Balibar aptly puts it, "humanity is connected with itself"¹⁴¹ in the power-structured totality of a real universality: a transcultural condition that awaits its translation in terms of what Dussel projects as "a transmodern *worldhood*",¹⁴² while Said would have preferred to speak of 'worldliness'. Said's own way of fostering such contrapuntal worldly descriptions of the real consisted in meticulous revisions of received self-descriptions, both past and present, of the 'centre' as a self-enclosed autonomous entity. Thus the persistent appeal and relevance of *Orientalism* lies not least in that book's rigorous demystification of the white mythology of European cultural autarky; the crucial issue of *Culture and Imperialism*, by contrast, is the exploration of options to productive dissidence in an overarching system that by virtue of its globality forecloses all separatist strategies: The planetarity of imperialism in Said allows for no 'outside'; in this respect it resembles, say, Fredric Jameson's notion of postmodernity as a condition in which everywhere everything has become (or been made)

¹³⁸ Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended", 103.

¹³⁹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. London (Vintage) 1994: 72; 385.

¹⁴⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 72.

¹⁴¹ Etienne Balibar, "Ambiguous Universality". *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 7.1 (1995): 48–74; 51.

¹⁴² Dussel, *Invention of the Americas*, 26.

modern, or Hardt and Negri's 'Empire' as the smooth surface of a global capital that subjects all residues to real subsumption. As we have seen, for Said, the task of the contrapuntal vision is not just to recuperate but to rewrite the actual transcultural and translocational connectedness historically instilled by the experience of imperialism, and currently reinforced in the processes that go under the name of 'globalisation': Contrapuntal reading must therefore itself be an articulatory procedure capable of holding together the apparently fragmentary and discrepant elements of the global reality that, in fact, had already been articulated *as moments* of imperialism. In the analytic framework proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, the difference between an 'element' and a 'moment' is positionally defined: "differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call *moments*. By contrast, we will call *element* any difference that is not discursively articulated".¹⁴³ Said's conceptualisation of a globally articulated world produced by the imperialist venture, requiring to be encountered from 'the perspective of the whole of secular human history', posits the postcolonial present as a scene in which each purported 'element' has always already been articulated as a 'moment' of the structured totality prepared by imperialism. For Laclau and Mouffe, however, the practice of articulation can only work on elements, and not on already articulated moments of a discursive formation. Contrapuntal reading, though forced to reproduce the 'total' reach imposed by imperialism, does however not reproduce the structural arrangement within which it has to operate. It rather utilises two significant options of working through and against the real universality it inhabits, the first being inscribed into the analysis of Laclau and Mouffe, the second in tune with Sara Ahmed's ethics of encountering the Other as always already encountered.

If any component of the present is already articulated as a moment of imperialism, that system itself yet remains, as a differential discursive formation, ultimately delimited since, for Laclau and Mouffe, "no discursive formation is a sutured totality and the transformation of the elements into moments is never complete".¹⁴⁴ It is due to this impossibility of a closure of the social into a complete structured totality that the play of difference and identity remains as inconclusive as the struggle for fixed meaning; what is more, every social discursive formation has its own exteriority inscribed into itself – not as some 'beyond' located outside the field of the social but in the form of antagonistic relations internal to, and subversive of, the system itself. Antagonistic relations manifest the limits of the structure in that they subvert the assumption of an already established fixed identity of the 'moments'

¹⁴³ Laclau & Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 105.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 106–107.

involved in the relation, so that difference itself collapses in antagonism where “the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself”; hence the antagonistic relation “arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution”. Thus antagonism bespeaks the categorical “limits of every objectivity, which is revealed as partial and precarious *objectification*”.¹⁴⁵ Antagonism as an experience, then, puts into question the presupposition that, in a relation, it is something that the involved objects *already are* which makes the relation possible and intelligible. It is by way of antagonism that the impossibility of fixed identities and differences is revealed, and that the relation itself is substituted for ontology. On my reading, Laclau and Mouffe propose here in their characteristically cool scientific style a highly political complement to the ethics of the productive encounter that, as Sara Ahmed demonstrates, also occurs without ontology. For Ahmed, globalisation entails that every ‘Other’ has already been appropriated or subsumed under the logic of capital, and can therefore only be (re)encountered as already encountered. To put it differently, the Other is always already endowed with a fixed identity systemically ascribed to it; it is the burden of the ethical encounter to undo this ontologisation of the Other which, of course, involves the complementary de-ontologisation of the self. The encounter thus disrupts – like Laclau and Mouffe’s antagonism – the differential order of reality and clears a space for the articulation of that which had hitherto been relegated to the sphere of the virtual: “one has a close encounter, where something happens that is surprising, and where ‘we’ establish an alliance through the very process of being unsettled by that which is not yet”.¹⁴⁶ With Laclau and Mouffe, it is now possible to anchor this otherwise purely ethical operation in the political framework of antagonism as both a categorical disclaimer of the myth of ontology and a starting point for the articulation of new alliances in the name of a democratic politics that “involves the institutionalisation of its own openness and, in that sense, the injunction to identify with its own impossibility”¹⁴⁷ – one of the many impossibilities that literature can figure in its capacity of “surprising the historical”.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Laclau & Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 125.

¹⁴⁶ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 180.

¹⁴⁷ Ernesto Laclau, “Structure, History and the Political”. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau & Slavoj Žižek. London & New York (Verso) 2000: 182–212; 199.

¹⁴⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*. Calcutta (Seagull) 2004: 55.

2 Meanwhile, in Indian Standard Time

Figuring Time and Nation

I. Allen Sealy's novel, *The Trotter-Nama*, is according to its narrator, a "synchronicle" that configures "three ages side by side".¹ In Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass*, the first-person narrator is an involuntary time-traveller propelled back from the mid-1980s into the days of the Quit India campaign, 1942, where he finds himself "knocking around in a time that didn't belong to [him]".² More ironically but no less ambitiously, Shashi Tharoor *retells* a textbook version of modern Indian national history in the guise of the age-old epic, the *Mahabharata*, while the main narrator in Vikram Chandra's novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, straddles by way of reincarnation the temporal gulf between the last days of the Mughal Empire and postmodern migration to the US. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, explores and exposes the limits of the novel as a nation-building device in the sense of Benedict Anderson's assertion that formal realism structurally prepares its readership for imagining the nation in homogeneous empty time. Kiran Nagarkar, in *Cuckold*, fictionalises a sixteenth-century Rajput prince as an advocate of a genuinely modern(ist) concept of governmentality – one of whose hallmarks in Nagarkar's text is rigorous time-discipline. Pankaj Mishra's narrator in *The Romantics* retrieves from the objects in his deceased mother's room an entire different time regime: "a world with its own rhythms and seasons" patterned by the prescriptions of the "heavily annotated Hindu calendar" that had "given shape and coherence to my parents' lives". The melancholy of Mishra's text derives from the very fact that this kind of "subliminal order [of] time on earth" is no longer available to the contemporary citizen of liberalisation India.³

¹ I. Allen Sealy, [1988] *The Trotter-Nama: A Chronicle*. New Delhi (India Ink) 1999: 437.

² Mukul Kesavan, *Looking Through Glass*. Delhi (Ravi Dayal) 1995: 44.

³ Pankaj Mishra, *The Romantics*, New Delhi (India Ink) 2000: 70–71.

In short: Indian novels in English,⁴ particularly those that may with all precaution be labelled ‘national allegories’, are obsessed with time; more precisely put, with the figuration of what I will, with Partha Chatterjee, call “heterogeneous time”.⁵ Such a conspicuous ‘boom’ of fables of time cannot be accidental but must rather be read as an indicator of a structure of feeling expressive of a more general consciousness for which there is no external counterpoint in dominant discourses of both temporality and nation. The frame of reference of these texts, then, lies in silenced conceptual and experiential deviations from the naturalised and universalised notions of what time and belonging are; in concert, they tend to effect an exposure of the “catachresis named Time”⁶ as *catachresis*. Thus they tie in with the much larger project of a heterogenisation of modernity itself: as contributions to a counter-hegemonic, internally variegated discourse of modes of vernacular self-fashionings whose aim it is not to catch up with a given/imposed prime modernity but to formulate conditions of possibility for being modern with a difference. As these tamperings with the clock are regularly linked with problematisations of the nation as a figure of the mind, these postcolonial fables of time can be safely situated within the framework of the national/modern.

2.1 Modern times

Why, while writing the nation with a difference, are these texts ultimately informed by their very differently articulated constructions of heterogeneous time? This latter term already indicates the polemics built into the project I am trying to delineate: Heterogeneous time obviously implies a dissent from its Other, i.e. homogeneous time that relies on the principles of chronological and continuous linearity, irreversibility, and the commensurability of all

⁴ Experimentations with time and history are of course not restricted to Indian novels written in English. To name but two outstanding examples: Already in her monumental novel, *River of Fire* (originally published in Urdu as early as 1959 and translated into English by the author in 1998), Qurratulain Hyder has a set of characters resurface time and again at crucial junctures in the history of the subcontinent, spanning a period of more than two thousand years, and hovering over the riddle of what might define ‘Indianness’; Qurratulain Hyder, *River of Fire*. Delhi (Kali for Women) 1998. – Mahasveta Devi’s novella, “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha” (translated from the Bengali by Gayatri Spivak), dramatises the simultaneity of apparently incommensurate temporal ‘stages’ – the ‘modern’ mainstream Indian journalist; the ‘ancient civilization’ of the tribal community he visits; and the prehistoric reptile whose irruption into the present remains unexplained but cannot be contained in terms of anachronism; Mahasveta Devi, “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha”. *Imaginary Maps*, 95–198.

⁵ See Partha Chatterjee, “The Nation in Heterogeneous Time”. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38.4 (2001): 399–418, 402.

⁶ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 53.

points in time. Walter Benjamin, who first introduced the term, equates homogeneous empty time with clock-time⁷ which is, in Benjamin's critique, the prerequisite of progressivism and 'historicism'. Any construction of history as a continuous (albeit inconclusive) process towards infinite perfectibility relies, for Benjamin, on the prior normalisation of homogeneous empty time that degrades the past to a mass of computable data and the present to an evanescent moment of transition. It takes nothing less than a revolutionary breach with the modern temporal regime of linear succession to re-appropriate history as a configuration of significant moments in a "tiger's leap" back into a past which is no longer predicated on homogeneous empty time but on the dense "time of the now".⁸ Revolutionary movements therefore do introduce calendars (as both the French and the October Revolutions did) but spontaneously launch assaults on the clock: During the July Revolution, on the evening of the first day of combat (Benjamin recounts), steeple clocks in different quarters of Paris were shot at in order to symbolically enact the explosion of history's continuum - a gesture that is, for Benjamin, peculiar to the revolutionary classes. Benjamin's theses invoke a historical consciousness beyond the measures of homogeneous empty time, and this consciousness is itself, as far as the West is concerned, located in the past: "not the slightest trace [of it] has been apparent in Europe in the past hundred years"⁹ due to the normalisation of clock-time, which latter is therefore by implication culturally specific and not (yet) universal. Yet clock-time, though historically clearly a product of Western culture, has become global time as the outcome of a long history of European expansion, conquest and colonialism. With irritating triumphalism, David Landes – one of the authoritative historians of time-keeping and its effects – sums up his archaeology of measured time as a victory march of globally naturalised clock-time:

I would not want simply to say that time measurement and the mechanical clock made the modern world and gave the West primacy over the Rest. That they did. But the clock in turn was part of a larger, open, competitive Western attitude towards knowledge, science, and exploration. Nothing like this attitude was to be found elsewhere. Attitude and theme came together, and we have all been the beneficiaries, including those civilizations and societies that are now learning and catching up.¹⁰

⁷ See Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", 261–62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 263. The German original is more explicit about this pastness: In Benjamin's own words, the calendrical consciousness appears like an extinct species "von dem es in Europa seit hundert Jahren nicht mehr die leisesten Spuren zu geben scheint"; "Über den Begriff der Geschichte". *Gesammelte Schriften I.2*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt/Main (Suhrkamp) 1980: 691–704; 702.

¹⁰ David Landes, "Clocks and the Wealth of Nations". *Dedalus* (Spring 2003): 20–26, 26.

Needless to say there is no such thing as a homogeneous and uniform modern 'West' vis-à-vis a retarded 'Rest' "now learning and catching up". Obviously clock-time, though producing synchronicity, still engenders allochrony, a construction in which "the 'out there' [is] almost always seen as 'back then'".¹¹ One historical example, picked at random, might help to illustrate how Eurocentrist chronopolitics has utilised this allochronic synchronisation of the 'Rest': Ca. 1870, the English colonial officer, Henry Maine, suggested that administrators in British India "had to keep their watches set simultaneously to two longitudes".¹² Of course, Maine is not only talking about technical time-reckoning here but more crucially insinuates that Indian development were 'lagging behind'. It is a chronopolitical statement that, as Johannes Fabian would have pointed out, posits the modern Western subject by way of "denying coevalness to its Other".¹³ Maine's recommendation of a two-dialled watch emphasises the historicist gulf between the modern and the pre-modern (the latter consolidating the former as a contrast foil); but in order to construe British time as modern time, Maine has to efface the fact that two-dialled watches were very much in demand in England itself deep into the 1850s: In fact, as Nigel Thrift observes, the transformation of Britain into one uniform time zone was effectively achieved not before 1855 (by which year ca. 98% of the public clocks in Great Britain were set to Greenwich Mean Time), and only on August 2, 1880, i.e. with the Royal Assent given to the Statutes (Definition of Time) Bill, did the synchronisation of Britain get formally sanctioned. Read in this context, Maine's counsel harks back to a not-so-distant past where in Britain itself "watches could be bought showing local and Greenwich time".¹⁴ Nor is the longevity of such non-synchronicity merely technical but much rather, as E.P. Thompson and others have demonstrated, indicative of a plurality of socially constructed times - not least due to intense and widespread resistances to the imposition of modern clock-time in the West, especially its disciplinary aspects in the organisation of industrial labour processes: The time-discipline that industrial capitalism demands gets consistently refracted on the ground, "and we may doubt [Thompson suggests] how far it was ever fully achieved".¹⁵ Instead of

¹¹ D. Graham Burnett, "Mapping Time: Chronometry on Top of the World". *Dedalus* (Spring 2003): 5—19, 16.

¹² Quoted in Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj: The New Cambridge History of India III.4*. New Delhi (CUP) 1998: 66.

¹³ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 152.

¹⁴ Nigel Thrift, "The Making of a Capitalist Time Consciousness". *The Sociology of Time*. Ed. John Hassard. Basingstoke (Macmillan): 105—129, 126.

¹⁵ E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism". *Past & Present* 38 (1967): 56—97; 90. Thompson's narrative may be read along with the manifold aesthetic and philosophical explorations – from Romanticism to High Modernism and beyond – of (mostly) personal time as deviant from, and beyond the measure of, the clock. Benjamin's

one homogeneous time zone entirely subsumed under capital, one “universe of disciplined time”¹⁶ then, even the heartlands of the first Industrial Revolution are better grasped as heterochronic – shot through with “slices in time [...] when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional [read: normalised] time”.¹⁷ Given Thompson’s insistence on the longevity of resistance to homogeneous empty time, it is actually inconceivable why postcolonial critics with fervently anti-historicist agendas such as Partha Chatterjee or Dipesh Chakrabarty should have responded so outright ungenerously to Thompson’s historiography. Chakrabarty, somewhat myopically, summarises “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” as “a good example of historicist thought”:

the worker in the history of advanced capitalism has no option but to shed precapitalist habits of work and ‘internalize’ work-discipline. The same fate awaits the worker in the third world. [...] Thompson writes: ‘Without time-discipline we could not have the insistent energies of the industrial man; and whether this discipline comes in the form of Methodism, or of Stalinism, or of nationalism, it will come to the developing world’.¹⁸

Chatterjee picks up the thread in his article on Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation, which is available in at least three versions only two of which acknowledge that the author was alerted to Thompson’s ‘historicism’ by Chakrabarty.¹⁹ Neither of the two critics appears to be willing to seriously engage with the central argument of Thompson’s text, namely the categorical chronodiversity of industrialising and industrialised Britain even after the implementation of a capitalist work-discipline that, in his argument, does never get fully normalised. What Thompson claims for Britain could therefore be grasped in Chakrabarty’s terms as a continuous interplay of “history 1” (capital) and its concrete refracturings into multiple “history 2s”, and in Chatterjee’s register as “heterogeneous time”. The decontextualised quote that Chatterjee picks up from Chakrabarty in fact stems from a moment in Thompson’s text that is devoted to a critique of precisely that progressivist historicism that Chatterjee and Chakrabarty accuse him of. The normalisation of homogeneous empty time is, according to Thompson, as utopian as it is for Chatterjee: It only occurs as a delusion in the perspective of the “engineer of economic growth” while, in fact, “the historical record is not a simple one of

own intervention obviously forms an attempt to politicise precisely the High Modernist aesthetic of the epiphany.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault [1967], “Of Other Spaces”. *Diacritics* (Spring 1986): 22–27, 26.

¹⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 48.

¹⁹ The reference to Chakrabarty is given in the unpublished sketch, “The Nation in Heterogeneous Time” and in its extended version published under the same title in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*; it is omitted in Chatterjee’s contribution to *Grounds of Comparison*, “Anderson’s Utopia”.

neutral and inevitable technological change, but is also one of exploitation and of resistance to exploitation”.²⁰ Ironically, Thompson is at least in this respect in full accordance with his own favourite object of outrage, Louis Althusser, who in a much more systematic manner proposes the coexistence of multiple temporalities in *advanced capitalism*. It is true that the Althusserian notion of the relative autonomy of the various levels of the unified structure which is the mode of production does concede that the economic level is ultimately defining – but only “in that lonely hour of the ‘final instance’ [which] never comes”.²¹ In social practice, Althusser makes out a coevalness of manifold ‘social instances’, a heterogeneity of practices that are relatively autonomous from each other, and of which each possesses its own ‘peculiar time’. Althusser’s mode of production thus structurally resembles the notion of modernity as singular but not one: The fact that they are folded into the unified structure of the mode of production does not eliminate the actual multiplicity of these ‘peculiar times’ but instead renders the structure as a whole heterochronic: Inasmuch as the “the specificity of these times and histories is therefore *differential*”, there is “no history in general”.²²

Chakrabarty and Chatterjee’s dismissal of Thompson as ‘historicist’ may be read (along with their telling silence about the Althusserian model) as an indicator of a deep fissure in postcolonial (Marxist) theory in general, where the nature of the nexus of temporality/modernity and capital is contested. As we have seen, Chatterjee, Guha and especially Chakrabarty try to establish a notion of capitalism as itself heterogeneous at least in its ‘local’ articulations; it is *not* from a denial of the crucial importance of capital, but from the insistence on capital’s own multiplicity – its manifestation as so many capitalisms – that their various claims to plural temporalities and genres of modernity are derived. In the absence of a normative formation of a universal ideal type of capitalism as a unified mode of production, the point of reference for a Bloch-inflected distinction of ‘synchronous’ and ‘anachronistic’ forms evaporates. From a more ‘orthodox’ Marxist

²⁰ Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline”, 92; 93–94. I am not interested in charging postcolonial critics of not being primarily committed to the archaeology of the West’s empirical internal heterogeneity. Why should they? And yet, the status of the West (or hyperreal ‘Europe’) as a unified historical effect notwithstanding, the critique of epistemic violence and historicism should surely not lead to misreadings – with whatever agenda – that easily transform birds of the same feather into *bêtes noires*. Neil Lazarus observes in a similar vein how Chatterjee subjects Benedict Anderson to a tendentious and hostile reading; see Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*, 131–33.

²¹ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*. Tr. Ben Brewster. Harmondsworth (Penguin) 1972: 81.

²² Louis Althusser & Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*. Tr. Ben Brewster. London (New Left Books) 1970: 99; 108.

perspective that insists precisely on the ultimate ‘unity’ of the mode of production, this line of thought must be anathema; it figures, in Keya Ganguly’s recent interrogation of Chatterjee and Chakrabarty, as “the voguish assertion of ‘alternative modernities’” based on a blindness to the “fundamental meaning of modernity and modern times as the system of world-wide capitalism itself”. Instead of addressing postcoloniality in its systemic dimension within the globalised mode of production, the privileged status assigned to ‘modernity’ and temporalities as *cultural* phenomena engenders, according to Ganguly, the distorting assertion of “‘non-white’ aporias and fragments”.²³ To read heterogeneous time *not* in terms of the synchronicity of the non-synchronous can in this argument only signal a refusal to acknowledge the omnipresence of a singular capitalist modernity. Yet, while neither Chatterjee nor Chakrabarty deny this formation, they insist on its various different articulations.

Their at times irritating polemics against critical Western thinkers like Thompson can be understood as an indicator of the controversy over the status of the mode of production; it is also a symptom of the vastly different and hence highly charged itineraries of time in general, and the clock in particular, in Europe and the colonial world. For within the horizon of a history of time in a cross-cultural contact zone like colonial India, heterotemporalities attain an entirely different political character. Buttressed with Foucault, the West itself will appear as internally heterochronic; even David Landes’ occidentocentric and triumphalist account abounds with hints at the ‘colonial rise of the clock’;²⁴ Homi Bhabha’s considerations of “the ‘splitting’ of the national subject” along varied temporalities do indeed explicitly pertain to “the symbolic structure of the western nation”.²⁵ Yet the colonised world did not receive the plurality of Western social times but – as a ‘unified effect’ – clock-time and its concomitants: historicism and allochronic discourse.

In a poignant anecdote in his *In an Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh dramatises the author-narrator’s encounter with an Egyptian Imam as an alienated dialogue performed by two postcolonial subjects interpellated into, and ventriloquised by, that Western historicism they have both internalised, and that provides “the only language we had been able to discover in common”: Interrogated by the Imam about the “primitive and backward [Hindu] custom” of burning the dead, Ghosh’s narrator engages in a

²³ Keya Ganguly, “Temporality and Postcolonial Critique”. *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literature*. Ed. Neil Lazarus. Cambridge (CUP) 2004: 162–179; 178; 167.

²⁴ Especially the necessity of refining the escarpment technology in the service of transoceanic voyage.

²⁵ Bhabha, “DissemiNation”, 298; 303.

competition about which of the two countries, India or Egypt, is more advanced. Significantly, the quarrel gravitates around 'the West' as the normative point of reference against which alone 'advancement' or 'backwardness' can be measured: in terms of technological achievements that ultimately get expressed in the globally legible symbolic currency of weapons of mass destruction. In the overdetermined arena prepared by imperialism, the Imam and the narrator can only act as "delegates from two superseded civilizations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence"; they have to resort, in other words, "to the universal, irresistible metaphysic of modern meaning". Ghosh's episode condenses a kind of subaltern desire for the condition of modernity and exposes it as the only common ground available to "millions and millions of people on the landmasses around us"; time as the medium of progress and advancement then operates, in its form as homogeneous empty time, as the definitive horizon within which such encounters occur between postcolonial subjects interpellated to compete with one another for the more privileged place "on the ascending ladder of Development".²⁶

With reference to India, social historians like U. Kalpagam or Sumit Sarkar have investigated the modes of implementing the clock in a terrain up to then marked by baffling chronodiversities. It should not go unnoticed that "at the beginning of the colonial period there were 13 calendrical systems in what was then identified as the Indian subcontinent", and that, "in precolonial India, measurable time had a minimal role to play in the everyday life of the majority".²⁷ With the British intervention, Kalpagam argues, a centralised and controllable standard time gets implemented which is not only instrumental in the re-organisation of production and administration, but which also largely succeeds in enabling "both a rational history and the idea of 'progress' to take hold of the colonial imagination"²⁸ – with the proviso that this newly introduced Western variety of time gets continuously refractured and rearticulated with other kinds of temporalities, thus getting inserted into the emergent national/modern.

With Sumit Sarkar's observations on the introduction of clocked time in the colonial context it becomes apparent to what extent this production of the national/modern occurs as a pluralisation of the *narrative* of modernity. Sarkar delineates how the clock and the abstract time it produces made a surprisingly late entry into South Asia, in spite of intensive European commerce from the sixteenth century. Only with the construction of railway

²⁶ All quotes in this section from Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*. London (Granta) 1994: 235–237.

²⁷ Kalpagam, "Temporalities, History and Routines of Rule in Colonial India", 143; 146.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

and telegraph networks from the 1850s onwards; the inauguration, in India, of English schools with their rigid timetables; and the establishment of a modern bureaucracy did rigorous clock-time discipline become an issue, along with the varied responses to its implementation. Sarkar focuses on a particular group affected by the newly imposed temporal order, namely Bengali office clerks in the service of the Raj, and demonstrates how the rigours of clock-time discipline were appropriated by way of their translation as symptoms of *Kali-yuga*, a motif which “enjoyed a kind of revival [...] precisely alongside the spread of clock-time”.²⁹ What in the dominant, Western perspective appears as universally valid, neutral and natural homogeneous empty time, then, gets reformulated by Sarkar’s clerks in terms of a reactivated concept of time that hovers between the mythic and the historical, the cyclic and the linear in an excessively indeterminate fashion: The four ages, or *yugas*, of Brahminical lore form one *mahayuga*, a combined unit that repeats itself time and again. 2000 *mahayugas* make a *kalpa* which equals a day and night of Brahma or – 8,640,000,000 human years. Likewise the *mahayuga* as well as the four *yugas* are each endowed with precise duration, which is in all cases derived from divine temporalities (*Kali-yuga*, e.g., spans 1200 years of the gods which equals 432 000 human years). The astronomical immensity of such temporal units does not only display the pleasure derived from the mastery over the concept of the zero and decimal place value notation; it also suggests that such units as the *mahayuga* or the *kalpa* were “almost calculated to defeat any controllable sense of time”³⁰ as history. Their function seems to have resided mainly in the organisation of a porosity between cosmological-cyclic and historical-linear times since the *yugas* form “fragmentary arcs within the cycle that take on the role of linear time. The dichotomy between cyclic and linear becomes increasingly vague”.³¹ Hence, if one of the more conspicuous responses of the colonised to the imposition of clock-time was the latter’s representation and transculturalisation as an aspect of *Kali-yuga*, the effect was the insertion and subordination of homogeneous empty time – the site of the West’s Universal History – to the superior temporal framework of serialised *mahayugas* and *kalpas*.

2.2 Nation and time

Obviously, the nexus between (homogeneous empty) time and nation – both apparently universal key concepts of the modern imaginary – poses a

²⁹ Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, 26.

³⁰ Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India*. New Delhi (OUP) 1996: 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

fundamental problem for the theoretical and fictional texts in question here. How is this nexus construed and interrogated?

In Benedict Anderson's highly influential account of the emergence of imagined communities, the homology of modern times and modern nations gets underscored. Homogeneous empty time is elevated to a structural condition of possibility for the modern nation to emerge: To imagine the political community of the nation requires, according to Anderson, the imagining of a common "steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity", it being understood that simultaneity be conceived strictly in terms of homogeneous empty time as "temporal coincidence, measured by clock and calendar".³² A particularly modern sense of time needs to be produced and fostered, by which the "significance of the calendrical simultaneity of apparently random occurrences"³³ get reinscribed, time and again, into the political imaginary. This aesthetic and ideological function is fulfilled, in Anderson's narrative, by the dissemination of print capitalist products: texts – particularly novels and newspapers – that reproduce precisely that kind of simultaneity-as-coincidence. "[T]he novel, with its spectacular possibilities for the representation of simultaneous actions in homogeneous empty time",³⁴ allows for the textualisation and articulation of different, independent but synchronised actions, while newspapers encourage the illusion that their perusal – though mostly in isolation – forms a 'mass-ceremony' in which virtually all members of the imagined community are involved.³⁵ The morning paper on this reading, then, effects the daily reproduction of some imaginary uniform nation-time that finds its iterative performative re-enactment in the subjects' participation in a single cult. What does it signify, then, that Saleem Sinai's portentous birth, in Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, is advertised and hence made a national affair in *The Times of India* – a daily that by its very title literally pluralises and hence disclaims Andersonian uniform nation-time? Publicising the birth of a figure that will later turn out as an all too leaky container of the multitude longing for (and yet persistently undoing) the nation-form, the newspaper (not to speak of the novel in which it appears) here functions as a harbinger of disintegration

³² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed. London & New York (Verso) 1991: 26; 24. – Other than Benjamin, Anderson does not allow for a distinction between calendar time and clock time.

³³ Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*. London & New York (Verso) 2002: 33.

³⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 194.

³⁵ In his later book, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, Anderson adds two more "principles of coherence" enforced by the medium of the newspaper: the representation of a unified world and the relative linguistic uniformity of all newspapers; see Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, 33.

rather than unification. The pluralisation of Indian Standard Time into the multiple times of India, in Rushdie, ties in with a consistent representation of an Indian “distinctive modernity”,³⁶ in whose construction pluralised temporalities and a departure from the universalised concept of nation work hand in glove.

Yet the received idea of nation remains a crucial structural effect in the Indian context, as the work of Partha Chatterjee demonstrates most eloquently: Here, in a continuous de-claiming, the nation is at once interrogated as a severe limitation to the political imaginary, and retained as the crucial site of political struggle. As discussed in the previous chapter, Chatterjee’s sustained critique of the normalisation of the nation and the nation-state hinges on the assumption that alternative forms of collective identity and affiliation actually exist, but that those alternatives are systematically suppressed by the nation-state: “The modern state [...] cannot recognize within its jurisdiction any form of community except the single, determinate, demographically enumerable form of the nation”.³⁷ Community, Chatterjee argues, stands outside the institutions of both state and civil society but straddles, instead, the ‘modern’ split between private and public domains. If community thus appears oddly delinked from the standards of modernity, it is yet neither residual nor marginal; rather community “is very much a part of here-and-now modernity, and yet it is an idea that remains impoverished and limited to the singular form of the nation-state”.³⁸ Community in this scenario effects a fragmentarisation of the seemingly unified nation, which latter then can no longer be imagined (with Anderson) in empty homogeneous time but in a plurality of different temporalities: “The real space of modern life consists of heterotopia [...]. Time is heterogeneous, unevenly dense”.³⁹ Similarly, Homi Bhabha claims that “the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities”.⁴⁰ As against Anderson’s narrative, Chatterjee insists that “homogeneous empty time is not located anywhere in real space – it is utopian”,⁴¹ hence not descriptive of any social reality whatsoever. Like the concept of the nation, it is imposed on a fundamentally heterochronic present: Far from neutral but much rather productive of precisely those ‘historicist’ fictions that effectively hierarchise the world in ever new formulations of allochronic discourses, homogeneous empty time “linearly connects past, present and future, creating the possibility for all of those historicist imaginings of identity, nationhood,

³⁶ Deshpande, *Contemporary India*, 47.

³⁷ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 238.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁹ Chatterjee, “Anderson’s Utopia”, 163.

⁴⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation”, 303.

⁴¹ Chatterjee, “Anderson’s Utopia”, 166.

progress”.⁴² It is, in short, the utopian “time of capital” which engenders the latest and most successful version of historicism and enables advocates, but also ruthless critics of capitalist subsumption to conceive of the present as composed of coexisting temporalities: Tales of underdevelopment in that sense share common grounds with all kinds of Marxist narratives of transition from one mode of production to the next. Modernity, in Chatterjee, does not work that way at all since it is predicated on the “presence of a dense and heterogeneous time” which he illustrates with a couple of examples that might immediately stem from Rushdie, Vikram Seth, or Kiran Nagarkar, such as

industrial capitalists waiting to close a business deal because they hadn’t yet had word from their respective astrologers, or industrial workers who wouldn’t touch a new machine until it had been consecrated with appropriate religious rites [...]. To call this the copresence of several times – the time of the modern and the times of the premodern – is only to endorse the utopianism of Western modernity.⁴³

In a similar vein, anthropologist Kalpana Ram claims that typically modern “discourses of social reform [...] coexist, albeit in uneasy fashion, alongside discourses that enjoy archaic, precolonial resonances. Discourses of spirit possession [...] coexist with discourses of social reform”.⁴⁴ Instead of marking out anachronism here, Ram interprets the configuration of these seemingly incompatible discourses as itself genuinely modern.

Despite his far-reaching critique of the nation in homogeneous empty time, and the nation-state as a structure that permanently (and if necessary violently) subjugates aspirations of community identity, Chatterjee on the other hand unfolds an equally sustained, albeit more controversial, argument ‘in favour of’ the nation-state as the definitive horizon within which any struggle for democracy will have to take place. This positively ‘nationalist’ streak in Chatterjee is grounded in the analytical differentiation between modernity and democracy, the former finding its materialisation primarily through the institutions of civil society, the latter however depending on the functioning of political society “mediating between civil society and state”.⁴⁵ Proceeding from the general assumption of the nation’s heterogeneity, this political society can by no means be conceived as a set of institutions that smoothly organise representations of the people, or the people’s will, as envisioned in civil society; much rather the ideal coincidence of nation and state, civil society and political society, is always disrupted by the

⁴² Chatterjee, “Anderson’s Utopia”, 166.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁴ Ram, “Uneven Modernities”, 273.

⁴⁵ Partha Chatterjee, “Introduction”. *The Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State*. Ed. Partha Chatterjee. New Delhi (OUP) 1998: 1—20; 14.

fragmentary condition of the nation – the absence of the ideal figure of the citizen – so that the primary task of political society, the implementation of democracy, remains unfulfilled: Political society in India can best be described as a “site of strategic manoeuvres, resistance and appropriation by different groups and classes, many of those contests remaining unresolved even in the present phase of the postcolonial state”.⁴⁶ In this perspective, globalisation basically reorchestrates an institutional set-up that, in historical terms, flawed the colonial polity: Under a regime of colonial difference, the colonised subject was ideally admitted to certain institutions of civil society and thus implicated in the project of modernising the colony, but never entitled to citizenship. In the political division of labour, then, civil society enacted the dissemination of modernity while political society by and large was withheld by colonial rule. If in the wake of globalisation a new, global civil society gradually emerges, then its function lies precisely in the mediation “between globality and modernity” but – in analogy to colonialism – not in democratisation. In the obvious absence of a global political society whose task it would be to mediate between globality and democracy, the nation-state remains the critical site for the “democratic negotiation of citizenship under conditions of globalisation”.⁴⁷ In light of Chatterjee’s prior critique of the nation-state, however, it goes without saying that such negotiations primarily comprise the struggle over claims and entitlements that the “earlier liberal consensus” of the homogeneous nation-state effectively foreclosed. The continuous reference to the state therefore occurs in favour of the concrete empowerment of the as yet disenfranchised fragments, not in the name of some abstract national unity: It is precisely the crisis of the monolithic nation-state under conditions of globalisation that enables communities within the nation to “work out new forms of democratic institutions and practices in the mediating field of political society that lies between civil society and the nation-state”.⁴⁸

The dual move of both problematising and privileging the nation (state) is by no means restricted to Chatterjee’s work but informs much of the cultural production of postcolonial India: not in the sense of some indiscriminate celebration of national unity but much rather as a de-claiming of the nation. The representational apparatus of the novel, so crucial to Anderson’s account, therefore serves a far more complicated project than mere nation-building or consolidation; instead, in what Robert Fraser has called the “narrative of

⁴⁶ Chatterjee, “Introduction”, 15.

⁴⁷ Partha Chatterjee, “Beyond the Nation? Or Within?”. *Economic and Political Weekly*. (Jan 4–11 1997): 30–34; 33; 34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

internal dissent”,⁴⁹ it hovers between negation and reaffirmation. Likewise, art historian Geeta Kapur hints at such a shift from affirmations to interrogations of nationness:

Taking the cue from various examples of Indian art in the twentieth century, we can claim a tradition of the modern that inscribes within its very narrative the aspirations of a secular nation. Logically, contemporary examples of the same practice offer a critique of the assumptions that render the secular nation self-evident.⁵⁰

Before entering into a series of close readings of some of the more prominent novels that contribute to this project – not least by subverting the paradigms of homogeneous empty time – it appears helpful to revisit one important debate on the issue of the textual representation of the postcolonial nation: the struggle over the notion of the ‘national allegory’.

2.3 Allegories of the nation

Speaking of postcolonial writing in general, Robert Fraser states that “[n]owhere has the continuing debate as to the identity of postcolonial nations been carried on with more energy than in the novel”. With regards to India, Fraser goes on to argue that this national significance were most consistent with the Indian novel in English since, “[w]hereas authors who write in Bengali or Urdu or Kannada tend to concentrate on the *milieu* of region, writers in English like Rushdie and Vikram Seth conceptualize and write about India as a whole”.⁵¹ Both propositions put forward by Fraser are deeply problematic: His assertion of the novel as the central medium for the playing-out of the national imaginary remains uncritically indebted to what Clifford Siskin has called “novelism”, that is, an indiscriminate overestimation of the importance of the generic scope of the novel. This is particularly pertinent to the Indian context where the novel – and most flagrantly, the novel in English – has always been a minority exercise, and where popular or plebeian nationalism has been articulated most vibrantly in other genres and media, more often than not non-literary ones. As a consequence, Fraser’s second assumption – the national reach of the Indian novel in English – is as flawed as his first one; moreover, it is grounded on the misreading of an argument put forward by Amit Chaudhuri who, in his

⁴⁹ Robert Fraser, *Lifting the Sentence: A Poetics of Postcolonial Fiction*. Manchester & New York (Manchester UP) 2000: 8.

⁵⁰ Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 344.

⁵¹ Robert Fraser, *Lifting the Sentence*, 31.

1999 *TLS* article, “The Construction of the Indian Novel in English”,⁵² *interrogates* the shallow

implication [...] that only in the English language do Indian writers have the vantage-point [...] to articulate that post-colonial totality called ‘India’ (on the other hand, it sometimes seems that the post-colonial totality called ‘India’ only exists in the works of Indian English novelists, or in the commentaries they engender).⁵³

In Chaudhuri’s line of argument, it is precisely the privilege allocated to the Indian novel in English by the international culture industry that obscures the rich multiplicity of Indian fiction as such, overshadowing the “traditions and histories and languages [...] from which this real and heterogeneous entity emerged”.⁵⁴ Moreover, the Indian novel in English gets constructed in well-oiled machineries of marketing and distribution as *the* site at which ‘India’ gets articulated. Fraser would then be complicit in this very process of ‘constructing’ the Indian novel in English in its dual characteristics as internationally privileged and reduced to the task of allegorising the nation.

Both Fraser and Chaudhuri write in the well-nigh overdetermined field prestructured by the debate over Fredric Jameson’s controversial theses on “third-world literature”.⁵⁵ As Neil Lazarus delineates, the Jameson debate stands itself as a symptom of the tacit politics of mainstream postcolonial theory as it develops from a controversy within Marxism into a denunciation of Marxism *tout court* in the name of postcolonial specificity: “The critique mutates from a Marxist critique of ‘third-worldism’ [Ahmad’s original charge against Jameson] into a ‘third-worldist’ critique of Marxism”.⁵⁶ In his highly critical and institutionally “paradigmatic”⁵⁷ response to Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad launches a particular assault on what he perceives as Jameson’s reduction of the collective to the national. Jameson had, to remember, in his

⁵² “The Construction of the Indian Novel in English”. Repr. *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*. Ed. Amit Chaudhuri. Basingstoke & Oxford (Picador) 2001: xxiii—xxxi.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxi.

⁵⁵ Apart from Aijaz Ahmad and M. Madhava Prasad, to whose contributions to the debate I will refer at some length, Jameson’s article has been severely criticised in Jean Franco, “The Nation as Imagined Community”. Repr. *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti & Ella Shohat. Minneapolis & London (U of Minnesota P) 1997: 130—137; in Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago (U of Chicago P) 1992: 13—14; and in Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Cambridge (CUP) 1996: 102—113; more differentiated discussions can be found in a special issue of *Public Culture* (1993) which comprises articles by Partha Chatterjee, Michael Sprinker, and Vivek Dhareshwar.

⁵⁶ Neil Lazarus, “Fredric Jameson on ‘Third-World Literature’: A Qualified Defence”. *Fredric Jameson: A Critical Reader*. Ed Sean Homer & Douglas Kellner. Houndmills (Palgrave) 2004: 42—61; 51.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

1986 article “Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, put forward the crucial hypothesis that “[a]ll third-world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical, and in a very specific way: they have to be read as [...] *national allegories*”, a form in which “*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*”.⁵⁸ Jameson underpins these apodictic claims with another set of equally apodictic assumptions concerning the differently organised relations between the individual and the collective, the ‘private’ and the ‘public’, in “First” and “Third” world cultures: While the latter is marked by an “identity of the political and the individual or psychic”, the former is characterised by some absolute “split between public and private” placing the subject ineluctably in a “placeless individuality”.⁵⁹ Needless to say, Jameson’s own excessive employment of the first person plural when addressing “*our* imprisonment in the postmodern present”,⁶⁰ is part of a rhetorical strategy, a performative contradiction whose objective it is to retain, if not recuperate, precisely that collective dimension that “*our* various modernities” have purportedly effaced, but that remain, in his argument, a presence in those regions where capitalism is articulated with “distinct modes of production that pose [...] very different types of social and cultural resistance to its influence” (319): While Western culture thus appears as thoroughly and pervasively informed by real subsumption (hence, in Jameson’s nomenclature, properly postmodern), the term ‘third world’ denotes those regions where a composite regime holds sway.

In Jameson’s own version of historicism (indebted primarily to Ernst Bloch), this kind of mixed constitution gets conceptualised as “the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history – handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant field with the Krupp factories or the Ford plants in the distance”.⁶¹ Obviously, Jameson is speaking here about the West, but more exactly, about the West’s past. In his idiosyncratic periodisation, this mixed constitution, in which the synchronous and the non-synchronous coexist, marks modernity proper: a formation entirely effaced in the West by the thorough and all-pervasive modernisation of society but still present in the ‘Third World’ which now – in clearly historicist terms – appears as a rerun of the past of the West. The opposition is no longer that of a modern West vis-à-vis a pre-modern Other but that of a postmodern West in relation to a still modern ‘Third World’. Geeta Kapur upholds this notion

⁵⁸ Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”. *The Jameson Reader*. Ed. Michael Hardt & Kathi Weeks. London (Blackwell) 2000: 311–331; 319, 320.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 329, 336.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 316; my emphasis.

⁶¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 307.

of a specifically ‘Third-World’/Indian modernity with express references to Jameson: “When communitarian and secular ideals combine, when storytelling realizes itself in national allegories, how shall we designate these if not as structures of modernity?”⁶²

There is, obviously, a certain unintentional perfidiousness to Jameson’s argument as it cannot be countered with a ‘Third-World’ claim to modernity as iterated by Chatterjee and others – a claim that Jameson himself emphatically supports with the proviso that, in his argument, the modern itself is now anachronistic. From the perspective of the ‘critique of modernity’, the flaw in Jameson’s argument therefore consists not in his labelling the ‘Third World’ pre-modern (which he does not), but in the allochronic discourse he activates by placing the two ‘worlds’ in different times – one postmodern, one modern.

Clearly, Jameson’s text is about a difference between two poles that are deliberately homogenised for the sake of an argument that, in the context of both Jameson’s work in general *and* the cultural-historical formation it belongs to, introduces a corrective self-locating: Far from transparent or universal, the normative ‘American’ perspective is revealed as one particular position among many. Such auto-provincialisation of first-world assumptions apparently involves some hazardous rhetorical moves employing a set of terms that – though certainly put under erasure – remain open to misreadings: such as the construction of ‘first’ and ‘third’ world cultures as unified and homogeneous entities; or the conflation of the collective with the national – as if, to put it with Ahmad, one could not

indeed connect one’s personal experience to a ‘collectivity’ – in terms of gender, class, caste, religious community, trade union, political party, village, prison – combining the private and the public, and in some sense ‘allegorizing’ the individual experience, *without involving the category of ‘the nation’* [...].⁶³

By insisting that community is a larger and more inclusive term than nation (which latter is not more than one particular form of the first), Ahmad implicitly underwrites the more systematic and far-reaching critique put forward by Partha Chatterjee, namely that the nation has been normalised in Western political theory to the status of the universally normative form of community. By tacitly treating community and nation as coterminous, Jameson on the other hand seems to performatively display exactly that myopia, that very “weakness in our imaginations”,⁶⁴ that his other writings pinpoint so precisely as part and parcel of the position of the Western subject under the postmodern regime. Reading Jameson’s article, however, the

⁶² Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 287.

⁶³ Ahmad, *In Theory*, 109–10.

⁶⁴ Jameson, “The Antinomies of Postmodernity”. *The Cultural Turn*, 50.

national horizon never closes in; there is in fact not one direct or indirect reference to the nation, or the nation form, that might elucidate the alleged connexion between the 'third world text' and the nation. What the third-world text, according to Jameson, conjoins is the individual experience with collectivity, or 'the political' – but nowhere does Jameson claim that this collectivity necessarily has to take the form of the nation. Almost inevitably, this openness of Jameson's usage of the term of the collective leads to the question as to how 'national' the national allegory is after all. The crucial quality of the 'third-world text', as Jameson repeatedly emphasises, lies not so much in some necessarily *national* frame of reference but in its ineluctably *political* thrust due to which "the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself".⁶⁵ If the 'third-world text', for Jameson, basically articulates the individual-libidinal and the collective-political (effectively dis-articulated in the West since modernism), then this articulation can by no means be restricted to the telos of the nation form: what Jameson – not without nostalgia for the veritable but lost Western tradition of utopianism – makes out in these texts is instead the horizon of "a social world of collective cooperation", an articulation of the "social totality" as "community interdependence".⁶⁶ Clearly, terms such as these are not descriptive of 'the nation' but of community as such, and in a writer like Jameson most likely with the high, realm-of-freedom utopianism derived from certain strands of Marxism. The national allegory, then, would much better be renamed 'collective'. In fact, Epifanio San Juan, Jr. employs Jameson precisely in this manner when he makes the notion of the national allegory productive as a politicising textual form that addresses not a *Volk* but a *populus*: "The nation appealed to here would then signify a 'concrete universal' embodying solidarity with other oppressed communities".⁶⁷

Ahmad's second fundamental objection to Jameson appears somewhat inconsistent with his first one: On the one hand accusing Jameson of dogmatically imposing the nation, as the defining frame of reference, on the political imaginary of the subaltern, he simultaneously takes him to task for an implicitly allochronic rhetorics that posits the (third-world) Other as – romantically or deficiently – retarded and not-quite-modern. In response, Ahmad engages in a construction of postcolonial India as a "parliamentary republic of the bourgeoisie" which effectively has created "a bourgeois

⁶⁵ Jameson, "Third-World Literature", 336.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 331, 336.

⁶⁷ Epifanio San Juan Jr., "From Postcolonial to Alter/Native National Allegory: Dialectics of Nation/People and World-System in Philippine Writing". *Nationalism vs. Internationalism: (Inter)National Dimensions of Literatures in English*. Ed. Wolfgang Zach & Ken L. Goodwin. Tübingen (Stauffenburg) 1996: 1–7; 6.

political subjectivity [...] for the populace at large”.⁶⁸ The price for Ahmad’s repudiation of Jameson’s (alleged) ‘rhetoric of otherness’, therefore, is the fashioning of ‘India’ as ‘same’, hence the erasure of difference altogether. The problem is not so much that Ahmad merely describes India as a faithful derivation of the modular form of the nation state in the image of Western societies, but that he invokes and embraces this description polemically in order to disprove Jameson’s notions of ‘third-world’ specificity: By conjuring up an “India [that] has all the characteristics of a capitalist country”,⁶⁹ Ahmad has to omit precisely that heterogeneity that Jameson ascribes to the ‘third world’, and that the participants in the ‘critique-of-modernity’ debate emphatically uphold.⁷⁰ Instead of interrogating the nation form in its relation to the existent Indian polity, Ahmad rather suggests its successful appropriation after Independence. The antinomies of the postcolonial nation-state would undermine Ahmad’s own ‘one world approach’ that hinges on an extremely generalised concept of the global division of labour: “What gives the world its unity, then, is not a humanist ideology but the ferocious struggle between capital and labour which is now strictly and fundamentally global in character”.⁷¹ Within this framework of a world both riven and totalised by the class struggle, the persistent function of the nation-state as a primary institution of neoliberal globalisation tends to disappear from view; this framework is, as Madhava Prasad poignantly puts it, “blind to the participation of the nation-state in the hierarchization of the globe along class lines”.

Prasad’s unanswerable contribution to the debate over the national allegory is critical of Jameson and Ahmad alike, taking both to task for failing to take into cognisance the crucial role of the nation-state as “the politically, economically, and ideologically privileged mode of participation in the global order”.⁷² It is, however, only on condition of such a re-theorisation of the nation-state in global capitalism that a conceptualisation of (third) world literature can begin. Why? For Prasad, no such theory can emerge “from the position of a Western reader or from that of a ‘native’, for even the former is a kind of nativism”; it takes nothing less than a virtually

⁶⁸ Ahmad, *In Theory*, 100.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁷⁰ Not surprisingly, Partha Chatterjee’s major point of critique consists precisely in his debunking of Ahmad’s self-declared Marxist construal of India as a virtually Western nation-state; see Partha Chatterjee, “The Need to Dissemble”. *Public Culture* 6.1 (1993): 55–64; esp. 63.

⁷¹ Ahmad, *In Theory*, 104.

⁷² M. Madhava Prasad, “On the Question of a Theory of (Third) World Literature”. *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti & Ella Shohat. Minneapolis & London (U of Minnesota P) 1997: 141–162; 145; 153.

Saidian ‘contrapuntal’ vision – “a new position, which for the present can only be a potentiality”⁷³ – to achieve the translocational perspective necessary for the analysis of the framework established by global capital. Jameson’s suggestion of a dichotomy of ‘private-libidinal’ (First-World) and ‘collective-political’ (Third-World) texts, though obviously depending on the assumption of location, proves fruitful to Prasad inasmuch as it touches upon a more fundamental global binarism that Jameson, however, does not elaborate on. Proceeding from the assumption of the persistent relevance of the nation-state as a political institution, Prasad points out how under the aegis of a developmental paradigm, the visibility of the national frame of reference has virtually disappeared in the West because Western nationness has taken on the status of a transparent norm that requires no further elaboration and hence tends to vanish from view; by contrast, the counter-nationalisms in the erstwhile colonies remain subject to definition in collective terms. To strive for Western transparency – that is, national self-description in post-national terms as “a free space occupied by free individuals”⁷⁴ – would still imply conformity to the Western-derived developmental paradigm; to simply stop short at a descriptive assessment of the global binarism, would more or less repeat Jameson’s gesture of reasserting it as difference; for Prasad, the decisive move

out of this model is to begin by redefining the libidinal-private in its allegorical status (its relation to particular nations but especially to particular classes – a class allegory) and collapsing the distinction [between the ‘libidinal-individualist’ and the ‘political-collective’] that originates in capitalist ideology.⁷⁵

Thus, Prasad manages to elucidate the political unconscious that forms the blind spot of Jameson’s own argument, namely the incapability to decipher ‘Western’ fictions of the private individual as collective myths that (re)produce and (re)inscribe fantasies of national and class coherence within the unified and uneven structure of global capitalism. From here, it becomes possible to reassess the notion of the ‘national allegory’ – now no longer a mark that differentiates the ‘Third-World’ text from its ‘First-World’ counterpart but, potentially, a characteristic of literature as such (it being understood that the tenor of the allegory is not necessarily the nation but some kind of collectivity).

With Prasad, Jameson’s model would be viable if modified as follows: Texts in general tend to allegorise collectivities, but the visibility of their allegorical status depends on their respective conditions of emergence from ‘First’ or ‘Third’ World situations. There are third-world texts that allegorise the nation

⁷³ Prasad, “On the Question of a Theory of (Third) World Literature”, 158.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

without participating in the production of a national community imagined in homogeneous empty time; rather they produce allegories in which the nation itself is rendered as deeply problematic, fictitious, at odds with itself. The nation (metonymically referring to that larger formation, modernity) emerges from these allegories as an incomplete and possibly inconclusive project that never realises itself and hence cannot live up to its own standards. The impossibility of a convergence of state and culture;⁷⁶ the production of the people as an “effect of unity by virtue of which the people will appear, in everyone’s eyes, ‘as a people’”;⁷⁷ the precarious suturing of “the well-worn pedagogies and pedigrees of national unity” with the “incommensurable perplexity of the nation’s living”⁷⁸ – all these crucial effects of writing the nation are marked, in the image of third-world national allegories, as fundamentally aporetic. Most conspicuously, however, it is the temporal dimension of homogeneous empty time that gets refracted and ultimately exploded in these texts.

Nonetheless, national allegories abound in the cultural production of postcolonial India; and it is, counter to Amit Chaudhuri’s polemics, by no means only in that globally visible field of novel writing in English that the ‘postcolonial entity called ‘India’ gets articulated’. In fact, the attention that novels such as Rushdie’s, Ghosh’s or Seth’s have received in the West may well be read as a further symptom of Western “novelism”⁷⁹ rather than as an indicator of the importance these texts have had in the Indian context itself, where the novel, and in particular the novel written in English, has largely remained “an élitist and minority form in developing countries when compared to poem, song, television and film”.⁸⁰ Many discussions of Indian ‘national’ culture do not touch upon novels at all but rather focus on feature and documentary films, visual arts and their staging in exhibitions, or cottage-industry handicraft.⁸¹ Indian cultural studies and film studies abundantly demonstrate how ‘the nation’ is allegorically invoked in

⁷⁶ See Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture*. London & New York (Routledge) 1999: 49.

⁷⁷ Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology”. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. Etienne Balibar & Immanuel Wallerstein. London (Verso) 1991: 86–106; 93–94.

⁷⁸ Bhabha, “DissemiNation”, 317.

⁷⁹ Clifford Siskin, “Epilogue: The Rise of Novelism”. *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*. Ed. Deidre Lynch & William B. Warner. Durham & London (Duke UP) 1996: 423–440; 423.

⁸⁰ Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. Basingstoke (Macmillan) 1988: 18.

⁸¹ See the essays assembled in Partha Chatterjee’s *Wages of Freedom* (1998), or in *India – A National Culture?*, edited by Geeti Sen; both collections have articles on a wide range of artistic representational media but *not* on novels, or even literature in general.

television drama,⁸² Bollywood cinema,⁸³ popular calendar art,⁸⁴ or national art exhibitions.⁸⁵ Novelistic representations of the nation occupy a relatively marginal place in this context and yet operate, on a global scale, as the most prominent Indian national allegories – precisely because they employ representational devices easily compatible with dominant Western aesthetic traditions. Taking Chatterjee’s observation about the nation in heterogeneous time as a starting point for a selective reading of some of these novelistic national allegories, however, one must be ready to expect a fundamental breach with Anderson’s assumption of novels constructing the nation in the synchrony of the *meanwhile*, even where this effect of simultaneity becomes thematic.

2.4 A cursory glance at Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

From various locations, *Midnight’s Children* has been praised for, or accused of, so many things that a thorough engagement with that novel’s impact would require a study in its own right. The following reading – selective and ‘symptomatic’ – will attempt to trace, in Rushdie’s text, the unexpected valorisation of a vernacular modernity articulated primarily through the concepts of time and nation. In such a reading, then, *Midnight’s Children* would partake of that much larger project (mostly, but not only) within postcolonial politics, namely the interrogation, and heterogenisation, of a universalist concept of modernity. Such critical reassessments of a seemingly homogeneous modernity should not be misread as disclaimers to modernity altogether; rather the other way around, they stake the claims to a vernacularisation of modernity. Rushdie, to be sure, can only to a certain extent be associated with this project: Other than Chakrabarty or Chatterjee, in whose writings the claim to “our modernity” projects a political and cultural agenda, Rushdie exhibits a version of a mixed Indian modernity that belongs exclusively to the past, if not to fiction altogether: *Midnight’s*

⁸² Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. Cambridge (CUP) 2001.

⁸³ Ravi Vasudevan, *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi (OUP) 1998; Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987*. New Delhi (OUP) 1998; M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. New Delhi (OUP) 1998.

⁸⁴ Patricia Uberoi, *From Goddess to Pin-up: Icons of Femininity in Indian Calendar Art*. Tokyo (Fukuoka Asian Art Museum) 2000; and “Chicks, Kids and Couples: The Nation in Calendar Art”. *India – A National Culture?* Ed. Geeti Sen. New Delhi & London (Sage) 2003: 197–210.

⁸⁵ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “Instituting the Nation in Art”. *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State*. Ed. Partha Chatterjee. New Delhi (OUP) 1998: 89–122; and Kavita Singh, “The Museum is National”. *India – A National Culture?*, 176–196.

Children seems to be informed by a purely nostalgic appreciation of history's inherent, but irretrievably lost opportunities. The novel therefore can be read as an elegy to a genre of modernity that effectively never was but finds its only abode in fiction (pickle jars, poietic memory, narrativity in general). Read in this way, *Midnight's Children* would rehearse a mode of writing that James Clifford has criticised as "ethnographic pastoral", in which the vestiges of vanishing cultures are symbolically preserved in their textual representation on condition of their 'actual' disappearance: "'salvage' ethnography" works on the principle that "the other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text".⁸⁶ Clifford's point about the allegory of salvage is its underpinnings by a genuinely modernist, historicist subtext that actually *demands* that the Other be lost in order to occasion the constitution of the text as its shrine. In this sense, all references to and invocations of a heterogeneous modernity on Indian soil are, in *Midnight's Children*, linked with the underlying assumption of the failure of that modernity with a difference which, to get narrated in the first place, would already have had to disappear.

The nation as it initially emerges in Rushdie's text is on the one hand grasped in cutting-edge 'modern' terms that prefigure, to an astonishing degree, descriptive and theoretical concepts not yet circulated by 1981, the time of the novel's publication;⁸⁷ these notions, on the other hand, are consistently fused with heterotopian components that effectively disrupt the fiction of the homogeneously modern. A striking instance of this can be found in the way the inauguration of independent India is rendered in a manner highly consonant with, and at the same time significantly different from, Benedict Anderson's notion - published two years later than *Midnight's Children* - of the nation as a community imagined in homogeneous time:

And in Delhi, a wiry serious man sits in the Assembly Hall and prepares to make a speech. At Methwold's estate goldfish hang stilly in ponds *while* the residents go from house to house bearing pistachio sweetmeats, embracing and kissing one another - green pistachio is eaten, and saffron laddoo-balls. Two children move down secret passages

⁸⁶ Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory", 112.

⁸⁷ It is, as Josna E. Rege observes, in fact astounding that *Midnight's Children* should have preceded - and, as would have to be added, anticipated - much of the theoretical work that keeps informing even current debates on nationalism, postcolonial or no: the first edition of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* dates back to 1983; Partha Chatterjee's major books on the nation in colonial difference were published in 1986 and 1993; Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger launched *The Invention of Tradition* two years after the publication of *Midnight's Children*, and Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* appeared only in 1990, the same year that Homi Bhabha edited the collection of critical essays, *Nation and Narration*. See Josna E. Rege, "Victim Into Protagonist? *Midnight's Children* and the National Narratives of the Eighties". *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*. Ed. M Keith Booker. New York (G.K. Hall & Co.) 1998: 250-282.

while in Agra an ageing doctor sits with his wife, who has two moles on her face like witchnipples, and in the midst of sleeping geese and moth-eaten memories they are somehow struck silent, and can find nothing to say. And in all the cities all the towns all the villages the little dia-lamps burn on window-sills porches verandahs, while trains burn in the Punjab, with the green flames of blistering paint and the glaring saffron of fired fuel, like the biggest dias in the world.⁸⁸

The simultaneity of these instances dispersed across the panoramatically compressed space of the new nation-state cannot but evoke a sense of community, even communion. At one level, the performance of the nation is not only synchronous but same: the “little dia-lamps” that are lit “in all the cities all the towns all the villages” connect the inhabitants of the new nation-state and suggest their transformation into ‘the people’; this imagined community is symbolically enacted in strict analogy to Anderson’s description of “mass ceremony” as a ritualistic reconfirmation of the nation’s cohesion. In modern mass ceremonies – Anderson’s examples are the reading of novels and newspapers – “each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion”.⁸⁹ Rushdie’s dia-lamps, seemingly, signify an even more inclusive mass ceremony that would neither require the literacy nor the privacy which the act of reading implies, both of which are not to be taken for granted in an Indian context. Furthermore the oil lamps on the window-sills amplify the nation, even at the moment of its very inception, in some underdetermined fashion with ‘tradition’, thus suggestive of what Anderson would call the nation’s claim to an “immemorial past”.⁹⁰ Yet while in Anderson, the mass ceremonies that consolidate the imagined community consist of *genuinely modern engagements with equally modern mass media*, Rushdie’s India is performed by way of continuing a tradition that, significantly, is in itself communal instead of national. For in merely replicating the performative elements of the Hindu festival of Divali - the lighting of dia-lamps, the burning of firecrackers, the distribution of sweetmeats - the entire nation-wide celebration of Independence is overcoded with signs of religious partiality and hence stripped of its secular content. To bring this point home, Rushdie has his narrator characterise the festivities on the occasion of the 31st Independence Day “as if it were the day of the paint-festival Holi” (462), thus confirming the superimposition of the religious and communal on the secular and national. In short, the popular performance of the nation and its official formulation are as discrepant as Homi Bhabha will

⁸⁸ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*. London (Methuen) 1982: 114; my emphases. In the following, quotes from the novel with page numbers in my own text.

⁸⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 35.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

describe them in 1991, as indices of the “disjunctive time of the nation’s modernity - as a knowledge disjunct [...] between the shreds and patches of cultural signification and the certainties of a nationalist pedagogy”.⁹¹ In the same vein, the official iconography that represents India in a tricolour of saffron, white and green, is substantially modified in the midnight performance: When in the course of the popular festivities, “suddenly everything is saffron and green” (113), then it is *not* the national flag that is enacted in these celebrations but the symbolisation of the two main religious affiliations of the subcontinent, *not the ‘modern’ nation but religious communities*. In the heraldics of the Indian tricolour, the colour saffron is supposed to signify Hinduism, the colour green Islam; the secularism of the Indian nation state takes centre stage in the broad white stripe in-between those two colours - keeping them apart or connecting them, in any case proclaiming a constitutional, republican, supra-communal state (or, in present conditions, rather keeping the memory to such aspirations alive). White, however, is conspicuously absent from Rushdie’s celebrations of national Independence, where even the flames of the dia-lamps lit all over the country are fantastically coloured: “half the lamps burn saffron, the others flame with green” (114). By taking great pains to locate this performative enactment of the nation in a structure of synchrony, and rendering this performance of the nation in a manner that Anderson would have called “a complex gloss upon the word ‘meanwhile’”,⁹² Rushdie seems to underwrite a conception according to which India, with Independence, has ‘arrived’ at the modernity of homogeneous empty time. In Anderson’s terms, however, the enactment of the nation as composite *religious community* would locate that socius firmly in another, ‘retarded’ time, interrupting a normalising reading in terms of the homogeneously imagined community. In what Homi Bhabha has called “postcolonial time”, by contrast, it is precisely such a “polarized historicist *sensibility* of the archaic and the modern”⁹³ that is interrogated on the ground that nation-time is essentially heterogeneous. Rushdie’s panorama of the moment of Independence effects this kind of heterogenisation of the very simultaneity it insists on. For what exactly is connected temporally by Rushdie’s ‘whiles’? Goldfish and upper middle-class denizens of Methwold’s Estate celebrating Independence with saffron and green coloured sweetmeats; two babies in the pangs of being born in Bombay and an elderly couple in Agra “struck silent”. Obviously not all of these are equally enfolded into the festive invocation of the nation, nor do they partake of one and the same temporality. Time is clearly distributed unevenly across the subcontinent

⁹¹ Bhabha, “DissemiNation”, 294.

⁹² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25.

⁹³ Bhabha, “DissemiNation”, 304.

leaving the members of the nation curiously delinked. And not only that: the third 'while' immediately introduces the catastrophic and exclusive inception of the nation in a process of murderous separation: As the dia-lamps are burning (in saffron and green but not white), so do "trains in the Punjab": The unity of the Indian nation is being incantated in synchrony with its ultraviolet division in the Partition carnages; simultaneity thus does not stop short at the homogenisation of 'the people' but, more fundamentally, reveals the incongruity of nation and state and the latter's complicity in the very modernist dependence on an Other. Is it for this reason that Nehru, the representative head-of-state and champion of secularism, remains disconnected and solitary in preparation of his 'tryst-with-destiny' address?

Not accidentally does Saleem Sinai's miraculously timed birth become public property in and through the medium of *The Times of India*, for Rushdie's novel is of course set in the multiple times of India, at times "accelerated" (245), at other times "impeded" (150), or subject to "time-shifting sorcery" (368), in any case never reducible "to the narrow one-dimensionality of a straight line" (150). Heterogeneous time – "as variable and inconstant as Bombay's electric power supply" (106) – is not only the very condition for the narrative of *Midnight's Children* but for the life of the nation as it emerges from the pages of the novel. Even Mountbatten's announcement of the exact date of transfer of power does not effect a simple calendrical temporality but combines this latter with the teleology of apocalyptic time: Independence therefore comes according to the oxymoronic temporality of a "countdown calendar" (91) that only technically succeeds in implementing homogeneously measured time while actually "rushing everyone towards August 15th" (101). It may be worth recalling that Walter Benjamin, from whom Anderson derives his crucial notion of homogeneous empty time, had insisted that "the calendars do not measure time as clocks do".⁹⁴ Strictly speaking, it is only the time of the clocks that is empty and homogeneous, whereas the calendar already splits an allegedly unified time by incorporating differently intense moments: recurrent festivals and holidays that, in the mode of mythic time,⁹⁵ regularly reinstate "the very same day" all over again. In order to illustrate his urge for a revolutionary exploding of the regime of empty homogeneous time, Benjamin draws attention to the suspension of clocked time in the course of the Paris July Revolution.⁹⁶ In Rushdie's magic realism, the immense growth of the prenatal nation (as embodied in the narrator figure and/or his double, Shiva) effects in a similar

⁹⁴ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", 261.

⁹⁵ See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*. Tr. Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer. Chicago & London (U of Chicago P) 1998: 105.

⁹⁶ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", 262.

way the arresting of clocked time, so that synchronous with the calendrical-apocalyptic rush towards fulfilment in Independence, for Amina, the mother of the nation, “time had come to a complete stop. The baby in my stomach stopped the clocks” (101). While Amina thus inhabits her own private temporality of arrested time, the clocks of the official countdown seemingly keep ticking out homogeneous time; but even this clocked time is subject to far-reaching modifications, so that the midnight hour of August 15th, far from representing a levelled-out temporal unit commensurate with any other in the continuum of homogeneous empty time, is excessively endowed with marvels and constitutive of an altogether anomalous temporality. Ironically, it is precisely through the modality of clocked time that membership to the prodigious Midnight’s Children’s Conference is defined, the condition being a date of birth exactly “during the first hour of August 15th, 1947 – between midnight and one a.m.” (195). The narrator reflects that the Midnight’s Children’s Conference functions as a polyvalent metaphor that “can be made to represent many things” – among others, “the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation” (200); in any case, however, the MCC is made sure to function as the ideal imagined community of the “child-nation” (172) conceived as a “gang which was spread over the length and breadth of the country, and whose headquarters were behind [Saleem’s] eyebrows” (207). Thus, in an ideal crystallisation of the paradigm of the national/modern, the nation emerges in a modernity that ineluctably implies ‘retrogression’ – a split temporality that pertains to the very medium of such a nation’s self-expression. For Saleem, it will be remembered, can function as the mediator of the Conference thanks to his personal magical gift which transmutes him into “a sort of radio” (166), i.e. an embodiment of the mass media that historically succede Anderson’s print capitalism. While this reference to broadcast technology underscores the claim to modernity, the ‘gift’ of the radio is elsewhere grasped in terms of parapsychology, hence relegated to primordial superstition: “telepathy, then” (168).

Significantly, the Children figure not only as an imagined community but also as that imagined community’s political representation; the Conference, according to Saleem’s intentions, is meant to function as a body that regularly “would assemble, for one hour, between midnight and one a.m., in the lok sabha or parliament of my brain” (227). This parallel assembly then turns out to operate as a true representation of the nation’s plurality in that it embodies “the very essence of multiplicity” (229), at the price, however, of utter failure in concrete political terms.

Rushdie’s version of Indian modernity, then, works on a principle of fusing the received ‘prime modernity’ (with its historical origins in Europe) with elements that – in a progressivist narrative – would be identified as

diachronic; the point is, however, that *Midnight's Children* defies such historicism by establishing configurations in which things are both 'modern' and 'antiquated' at the same time: the midnight hour as clocked time as well as apocalypse; the Midnight's Children's Conference as both modern imagined community and manifested magic, as both parliament and prodigy; Saleem's gift grasped in terms of technology but equally magic. Within the field of historical possibility that Rushdie expands, these features cannot be hierarchised as 'contemporary' or 'residual': This peculiar version of modernity, in other words, does not conform to any model of uneven development or synchronous diachronies but produces categorical heterotopias. Independence, in *Midnight's Children*, initially inaugurates the option for an alternative, vernacular modernity whose receptacle is the nation as imagined in the Midnight's Children's Conference. This version of modernity implies what Partha Chatterjee calls "the presence of a dense and heterogeneous time", and that he illustrates with examples that could stem directly from the world of *Midnight's Children*: Chatterjee's "industrial capitalists delaying the closing of a business deal because they hadn't yet had word from their respective astrologers" inhabit the same heterotopian modernity that Rushdie assigns to Nehru himself, sitting "amongst a bunch of gaptoothed, stragglebearded astrologers and adjust[ing] the Five Year Plan to bring it into harmony with the music of the spheres" (174). Politics, in this version of Nehru, is firmly implicated in a cosmology based on precisely those correspondence patterns that, as will be demonstrated below, inform Saleem's entire narrative even beyond the apparent dissolution of those patterns.

Such representations of the Prime Minister notwithstanding, it is the state that forecloses this local option to a vernacular modernity by brutally interpellating the nation into homogeneous empty time - first by subjecting it to relentless Western-style modernisation in the course of inserting India into a "modernizing, twentieth-century economy" (200), and, later, in the form of Emergency authoritarianism. Politics as such thus comes to figure as a domain destructive of "the true hope of freedom" (200):

Politics, children: at the best of times a bad dirty business. We should have avoided it, I should never have dreamed of purpose, I am coming to the conclusion that privacy, the small individual lives of men, are preferable to all this inflated macrocosmic activity. (435)

Clearly the failure and annihilation of the Midnight's Children's Conference engenders an embrace of the clear-cut distinction between the political and the individual that marks Western mainstream modernity. The absence of that split, or rather the over-emphasised identity of those two domains, had, to this point, operated as formative of the vernacular modernity of Saleem's

India. It is precisely the connectedness of public and private, political and individual, that makes the entire narrative of *Midnight's Children* possible. Even the renunciation of this continuity is still a document of heterogeneous time since to grasp politics in terms of the macrocosm engages a 'pre-modern' epistemology,⁹⁷ by virtue of which the delinking of public and private is curiously crossed out in the very act of being spoken: The macrocosm is conceivable only in relation to, and continuous mediation with, its necessary complement, the microcosm.⁹⁸ As long as the political is expressed in 'macrocosmic' terms, therefore, a fundamental linkage with its microcosmic counterpart is presupposed even when this linkage is explicitly questioned. Here, of course, Jameson's notion of the national allegory is at stake: *Midnight's Children* basically operates on the inextricable connection of the political and the individual by virtue of a "correspondence" (135) that articulates "the effects on private life" with the "consequences for the sphere of public action" (237); this structure of correspondence, however, is permanently reflected upon and rendered self-conscious by way of satirisation. Saleem's 'identity' with India, overdetermined and regularly reenacted, thus evokes "not so much a national allegory proper as a parody of such allegories".⁹⁹ With his "destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" (9), his facial physiognomy a repetition of "the whole map of *India*" (231), the "history of [his] family" invariably congruent with "the fate of a nation" (313), Saleem all too obviously lends himself for a reading in terms of a national allegory that is here literalised to embodiment: Just as the "body politic began to crack" (245), Saleem himself is in the process of "falling apart" into "(approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust" (37). If *Midnight's Children*, then, traces the disarticulation of the imagined community, this very process of dissolution is still contained within the allegorical relation of correspondence that remains stable all through the text. Despite the novel's pessimistic rhetoric of entropy, the nation does not entirely dissolve in *Midnight's Children*. Its stability, in the final instance, seems to depend not so much on the lost integrity of its body but on its location in a shared vernacular modernity - one which provides for alternative versions of cohesion:

⁹⁷ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Tr. Alan Sheridan. London & New York (Routledge) 2001: 62—70.

⁹⁸ See J.P.S. Uberoi, *The Other Mind of Europe: Goethe as a Scientist*. New Delhi (OUP) 1984: 90—92.

⁹⁹ M. Keith Booker, "Midnight's Children, History, and Complexity: Reading Rushdie After the Cold War". *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*. Ed. M Keith Booker. New York (G.K. Hall & Co.) 1998: 283—313; 292.

As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form - or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes. Hence our vulnerability to omens ... when the Indian flag was first raised, for instance, a rainbow appeared above that Delhi field, a rainbow of saffron and green; and we felt blessed. (300; my emphasis)

Again the vernacularisation of modernity: the fusion of 'national longing for form' (or longing for the nation form) with the 'pre-modern' epistemology of correspondence and similarities; a local modernity from whose iconography the secular colour white is necessarily banished in order to leave room for the portentous saffron-and-green rainbow to appear. Now, however, the conspicuous absence of white as a heraldic colour is naturalised in the image of the rainbow that by definition cannot contain white precisely because it results from the prismatic analysis, the taking-apart, of white light: If the rainbow as an unfolding of the spectrum requires the disarticulation of the unity of white light, it is in other words always preceded by the containment, or full articulation, of the spectrum in the waves of white light. This process now can be read in analogy to the narrative procedures at work in *Midnight's Children* at large: If Saleem right from the start claims to "have been a swallower of lives" with "consumed multitudes [...] jostling and shoving inside" (1), this container figure can now easily be linked with the composite status of white light; just as this latter needs to be disarticulated in order to release a spectrum in which all colours but white itself can appear, likewise must the former 'literally fall apart' in the process of narration. White, then, is not fully absent from Rushdie's text; rather it forms the absent cause of the entire narrative, within which it is nowhere empirically present as a textual moment and yet the indispensable condition of possibility for the narrative to emerge – if only from the long process of disarticulation.

It is puzzling and ultimately futile to even try to pinpoint Rushdie's stance in this muddle: *Midnight's Children* is neither a celebratory valorisation of India's vernacular modernity (whose continuity with outright communalism is all too obvious in the novel), nor simply a 'Westernised' caricature of a retarded and incomplete derivation of the one and only version of the modern in which, as Saleem puts it, "Europe repeats itself, in India, as farce" (185). Abiding by Marx's dictum that Saleem alludes to, 'Europe' has taken the place of 'history' (more precisely: "all the great events and characters of world history"): a selectively received past imposed on the living as a monumental role model that defines what is and what is not thinkable, as hyperreal as the preservation of a fake Europe in Methwold's Estate even after the demise of the Raj. For Marx (and Nietzsche, for that matter), such monumental history serves for an appropriation as a pre-text for agency here

and now, even while imposing severe limitations on the imagination: Agency occurs in the constraints of, but also thanks to, handed-down costumes from the store-houses of the past so that the present is never 'pure' but in its very texture shot through with retentions. In the face of the "irreducibly plural nature of the 'now'",¹⁰⁰ well theorised in Western thinking from Bergson via Husserl and Heidegger to Derrida, the claim to a homogeneously 'contemporary' modernity is revealed as White mythology. India conceived as 'Europe-as-farce' is therefore not so much an exposure of a postcolonial fixation on colonialism but one more instance of the inherent plurality of modern temporalities. Rushdie's heterotopia is thus local and universal at once, and it strikingly lacks any commitment to Chatterjee's central category of community: In *Midnight's Children*, there is no in-between the individual and the 'whole' of the nation. In that sense, the political imagination, ensnared in the rigid binaries of the nation and its atoms, is – from a subaltern perspective – as impoverished as official Western political theory prescribes. That Rushdie, at least in his first major novel, should nevertheless have achieved a glance beyond these limitations by representing, and embracing, post-Independence India as the inherently heterotopian scene on which the national/modern is played out, makes *Midnight's Children* set the tone for the series of self-conscious Indian national allegories that followed its publication.

¹⁰⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 253.

3 Mythologising the Quotidian

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

The Great Indian Novel basically depends on one single move in which the classical mythological text of the *Mahabharata* is displaced and superimposed as a pretext upon a historical narrative that reaches from the inception of the Indian freedom struggle to the end of Indira Gandhi's emergency. As historical fiction, Tharoor's book thus roughly covers the same terrain as *Midnight's Children*: the period from the emergence of Indian nationalism through the struggles for independence and its achievement, to the corruption of the nation-state that India has become. By way of telling India's modernity consistently in terms of the epic, this modernity becomes, at one level, legible as fundamentally *different*: not as a derivation of the modular form of European prime modernity but, in an emphatic version of the paradigm of the national/modern, as a rerun, or rather re-enactment, of the events codified in the *Mahabharata*. Jonathan Culler observes that Tharoor's "retelling in modern form of the traditional narratives of the *Mahabharata* seems to re-establish their authority while suggesting that all Indian history is already contained in them, *as if events were determined by their signifying structures*".¹ Culler, of course, is aware of the indeterminacy that such a signifying structure effects as it produces, in Tharoor's text, a narrative that hovers between satirisation and sacralisation of the historical-as-mythology. What renders Culler's reflections slightly unsatisfactory is his acceptance of the *Mahabharata* as a given "story of origin"² unproblematically available as a point of reference from which an allegorisation like *The Great Indian Novel* might proceed as if there were only one *Mahabharata*. A notion like this overlooks the constructedness of the epic as a unified entity that as such has historically emerged from 19th-century orientalist interventions aimed, as Peter van der Veer points out, at

¹ Jonathan Culler, "Making History: The Power of Narrative". *Narrative: A Seminar*. Ed. Amiya Dev. New Delhi (Sahitya Akademi) 1994: 5—12; 12.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

articulating “Indian civilization [as] a unified whole based on a *shastrik*, authoritative tradition”. In this project, van der Veer argues,

critical editions of Hindu scriptures [...] replaced a fragmented, largely oral set of traditions with an unchanging, homogenized written canon. The critical editions of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana [...] show this project of selection and unification very well.³

This is not to say that there were no *Mahabharata* but, rather to the contrary, that various versions of the epic coexist specific to region, class, caste and/or ethnic group,⁴ and even across the Hindu-Muslim divide. Current Indologist scholarship is concerned with the question whether the classical canonised *Mahabharata* is derived from the oral folk epics, or whether these latter rather form “disenplotments and reenplotments” of the former.⁵ Needless to say, philological intricacies like these cannot be addressed here; however, it is important for a reading of *The Great Indian Novel* to acknowledge the polyvocal epic repertoire on which Tharoor’s novel feeds, and to which it also contributes: Writing *Mahabharatas*, it seems, is by no means a ‘medieval’ practice but very much part of the ongoing negotiations of ‘Indianness’ in the postcolonial state.

³ Peter van der Veer, “The Foreign Hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and Communalism”. *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*. Ed. Carol A. Breckenridge & Peter van der Veer. Philadelphia (U of Pennsylvania P) 1993: 23–44; 40. – Already in his *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion* had John Dowson conceded that “the poem has been subjected to much modification and has received numerous modern additions, but many of its legends and stories are of Vedic character and of great antiquity. They seem to have long existed in a scattered state and to have been brought together at different times.” John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion*. Calcutta (Rupa) 1998: 183.

⁴ Thus, e.g., Dipesh Chakrabarty attests to his own attachment to “(middle-class versions of) the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*”; see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Radical Histories and Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critiques of *Subaltern Studies*”. *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. Ed. & intr. Vinayak Chaturvedi. London & New York (Verso) 2000: 256–280; 262. In his study of the politics of Dalit narratives, Badrinarayan mentions how certain caste communities in rural Bihar “claim to be descendants of Dushasana, one of the brothers of the Kaurava prince Duryodhana. Some others claim to be the offspring of Arjuna and Chitrangada”: In such claims to Kaurava ancestry, that imply a positive reference to the alleged genealogical forebears, multiple readings of the epic are manifested, considering that the Kauravas are both the villains and the losers of the official epic (Badrinarayan, *Documenting Dissent: Contesting Fables, Contested Memories, and Dalit Political Discourse*. Shimla (Indian Institute of Advanced Study) 2001: 29).

⁵ Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India’s Oral and Classical Epics: Draupadi Among Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits*. Chicago & London (U of Chicago P) 1999: 17. – While Hiltebeitel insists on the primacy of the classical versions of the epics, of which the oral folk *Mahabharatas* would then form strong rewritings, other scholars claim a structural autonomy for the oral epics (see, e.g., Stuart H. Blackburn, Peter J. Claus, Joyce B. Flueckiger & Susan S. Wadley, *Oral Epics in India*. Berkeley [U of California P] 1989).

In this sense, Culler falls back behind Tharoor's own self-consciousness with respect to the intertextual source of his national allegory. Culler's reading plays down the fact, acknowledged by Tharoor,⁶ that *The Great Indian Novel* implicitly relies on a highly selective rearticulation of its pretext from among the many contesting *Mahabharatas*. Thus, while Culler seems to affirm Vyasa's high-Sanskritic, canonised version as the definite 'only story', Tharoor's text not simply repeats but principally *reflects* the ideological manoeuvres that Chatterjee and others have identified at work in the creation of 19th century Indian nationalism: In order to be able to produce a 'different discourse' of modernity, Tharoor has first to consolidate a 'tradition' in which to ground his claim to difference. The formulation of that different discourse will necessarily depend on the construction of the 'tradition' that it refers to. Though not concealed, Tharoor's decision will mark the text as a whole deeply problematic from a standpoint informed by the critique-of-modernity debate: Superimposing his own selective reading of the epic onto modern Indian history, Tharoor produces a reconfirmation of that "elitist historiography [...] in which the indigenous elite led the people from subjugation to freedom".⁷ Depending on translation, Tharoor necessarily employs a non-hieratic approach to the epic, yet not a 'plebeian' one: The rewriting of the *Mahabharata* as *The Great Indian Novel*, I will argue, will entail a foreclosure of popular agency and result in a romance of the state. This gets all the more obvious as soon as one takes into account that Tharoor's text stems from exactly the same period in which the two canonical Indian epics were revamped as "*dharmic serials*" launched by the state-run television channel, Doordarshan. Transferred from the classical orientalist niche of Sanscritic high culture into the domain of popular culture, the broadcast versions of the classical versions of both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as devotional serials contributed to the *Hindutva* effort of rearticulating cultural unity by suggesting a national mass culture aggressively conceived as Hindu: "By rendering it in a format meant for a general [nationwide] audience, Hindu programming was now being offered not as part of some quota system, but identified with culture in general".⁸ Arvind Rajagopal demonstrates how the ninety-four episode *Mahabharata* serial, directed by B.R. Chopra and televised from 1989 onwards, instils a specific mass reception including "viewers who bathed before the show, who distributed sweets after it, who decorated the TV set with flowers and incense

⁶ See Shashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*. New Delhi (Penguin) 1989: 419: "I am no Sanskrit scholar and have therefore relied on a highly subjective reading of a variety of English translations of the epic."

⁷ Ranajit Guha [1982], "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India". *Subaltern Studies. Vol. 1*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. New Delhi (OUP) 1997: 1—7; 2.

⁸ Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 83.

sticks as it began”.⁹ These, to be sure, are phenomena that answer strikingly to the festive, reverential and ceremonial practices of viewing media events as described by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz: Media events, according to Dayan and Katz,

cause viewers to *celebrate* the event by gathering before the television set in groups, rather than alone. [...] Figuratively, at least, these events cause people to dress up, rather than dress down, to view television. These broadcasts *integrate* society in a collective heartbeat and evoke a *renewal of loyalty* to the society and its legitimate authority.¹⁰

The analogy with the ‘secular mass ceremonies’ of novel and newspaper readings described by Anderson as constitutive of the national imaginary are self-evident; they elucidate, in the context of a discussion of *The Great Indian Novel*, how any reference to the *Mahabharata* at that novel’s historic location must be read as an intervention into a public discursive field overdetermined by a specific *Hindutva* version of nationalist mobilisation efficiently tapping the resources of the epics. In this light, Tharoor’s text becomes readable as an alternative reappropriation of the *Mahabharata*, as a polemic contestation of the anti-secular Hindu chauvinist attempt to rewrite Indian pasts and present as ‘authentically’ Hindu. The very popularity of the Doordarshan serials and, even more crucially, the mass appeal of the Hindu right in Indian politics, therefore inform Tharoor’s specific way of taking recourse to the epic: As soon as one conceives of *The Great Indian Novel* as a “symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation”,¹¹ it becomes self-evident that the text as a whole is formulated as an individual utterance in the larger discursive struggle over the ‘secular’ or ‘communalist’ character of the Indian state – an ‘individual utterance’ that necessarily has to establish and maintain some kind of *relation* with its antagonist. This latter, for Tharoor, is the anti-secular *popular* Hindu right, against which his own text mobilises its own revision of the liberal *elitist* secular State. In order to engage his in-built opponent in a polemic debate, however, Tharoor’s text must submit to the code utilised by that antagonist;¹² hence the effort of offering *another* rewriting of the *Mahabharata*.

To be sure, there is no determinism at work here; no putative *Hindutva* hegemony could have enforced the specific reply that *The Great Indian*

⁹ Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 94.

¹⁰ Daniel Dayan & Elihu Katz, “Defining Media Events: High Holidays of Mass Communication”. *Television: The Critical View*. 6th ed. Ed. Horace Newcomb. New York & Oxford (OUP) 2000: 401–420; 406.

¹¹ Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 85.

¹² Jameson claims that the polemic dialogue occurs in the “all-embracing unity of single code which [the antagonists] must share”; *ibid.*, 88.

Novel formulates. It would for instance have been possible to question not only its chauvinistic reappropriation but the *Mahabharata* itself as a Brahminical “accretive epic”.¹³ Instead, Tharoor chooses to reclaim the authority of the epic for a secularist-liberal agenda, on condition that the pretext itself remain largely unproblematic. This is achieved by way of a presentist projection of essentially (post)modernist positions onto a past represented by an ancient text that, thus constructed, begins to figure as the guarantee of that which appears as desirable for the present: tolerance as the ‘true genius of India’. This is precisely the argument put forward by O.P. Juneja who claims that the *Mahabharata* and its multiple modifications and rewritings point towards a “polyphonic heteroglossic dialogism” characteristic of ‘Indian culture’ as such, as if ‘India’ were, and had in fact always been, a prototypical embodiment of the Bakhtinian ideal: “The post-modern condition which was already, always there in the Indian soil produced post-modern texts like the *Mahabharata* and its contemporary re-written texts like *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor”.¹⁴

Even though Tharoor arguably utilises the *Mahabharata* in a similar manner, he is not after a mechanical one-to-one equation between pretext and text, mythology and historical fiction; it is an altogether different question whether – as Vrinda Nabar claims – his “selectiveness keeps the basic narrative of *The Mahabharata* intact, falsifying neither its potential nor its metaphorical application”.¹⁵ K.C. Belliappa begs to differ, complaining that the “parallels between the characters in the *Mahabharata* and the historical figures in the novel seem, at times, rather naive and quite often do not work”.¹⁶ Only after some more detailed (albeit exemplary) analyses of a few selected sequences from *The Great Indian Novel* will these questions be

¹³ A critique of the *Mahabharata* as an ideological tool in the continuation of Brahminic hegemony is put forth by Kancha Ilaiah who, from a Dalit position, exposes the epic’s “role in building a strong consent system that drew in all the Dalitbahujans to cement Brahminism”; Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hinduva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Calcutta (Samya) 1996: 85; in her translator’s foreword to Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi” – itself a strong rewriting of an episode from the *Mahabharata* – Gayatri Spivak calls attention to “the *Mahabharata* itself in its colonialist function in the interest of the so-called Aryan invaders of India”; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “‘Draupadi’ by Mahasweta Devi: Translator’s Foreword”. In *Other Worlds*, 179–196; 183.

¹⁴ O.P. Juneja, “Post-Modernism, Indian Literatures, and *The Mahabharata*”. *Critical Practice* VII.1 (2000): 48–67; 53–54.

¹⁵ Vrinda Nabar, “The Tale and the Teller: Three Indian English Novels of the 1980s”. *Mapping Cultural Spaces: Postcolonial Indian Literature in English*. Ed. Nilufer Bharucha & Vrinda Nabar. New Delhi & Bombay (Vision Books) 1998: 201–211; 207.

¹⁶ K.C. Belliappa, “Interrogating Post-colonial Societies: Chinua Achebe, Shashi Tharoor and Rukun Advani”. *Interrogating Post-Colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*. Ed. Harish Trivedi & Meenakshi Mukherjee. Shimla (Indian Institute of Advanced Study) 1997: 203–212; 207.

picked up again - not so much in terms of value judgements about Tharoor's success or failure,¹⁷ but in the sense of an attempt to come to grips with the ideological underpinnings and functions of myth displacement in *The Great Indian Novel*, which, as I will argue, tries to bring liberalism/individualism and collectivity, the mundane and romance into alignment – in a revised form of the nation and the nation-state.

3.1 Reverent revenants

As Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah etc. enter the scene of *The Great Indian Novel* as Gangaji, Dhritarashtra, or Karna - i.e. in the cloaks of the heroes from the *Mahabharata* -, the novel turns into a *roman à clef* but more importantly into an attempt to play out the mythological against the historical, and vice versa. To narrate the ultimately profane in terms of the sacred (after all, the *Mahabharata* contains the Bhagavad Gita, one of the central scriptures of Hinduism) may effect both the profanisation of the sacred and/or the sacralisation of the profane; it does not, however, have to entail a necessarily satiric effect, which latter would only arise from the assumption of a fundamental incongruence between the two domains. If *The Great Indian Novel* unfolds the story of the secular state as re-enactment of mythology, the text may just as well aim at an opening-up of the common-sense notion of the secular, as the opposite of the religious, to a potentially transmodern – but in fact rather anti-modern – reassessment as proposed by Ashis Nandy in his “Anti-Secularist Manifesto”. Nandy's argument proceeds from the dichotomy of two incompatible concepts of the ‘secular’: the first, “known to every modern westerner”, connoting the “opposite of ‘sacred’” and an equally distributed disrespect towards all religions; the second, “Indian meaning”, emphatically excludes “‘ethnocentrism’, ‘fanaticism’, and ‘xenophobia’” but is “equally respectful towards [all religions]”.¹⁸ My hypothesis will be that Tharoor to some extent subscribes to Nandy's idiosyncratically manichean opposition and endorses the ‘Indian’ meaning of secular, but that, quite contrary to Nandy's avowedly ‘plebeian’ and anti-etatist programme, *The Great Indian Novel* enacts its specific conjuncture of history and mythology in order to sanctify the state – not as practised institution but as principle. It is precisely because of the principal sanctity of the state that political practice must appear as corruption and ‘degeneracy’. Therefore, as Spivak suggests,

¹⁷ Not being a Sanskrit scholar myself, I will not even begin to pretend that I could offer a reading of Tharoor's novel in terms of its intertextuality with the epic; such a synoptic reading would, in light of Tharoor's own acknowledgement (see n3), anyway assume a degree of scholarship that is absent from the text.

¹⁸ Ashis Nandy, “An Anti-Secularist Manifesto”. *The Romance of the State*, 34—60; 34.

Tharoor's intertextual device may serve to ridicule "the postcolonial politicians' fantasy to make the present identical with the hallowed past, and thus win votes for a politics at degree zero of history";¹⁹ it raises in any case questions concerning the metahistories that provide formative narrative matrices in the ongoing renegotiations of the national legacy. "The recounting of history", Tharoor has his narrator reflect, "is only the order we artificially impose upon life to permit its lessons to be more clearly understood".²⁰

In the Northrop Frye-inflected taxonomy of "pre-generic plot structures" suggested by Hayden White, then, *The Great Indian Novel* would encourage a reading of history as romance. In Frye's distinction, the specificity of romance "as a literary design" lies in its tendency "to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to 'realism', to conventionalize content in an idealized direction".²¹ In Tharoor, to whose narrator "metaphors come too easily" (124), history as romance emerges primarily through the book's overtly metaphorical tropology which in the first place enables myth displacement; the pervasive application (by way of metaphorical transfer) from the mythical to the historical ultimately suggests a salvaging teleology that the mythological master narrative imports into the contingencies of profane history.²²

Certainly the *Mahabharata*'s eschatology differs widely from, say, that of the Judaeo-Christian repertoire of possible pretexts (which latter group forms the privileged object of study of archetypal criticism in the wake of Frye's works). The epic of the house of Hastinapur and its feuds, culminating in the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, establishes a world governed by prescriptive codes of conduct that determine righteousness and dutiful behaviour (*dharma*) in a universe stratified by a transcendental order. The key revelation of *dharma* in the Gita primarily spells out an ethical code and not so much a theological assertion of a divine design for the world beyond its end; if Hinduism offers such apocalyptic-revolutionary scenarios at all, they are much rather to be found in those narratives that conceptualise historical time as *Kali-yuga*, an extended period of lack and deprivation to be

¹⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "How to Teach a 'Culturally Different' Book". *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Ed. Donna Landry & Gerald MacLean. New York & London (Routledge) 1998: 237—265; 240.

²⁰ Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*, 109. In the following, quotes from *The Great Indian Novel* with page numbers in my own text.

²¹ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton (Princeton UP) 1957: 137.

²² See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore & London (Johns Hopkins UP) 1973: 179—213; and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore & London (Johns Hopkins UP) 1987: 64—100.

terminated by the advent of the tenth avatar of Vishnu. By contrast, the *Mahabharata*, and in particular the Gita, has a clearly immanentist, affirmative message that calls for the fulfilment of one's (caste-, class-, and gender-specific) *dharmic* obligations. It is precisely by this conformity that salvation can be achieved individually; as a displaced myth, then, the *Mahabharata* not so much prefigures the fate of the collective but much rather fosters the obedient subject fulfilling his/her duties according to the metaphysical catalogue of a collectivity deemed transhistorical. Caste, class and gender obligations are thus eternalised; the Gita, on this reading, is a call for subjection. Tharoor's project of rewriting, as will be shown below, consists not of disclaiming this call for subjection but of updating it: from the interpellation of the organically circumscribed subject firmly placed in metaphysical order to the interpellation of liberalism's citizen/subject allegedly centred by his/her individual "own code of conduct" (418).

It is well documented that at certain conjunctures myth displacement has proven a central and empowering tool in ideologically grappling with the otherwise incomprehensible past or present;²³ while such 'mobilising' invocations of sacred or mythological pretexts are without any doubt strategic, they have to refrain from reflexivity and irony in order to become operative in the first place: Their task is to establish – and not to problematise – a relation of analogy (between myth and history in the sense of a Jamesonian 'situation') that appears to involve an authority superior to that of the author: In terms of historical logics, the given text is proleptically applied as a blueprint to the as yet inconclusive present, suggesting that the outcome as prescribed in the pretext will materialise in concrete history, which latter, then, is translated into a (more or less modified) rerun of the 'original'. If the present is thus conceptualised in terms of the mythical past, a specific conflation of temporalities occurs by virtue of which the present at hand figures, in the last resort, as the repetition (with or without a difference) of a moment from an altogether different temporal reservoir: While still retaining its status as present, it equally partakes of the past. Moreover, it is the past as transmitted through the blueprint text that virtually contains the present's

²³ One may recall as prominent instances the metaphorisation, in terms of apocalypse/revelation, of such discrepant historical moments as the English Civil War (the *locus classicus* for the analysis of this phenomenon arguably remains Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas in the English Revolution*), the Industrial Revolution, or the Blitz of London (see Sebastian D.G. Knowles, *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War*); similarly, the employment of the Exodus narrative in the US Civil Rights Movement (Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*), for narrativisations of the Holocaust in terms of the biblical Book of Job, or the passion and resurrection stories from the canonical gospels as pretexts for narrativisations of national liberation on the side of German, Austrian and Czechoslovakian exiles in the Second World War, see my own *Exilliteratur in Großbritannien 1933–1945*.

future and transmutes contingent moments into the plot elements of a teleological metanarrative.

Yet if *The Great Indian Novel*, as its narrator claims, is to function as “the story of an entire nation” (93), how does the text as a national allegory engage with the split temporalities it pervasively employs by way of myth displacement? More precisely, how does the heterochronic representational apparatus of history as romance conjoin with the aspect of (novelistic) simultaneity that is, according to Benedict Anderson, the indispensable condition of possibility for the national imaginary to emerge in the first place? This question is pertinent not because the Andersonian model were inescapably *true* but because Tharoor in many sequences of his book – in particular those devoted to the process of nation building – seems to subscribe to it. For like *Midnight's Children*, Tharoor's text captures the gestation of the nation in a “complex gloss on the word meanwhile”. Here the freedom struggle itself takes the place of Benedict Anderson's “mass ceremony”, and functions as the site of nation building through “the constant, unrelenting actions of thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands, of men and women across the land” (109). The nation prefigures its advent as a politically sovereign entity not only in such concerted action; at a more fundamental level, its “living” in empty homogeneous time is asserted in a panoramic ‘complex gloss’:

all the while life is going on elsewhere [...]: as the shots ring out in the Bibigarh Gardens babies are being born, nationalists are being thrown into prison, husbands are quarrelling with wives, petitions are being filed in courtrooms, stones are being flung at policemen, and diligent young Indian students are sailing to London to sit for the examinations that will permit them to rule their own people in the name of an alien king. (109f.)

As if to confirm the nexus between such panoramas and the emergence of the idea of nation, Tharoor has one of his protagonists, Arjun, undergo an extended tour of the postcolonial state which is, again, rendered as one vast tableau of the “range and immensity of India and all its concerns” (322) to be summed up by its viewer in a Woody Guthrie-style assertion of national belonging: “the thought struck him with overwhelming intensity: ‘This is my land’” (324). In short, India emerges from such sequences very much in the vein of the modern nation as delineated in Andersonian terms. Nonetheless, the split temporal status of the focaliser – Arjun displaced from myth to history – immediately removes the homogeneity of modern standard time and ensures the persistence of the multiple times of India in which the modern and the mythical collapse into each other. Chatterjee's heterogeneous time and Rushdie's portrait of a Nehru who tries to bring the five-years plan and the music of the spheres into alignment figure prominently in Tharoor's

novel, too, where government ministers “go to inaugurate a steel factory or a chemical laboratory, and [...] break a coconut and perform puja outside” (257).

In Tharoor’s text, there is a particular volatility with which a host of characters – some of them referring to real-historical agents, others purely allegorical embodiments of some abstract principle or quality – tend to be represented as literal national allegories. V.V., the narrator figure himself, at one point describes himself in terms of a profound correspondence with India at large, and it is significant that the analogy should be grounded in a shared composite modernity: “Like India herself, I am at home in hovels and palaces [...], I trundle in bullock carts and propel myself into space, I read the *vedas* and quote the laws of cricket” (65). Both heterotopias and heterochronies therefore qualify the nation and the narrator, establishing a relation of identity between the two: Hence, *The Great Indian Novel* narrates “my story, the story of Ved Vyas [...] and yet it is also the story of India, your country and mine” (46). If the fusion of apparently incompatible temporalities pertains to both India and the narrator, then the text produced by that narrator must itself as a consequence be marked by such hybridity. The myth displacement that structures the narrative as a whole ensures, in this respect, that a continuous mix of temporalities be performed; as if to keep this circumstance visible, V.V. occasionally offers self-referential reminders to the double encodings that mark the text at large. Before presenting a micronarrative that renders the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 and the ensuing secession of Bangladesh in terms of the Jarasandha episode from the *Mahabharata*, V.V. introduces that narrative as the recounting of one from a series of heterochronic, “extraordinarily vivid dreams, in full costume and colour, with highly authentic dialogue delivered (for they were clearly set in the epic era of our national mythology) in Sanskrit” (355). Inasmuch as they partake of both mythological and contemporary dimensions, V.V.’s dreams align with India in heterogeneous time as well as with the narrator’s own temporally mixed stature; furthermore, however, they function as overt references to the heterochronies figured in and by the text itself: Like the pages of the book, V.V.’s “dreams were populated not by the Ramas and Sitas of your grandmother’s twilight tales but by contemporary characters transported incongruously through time to their oneiric mythological settings” (355). If *The Great Indian Novel* is ‘populated by contemporary characters’ cross-dressed as mythological heroes and villains, though, the very contemporaneity of these characters is called into question - not by their anachronistic garb and appellation but by their internally composite characteristics. This is nowhere more conspicuous than in the case of Gangaji (read: Gandhi) who gets introduced from the outset as an inhabitant of widely

diverse temporalities: "he would startle his audiences with pronouncements which led them to wonder in which century he was living at any given moment" (26). Endowed with proleptic and analeptic capacities alike, Gangaji may at times revert to "croaking to himself in Sanskrit" (81), embarrassingly esoteric practices like the imbibing of enema, and pursue political tactics that "embodied an atavism that would never take the country forward" (142); equally, however, he is profiled as a "master tactitian with his feet on the ground" (122) who cleverly employs the power of media and public opinion in his spectacular campaigns of civil disobedience in order to "propel [his] vision into a tangible nationhood" (110). Heterochronic Gangaji, embodying both "the fullness of the nation's past and the seed of the people's future" (123), thus figures as the ideal forger of a nation that itself is characterised as ineluctably heterogeneous not only in terms of temporalities. When Gangaji asserts "his faith in all religions with the words, 'I am a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, a Zoroastrian, a Jew'" (142), he implicitly confirms his own identity with the nation as a whole that, in the words of V.V., had up to the British conquest comprised an ecumene of a wide range of different groups in constructive interaction. The unity in diversity of non-enumerable fuzzy communities is accordingly highlighted as the authentic Indian tradition: "we Indians are open about our differences; we do not attempt to subsume ourselves in a homogeneous mass" (132). It is due to this correspondence that Gangaji and the nation can merge into a corporeal unity so that "Gangaji's fasts slowed down the heartbeat of the nation" (105).

Yet it would not suffice to describe Tharoor's strategy of myth displacement in terms of shifting 'myth in a human direction'. The structural device on which the entire book hinges gets also problematised as a substitution of myth for history. Gangaji gets, only two decades after his death, "consigned [...] to the mists and myths of historical legend": "He might as well have been a character from the *Mahabharata*" (47). Not only does this reflection criticise a general collective amnesia or at least myopia by way of which a fundamentally distorted legacy is being established as national heritage; it first of all refers to the text itself in which Gangaji of course is presented precisely as a 'character from the *Mahabharata*' so that V.V.'s verdict applies to his own narrative as much as to the historiographical forgeries he exposes. Myth displacement, then, is not only a textual strategy employed in *The Great Indian Novel* (whose very title is allegedly derived from "its primary source of inspiration [...]. In Sanskrit, *Maha* means great and *Bharata* means India", 3); it is just as well a dominant cultural practice in the renegotiation and tradition of the nation's past. It is in this respect that Tharoor has his V.V. go out of his way in order to debunk or at least diminish the effects of myth displacement, particularly in the first sections of the book

that are dedicated to the history of the freedom struggle, Gandhianism, and the establishment of the Indian National Congress - i.e. those heroic episodes of the national legacy that are liable to fall prey to epicalisation. One instance that will have to stand in here for a whole range of V.V.'s conspicuous debunkings is the transformation of the Gandhian Salt *satyagraha* into the "Great Mango March" (122).

Relations of allegorical identity with India are ascribed to more than one character in *The Great Indian Novel*. Since V.V. may figure as an embodiment of the country/nation by virtue of the internal (temporal and spatial) heterogeneity he shares with the latter, he comes to stand in for one particular version of India as heterotopia - a version that gets further enforced to the point of overdetermination by the text's own chronotopic duality thanks to which "the chronicle of Hastinapura becomes the story of India".

3.2 Draupadi, *dharma*, and democracy

Yet in *The Great Indian Novel*, this mode of pluralising the apparently homogeneous present is employed with a pervasive gesture of ironisation. When, e.g., Indira Gandhi's emergency rule gets recounted in terms of the Kauravas' attempt at disrobing Draupadi, who allegorically stands in for India's democracy (see 309ff.; 315; 414), the outcome is already prefigured in the *Mahabharata*'s resolution of that episode according to which divine intervention will ensure that the Pandavas' common wife emerge from the tribulation unscathed. Supported by the epic's authority, *The Great Indian Novel* thus seems to assert the stability of Indian democracy even in the face of despotic attempts at "stripping the nation of the values and institutions we had been right to cherish" (383). While in Ved Vyasa's *Mahabharata* the attempt on Draupadi's honour is perpetrated by the Kauravas (i.e. the Pandavas' one hundred cousins under the leadership of Duryodhana), Tharoor compresses that entire branch of "The Great Indian Family" (11) into one single female character, Duryodhani (who metaphorically stands in for Indira Gandhi). The lecherous voyeurism of the male Kaurava gang is thus transferred onto an individual woman. Yet before probing more deeply into the - potentially ironic - discrepancies between the Draupadi episode and its rewriting, it needs to be noted that already the allegorical dimension of the Draupadi figure itself appears to be muddled beyond repair. Who exactly, one is obliged to enquire, is being "stripped" in this process? At the surface level, it is of course Draupadi who for her part is, throughout the book, consistently nominated an embodiment of democracy in terms of the national/modern: "[S]he was delicately dusky, with the sun-ripened wheatfields of the Doab glowing in her complexion. Yes, Ganapathi, ours

was inevitably a darker democracy, and all the more cherished for the Indianness of her colouring" (309). Yet the conclusion of the disrobing episode suggests that it is not democracy which is saved from being stripped (of what?) but the nation which is saved from being stripped of democracy. Insisting on allegorical consistency, then, one has to read Draupadi (suddenly having shifted from 'democracy' to 'nation') here as being rescued from being stripped of – Draupadi! Democracy, now no longer embodied as Draupadi but as the latter's garment, would then all of a sudden find its allegory in an inexhaustibly unrolling sari, a figure of deferral: Is there a Laclau-inflected hint here at the endless deferral, hence impossibility of democracy? Only on condition of an uncritical siding with Tharoor and his construction can such a lapse be redeemed as a deliberate autocritique of national allegory itself, while it much rather symptomatically refers to the strain under which the entire endeavour of this specific myth displacement stands: In order to maintain some allegorical relation between the novelistic characters and their epic as well as historical equivalents, the text has to sacrifice the former to the latter. Hence, explicitly juxtaposed as she is to the shifting tenors of democracy and nation, Draupadi in *The Great Indian Novel* has to remain an unspecific entity whose allegorical dimension as personified democracy needs to be asserted time and again in order to get established at all.

At the same time, this allegorical dimension of the Draupadi figure gains centrality in the entire second half of the book that is dedicated to the postcolonial phase of modern India. Here, Draupadi is configured with the five Pandava brothers to all of whom she acts as wife after having initially been wedded to Arjun alone: "she realized that democracy's destiny [...] embraced his brothers too" (315). By virtue of their common marriage to democracy, the Pandavas seem to function as a collective allegory of the postcolonial *nation* while they actually stand in for the postcolonial national *elite* whose very eptiomes (and nothing much else besides) they embody: "they personified the hopes and the limitations of each of the national institutions they served" (319) as politician (Yudhishtir), military officer (Bhima), journalist (Arjun), diplomat (Sahadev) and bureaucrat (Nakul). Clearly the impotence of these five husbands in protecting their shared wife from public humiliation and enslavement at the hands of the plotting Kauravas subjects precisely the 'national institutions' they represent to a severe critique and thus emphasises their collective failure as custodians of democracy in the face of Indira Gandhi's emergency: While, through Krishna's intervention, Draupadi's humiliation is miraculously averted, the Pandavas emerge from the scene utterly discredited – in Vyasa's canonical *Mahabharata* as well as *The Great Indian Novel*. Despite the synergetic

relation that pertains between text and pretext in this regard, however, the hiatus between the two rather prevails throughout, shifting the focus to the manoeuvre of myth displacement itself: To the degree that the latter becomes reflexive, the very conditions of possibility of such metaphorisation are shifted to the centre of attention.

What the text then finally results in is a problematisation of its initial driving force, namely the pure desire for history-as-romance itself along with the maintaining of a relation of metaphorical interchangeability between the text as a whole, its personae, and the body politic they purport to 'represent': "as with our heroes and heroines, so too our nation's politics were subject to the confusion, the misunderstandings, the casual couplings and startling intimacies of our story" (339). Therefore, if "this story, like that of our country, is a story of betrayed expectations" (411), the let-down lies precisely in the breakdown of the metaphorical relation of correspondences. V.V. – Tharoor's narrator who himself is, of course, a displaced version of the author of the authorial version of the *Mahabharata*, Ved Vyasa – confides in his secretary, Ganapathi (read: Ganesh, Ved Vyasa's scribe), to be haunted by the possibility that

the India of the epic warriors died on its mythological battlefields, and that today's India is a land of adulteration, black-marketing, corruption, communal strife, dowry killings, you know the rest, and that this is the only India that matters. Not my India, where epic battles are fought for great causes, where freedom and democracy are argued over, won, betrayed and lost, but an India where mediocrity reigns, where the greatest cause is the making of money, [...], where the real political issues of the day involve not principles but parochialism. (412)

V.V.'s horror lies not in the potentiality that the dark forces who are part of the romantic imagination might take over, but that the profane and quotidian – "mediocrity" – might do away with the epic projection in one sweeping move of pervasive disenchantment. In his study of late imperial romance, John McClure points out that the "ultimate enemies of romance, then, are not the foreign foes confronted on the field of battle", but much rather the representatives of "the banal, quotidian world of calculation and compromise from which the heroes of romance are always in flight".²⁴ It is precisely in this vein that V.V. tries to redeem and perpetuate his project of analogising the epic and the historical by invoking "Kurukshetra", the site of the decisive battle in the *Mahabharata* (and the place at which Krishna reveals the Gita to Arjun), not as heterotopia but as the categorical condition of the nation's living: "life is Kurukshetra. History is Kurukshetra. The struggle between dharma and adharma is a struggle our nation, and each of us in it, engages in on every single day of our existence" (391). What is this if not the ultimate

²⁴ John McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*. London & New York (Verso) 1994: 3.

conflation of the literally quotidian (“on every single day”) with the high romance encapsulated in the name of the mythological battleground? Hence, heroisation becomes existential in *The Great Indian Novel*, but at the price of its own quotidianisation: It invades the everyday and thus ensures that romance be inexhaustible, only that romance now can no longer be held apart from the mundane. This move in which the dichotomy of romance and the quotidian collapses gets ever more dominant towards the end of the text; it does not, however, effect that the sphere of romance be entirely evacuated. In this respect it is helpful to consider what story element in *The Great Indian Novel* occupies the place of the epical battle of Kurukshetra. It is the post-Emergency national election that results in Indira Gandhi's defeat, and that is conceptualised by V.V. in terms of a nation's decision not only “between democracy and dictatorship” but “between dharma and adharma” (391). It is by reclaiming the promise of citizenship inscribed into the nation-state that the people of India assert their agency. This occurs through the procedure of an election which requires the prior transformation of the people into the enumerable category of a population. Popular agency is, in other words, restricted to a mobilisation in governmentality. History as romance, shifted towards the quotidian, thus gives way to the romance of the state whose institutionalised procedures now become the site at which the historical promise of “Independence come[s] pulsating to life” (392), and democracy is epiphanically revealed as liberating itself from its state of siege: “I saw Draupadi's face glowing in the open, the flame of her radiance burning more brightly than ever. And I knew that it had all been worthwhile” (392). The nexus between *dharma* and democracy confirms that the myth displacing strategies in *The Great Indian Novel* primarily aim at the enforcement of a particular version of the *dharmic* state as conceived in the “great cause of Gangaji, Pandu and Dhritarashtra” (392): The *Mahabharata*'s ultimate opposition between *dharma* and *adharma* is therefore by no means trivialised when projected onto the historical contest of liberal democracy and authoritarianism. In order to bring the mythological pretext into full alignment with such liberal desires, however, the former requires to be subjected to a more far-reaching rewriting than the text itself offers. The task of the novel's final sequence lies precisely in a prefiguration of such a further revision of the *Mahabharata* as a legitimising narrative for India's liberal(ised) modernity.

The ending apparently spells out a complete break with romance as V.V. finally wakes up from his myth-displacing dreams to one last panorama of “today's India” (418). But what exactly does ‘today's India’ look like? It is a “land of computers and corruption, myths and politicians and box-wallahs with moulded plastic briefcases” (418), in other words a collage of coeval

(and co-evil) temporalities, again. Significantly, V.V. wakes up to this heterochronic vista from a dream in which the salvation as prefigured in the *Mahabharata* melts into thin air: Instead of embracing his posthumous redemption, Yudhishtir, the paragon of *dharma* and only Pandava to gain admission to *moksha* (i.e. liberation from the cycle of rebirth), engages in an ethico-political dispute with Dharma, “god of justice and righteousness” (415) himself. Yudhishtir’s charge against the god lies in the latter’s failure to acknowledge pluralism and uncertainty: “Accept doubt and diversity. Let each man live by his own code of conduct, so long as he has one. [...] Admit that there is more than one Truth, more than one Right, more than one *dharma*” (418). If thus liberalism speaks the verdict of obsolescence on “a heritage whose relevance must constantly be tested”, it still operates with heritage terms in order to formulate its assault in the name of modernity. Envisaging many *dharmas* instead of one, Yudhishtir has not come to cut the ropes with tradition completely but to reform old legacies in order to make them match the present. More precisely: Yudhishtir pleads not for the radical discarding of myths as metanarratives, not even, to borrow a formulation from Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*, for “the substitution of a new myth for the old one”. The difference between Rushdie and Tharoor gets immediately tangible when one reads on, in *Shame*: “Here are three such myths, all available from stock at short notice: liberty; equality; fraternity. I recommend them highly”.²⁵ While Rushdie, like Tharoor, presupposes an Althusserian ineluctability of myth as such (probably due to the categorical opacity of any thinkable historical present), he envisages an ideological paradigm shift achieved by the full replacement of one myth by another; Tharoor, by contrast, has his Yudhishtir operate within the confines of the given myth of *dharma* which is not abandoned but merely rewritten. This more conservative procedure confirms the principal validity of the *Mahabharata* as guiding narrative, and the centrality of the concept of *dharma* – now displaced into a liberal direction – as an ideological force beyond critique: Pluralisation cannot do away with its authoritarian validity claim.

V.V. for his part interprets his dream of Yudhishtir’s salvation as a hint that he has “told [his] story from a completely mistaken perspective” and that he has to start telling it all over again. The new, more correct version of *The Great Indian Novel* is of course not realised; it will obviously not discard of the *Mahabharata* as metanarrative but instead offer a rewriting of its rewriting, replacing the original myth of one absolutist *dharma* by the new, liberal myth of “more than one”. The updated Gita for the 21st century, then, will instruct the good Indian citizen to stick to a *dharma* that will be

²⁵ Salman Rushdie [1983], *Shame*. London (Vintage) 1995: 251.

grounded in personal truth, and – apart from tolerance – will prescribe no societal obligations whatsoever. Saleem Sinai's *horror vacui* in the face of the nation's fragmentation gets superseded, in Tharoor, by the promise of the liberal individual.

4 Typing the Minutes

Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*

Sumit Sarkar points out “two major innovations brought in by colonial rule: clock time and print culture”.¹ As homogeneous empty time and print capitalism, these two innovations figure, as we have seen, as indispensable in Benedict Anderson’s account of the rise of nationalism. At a first glance, then, it seems that Sarkar herewith subscribes to a narrative of derivation in which India receives the basic tools for nation-forging from the coloniser and is interpellated to reproduce the prime modernity of the West. Sarkar’s interest, however, lies in the antinomies of commonsensically ‘modern’ temporalities and the specific appropriation of clock-time in the colonial context: Not only is there a significant temporal “lag in the entry of clock-time even in such areas [of the Indian subcontinent] open to intensive European commerce from the sixteenth century”;² furthermore, clock-time gets hybridised by way of its representation in terms of Kali-yuga, the last and most depraved epoch in the eternally repeated four-ages cycle at the heart of Brahminical cosmology. Thus, Sarkar argues, the dichotomy of linear and cyclical conceptions of time and history collapses into a complex fused temporality constitutive of the time zone of a *different* genre of modernity.³ If Sarkar, with reference to colonial Bengal, explodes the monolith of modern “time as the abstract, linear framework in which events happen”,⁴ his more general assumption is, of course, that such monolithic temporality – Anderson’s “empty homogeneous time” – is ultimately fictitious even in the context of Europe itself. “Other times”, supplementing Foucault’s “other places”, abound for sure in the West’s own experience of the temporal. Yet monuments to temporal multiplicities in European theory and fiction, art and music notwithstanding, the global colonialist expansion of standard time

¹ Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*. New Delhi (OUP) 1998: 188.

² Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, 21.

³ See Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 7—13; 186—215; and *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, 10—37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

defined by the Greenwich meridian ensures that Europe, even in terms of time, be orchestrated once again monolithically for the non-West. Homogeneous empty time, though itself fundamentally “utopian”, becomes the transparent norm of a neutral temporality on a global scale: Roughly around the same time that Sarkar’s Bengali clerks translate clock-time into an aspect of *Kali-yuga*, an assembly of European and US-American specialists, authorised by their respective governments, implement the still valid system of twenty-four time zones as a globe-spanning grid at the 1884 International Meridian Conference held at Washington, DC.

4.1 The big Indian lie

Though Vikram Chandra’s *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* passes for a novel, it much rather forms a compilation of largely self-sufficient stories that are inserted into a complex set of narrative frames. In generic terms, the book thus refers to the process of genre migration itself as it self-consciously reapplies crucial features of what Meenakshi Mukherjee calls “pre-novel narratives”: the simulation and, as we shall see distortion, of an oral narrative situation as well as the circular narrative pattern that Mukherjee associates with pre-modern narratives that relate “a larger story which contains a smaller one which in turn contains another and so on”.⁵ In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, this structure of narratives intricately embedded in frames of artificial orality is played out with much more complexity than in Rushdie, Tharoor, or Sealy’s *Trotter-Nama*: The ultimate narrative frame consists in a vaguely determined situation in which a character named Sandeep tells a story to the sadhus of the ashram he is visiting – a story about his encounter, in the jungle, with a meditating woman who tells him a story. The woman’s story, again, is split into a variety of differently framed narratives, involving, among others, a monkey typing the lives of his former incarnation as a human away on the keyboard of a typewriter, a US-returned student, and his parents. Chandra’s second book, *Love and Longing in Bombay*, dispenses of these connective narrative frames that purport to assemble the component parts of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* into one contiguous if self-consciously anti-totalistic text. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is marked by autocomentaries that refer to the text’s status as neither conclusive nor complete: Assertions that “[t]his was after all only part of the story”⁶ conjoin with the poetics of an ideal interminable and rhizomatically unbounded story that “will grow like a lotus vine, that will twist in on itself and expand

⁵ Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, 5.

⁶ Vikram Chandra, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. London & Boston (Faber & Faber) 1995: 581. Subsequently, quotes from this novel in my own text with page numbers.

ceaselessly" (617). The ensuing non-linearity and generic plurality that characterise Chandra's book may in a broad sweep be read as formal encodings of the oppositional message the text is designed to convey as one more contribution to the heterogenisation of time – a politics encoded into its poetics as a 'dissident' novel that subverts, and yet conforms to, the loose network of laws of the genre. The architecture of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* at large corresponds to the structures of temporalities that Romila Thapar had identified in ancient Brahminical methods of conceiving of time: a system of wheels within wheels – *yugas* within *mahayugas* within *kalpas* – that still accommodates linearity. Thapar's account of the *yuga* system as one that locates irreversible 'linear arcs' within an overarching cyclic and iterative pattern of *mahayugas* and *kalpas* finds its well-nigh homologous correspondence in Chandra's composition where different linear narrative blocs of various duration are ultimately integrated into a circular structure: The various endings of the text all spell the return to the story element of its beginning (the shooting of a monkey), and hence the very last sentence speaks out the resolution to "start all over again" (617). Although apparently akin to the circularity that Peter Brooks ascribes to linear narrative, Chandra's narrative cycle, to be sure, is not to be confused with it: Brooks, relying on the authorities of Benjamin and Freud, construes a transgeneric master plot according to which narrative desire, like the Freudian death drive, is magnetically attracted by the promise of narrative closure and the arrival at that 'moment of quiescence' that follows plot resolution; the determinedly linear activity of reading results in a 'cycle' only insofar as the ending is the exit through which the reader gains admission, again, to that 'inanimate state' that had prevailed before passing through the entrance gate of the beginning: "Between these two moments of quiescence [before the beginning and after the ending] plot itself stands as a kind of divergence or deviance, a postponement in the discharge that leads us back to the inanimate".⁷ Reading, therefore, as an allegory of life itself, traverses the animate in order to arrive at the inanimate prior to the plot. Circularity resides *outside* the plot in the identity of that which precedes and what comes after it: the 'inanimate' state *before* the beginning and *after* the ending. Chandra's cycle, obviously, is of a different order altogether since here, the circular is immanent to narrative itself: Beginning and ending – and not the transnarrative 'states' beyond those points – collapse into one and thus enable a potentially ceaseless iteration of readings. Needless to say, such a reading would soon dispose of narrative desire altogether.

⁷ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 103.

Of course, the simulation of a circular narrative form is nothing new; reading form as sedimented content,⁸ however, demands a decoding beyond the mere attestation of such formal features. The following thoughts on *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* will attempt to read the supersession of linear continuity by the cyclic design in terms of the book's engagement with histories, narration, and time, all of which issues are inextricably linked with questions of nation. Like *Midnight's Children*, *The Great Indian Novel*, and *The Trotter-Nama*, Chandra's narrative simulates orality, but employs a far more complex structure of frame narratives, a plurality of narrators, and diverse historical and geographical settings ranging from eighteenth century France via late Mughal and pre-Raj India to late nineteenth century London as well as present-day US and India. Obscure historical figures such as the French and German mercenaries Benoit de Boigne and Walter Reinhardt or the nineteenth-century aristocrat and Christian convert, the Begum Sumroo, make their appearances along with Hindu gods and fictitious characters; moreover, the main narrator is an old monkey who, after having been seriously wounded, retrieves his memories of his former incarnation as a human: the nineteenth century poet and nationalist activist Sanjay. In order to avert his imminent death, the monkey strikes a deal with Yama, the god of death, and that deal involves the transformation of clock-time into the altogether different temporality of narrative time: If he succeeds in keeping half of an audience "in a state of interest for a total of two hours each day" (18) over one week, the monkey will be granted a prolonged life. Hence, a situation is established in which, once again, storytelling and survival coalesce; and as in Rushdie, the narrative to emerge from such a situation will somehow tie in with the story of the nation – in this case announced as "the Big Indian Lie" (17) in an overt sideswipe at Tharoor's claims at rewriting the *Mahabharata* as *The Great Indian Novel*. In a series of narrative soirées, the mute simian storyteller communicates his accounts with the help of an old typewriter while a friend of his host family reads out the typed text to a daily increasing audience. While this audience swells to a throng, television coverage makes the monkey business what it has been right from the start anyway: "a national issue" (419). For what the monkey has to tell is not just the story of 'his' former life as the poet Sanjay Parasher, but in fact a vast historical tableau of Indo-European encounters and crosscultural clashes and communions whose sites are not only battlefields and political assemblies but more crucially the domains of religion,

⁸ See Fredric Jameson's hermeneutics of what he calls the "ideology of form", a method that attempts to "grasp [...] formal process as sedimented contents in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works"; *The Political Unconscious*, 99.

aesthetics, and philosophy. The ultimate horizon of these narrative sessions, then, is the recuperation of transculturality as always already there: If India, as a 'national culture', is inconceivable without the inputs of the many conquests and less violent cross-cultural interactions, the same holds true for Britain and the West at large.

As a time-traveller – in that respect akin to Mukul Kesavan's narrator – the monkey finds himself, after resurfacing from his coma and retaining his former awareness as Sanjay, stranded in a time not his own, "immeasurably far from home", and victim of the "bewildering depredations and convolutions that are the children of Kala, of Time" (10). No wonder the very language he commands is a "curious mélange of living words, dead expressions and buried and forgotten phrases" (14). It is in this quaintly heterochronic language that the monkey/Sanjay recounts the emergence of the nation from anti-imperial resistance. In addition, the members of his host family contribute their own complementary narratives: Abhay, the family's son, narrates his life as a non-resident Indian in the US, while his parents – both of them retired school teachers – interpolate a series of short but panoramic historical accounts of the *longue durée* of India's civilisation as a set of "stories of a nation made up of many nations, the collective dream of many peoples who were one people" (299).

4.2 Clockwork armies

In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, time becomes the source of a horror that is primarily experienced by and ascribed to a set of historical European figures, most of them mercenaries in the service of Indian princes on the eve of the establishment of the Raj. At one level, Chandra renders the French mercenary Benoit de Boigne as a prototypical para-colonialist moderniser whose innovative influence is not restricted to military strategy alone: De Boigne's introduction of the then cutting-edge European strategy of massed and static battlelines supported by heavy artillery not only proves 'historically' superior to the traditional Rajput fashion of combat with its reliance on swift cavalry assaults performed by small bands; it actually effects a virtual nationalisation which, tellingly, gets articulated in Chandra's text through the implementation of clock-time. Other than in Anderson's account, though, Chandra's nation emerges not as an imagined community fostered by mass-ceremonial acts of reading (novels or newspapers), but as the outcome of military training. If, as French historian Jean-Marie Lafont points out, "de Boigne and his general staff trained some tens of thousands of Indian soldiers and officers in European discipline and tactics", then the impact of such an enterprise clearly exceeds the battlefield itself but caused, in Lafont's words,

“an upheaval not only in those armies themselves, but, in concentric ripples, within the socio-political systems of the states concerned”.⁹ Chandra’s version of de Boigne tacitly underwrites the political impact ascribed, by Lafont, to the introduction of ‘European’ military technique and strategy: In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Benoit de Boigne, mercenary in the service of the Maratha king Rajdath Sindhia, earns his legendary status as a military genius by transmuting

immensely skilled, courageous, individualistic and unruly men from every clan and class into a single mass, a thing of mechanics, a phalanx, a machine which turned and wheeled on order, coerced into synchronization by La Borgne’s magical certitude (37).

Synchronicity here does not arise from an act of imagining (as it does in Anderson) but through military drill as a result of which the docile body gets trained into a cog within a machine that, as a whole, ‘turns and wheels’. In Foucault’s classical analysis of the emergence of mid-eighteenth century “cellular power”, the body is subjected to a historically new time discipline first in the military sector, and only later in production processes and schools. It is in the garrisons and on the mustering grounds that the new “sort of anatomo-chronological schema of behaviour is defined” through which “Time penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power”.¹⁰

What if not a clock is that ‘wheeling and turning’ machine that Chandra invokes? Consequently, de Boigne’s battalions are a little later represented as “moving like clockwork” (40), and by virtue of their corporate precision and efficiency they contribute, in de Boigne’s own ambiguous perspective, to a Weberian disenchantment of the world, here played out on the battlefields where chivalric individual heroism gives way to technological and disciplinary superiority. While de Boigne’s strategy ensures a victory that is clearly encoded in terms of modernisation, nostalgia immediately raises its head to mourn the losses implied in this triumph: De Boigne, at the point of exterminating the last remainder of the valiant enemy army of the Rajput Rathors, “felt an emptiness within him, a finishedness, and understood that there would be no more visions for him. [...] he knew that what he had to do now would be the end of all romance” (41—42). The complete annihilation of the Rathor cavalry alone could not have effected such pervasive rationalisation; it is rather the mercenary’s tactics of transmuting warfare into an “unnatural” (40) mechanistic enterprise, an engineering science, that obliterates age-old military codes of conduct and honour, which latter, in the

⁹ Jean-Marie Lafont, *Indika: Essays in Indo-French Relations*. New Delhi (Manohar) 2000: 190.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 152.

European imaginary, have to appear as 'romance'. Romance, of course, is what the young de Boigne had initially been after when embarking for India, inspired by the obsessive iterative perusal of *The Romance of Alexander*. Ending up as its terminator, the mercenary "discovered the boredom and banality of everyday life [...]; was famous and rich, but found no release from the dreary business of living" (42). The ambiguities of imperial romance lie precisely in the antinomies of the colonial project as such, whose agents legitimise themselves as arbiters of global modernisation but are simultaneously eaten by desire for modernity's Other - while, all around, *other genres of modernity* emerge visibly but unseen from the coercive and violent encounters in the contact zone. In whose perspective does the transformation of Sindhia's army appear as both the coerced synchronisation into a clockwork *and* simultaneously as a miracle due to de Boigne's "magical certitude"? The invention of the coordinated and "unnatural" style of combat, though highly rationalised, renders de Boigne's battalions themselves as a new magical device, a cyborg army of "straw-headed doll-soldiers" under the remote control of their "puppet-master" (176—177). Saleem, we remember, is both transistor radio and parapsychological medium. Sindhia's army in a similar vein is a clockwork orange.

De Boigne the killer of romance has propelled himself completely into the empty homogeneous time of the clocks that his legions embody; he is henceforth condemned to "the horror of living solely in the present and for the future", a man without a shadow as it were, to whom his entire life - bereft of retention and memory - is available only in terms of Hegelian historicism; hence the old de Boigne's futile longing for "something [that] would assure him that his life had been real, not just necessary" (44). Homogeneous empty time as personal time becomes nightmarish and finally, in a gesture of re-romanticisation, leads to that assault on the clock that Benjamin recalls as a revolutionary act in the name of heterogeneous time-of-the-now. De Boigne goes back to "the water-mill of his youth" (44), a virtual clock that had initially fascinated and inspired the adolescent to his modernising visions with "the regularity of the click-click-clicking gears" (29). Setting fire to the mill is an autodafé of clock-time as such, and from the machine's ashes does the past resurface finally, relieving the dying de Boigne from the horror of the present continuous whose implementation he so effectively furthered as a military engineer.

De Boigne's complementary counterpart, in Chandra's novel, is the German adventurer Walter Reinhardt, another European mercenary on the lookout for employment in princely armies. Entangled in imperial romance in a different way, Reinhardt falls prey to another, non-Western time-measuring machinery that, like the clock, works on wheels and cogs and yet produces an

entirely different temporality. Under the tutorship of his later wife, the Begum Sumroo, Reinhardt discovers the crushing temporal immensities of Brahminical cosmology in which the extensions of time units – *yugas* and *kalpas* – stretch “beyond the grasp of conception” (85). The conflation of divine and mundane temporalities effects a de-humanisation of time in an ultimately mechanical universe in which “the Great Cycles follow each other, the smaller cycles within, wheels within wheels, creation, construction, chaos, destruction” (85). If this Brahminical cosmology appears to share a lot with the later Victorian “dominant metaphor of a ‘clockwork universe’”,¹¹ then the horror it evokes in Reinhardt will not be entirely different from but rather complementary to de Boigne’s, since both find themselves in the grips of a genuine *horror vacui* with an essentially anthropofugal temporality, whether conceived as homogeneous empty time or sheer infinity: time, in both cases, with which no subject can be sutured. Reinhardt’s attempts at translating Brahminical god-time into human time lead into a terrifying computation of the age of the world and the immensity of the past: “‘It weighs on me like a great stone. It crushes me.’ [...] 4,320,000,000 [years]. He sighed. ‘It’s endless’” (87). In the process of enculturation, Reinhardt grows “thin and pale because of the infinite aeons of creation, because of the unspeakable age of Hindustan and the burden of unending time” (118). While de Boigne suffers from chronic presentism – the loss of the past under the regime of homogeneous empty time – Reinhardt, caged in the cyclic infinity of ‘Hindu’ time, is crushed by an excess of past; for both, relief can only be found in death. Reinhardt’s liberation from the endless circular move of time comes only with suicide: As he shoots himself, his body “rose three feet into the air, and - they swear to this - hung motionless and light there for an eternity” (430).

The two mercenaries entrapped in time are loosely associated with a third historical figure from an entirely different period: Alexander the Great, who in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* has a legendary afterlife as the arch-imperialist, Sikander the Greek, who “wanted to be king of the world [...] and for this he destroyed it” (145). De Boigne’s initial inspiration for seeking a military life abroad is his fascination with “a book called *The Romance of Alexander, with Stories of Aristotle*, by a Prussian officer named Blunt” (28). Like de Boigne at the peak of his military prowess, Alexander is remembered in Chandra’s India as the commander of “clockwork armies moving like one being” (149); and like the Frenchman, he is in fact an “upstart given to melancholic fits” (144). His abortive sojourn into India is ridiculed in an unpublished drama written by two mid-nineteenth century Calcutta

¹¹ Burnett, “Mapping Time”, 12.

Brahmins, and retold by one of its authors to the main narrator, Sanjay. Here, Alexander's encounter with a group of sadhus is rendered in terms of colonial first contact; the Greek conqueror "is speaking to the sadhus through a translator" whose task as native informant proves increasingly precarious in the course of the dialogue since the sadhus, by virtue of their "answering-questions-with questions dodge" (250), plainly refuse to hold still as prospective objects of imperial knowledge: "Translator: He wants to know why you are naked. Sadhu: Ask him why he is wearing clothes" (248).

While in the course of the conversation the "King of Kings" gets intrigued by the sadhus' incomprehensible indifference towards power and even death, his urgent questions – "He says you should tell him exactly what mystic path you followed to reach this sublime state of indifference" (249) – are invariably rewarded with seemingly incongruent responses: "When I feel like shitting, I shit; when I feel like eating, I eat". If this, for Alexander, cannot pass for a satisfactory delineation of some "mythical pass", the sadhus are in fact more serious than might appear. At the heart of their yogic wisdom lies a radical disregard for discipline; and it is this disrespect which is anathema to Alexander to whom "shitting when you feel like shitting is irresponsible, you should have some discipline in your life" (250). Discipline from the sadhus' perspective, however, engenders all those discontents within civilisation that trigger off compensatory "behaviour like running about slashing at people, besieging towns, and frivolous acts of bravery" (250). In short, the dialogue concludes with the "world's only all-comprehensive theory of imperial conquest: the constipation hypothesis, or the shit-glory affinity" (252).

Needless to say such mock-Freudianism is anachronistic with reference both to the historical situation figured in the dialogue *and* the mid-nineteenth century background from which this intratext allegedly stems. All the more it is profiled as one more contribution, within the all-over arrangement of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, to the problematisation of rationalisation, discipline and control as European inscriptions into the resilient texture of India: Alexander, de Boigne, and Reinhardt all operate as agents of discipline, and fail miserably.

4.3 Print capitalism and the texture of India

What is this resilient texture of India? It would be possible to construe a homology between Chandra's India and the intricate structure of his own text, since both are designed in ways that ultimately defy and frustrate 'Western' horizons of expectation. And yet is the dominant impulse not a 'nativist' exclusion of the West in favour of some purist Indianness (of nation

and novel) but much rather a subversive integration on the condition that Western universalist claims be given up in the process of fusing. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* derives its title from a love poem that celebrates such fusion:

What could my mother be
to yours? What kin is my father
to yours anyway? And how
did you and I meet ever?
But in love
our hearts have mingled
like red earth and pouring rain. (233)

Not a courtesan but a prostitute operating in a slum is the singer of this song which, according to Chandra's acknowledgements, goes back to the Tamil poet Chempulappeyanirar, "ca 1-3 AD" (618). It is here – "in love" – that another imagined community emerges beyond the measures of homogeneous empty time, nation, caste, religion and disciplinary interpellation, as the nameless prostitute reveals: "They all come here, Brahmins and Rajputs and Company men. Here, touch-this-and-don't -touch-that and untouchability and your caste and my people and I-can't-eat-your-food is all forgotten" (233). Clearly, this literal sexual politics defies both 'Western' and genuinely 'Indian' disciplinary regimes of inclusion and exclusion and, as such, forms the utopian horizon of the entire text. Its very medium – orally transmitted popular culture – coalesces with the message, pitched against the power of print-capitalist texts that – from de Boigne's tattered copy of *The Romance of Alexander* to *The New York Times* (56) – continuously collaborate in forging the modern nation as the only imaginable political community. Most prominently, Aristotle (significantly, Alexander's tutor) figures as the ultimate adversary of everything that is articulated in the 'Red Earth and Pouring Rain' poem. For in the *Poetics*, handed over to Sanjay by the British publisher, Markline, in whose Calcutta printing press he is employed as an apprentice, the young reader detects a sentiment "as if unity could be said to be defined as homogeneity or identity" (332). If the prescriptive genre system of the Greek classic imposes severe limitations on the freedom of the artists, it could still be read, muses Sanjay, "as an intellectual exercise, a system of belief, one darshana of the world"; however, this reading in terms of a principal plurality of possible modes of making sense of the world is precisely what Aristotle defies: His book accepts no other books' existence alongside its own. Like a Bakhtinian 'authoritarian word', the text of the *Poetics* effects a silencing of all other voices by virtue of its universal claims: "What was unearthly and frightening about the book was a voice that

whispered from its pages, a voice that whispered and yet hushed all others, that left a silence in the printery-shop, in which it alone remained and spoke, spoke again and again one phrase: 'Katharos dei eynai ho kosmos'" (332—333). Sanjay intuits that the incessantly whispering voice must belong to Alexander, the "madman" and "butcher" (344), who after all was Aristotle's pupil. The slogan later on gets translated as "The world must be clean" (336): a programme according to which the mingling of red earth and pouring rain will produce nothing but mud. Accordingly, Markline's verdict on "your great books, all the great wisdom of the east" is summed up in one phrase: "a mass and morass of darkness, confusion, necromancy, stupidity and avarice" (335). Of course, such purist claims are by no means restricted to poetics alone but rather feed into the ideologies of the Raj as a universalist discursive formation that implements a parochial genre of modernity as the only one; claiming the authority of Aristotle for itself, the colonial rule of difference is articulated with a much longer history of Western thought: Aristotle and Alexander provide the ideological and political/military role models for the colonial project as such. Purity, however, like Alexander's demand for discipline, will be counteracted by a subversive politics that infiltrates the very medium through which it operates: the printed book. Sanjay's apprenticeship at Markline Orient Press, Calcutta, is not restricted to the crafts of printing and proofreading alone, nor even the command of the English language implied in these acts; under the guidance of Sorkar, the printing-master, Sanjay also learns the art of contraband. For Sorkar has taken on the strategy of smuggling secret messages into the colonialist pamphlets and treatises commissioned to the Press - the latter being texts that contribute, to employ Thomas Richards' phrase, to the constitution of the imperial archive: "the collectively imagined junction of all that was known and knowable, [...] a virtual focal point for the heterogeneous local knowledge of metropolis and empire".¹²

Sorkar's messages are concealed in the official imperial text as a loose constellation of individual letters printed in an almost, but not quite, identical font; "then, if an alert reader saw these odd characters [...] he could uncover a hidden message" (323). Thus, e.g., the Press "printed a Company report entitled *A Physical and Economic Survey of the Territories of East India, with Special Attention to Bengal*, and our friend secreted the following message: "The Company makes widows and famines, and calls it peace"; [...] in *Britain and India: Reflections on Civilizational Decay and Progress*, "Britain is the pus from the cancer of Europe" (324). Sorkar's anti-colonialist and subversive undings of textual purity go back, however, to a controversy

¹² Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*. London & New York (Verso) 1993: 11.

that immediately undermines any simplistic West vs. non-West dichotomy. For Sorkar applies his duplicate fonts for the first time to a text that does not at all collaborate in the construction of India as an object of colonialist knowledge, a text that apparently has nothing orientalist about it, and yet enrages the printing-master to the highest degree. It is a pamphlet written by Markline himself on his personal hobbyhorse topic: the identity of the author of those works that go under the name of Shakespeare. In the context of the well-documented authorship controversies surrounding that author, Markline is obviously listed with the anti-Stratfordians, more precisely, with the Baconians who asserted, up to the end of the nineteenth century, that Sir Francis Bacon was the clandestine author of 'The Complete Works'. Interestingly, it was especially in the second half of the nineteenth century that the deciphering of cryptograms, allegedly embedded in the textual ocean of 'Shakespeare' according to some complicated formula, figured as a chief Baconianist device; thus, Ignatius Donnelly claims as late as 1888 to have decoded Bacon's alleged secret message smuggled into the First Folio of 'Shakespeare's' *Histories*: "First you must deduce the formula of the cipher. It is ' $516-167=349 - 22b\&h = 327$ ' Then using square roots you must select a number of words from the columns of the First Folio. Thus from pages 74—6 of the *Histories* you will find: Seas/ill/said/that/More/low/ or/Shak'st/Spur/ never/wrote/a/word/of/them'".¹³

What is it that brings Sorkar to employ the very same technique of print contraband that the Baconians ascribe to their cultural idol? Why does he enhance Markline's learned treatise with the enciphered question, "Did the mother of this author lick pig's pricks by the light of the full Stratford moon?" Why should a nineteenth century Bengali printer turn out to be passionately partisan in what seems to be a purely philological debate, and fervently hold on to the conviction that "the Stratford man", and not Sir Francis Bacon or any other, was to be acknowledged as the author of "the Complete Works"? It is not a colonialist or orientalist distortion that Sorkar labours to undo with his clandestine defacement; what he attempts to subvert is a *classist* argument according to which "some unlettered, mean, drunken and rustic farm lout, sunk in the superstitions and vulgarities of country folk, could never have produced the divine plays, that splendid body of work" (322). Rather, Markline insinuates, the true author must have been "an urban sophisticate, a courtier and noble, and above all a scientist". True, in its insistence on 'Shakespeare' having in fact been a "rationalist" (323), Markline's class-biassed snobbery ties in with the colonialist project of rationalisation but even then would remain a marginal issue in the ideological

¹³ Qu. in Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*. London (Picador) 1997: 89—90.

anti-colonial struggle that Sorkar has subscribed to. Sorkar's (and, one may assume, Chandra's) Shakespeare, however, cannot be reduced to the status of the national English poet; if that were so, Markline's pamphlet would simply intervene, as an elitist polemic, into the ongoing negotiations of Englishness whose definite epitome, in this argument, could not possibly have originated from the domain of popular culture. Markline, of course, is not arguing on this level of national culture; nor does Sorkar, on the other hand, counter this polemic *as a cosmopolitan* whose claim to Shakespeare would not be predicated on nationality but ideal humanity. Instead, both Markline and Sorkar are situated in a discursive context in which Shakespeare has already been universalised as a figure whose "truth was eternal, his value indisputable".¹⁴

Precisely through that deification could this construction of Shakespeare become instrumental in the muting of the colonised subject that was posited, vis-à-vis the overpowering text, as invariably inadequate.¹⁵ In this configuration, Sorkar's appropriation of Shakespeare consists not in a rejection but a revision of that hegemonic construction: The defence of "sweet Willy" against "the pompous stewbrained knaves" is a strategic move in a more general conflict of popular versus elite cultures, and by extension, entitlements to agency. At this level, the demarcation lines do not run between East and West but 'the people' and their rulers, whether colonial or no. Sorkar constructs a Shakespeare whose Englishness is merely contingent, but whose plebeian origin enables a Saidian contrapuntal perspective even in the heyday of imperialism. This popular Shakespeare feeds into the imagination of an undivided world, a popular cosmopolis; an elitist Bacon-as-Shakespeare, into the global networks of exclusive, dominant culture. Class, in other words, supersedes national, racial and linguistic divisions. The "Complete Works", stolen by Sorkar from Markline thirty-five years before and ever since then cherished and finally learned by heart, have not only helped the printer in mastering the English language but more fundamentally to "know the other half of the world" (322). Sorkar's reading Shakespeare involves pain, if not outright danger, particularly in its earliest stages; for the English book here operates in a full reversal of its function in colonial fantasy where, as Homi Bhabha pointed out in a well-known passage, the oft-repeated topos of the "discovery of the English book [in the wilderness] establishes both a measure of mimesis and a mode of civil authority and

¹⁴ Ania Loomba, "Teaching the Bard in India". *Subject to Change: Teaching Literature in the Nineties*. Ed. Susie Tharu. New Delhi (Orient Longman) 1998: 33–51; 41.

¹⁵ See Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "After 'Orientalism': Colonialism and English Literary Studies in India". *Social Scientist* 158 (1986).

order”.¹⁶ Would Shakespeare lend himself easily to such ‘civilised’ and civilising readings? At least in the field of nineteenth century colonial pedagogy, Shakespeare appeared – in spite of the deification mentioned above – as a dubious candidate for convent and missionary schools’ curricula of English because his “language [...] reflected a pagan rather than a Protestant morality and would therefore exert an unhealthy influence on the natives”.¹⁷ In any case, the English book, fallen into the hands of the colonised subject, and then properly ‘discovered’ by that subject, effects the exact opposite of civil authority and order but disrupts all sense of control:

at first the complete works were like a jungle, the language was quicksand. The metaphors turned beneath my feet and became biting snakes, similes fled from my grasp like frightened deer, taking their meaning with them. All was alien, and amidst the hanging, entangling creepers of this foreign grammar, all sound became a cacophony. I feared for myself, for my health and sanity, but then I thought of my purpose, of where I was and who I was, of pain, and I pressed on. [...] And so I have traversed the complete works thirty-four times, and from a foreign jungle I have made it mine own garden. Every part of this terrain I have faced with my body, this earth is my earth, Willy is my boy. (317)

The Crusoe-ish overtones of Sorkar’s account drive home how this is a story of appropriating a version of Shakespeare whose works make up a ‘terrain’ to be civilised: The English book is itself the wilderness, and only by way of tireless application (“I traversed the complete works thirty-four times”) will it finally yield. All the colonialist stereotypes are in place but reversed: jungle, quicksand, snakes and entangling creepers threaten the discoverer’s sanity while he proceeds into a European heart of darkness – only to come back, finally, having “mastered the animal himself” (314). Much of this narrative signals a simple reversal (or a pure negation) of colonialism – not by accident does Sanjay as Sorkar’s apprentice have to learn “to recognize [the] mirror images” of letters (313); and yet it is not conquest but literal internalisation that stands at the end of Sorkar’s long journey across the terrain of Shakespeare. A bond of solidarity across time and space holds between the printer and “his only and best friend” (323), the plebeian figure from Stratford, whose unruly poetical practice forms a powerful positive counter-statement to the dogmatic compartmentalising demands codified in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Thus, Sorkar’s Shakespeare embodies the productivity and creativity of the multitude and hence prefigures the popular self-rule that Sorkar struggles for politically. In a conclusive irony, this episode of Chandra’s novel closes with the re-discovery of the English book, after

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817”. *The Location of Culture*. New York & London (Routledge) 1994: 102–122; 107.

¹⁷ Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, 88.

thirty-five years, by Markline, who has it burned as a public punishment of the thief. Englishmen putting fire to Shakespeare's works, of course, enact a weird echo of Gayatri Spivak's formula for the Raj's policies of abolishing *sati*: "White men are saving brown women from brown men".¹⁸

Sanjay, for his part, takes one more crucial lesson from his Calcutta apprenticeship, namely an insight into the power of print capitalism, and the power relations built into it. The seriality of mechanical production fascinates him in a way that refers back to the young de Boigne's addiction to the virtual clock of the water mill. The power of the printed word is immediately grasped by Sanjay as the power inherent in potentially unbound dissemination: "khata-khat, khata-khat, page after page, book after book, the words multiplying, all the same, all exactly and blessedly identical, becoming millions from thousands, filling the world, khata-khat" (312). The products - both "*exactly* and *blessedly* identical" - embody one more fusion of the scientific/technological with the theological, a duality built into the process of printing itself, in which letters appear on empty pages both "mechanically and magically" (311). In spite of the contraband strategies employed by Sorkar (and later Sanjay himself), the printed word remains basically a weapon of the colonisers' struggle for legitimacy; no mechanical/magical fascination can do away with this asymmetry that engenders an acute awareness that, again, conceives of colonial rule in terms of class-consciousness. Technological progress, as Walter Benjamin relates Marx, is never in itself of benefit for those who work the machines; it becomes so only on condition of their participation in ownership and decision-making.¹⁹ Sanjay's crisis resembles and repeats Sorkar's crisis when the latter was forced to print Markline's anti-Shakespeare treatise: Sanjay realises with a shock that he is in the process of printing the account of the Christian missionary Sarthey who had been involved in the abduction of his friend Sikander's sisters to a convent school (where they most probably would not have been instructed in Shakespeare); in the process, Sikander's mother Janvi had committed suicide by public self-immolation in an act of defiantly and desperately asserting the (invented) Rajput tradition of *johar* (i.e. the collective suicide, if possible by fire, of women of a defeated clan in order to escape sexual exploitation at the hands of the victors). Resorting to *johar* is a conscious act of choice in Janvi's case (see 288); interpreted as an act of resistance, it furthermore sets a precedence for others to follow: "In the six months after Janvi's death, three hundred and four women were burnt to death [...]" (293).

¹⁸ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 296.

¹⁹ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", 258—259.

As is well documented, resurging practices of women's (not only widows') immolations in nineteenth century colonised India posed a severe problem for the British administration of the Raj (as well as postcolonial historiography);²⁰ apart from the ban on *sati*, one of the colonisers' responses was the increased admission of missionaries into British India as a concession to public mood at home as "[a]ll these deaths were widely written about in newspapers in India and in Europe. They became the focal point of many sermons and editorials" (293). Sarthey's account of Janvi's death by fire is one such print text that Sanjay, who had been witness to the event, finds himself producing. Janvi's suicide, in Sarthey, stands as proof to how "the interior darkness of India, that centuries old barbarism, took yet another life" (340). On the printing press shopfloor, technology thus produces and multiplies allochrony with each page of Sarthey churned out by the machinery reinforcing the representation of India as barbaric. Sanjay's initial enthusiasm for the press – "horses and swords are finished, I speak a word here, tomorrow it's a book, the day after the world is changed, khata-khat" (312) – gives way to rage and horror as the machine is revealed as an instrument of colonialist representation that threatens to enforce and impose an image of the entire world in the image of Europe. As the bottom line that triggers the rhythmic clatter of the press, Aristotle's universalist imperative – "katharos, katharos" (341) – can now be discerned, and the monologic output of the machine begins to efface all difference in the name of historicism. Hence, what is at stake is not simply the historical truth of one particular event of an Indian woman's self-immolation, but historical difference itself: The danger is that "half the world with its animals and trees and festivals and gods and philosophies and books and wars and loves, more than half the world [might be] made insubstantial and nothing" (341).

In this battle over representation, Sanjay adopts Sorkar's tactics of smuggling dissent into the dominant text; but more crucially, he engages in an imaginary struggle with Aristotle himself, against whose mechanical (and mechanically reproduced) demand of "katharos" he pitches his own, purely negative mantra: "So Sanjay took a deep breath, and in the manner of a chant began to speak, in English: 'Did not happen like that, did not happen like that, did not happen like that, did not happen like that ...'" (341) – a mantra that, after three days of incessant chanting, implodes into the "monosyllabic negative" (342) 'not'. What seems to be pure negation on the verge of the

²⁰ See, e.g., Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 297–308; Lata Mani, "Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning", *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*. Ed. Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhler & Vivek Dhareshwar. Calcutta (Seagull) 1993: 273–290; Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "The Subject of Sati", *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, 291–318; Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India 1600–1800*. New Delhi (OUP) 1995: 51–68.

inarticulate, in fact turns out to be the crystallised container into which all is collapsed that cannot (no longer, or not yet?) be spoken under the regime of the dominant colonial discourse: "the true shape and contour of a nation's heart" (344). It cannot go unnoticed that the concept of nation comes in here not as a derivative discourse but a dialectical sublation of both the Eurocentrist/historicist misrepresentation and its mere negation, which latter, when unfolded, already contains the seeds of a future plenitude of what now goes under the name of nation but as yet belongs to the unspeakable, the virtual, the impossible: "he did not know what it was he wanted to say but knew he couldn't say it". In the absence of a concept, a series of metonymies is unleashed each of which somehow refers to but never 'hits' the evasive, utopian referent; and while this series of metonymies marks that which "was possible to say", it cannot be expressed in English:

how in English can one say roses, doomed love, chaste passion, my father my mother, their love which never spoke, pride, honour, what a man can live for and a woman should die for, how in English can one say the cows' slow distant tinkle at sunset, the green weight of the trees after monsoon, dust of winnowing and women's songs, elegant shadow of a minar creeping across white marble, the patient goodness of people met at wayside, the enfolding trust of aunts and uncles and cousins, winter bonfires and fresh chapattis, in English all this, the true shape and contour of a nation's heart, all this is left unsaid and unspeakable and invisible, and so all Sanjay could say after all was: 'Not.'
(344)

In one single performative contradiction, this sequence spells out in English all that it at the same time marks as unspeakable in English. Playing with intranslatabilities, it demonstrates how 'English' itself is forced to admit into its folds alien elements: monsoon, minar, chapatti, and thus becomes 'impure'. Yet there are two distinct levels of unspeakability in this passage of naming the nation, and only the first of these is playfully undone by performative contradiction: While Chandra's text against its own assertions very well enumerates, in English, a wide range of stand-ins for the 'true shape and contour of a nation's heart', this series of metonymies itself falls short, at a more fundamental level, of naming the catachrestic concept of nation that remains inaccessible to any language: "Absence at the heart of nation [Antony Easthope suggests] intensifies the wish for its presence".²¹ Sure, Sanjay's enumeration clearly approximates a concept of nation defined by common cultural practices, while any notion of a political form is conspicuously absent: His is obviously not 'the modern nation' in the European image that embodies precisely the unity of culture and state within clearly circumscribed territorial boundaries, but an alternative model of community whose cohesion is safeguarded by shared cultural values and

²¹ Easthope, *Englishness*, 50.

practices without requiring one particular political-institutional structure. Paradoxically, Sanjay's alternative nation, though unspeakable, actually exists as a community of cultural practitioners, whereas the officially proclaimed nation of the dominant Western script marks the categorical absence of a unity of culture and politics: as if, to return to Sanjay's critique of Aristotle, "unity could be said to be defined as homogeneity and identity". The manifest, monosyllabic negation therefore spells out a disclaimer of the universal validity claim of the nation-state while simultaneously containing the unconceptualised parameters of an alternative that cannot be articulated with the dominant discourse. The subsequent episodes of Sanjay's narrative will explore and pursue the possibilities and limitations of the subaltern's speech in this battle over representation.

4.4 Modernity as Gothic

If the British conjure up Aristotle and Alexander as harbingers of European supremacy in terms of intellectual clarity as well as military prowess (read: epistemic violence and colonialist conquest), Chandra counters this fiction with an oppositional pair of producers of consent and force: Sanjay and Sikander, the first starting out to become a poet, the second a warrior, both listed with the enemies of the Raj. Like de Boigne, Reinhardt and the Begum Sumroo, Sikander, born as James Skinner, falls into the line of historical figures that embody the precarious transculturality prevalent in pre-Raj India: The historical Anglo-Indian James Skinner was among those military leaders who even after joining the British side "preserved the traditions of Mughal cavalry".²² Skinner/Sikander therefore stands as an opposite number to de Boigne, the relentless moderniser and terminator of chivalric cavalry warfare. In Chandra, the miraculous story of Sikander's (and Sanjay's) conception and birth is designed to remove the character radically from the recorded referent and substitute a legendary Sikander for the historical Skinner. The fabulous story of Sikander's birth hence matches, and outdoes, the legends around Alexander's biography; it is recounted in a nutshell by Sanjay's uncle, Ram Mohan:

once a woman named Janvi was captured as a citadel fell, and a man called Jahaj Jung – who loved her – escaped from the burning city; Janvi's captor, Hercules, made a marriage with her, but by sheer force of will she produced only daughters, and one day she sent to Jahaj Jung, asking for sons; he sent back shining laddoos, and all who touched them became part of the story, and Janvi and her neighbour Shanti Devi [Sanjay's mother] ate the laddoos [...] And so each of you was born. Born, she said, for

²² C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*. Cambridge (CUP) 1999: 159.

revenge. But all of us who touched are your fathers, you are made for much more than that, and you are made of the dust from marching feet, the tears of men, spittle, hope. (292)

Multiple fatherhood, as in *Midnight's Children*, involves two 'sons'; here, it occurs due to the fantastic act of conception by way of consuming magical sweetmeats. Those who have touched the laddoos and hence can be counted among the boys' fathers are the old magician who produced the sweets; Jahaj Jung (i.e. the Irishman George Thomas); Benoit de Boigne who waylaid the courier carrying the laddoos back to Janvi; and the courier himself, Ram Mohan. Definitely excluded from fatherhood is Hercules Skinner, Janvi's husband. Ram Mohan's narrative of Sanjay and Sikander's mixed genealogy highlights on the one hand the composite background from which these characters emerge, but even more their status as embodiments of articulation as such: "you are made of the dust from marching feet, the tears of men, spittle, hope". It is worth recalling here that Sanjay and Sikander are operative primarily as *political* figures whose agency is played out in the arena of counter-hegemony. As a pair, they cover the whole field of ideological and military forces, which in both cases requires a lived relation to the masses; in such Gramscian terms, Sanjay may well be read as an organic intellectual. The emphasis on embodied articulation - which also applies to Rushdie's Saleem - makes the Sanjay-Sikander couple appear as one literalisation of what Gramsci calls "collective man" instrumental in "the attainment of a 'cultural-social' unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim".²³ While Saleem starts out as already fully 'welded together', his narrative is, at one level, one of incessant dis-articulation and hence increasing dissolution of corporeal integrity; Sanjay/Sikander, by contrast, are primarily shown in the process of paving the way for a Gramscian 'unity' in terms of nation-building. Given the colonial context and more crucially the European origin of the concept of nation itself, the activity of nation-building will however have to imply the integration of 'England' into the nation-to-be; at the same time, it will have to contest and overcome the dissecting force as which England is orchestrated for the colony. Hence any notion of Indianness as it emerges from Sanjay's exploits will be predicated on the indelible traces of 'England' in the future palimpsest of a postcolonial India: "It is precisely because I'm an Indian that I'm English" (576), Sanjay comes to conclude. Thus the labour of forging the nation is marked as a synthesising and hybridising process, of which the subversive smuggling of secret messages into the texture of the imperial archive is but one aspect.

²³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 349; 429.

Operating on the *katharos* doctrine, the analytical approach of colonialist knowledge production represents the exact opposite of such integration. The English medical researcher Sarthey - gradually revealed as Sanjay's narrative antagonist - figures as the epitome of such vivisectioning knowledge production in the ranks of the imperial archive. Sarthey's fieldwork effects an epistemic colonisation of North India so that "the air itself seemed [...] permeated with a rationalism from some other shore" (479). In this climate of an emergent monocultural new dominant, resistance has to switch its strategies. As the heterogenisation of the increasingly powerful imperial text no longer appears a viable option, Sanjay is forced to resort to a desperate tactics that is doomed to failure right from the start: the impossible destruction of the archive at large. The Begum Sumroo's advice, "if you want to destroy the Englishman's power [...] burn his books" (475), clearly falls back behind Sanjay's own insight gained in the Calcutta printing press, namely that print capitalist products will re-emerge serially in ever more copies, "more than enough to flood the world" (341). Yet, abortive as Sanjay's raid on Sarthey's field library may turn out, it still provides him with a crucial clue for his further opposition against the imperial archive: Among the stolen books, Sanjay discovers Sarthey's diary, written during his public-school education at Norgate, which introduces a genealogy of the monster that Sarthey gradually is transformed into. Monstrosity, it turns out, stems from a full subjection under the paradigms of imperial interpellation: The fragmentary entries account for an education in Englishness that is first of all a season "in Hell" (476). The gruesome goings-on at Norgate comprise racist discrimination as well as sexual exploitation at the hands of "uppers", who not only terrorise the young Anglo-Indian for his racial hybridity but also feminise him from Paul into 'Mary'. Initially thus victimised in terms of race and gender, Sarthey yet succeeds in transforming himself into a perfect specimen of the English gentleman by abiding to the implicit codes of hierarchy that underpin the brutal microcosm of the public school; his 'promotion' to membership of the elect club of 'blades' is owed to his cool scientific approach to the system in which he increasingly participates as perpetrator rather than victim. The diary ends with Sarthey himself ritually raping and in the process killing a classmate with "keen interest and curiosity" (495), and thus fulfilling the expectations of his dandy mentor who had earlier detected his 'talents' as a "crafty little experimenter" (487). If science, rationalism, and empirical experimentalism here go simply perverse, Sarthey's further career characterises him as a faithful graduate of this education "in Hell". For the Sarthey that Sanjay encounters for the final countdown in London, 1888, has fully transmuted into a Gothic monster occupying precisely that place that Victorian rationalist ideology excludes but at the same time, at least in

Chandra, produces. As Chandra's text passes into postcolonial Gothic, Sarthey in fact is revealed in the penultimate episode of the book as a cross of such demonic icons, from the reservoir of the late Victorian imaginary, as Dracula, Mr Hyde, Dorian Gray, and Jack the Ripper. Postcolonial Gothic is understood here as the appropriation of a Western genre – “the Gothic ‘way of writing’ [that] began as, and remained, a Eurocentric trope”,²⁴ – whose function it was to construct alterity as monstrous, and thereby ‘resolve’ the contradictions inherent in a constitutive interaction with, and dependence on, a racial, class and/or gendered Other. By locating its plots in the ‘barbarian’ regions of Catholic South Europe or the Orient, pre-Victorian as well as high imperial English Gothic organised “the spatial dislocation of the other as the unseen of culture”, and constructs figures of alterity serviceable “in the imposition of a hegemonic Eurocentric view”.²⁵

Imperial Gothic in the late nineteenth century cannot fully uphold the dislocating strategies of its forerunners: The figure of the Other can no longer be held at a safe distance but begins to invade the territory of the self in fantasies of reverse colonisation, or – even more threateningly – the imperial subject itself in narratives of regression, degeneration and ‘going native’.²⁶ At the same time, the perplexities and aporias of Empire as a system of power/knowledge begin to press on the genre and find their rearticulations in fables of monstrosity as the limit of scientific knowledge. In a fascinating reading of *Dracula*, Thomas Richards suggests that monstrosity in late Victorianism is inextricably associated with the capability of undergoing “catastrophic mutations of form”.²⁷ The mutant thus disrupts the fantasy of comprehensive knowledge that underwrites the project of the imperial archive, and that with the advent of Darwinism is primarily articulated through the expectation of a total morphological record: “Once reconstructed, the complete sequence of organisms would be absolutely continuous throughout”.²⁸ With its implicit telos of absolute continuity, evolution research and theory in the wake of Darwin therefore crucially ties in with the construction of homogeneous empty time; the monster that Darwinism expels from the surface of the earth accordingly embodies precisely those explosions of the historicist continuum that, some decades later, Benjamin identifies as

²⁴ Bernd-Peter Lange, “Postcolonial Gothic: Salman Rushdie and *The Moor's Last Sigh*”. “*The Decolonizing Pen*”: *Cultural Diversity and the Transnational Imaginary in Rushdie's Fiction*. Ed. Liselotte Glage & Rüdiger Kunow. Trier (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag) 2001: 39–50; 41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 48; 49.

²⁶ See Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*. Ithaca & London (Cornell UP) 1988: 227–253.

²⁷ Richards, *Imperial Archive*, 57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

the task of the revolutionary masses. While critics such as Franco Moretti or Gayatri Spivak have explored the generally subaltern and subversive status of the (pre-Darwinian) monster either as the proletariat or the colonised subject,²⁹ Richards' reading of *Dracula* as a narrative of colonialist anxiety addresses the fundamental epistemic underpinnings that are at stake in such fiction: The vampire as a discontinuous mutation threatens to disrupt an entire "imperial order figured as continuous", first of all by its impossible ontological status as a being with "no past, no progenitors, no lineage, no putative position on a reconstructed time-line":³⁰ a figure that more recently has re-entered critical/utopian discourse as the cyborg in Donna Haraway's conceptualisation. Only when this monster begins to reverse the historical trajectories and to invade the very heart of the empire does the horrific fantasy fully unfold: In that sense, as Richards observes, *Dracula* anticipates not only the breakdown of imperial epistemology but likewise the arrival of the colonised in the metropolis.

In Chandra's postcolonial Gothic narrative – the chapter is aptly titled "In London, a battle between immortals" – the monster's itinerary from the periphery into the centre is performed by Sanjay. Monstrosity as ontology, however, is paradoxically ascribed to Sarthey, the very epitome of rationalism, whose official scientific writings culminate in the utopia of the imperial archive with its vision of "a world rescued by the investigations of science, a world delivered from poverty, hunger, disease, war, and superstition, by the rational decisions of a polity governed not by emotion, but by scientific principle; the task is before us, we must not quaver. It will be done. It is being done" (562). Behind the facade of the distinguished Orientalist, travel writer and renowned physician, the monster lurks visible but unseen. Is it continuous or incommensurate with the overall rationalisation project of colonialist modernity that the official Sarthey epitomises? The monstrous emerges first, according to Sarthey's own confession to Sanjay, precisely at that moment when the constitutive paradox at the heart of the imperial archive is suspended. For the claim to comprehensive knowledge that informs the rationalist and continuous knowledge system of the colonialist formation is essentially proleptic: "[I]n the nineteenth century the imperial archive succeeded not in attaining comprehensive knowledge but in collectively imagining a not-too-distant

²⁹ See Franco Moretti, "Dialectic of Fear". *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms. Revised Edn.* Tr. Susan Fisher, David Forgacs & David Miller. London & New York (Verso) 1988: 83–108; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism". *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism. 2nd ed.* Ed. Catherine Belsey & Jane Moore. Basingstoke (Macmillan) 1997: 148–163.

³⁰ Richards, *Imperial Archive*, 64; 58.

future when all species would be identified, all languages translated, all books catalogued".³¹ Sarthey mutates into a monster exactly at that point where he deludes himself into believing that he literally embodies the complete archive; in other words, that he is in full possession of that universal knowledge whose achievement, in the epistemological complex of the archive itself, is invariably postponed:

when I sliced into the last wall [...] I had it, the first cause, the beginning at the beginning and the answer at the end, the straight line through, the arc, and the universe shivered and for a moment flew into place, it was there and no need to speak of God or gods, I understood. [...] I had become pure spirit, a principle free of this earth, I could fly. (558)

Thus while still in India on an extensive medical research mission, Sarthey finds himself all of a sudden gifted with the unaccountable capacity to fly, and the 'gift' seems to be immediately connected to autopsies and vivisection. The literal analysis of 'cadavers' (558) and later on living human bodies turns out as the pure spirit's necessary preoccupation - first in the guise of research, then of psychopathic mass murder. Sanjay arrives in a late-nineteenth century London stalked by a threat clearly reminiscent of Jack the Ripper, only to find out that not mental derangement but mad science gone Gothic lies behind the serial killings of 'harlots'. By virtue of their profession, the victims of Sarthey the Ripper refer back to the unnamed prostitute who had recited 'Red Earth and Pouring Rain' to Sanjay and thus formed the entry point of a poetics of transculturation into the text that primarily focuses the establishment of the imperial order of things; and in fact, as will be demonstrated below, the Ripper's victims get equated with colonial territory. The mastery over female bodies, pushed to its grotesque extremes by scientific-monstrous Sarthey, ties in with geopolitical conquest, so that Chandra's postcolonial Gothic explicates what imperial Gothic only hints at but ultimately disavows: namely, that the monstrous does not (only) grotesquely literalise the allochronic Other but that it (also) applies to the civilised Self. If, e.g., the vampiric "invasion of London" in *Dracula* at one level simply "mirrors British imperial activities abroad", then the vampire is "revealed as disquietingly familiar" to his Victorian readership,³² instead of standing in for some benighted atavism. *Dracula* is uncanny therefore not only as reversed coloniser but even more so as coloniser as such.

Social Sarthey of Scotland Yard information is "old now, must be all of a century" (551), and passes his days, *Dracula*-style, in hiding: "he's so feeble he can't stand the light, and he lies in a dark room with the curtains pulled"

³¹ Richards, *Imperial Archive*, 39.

³² Stephen D. Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonisation". *The Critical Response to Bram Stoker*. Ed. Carol A. Senf. Westport & London (Greenwood Press) 1994: 84—104; 91.

(564). The Sarthey that reveals himself to Sanjay, however, is revoltingly “youthful beyond all dreams, the jawline tight and elegant, the cheeks firm and red and handsome, the step jaunty” (555). Has there a painting been relegated to some attic, displaying the portrait of a man, “withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage” from living a “*monstrous* soul-life”?³³ Chandra’s text does not lift the secret of Sarthey’s monstrosity; it only hints, without fully asserting, at the possibility that the monster rips apart pregnant women and somehow rejuvenates itself by feeding on the extracted fetus. Robert Bloch of *Psycho* fame imagined Jack the Ripper in a very similar vein as a scientist working on his own immortality by way of ‘sacrificing’ women.

Sarthey’s last victim, Mary Kelly, has already been dissected when Sanjay and the police arrive to witness a scene that combines splatter with colonialism and morphology: “Sarthey is leaning over her [...] he picks up her hand and places it slowly in her stomach, in the red cavity where her stomach used to be, the room is red, [...] Sarthey says: ‘See. See. See, India, this is your womb. This is your heart. This is your bone.’” (570). The monster that Richards identifies as a virtually postcolonial threat in the colonial narrative of *Dracula* is thus rewritten in Chandra’s postcolonial narrative as the ultimate horror of colonialism and its fusion of pedagogy and vivisection. J.P.S. Uberoi identifies vivisection as the logical outcome of instrumental reason: not so much a ‘research methodology’ but an end in itself inasmuch as it asserts the total subjection of the object of knowledge to the controlling imperialist gaze.³⁴ In the horizon of the imperial archive, knowledge production (cartography, morphology, taxonomies of all sorts), exploitation and didactics go hand in hand, which is why Sarthey turns his atrocious murder into a sinister anatomy lesson held to the victim (‘See, India, this is your womb’). In this sense, Sarthey is a radical executioner of the civilizing mission, inserting the colony’s body into the normalcy of the morphological chain *and* transmitting that knowledge to the unenlightened backward Other that, ironically, has to be ripped apart in order for such demonstration to take place.

As a civiliser, Sarthey paradoxically seems to perform some obscure ritual that neatly matches the exorcist practices employed by Stoker’s vampire slayers, and tellingly Van Helsing himself describes his purging of the vampires’ nest, at the end of *Dracula*, as “butcher work” that involves among other niceties “the horrid screeching as the stake drove home; the

³³ Oscar Wilde [1891], *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Ed. & intr. Robert Mighall. London (Penguin) 2003: 213; my emphasis.

³⁴ See J.P.S. Uberoi, *The European Modernity: Science, Truth and Method*. New Delhi (OUP) 2002: 73.

plunging of the writhing form, and lips of bloody foam".³⁵ Of course Stoker's narrative posits such scenes as unavoidable outrages necessitated by the need to transform the monstrous (back) into the normal; for what is achieved with a little help from staking, organ extraction, and decapitation is a normalisation by way of which "the body began to melt and crumble into its native dust".³⁶ If the vampire's threat to the imperial archive, according to Richards, consists not least of that creature's refusal to decompose, then Van Helsing's 'butcher work' is ultimately legitimised by its effect as it finally relegates the monstrous body to decomposition and hence forces it to "complete the developmental process that forms the very precondition for life on earth".³⁷ The violence involved in this procedure remains, however, an outrage, and as such emphasises the necessity of its legitimisation through some overarching narrative: in *Dracula*, of course, the averting of the vampire threat and the rescue of the vampiric soul; in terms of colonialism, the civilising mission, and the white man's burden. Among the more subtle anxieties in Stoker's text is precisely the fear that the legitimising narrative might not hold and vampire slaying turn ultimately into sheer grotesquery. Stoker has Seward protest against the 'post-mortem' of Lucy's body – an intervention that bespeaks this fear and sharply poses the ethical problem of legitimacy: "The girl is dead. Why mutilate her body without need? And if there is no necessity for a post-mortem and nothing to gain by it – no good to her, to us, to science, to human knowledge – why do it? Without such it is monstrous".³⁸ In *Dracula*, of course, such fear is contained, albeit under heavy strain: Science, at the dominant level of the text, is proven definitely legitimate and successful in expelling monsters; yet its own potential to monstrosity has to be acknowledged, if only to be discarded of. Richards' reading emphasises the close outcome of the plot and the triumph of the Darwinian order over the unaccountable mutant. What remains to be stated, though, is that science itself has to de-rationalise itself in order to live up to the threat of that which cannot be accounted for within the paradigms of Victorian rationalism: Van Helsing's success, to be sure, relies on a prior critique of "our science that [...] wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain". Helsing's vampirology very obviously parts company with the utopian horizon of expectation that underpins the imperial archive: "Do you not think there are things that you cannot understand, and yet which are". The rhetorical question – "Do you

³⁵ Bram Stoker [1897], *Dracula*. Harmondsworth (Penguin) 1994: 441.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 441.

³⁷ Richards, *Imperial Archive*, 61.

³⁸ Stoker, *Dracula*, 199, my emphasis.

know the altogether of comparative anatomy?”³⁹ – aims at the heart of the scientific utopia of the imperial archive in that it disclaims the expectation of a fully comprehensive knowledge. Even if Richards convincingly points out that the vampire is finally defeated by information, the superiority of his enemies’ information order does not entirely consist in modern technology alone – the typewriter, the telegraph, that Friedrich Kittler devotes so much attention to⁴⁰ – but has, especially in the build-up of the crucial countdown, to rely on Van Helsing hypnotising Mina Harker in order to locate Dracula in his progress downriver. If the defeat of Dracula is thus readable as a triumph of empire over the insurgent colonial subject that refuses to stay in place, then the “information order”⁴¹ that enables this triumph necessarily has to accommodate, beside ‘advanced’ information networks, the codes of the native informant (in this case, displaced on a ventriloquised Mina Harker) in order to tap the other knowledge of the Other. *Dracula*, in this reading, not only figures colonial anxieties with anti-colonial ruptures and discontinuities; it articulates science with its apparent Other (magic? parapsychology?) and posits, beyond plot resolution, the deeply dialectic relationality of science and its object. Thus, even after his purging and reintegration into the archive’s “great chain of being”,⁴² Dracula necessitates a reformulation of the paradigm, if not its complete breakdown altogether: Van Helsing is *not* an imperial archivist (his broken English marks him as an outsider of that project)⁴³ but the representative of a knowledge system that fuses rationalism with the occult.

Leaning over the dissected female body of Mary Kelly/‘India’, Sarthey at once resembles Van Helsing and Dracula, and thus feeds on the relative fluidity of Stoker’s configuration. Like the vampire king, Sarthey is finally put to death and, in dying, subjected to a compressed process of decomposition. Other than Dracula, whose reward for his final integration into the imperial archive’s chain of being is “a look of peace”,⁴⁴ Sarthey remains ultimately unredeemed and “cannot die”: Even after the vampiric dissolution of the body that obligingly “collapsed into fine dust [...] still the

³⁹ Stoker, *Dracula*, 229; 230.

⁴⁰ See Friedrich Kittler, *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900*. Munich (Wilhelm Fink) 1987: 364.

⁴¹ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, passim.

⁴² Richards, *Imperial Archive*, 46.

⁴³ Moretti, interestingly, argues that Van Helsing’s “approximate and mangled English” is necessary in Stoker’s text to express that which standard or literary English cannot express – in his argument, not the kind of monstrosity proposed by Richards, but “capitalist monopoly” (which Dracula comes to embody on Moretti’s reading); see Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, 97.

⁴⁴ Stoker, *Dracula*, 447.

lips on the head worked" (571) and keep repeating the old Aristotelian mantra that the world must be clean.

In the Dracula-Van Helsing configuration, Stoker prepares for a collapse of dichotomies; Chandra follows suit in his juxtaposition of Sarthey and Sanjay. For the latter certainly shares as many traits with the Transylvanian monster as the former: In the first place, Sanjay's journey from the periphery into the centre repeats the move of "reverse colonization", that according to Stephen Arata addresses a subterranean imperial "geopolitical fear". This fear is still heightened by that other capacity that Sanjay overtly shares with Dracula, namely the ability to "impersonate an Englishman".⁴⁵ In fact, Sanjay's strategic self-fashioning – consisting of not much more than a proper shave, the appropriate attire, and the display of an aloof attitude – allows him to "pass for an Englishman" (552). For the perfection of his plan to stalk the streets of London under cover, Dracula, erudite Occidental autodidact as he may be, still requires the company of Harker as a living English native informant in order to "learn the English intonation"⁴⁶ properly. Passing, in *Dracula*, is the precondition of evading the authorities; in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, it works as the entry ticket that facilitates access to those authorities: Only as respectable (and first of all, English) "Mr Jones" can Sanjay enter into the heart of the surveillance system that alone might stop Sarthey from further 'butcher work'. Yet even if Sanjay, as Jones, succeeds in gaining the confidence of Scotland Yard inspectors, the ultimate showdown between him and Sarthey cannot but reveal the supernatural status of both antagonists; hence, Sanjay's partner, Inspector Abberline's unnerved question: "'I saw a blade go through you and yet you are not dead. What are you? What was he?'" (574). Sanjay's response clarifies not much: "We were just ordinary people. We were changed by something". Yet it makes it evident that something is at work here that cannot be contained within the dominant knowledge system; Abberline 'correctly' conjectures that "magic" has a role to play in the constitution of both Sarthey and Sanjay, but he is wrong in assuming that this is a magic from "over there". Sanjay has to rectify this assumption: "it was magic all right. But it was never Indian". If Thomas Richards describes Victorian rationalism as a system that produces an oxymoronic "positive mythological knowledge",⁴⁷ then Chandra's Sanjay obviously locates the origins of that emphatically non-Indian magic in that archive: an excessively rationalist epistemic edifice that, turning science into

⁴⁵ Arata, "Occidental Tourist", 85; 95.

⁴⁶ Stoker, *Dracula*, 31–32.

⁴⁷ Richards, *Imperial Archive*, 13.

black magic and thus going Gothic, refers to the “unreasonable origins of reason”.⁴⁸

The most obviously uncanny trait that Sanjay shares with Dracula, however, lies in the circumstance that he has transformed himself into another kind of “Un-Dead”: not in the Gothic mode of vampirism but by way of unrelenting meditation and prayer which finally compels Yama, god of death, to grant him the boon of immortality. Thus relieved from the pressures of time, Sanjay for a certain period enters into anti-imperial nationalist politics proper, preparing for a “simultaneous taking to arms all over Hindustan, an orchestrated turning to battle” (521). Reminiscent of the ‘clockwork armies’ of Alexander and de Boigne as well as Anderson’s emphasis on simultaneity in homogeneous empty time, Sanjay’s vision of the nation to be forged feeds obviously into a genre of nationalism as derivative discourse. To drive the point home, Chandra has Sanjay as nationalist leader act as a full mirror image of his purist Other; as if ventriloquised by Alexander and Aristotle, Sanjay’s slogan while whipping up the subaltern masses claims that “India must be cleansed” (535). Like Sarthey at Norgate, Sanjay thus gets his education in Englishness – with the significant difference that he realises, on time, how he is about to “change [...] entirely, because in anger he had not only lost his country but himself” (545). Instead of the purist vision of an India ‘cleansed’ of all extraneous components, Sanjay comes back to embrace the contrapuntal concept of an India-as-palimpsest of which to be a citizen ineluctably implies, among other things, also to be English. After the Gothic sojourn to London with its exorcism of Sarthey, Sanjay comes back to India to renounce Yama’s boon and finally die. In his last utterance – no doubt a sermon – he addresses the “children of the future, you young men and women who will set us free, may you be happy [...] may you be Hindustani and Indian and English and everything else at the same time, may you be neither this nor that, may you be better than us” (580). In this respect, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* invests the anti-colonial past with a utopian charge that – as in Walter Benjamin’s famous dictum – calls for its fulfilment in the present: “Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim”.⁴⁹ Sanjay’s ‘testament’ – a sermon ironically inaudible to anyone as it is whispered against the soundwall of a roaring waterfall – formulates that claim very precisely and confronts it, for the contemporary reader, with its as yet incomplete fulfilment.

⁴⁸ Chakrabarty, “Radical Histories and Question of Enlightenment Rationalism”, 268.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, 254.

5 Violent Separation – Violent Fusion

Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold*

The past was with my countrymen every moment of their lives. [...] To them five hundred years ago was the same as yesterday, outside the orbit of time. The past was never your responsibility. It was not the sum-total of mankind's wisdom, errors and insights. It was not the torch that lit the darkness and choices of today. My memoirs would try to go against the grain and break with tradition. If personal history was an inheritance, then I would leave behind a record that would allow the next generation, including my children, to understand how their fathers and forefathers negotiated the turns and twists of diplomacy and the business of the state; how they failed, what mistakes they made and how they picked up the pieces and started anew.¹

The writer of these reflections on the production of history is the protagonist and part-time first person narrator of Kiran Nagarkar's novel, *Cuckold* (1997), itself a 'dissident', highly self-conscious historical novel gravitating around the (im)possibilities of writing 'history'. Stoutly anti-historicist, *Cuckold* upholds the claim to an endemic, non-derivative regional genre of modernity that cannot be narrated in terms of progressivist matrices, however passionately the writer of the memoirs quoted above appears to strive for such paradigms. That writer is himself a historical if obscure figure, "about whom we know nothing but the fact that he was born, married and died" (604): Bhojraj, the Maharaj Kumar (i.e., heir apparent) of the Rajput kingdom of Mewar, who lived in the first third of the sixteenth century on the eve of the Mughal invasion of northern India. If the historical record holds no data concerning this prince other than his name, then Nagarkar's novel appears to operate as an exact counterpart to 'history': The prince remains unnamed all through the text but gets fully fleshed out as a public and private figure, civil and military politician, rational and religious thinker, and author of the above quoted journal that functions as a fictitious counterpart to the *Babur-Nama*, the autobiographical chronicle dictated by Bhojraj's military and political enemy and alter ego, the Mughal invader Babur. *Cuckold* thus

¹ Kiran Nagarkar, *Cuckold*. New Delhi (Harper Collins) 1997: 344–45; quotes from the novel subsequently in my own text with page numbers.

imaginatively fills the lacunae in a narrative of dynastic genealogy that, despite its omissions, still succeeds in constructing a historical continuum; Nagarkar's narrative, by contrast, effects the very opposite: The more the prince is 'developed' as a fictional character, the more does this figure appear to disturb if not disrupt historicist continuity.

Nagarkar's version of Bhojraj is obviously not meant to simply complete a continuist narrative but, by filling those gaps, interrogate the historicist paradigm as such: paradoxically by fictionalising Bhojraj as a harbinger of historicism. For the prince in *Cuckold*, however safely located in the period of Babur's seizure of Delhi, resembles in many ways the – equally unnamed – narrator in Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass*: Not literally a time traveller, Bhojraj as an anachronistically proleptic figure more often than not finds himself stranded in a time his own but not his own: a modernist in a world that must appear pre-modern to him. Other than Kesavan's sojourn into the immediate pre-Independence phase of the freedom struggle, Nagarkar's construction aims not so much at the positing of a possible alternative past full of roads not taken, but at the recuperation of the past's *actual* manifold heterogeneity. For the Bhojraj figure, all his modernist anachronisms notwithstanding, also remains a child of his time and attests to the modernities inherent in Indian pasts prior to the colonial interpellation of India into modernity. In this respect, Nagarkar's text articulates the various claims to a strictly non-European modernity that we have encountered in thinkers like Chatterjee or Chakrabarty. The endemic modernity proposed by Bhojraj, then, is firmly safeguarded against the charge of derivation, so that the 'modern' as part of the 'pre-modern' also works as a mirror image of the composite heterogeneous present and thereby effects the suspension of the concept of anachronism altogether.

Yet *Cuckold* does not stop short at the rewriting of an allegedly pre-modern past as inherently modern, and the concomitant unsettling of homogenising stageist periodisations. Like the Maharaj Kumar, his equally unnamed wife comes to operate as a provocation to historicist fantasies; yet if the prince's proleptic anachronism still depends on a notion of temporal succession in order to be identifiable in the first place, the princess imports a fully paradoxical transtemporal temporality that entirely exceeds historicism. Again, the unnamed figure can be historically identified and located as the *bhakti* poet and saint, Mirabai. As a radical religious (or religiously encoded) reform movement, *bhakti* emerged in the twelfth century and has adherents even today. Anti-hierarchical in its outlook, the movement combines strong individualist and egalitarian traits. It can therefore be interpreted both as a quasi mysticist and a politically subversive tendency. Emphasising this first aspect, S.S. Mehta states that *bhakti* "has no English word for it. Worship,

prayer and even devotion fall short of the full connotation of Bhakti. It means standing in the presence of God, serving Him, loving Him, talking to Him, seeing Him, hearing Him, and in fact enjoying the Deity".² From an entirely different, Dalit perspective, *bhakti* appears however as "a fundamental cultural revolt against the caste system, challenging its underlying principles and holding up ideals of a different social order in which equality of castes and equality of women were crucial".³ In Nagarkar's novel, these two aspects of *bhakti* collude as constituents of a subversive anti-identitarian politics.

While the prince Bhojraj's place in official history is a blank, his wife Mirabai has been endowed with a profuse afterlife, "[h]er name [being] on almost every Indian's lips" (609). With "a tangled growth of stories woven around her name",⁴ Mirabai, not so much a historical but legendary figure, is associated with an excessive multiplicity of contesting narratives, but more than that with the inception of a still vital tradition that stands outside the parameters of homogeneous empty time. In the popular, even plebeian *bhakti* community that refers to Mirabai, "no sharp division exists between the past and the present. The past is evoked and born anew and it returns to form a real part of the present".⁵ Nagarkar, I will argue, is particularly interested in this transtemporality along with its radically subversive implications. While the Bhojraj figure, as will be demonstrated, engages in the truly modernist project of nation-building, Mirabai fosters the emergence of an alternative imagined community that is bound up in neither territory nor social stratification and that furthermore takes the explosion of homogeneous empty time for a starting point. The following reading of *Cuckold*, then, will first trace these two very different strains of disclaiming homogeneous empty time: the recuperation of the genealogy of India's mixed modernity through the figure of the Maharaj Kumar; and the more radical alternative of transtemporality as embodied in Mirabai. If this procedure suggests a dichotomy of two distinct and mutually exclusive strands, a subsequent conclusion will have to point out how Nagarkar's text finally articulates the one with the other.

² S.S. Mehta, *A Monograph on Mirabai, the Saint of Mewad*. Bombay (Fort Press) 1920: 32.

³ K.D. Purane, *Untouchability and the Law: The Ground Reality*. New Delhi (Gyan) 2000: 25.
⁴ Mehta, *Monograph on Mirabai*, 17.

⁵ Parita Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*. New Delhi (OUP) 1994: 89—90.

5.1 Translating modernity

“I shut myself up in my office. What was going on? This is daylight, nine seventeen in the morning” (50). Like any twentieth-century bureaucrat, Nagarkar’s Maharaj Kumar labours under the regime of the clock. He arranges meetings with the head of the department of city-planning for “six o’clock sharp” (20) and insists “not to be disturbed between seven thirty and twelve thirty in the morning” (355). Clearly, among the many aspects of “self-discipline” (290) the prince subjects himself to, time-discipline ranges prominently, as the narrator asserts quite early on: “I like to be at work by six-thirty in the morning. That gives me an hour and a half to scrutinize the papers, appraise individual issues, take decisions, jot down my remarks in the margins and move on to more pressing matters” (3). The bureaucratic attitude displayed here justifies the construction of a connection with the nineteenth century Bengali clerks referred to by Sarkar in his investigations into the emergence of clock-time in colonial India: If *Kali-yuga* becomes a metaphorical frame by way of which the deprivations of that temporal paradigm shift are being made commensurate with the given space of experience, then the reoccurring references to the ‘dark age’ obviously serve as a platform for the appropriation and interrogation of the general rationalisation of society, of which clock-time, then, is but one aspect, however crucial. Not surprisingly, the Maharaj Kumar, too, asserts the prosaic, post-romance status of a disenchanted and virtually immanent world with recourse to *Kali-yuga*: “The gods no longer materialize on earth, at least not in Kali Yuga, this most fallen of ages”; and yet he continues by suggesting that “the only miracles in life are wrought by time” (394). Oscillating between rationalisation and the miraculous, the Maharaj Kumar’s time has an ambiguity built into it that derives from its mixed constitution: at once the linearity of a virtually homogeneous empty time that pertains to *Kali-yuga*, and the subordination of that limited linear arc under a superior cosmological framework that – even for the modern prince – remains unquestionable. How else could the same person who exercises such rigorous clock-time discipline claim his descent from “my ancestor, the Sun-God” (48), or refer to *Kali-yuga* at all? It is precisely such peaceful coexistence of the linear and the cyclic, the historical and the mythical that European rationalism, not least in its Orientalist application, tries to rule out; interestingly William Jones explicitly derides genealogical claims to divine descent by excluding them from the domain of the modern: “all which fictions may be charming embellishments for an heroick poem, but are just as absurd in civil History, as the descent of two royal families from the Sun and

the Moon".⁶ Bhojraj, by contrast, integrates the two domains that Jones holds categorically apart: The cyclic provides the far horizon within which the linear is placed as a limited foreground; this latter, however, gets increasingly extrapolated by the Maharaj Kumar as the essential space of agency and involvement, as a metaphysical reflection on the cycles of death and rebirth indicates: "Reincarnation may be on the cards for most of us but we live this particular life, whether it is maya or whatever else, only once. This is our only chance to engage it" (364). As the ties with the speculative realm of transcendence come loose, the field of immanence emerges as the central arena in which singular and linear lives are played out.

If "Time is of the essence" (24), as the text heavily ensures from its very beginning, then this is obviously so because efficient time-management forms a prerequisite for the modernisation projects – and more generally: the rationalisation of society – that the Maharaj Kumar envisages. His reflections on governance and statecraft, military tactics and gender relations, technology and hegemony, subjectivity and the social contract, all mark him out as "ahead of his times" (344), as "a prophet who's come before his time. An early bird waking up people just a little after the hour of midnight" (307). Prophecy, of course, is not involved in these anticipatory visions; nor do the impulses that trigger Bhojraj's innovative schemes stem from some contact with other, more 'advanced' cultures. Instead, the prince – whether as first-person narrator or focaliser – functions as a filter through which the elaborately stratified and institutionalised socius of a sixteenth century feudal system gets rendered as an already heterogeneous fusion of the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. If, on his neatly planned working days, the Maharaj Kumar confers first with the head of the "Institute of Advanced Military Tactics and Strategy" (16), then with a civil engineer from "the Department of City Planning" (3); if the king's steward is introduced as the "PM to the Rana, my father" (27); if an extravagant member of the royal family does not get further loans "when his IOUs came due" (29); if Bhojraj rejoices in the state's additional source of income after "the tourist traffic had gone up by a hundred and fifty percent" (394); if an aristocrat summons his "ADC" [i.e., "aide-de-camp"] (528) in order to have a trespasser removed: then conspicuous interpolations like these appear to mark the intrusion of wildly proleptic moments into a traditional system, but they signify nothing but integral components of that system: Chittor *has* a bureaucracy that organises city planning and military instruction; the king *is*, after all, represented by a political agent whose office would roughly correspond to that of a Prime Minister. If thus the Rajput system holds ample referentiality for the

⁶ William Jones [1788], "On the Chronology of the Hindus". *The Works of William Jones: Vol. IV*. London (Stockdale & Walker) 1807: 1–47; 33.

modernist terms employed by the Maharaj Kumar, ‘anachronism’ – if there is any – arises solely from the mode of signification, hence from the hiatus inherent in any act of translation, as the following passage illustrates:

We have two prime ministers among us *Suryavanshis*, the descendants of the Sun-god. Father is a *Diwan* or prime minister to *Eklingji*, the five-headed Shiva who is our family deity and whose kin and representative he is on earth. Pooranmalji who had just entered is PM to the Rana, my father. (27; my emphases)

While at first sight simply translating opaque ‘vernacular’ terms – *Suryavanshis*, *Diwan*, *Eklingji* – for the anticipated reader’s benefit, the narrator’s role clearly exceeds that of a mere native informant inasmuch as the quoted sequence performs one act of literal translation in order to elucidate another, more complex one: the parameters of sovereignty in feudal Rajputana in the discharge of power first from Shiva to the King as the god’s deputy, then to the PM as the King’s stand-in. Nagarkar’s trick consists partly in the structural similarity that pertains between these two different levels of exchange (one of linguistic meaning, the other of political authority) both of which operate on the principle of replacing one term, in a conventionalised mode, by another. Two parallel lines of representations thus emerge, none of which, however, will escape the dynamics of the ineluctable slippage of the signifier: The translation of “*Diwan*” as “prime minister” gets undermined by the application of that same signifier to Pooranmalji, who is not the *Diwan* but in his capacity as the king’s representative, the “*Pradhan*” (as we later learn; see 542); this latter office, at the political level, serves as a stand-in not of the absent ultimate sovereign (Shiva) but of another absent referent (the king) which, in turn, is yet another representative – the place holder of the absent Shiva. Though these two distinct instances of representation – *Diwan* and *Pradhan* – occupy different positions in the sign chain of political authorisation, they can be subsumed under the name of “prime minister” because they operate on one and the same principle: the re-presentation of an absent, superior, and ultimately transcendent authority. The employment of the modernist term, ‘prime minister’, ensures that the discharge and transfer of authority from the god as ultimate sovereign to the latter’s first and second degree representations in the realm of the political proper gets uncannily commensurate with dominant contemporary political theories and entrenched structures; for very obviously, it would only take a rewriting of that ultimate sovereign’s name not as Shiva but ‘the People’ – an equally metaphysical point of reference – to arrive at the genuinely modernist conceptualisation of the State’s legitimacy as “the *representation* of the whole population”.⁷ This structural affinity gets substantially underwritten by the circumstance that the

⁷ Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, 105.

Rajput model of tiered translation of authority is already based on what Hardt and Negri describe as the genuinely modern passage of sovereignty, i.e. the paradigm shift that substitutes metaphor for metonymy: Whereas feudal sovereignty (in Europe) was grounded in the notion that territorial "property was part of the body of the monarch, just as [...] the sovereign monarchic body was part of the body of God", the modern rearticulation of sovereignty dissolves such stable metonymous relationality in favour of a fundamental displacement according to which, from now on, "the physical territory and population were conceived as the extension of the transcendent essence of the nation".⁸ While it is true that Bhojraj's version of the state is not yet settled on that "transcendent essence of the nation" (in fact, it is precisely that essence that the prince strives to articulate), the ties of the cosmology of European feudalism are clearly severed in Rajputana: The body of the king partakes no longer of the divine. The translatory series explained by Bhojraj rests on correspondence but not identity: The "Diwan" is never to be confounded with Shiva himself nor to be worshipped as a literal embodiment of the divine. Hence, when Rana Sangha, the king, justifies his tactical offer of abdication with references to his war injuries that make him "a damaged idol" (369) unworthy of worship, he fundamentally violates the codes that regulate the essentially *metaphorical* relationality between the king and the gods, as Bhojraj muses: "We were kings by divine right, the earthly regents of Lord Eklingji who is none other than the great Shiva himself. By the simple device of a simile, Father had entered highly dangerous and dubious waters and arrogated divinity to himself" (371).

None of this, of course, does away with the clearly metaphysical legitimization of power in Mewar. The point is, however, that this metaphysics is not so much presented as historically obsolete but much rather as eerily familiar, as the translatory efforts of Nagarkar's text underscore. The structural likeness of Mewar's reason of state to entrenched modern political systems emphasises how "the adoption of the field of immanence as the exclusive terrain of the theory and practice of politics"⁹ has as yet by no means been achieved with modernity. If thus a distinctly obsolete formation amazingly comes to serve as a mirror image of the present, the neat demarcation lines between those temporal units that historicist discourse posits as distinct epochs begin to blur. Only on this condition can it become thinkable at all that Nagarkar's prince obviously inhabits the world of the Rajputs whose state is run by a "Diwan", as well as that of his reader, where heads-of-state are called "PM". In short, *Cuckold's* play with historical difference suggests the juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible temporalities

⁸ Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, 94; 95.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 377.

as the coexistence of different 'stages' of social time-constructions (mythic and secular, premodern and modern, residual and emergent, cyclic and linear, 'Indian' and 'Western'), while at the same time defying such binarisms of clearly distinct and culturally specific temporalities in favour of a fusion that articulates a complex and transcultural heterogeneous time: one in which the 'past' and the 'present' engage in relations of mutual exchange.

At one level, Nagarkar's text suggests that the Maharaj Kumar operates as an embodiment of anachronism. As the prince, however, is at the same time very much a contemporary of the reader as well as the Rajputs and as such partakes of both structures of feeling, his temporal eccentricity ultimately effects a cancelling out of the demarcation lines that separate those apparently different stages of historical development: The translation of "Diwan" as "prime minister" suggests not only that the modern inheres (already) in the quasi-medieval and vice versa, but more crucially that a fundamental commensurability pertains between the two poles. Rajput modernity, then, is derived from a peculiarly productive way of appropriating tradition, a way of flexibly expanding the collective space of experience without either ossifying or abandoning the past and its documents. The self-set task for the present would therefore consist in a careful rearticulation of the field already articulated by past interventions. In *Cuckold*, the autochthonous and authoritative role model for such a dynamic approach to the legacy of the past is the prince's great-grandfather Rana Kumbha: In mainstream historiography already blown up to larger-than-life proportions as a prototypical icon of Rajput values, Kumbha serves as Bhojraj's ideal for his capacity of rendering tradition itself flexible:

Rana Kumbha was a great respecter of tradition but he saw it as a river not as a dead pool of beliefs. Every spring, runnel and rivulet added to the richness and breadth of the river and so when he came across anything which caught his fancy, was beneficial to his people, or medicinal or just plain beautiful to behold, he appropriated it and incorporated it into the Mewar tradition. (339)

Tradition conceived of as liquid instead of solid not only allows for a flexible interpretation of the legacy in the service of the present; it also requires that the culture at large be predicated not on a self/Other dichotomy but on osmotic porosity, hence capable of absorbing impulses from elsewhere and thereby sustaining itself. Such absorption, in order to organise the full inclusion of the enriching new element, will have to take the detour of translation by way of which alone a mediation of the given tradition and the to-be-included newness becomes feasible. Much of the Maharaj Kumar's preoccupation in *Cuckold* occurs precisely in this field: namely, the ongoing endeavour to articulate his own, unheard-of concepts with the dominant ideas and notions of Rajput society. One of the prince's most fervently pursued

objectives, the installation of an efficient sewage system in the capital city of Chittor, cannot be made convincing "because it is an untouchable matter" (20) – unless it be translated into a prestige project on par with the representative monuments that mark the Chittor skyline. The Maharaj Kumar's succeeds in persuading "Sahasmal from the Department of City Planning" (3) into the project exactly by this translatory strategy, including an ironic transparency about the hiatus inherent in each act of translation: Sahasmal, initially a mainstream civil engineer, of course aspires to "a new complex of marble temples" or "a new Victory Tower that would be twice as high as the one that the great Rana Kumbha had built" (20). The sewer system, Bhojraj concedes in a later meeting with the town planner, is "not exactly the Victory Tower you wanted to build when we first met. But we could call them Sahasmal's Victory Tunnels. Imagine how grateful future generations will be to you" (164). Thus encoded, the prince's project does not just substitute tunnels for towers but refers to a larger, more general innovation: the profanation of the state.

This objective is truly futuristic inasmuch as it can only address 'future generations', and is yet dependent on its mediation through the given dominant code system of heroic and autotelic architecture, so that the sewage system has to be translated into the 'Victory Tunnels'. At the same time, however, Bhojraj's vision is not utopian but has its fully contemporaneous anchoring in the precedent of "ceramic channels [used] for aqueducts in the kingdom of Vijayanagar" (19). Not only that: The tunnel system in fact ties in with the equally scandalous strategic shift that Bhojraj plans to introduce into the military code of Mewar. Sahasmal's task of designing an underground network crisscrossing the whole of Chittor has, for the Maharaj Kumar, not only sanitary but also military aspects to it. In a case of siege, the underground should also function as a route of escape for the population of the fort – especially women and children, whom it would provide with an alternative to the traditionally prescribed heroic self-immolation "in the fires of johar" (163). Retreat instead of valiant self-destruction forms one of the rationalist military strategies with which the prince is obsessed, and that he cannot manage to reconcile with the code of the Rajputs: "My first task, perhaps doomed from the start, was to remove the stigma from the word 'flight' and then from the act itself" (343). On his first military campaign, the Maharaj Kumar appoints his confidant, Shafi Khan, to his war council not only in an attempt to countervene the "Hindu-Muslim divide" that rifts the Mewar troops, but first of all because Shafi Khan had "spent the last fifteen years studying and innovating war strategies" (209) – a preoccupation the result of which is a "treatise on the science of retreat" (209). Put to practice, the new strategic paradigm, despite the pragmatic advantages it entails,

proves abortive precisely because it all too overtly violates the paradigms of Rajput ideology: The science of retreat removes all “gallantry and valour from warfare” (252) and spells out the death of “the age of chivalry [...] among the Rajputs” (232). Gallantry, valour, and chivalry, of course, are primarily individualistic virtues whose performative realisation occurs most prominently in the theatre of war; compared to the ideal individual performance, large-scale success is of only secondary priority. The Maharaj Kumar’s new strategy critically subordinates precisely that individualistic performance value inherent in the Rajput warfare code under the auspices of the collective, formatted body: “It would take months, perhaps years, to forge our various forces into one great fighting machine whose actions were as cohesive and single-minded as its intentions” (213). As in Chandra, then, the army serves as a nodal point of the nation to come, and the prince’s primary mission lies in its articulation. Clearly, the new model army again resembles a clockwork rather than a ‘commonwealth’, and as such can figure for the modern prince as an object of both admiration and desire: “Oh, what a sight it is to see a disciplined army do its work with precision” (211). Hence Bhojraj’s efforts to overcome the communalist divisions into Hindus, Muslims, and tribals in favour of a bloc that would have to be ideologically welded together by the trans-communal shared reference point of the nation’s territory. Warfare, then, would be translated into citizens’ patriotic duty inasmuch as each man would “only be too happy to do their bit for their country” (207—208). The vision of that unification, however, remains distinctly proleptic as long as “we were not one army but many units” (213). While Bhojraj realistically assumes that the forging of a nation would take time, the advent of the Mughal invader necessitates precisely the instant realisation of a proto-nationalistic unification. As Babur hits the scene, internal communal divisions as well as loose and shifting affiliations of petty kingdoms turn out as major obstacles in the formation of an appropriate strategy of defence. In fact, the enforced efforts at nation building on the side of Bhojraj and his few allies can increasingly be read as responses to the Mughal threat. It is the reading of Babur’s diaries, channeled to Bhojraj through the Mewar information service, that intensifies the Maharaj Kumar’s preoccupation with the political implications of the new power’s arrival. In order to contain the Mughals’ “territorial ambitions”, it becomes mandatory to secularise society in such a way that identification and loyalty be grounded in citizenship instead of religion:

Since my return I have been pondering the Hindu-Muslim divide. If Mewar is to grow and expand, one of our major tasks will have to do with making Muslims feel secure in a Hindu kingdom. They must have as much at stake in Mewar’s future as Jains and Hindus. How, I keep wondering, do we ensure a dichotomy whereby God and faith remain at home and the state takes first priority in public life? (384)

The Babur effect thus expands from the military proper into the realm of politics at large, so that the new model of the unified army comes to stand in for a whole new type of social cohesion. The Maharaj Kumar's slogan according to which "we have to think and move like a single unit instead of ten companies moving in ten directions" (516) refers therefore to both types of imagined communities – the army and the nation. Accordingly, the explanation for the devastating defeat of the Mewar troops at the hands of Babur's army – "we were not one army but at least fifty armies" (582) – implies the concession that the project of nation forging had failed along with the abortive military reforms envisaged by Bhojraj.

5.2 The mythical foundations of modernity

Why does Bhojraj fail at all? Is Rajput society too inert and ossified to adopt such modernising impulses, too inflexible to function as a target language for the prince's unheard-of translations; or does Bhojraj himself fall short in the pedagogic project of translating his visions into the existing code? Translation in the first place involves an encounter of, and transfer between, two languages (in the broadest sense of that term) whose interstices form the very site at which translation operates; its locus is therefore neither the source nor the target, neither some (ultimately phantasmagoric) pure source nor some "identity of culture [...] authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People".¹⁰ The target language, although flexibilised and opened up to the negotiation of the new 'foreign' input, does by no means get effaced in the process. It rather undergoes an expansion of its scope, as the 'liquid' tradition approached and appropriated by Rana Kumbha exemplifies. In contrast to this kind of reformist politics, Bhojraj pursues the altogether different, revolutionary strategy of a complete reformatting of the deficient and obsolescent Rajput code which, under the pressure of the historical threat posed by the Mughals, appears to fall apart anyway: Not forged and welded but only loosely affiliated, Rajput (military) order is prone to "disintegrating imperceptibly like a sand wall" (213). Sand signifies the very materiality on which a seemingly durable yet in fact ephemeral pattern appears to be inscribed that the modern prince first has to efface before he can even begin his own articulatory work. In the midst of a military campaign, the Maharaj Kumar retreats into the desert for a week-long meditation on his 'life's work' and finds that articulation requires that the extant structure first be completely disarticulated:

¹⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory". *The Location of Culture*, 19–39; 37.

The sand was crinkled like frozen waves on water. Each wave was precision-contoured and each ridge of a sand-drift was fine as a strand of hair and unbroken. It was breathtaking, the work of a mastercraftsman who must have spent hundreds of years creating this abstract image of perfection that stretched all the way to infinity. His life's work was cut out for him. He had to systematically dismantle the work of art, botch it till it was unrecognizable, churn it back to primal chaos. (247)

That which is to be effaced is a script with clearly divine authorship, whose eradication forms the condition of possibility for a new, anthropocentric script. Bhojraj's agenda consists not of translation but of a radical, violent, and impossible breach with the given script. The prince's iconoclastic fervour with its teleology of a return to the 'primal chaos' as the point of departure for a literal start from scratch, however, all too obviously breaks away from the path of flexible tradition and palimpsestification so admirable in the role model of Rana Kumbha. Instead of a rearticulatory project that (realistically) takes into account how it has to be negotiated within a discursively pre-structured field of considerable inertia, Bhojraj adheres to the modernist myth of an 'absolute beginning' that requires to be written on a Hobbesian 'empty sheet', a Lockean '*tabula rasa*'.

Accordingly, the prince's visions materialise as a revolution from above, as frontal assaults on all established paradigms; hence they prove to be incommensurate with the dominant and meet with outright rejection, "criticism and resistance" (219). In a later sequence, the prince hints at another project of his which more tangibly attempts to intervene into the dominant script(ure): In a scholarly debate on the role of Bhishma (Tharoor's 'Gangaji', read Gandhi) in the *Mahabharata*, Bhojraj fundamentally questions the very parameters on which orthodox Rajput loyalties are based. While his more conventional antagonist insists that the "*Gita*-god tells us, whichever caste or profession you belong to, be true to it" (533), the Maharaj Kumar tries to introduce the category of ethical choice which would enable subjects to ground their loyalties not on predetermined bonds of familial or casteist ties, but on self-chosen values. The point is that such a conception cannot pass for a legitimate reading of the *Gita* (against whose principal teachings it very much violates) but requires a transcending of the scripturally authorised paradigms: to "rewrite the *Mahabharata*" in such a way that "gods too may be wrong occasionally and one must have the courage to go against them" (533). Yet Bhojraj's version of the *Mahabharata* – different from Tharoor's – remains unwritten precisely because a modernising translation of the *Gita*'s core concept of *dharma* seems out of reach for the sixteenth century prince.

At times, however, Bhojraj succeeds as a practitioner of translation, most tellingly with respect to time itself. Recounting a story told to him when he

was a child, the prince transforms a Hindu legend into a narrative of the birth of the clock:

Time was suffering from advanced symptoms of megalomania. He was the framework or the boundaries within which everything that happened, happened. The demons, the gods, space and the cosmos were time-bound. [...] Little wonder that Time began to perceive himself as cause and consequence, the begetter and begotten, as the beginning and the end. It wasn't just that he had delusions of grandeur, it appeared that he was what he claimed to be: omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. (60)

After the gods' attempts to negotiate with Time had failed, and Time straightaway refused to behave, catastrophe seems inevitable: "Time was about to ingest the three worlds". It is in that moment of cosmic danger that Charani Devi hits the scene and saves the worlds in an act that does to Time what Time had threatened to do to the world:

She was gathering together the million and one strands of Time; [...] her fingers picked up the loose ends and the unbroken threads, endless stretches of pre-history, history-to-be, and the simultaneous present which is the same second multiplied by all the points in space, [...] she bundled it up helter skelter, no beginning, no middle, no end, no order, just one monstrously big ball the size of the cosmos. Then the Devi opened her mouth and swallowed all of it in one gulp. (60—61)

Time, obviously heterogeneous, the devourer thus is himself devoured - which, of course, effects a new and different crisis: "Time had stopped dead. And so had everything else. Because life, as we all know, can only occur on the axis of time with its three sharp and fluid divisions: the past, the present and the future" (61). There is only one way out of this deadlock: Since the gods cannot run the risk of releasing Time from his dungeon of Charani Devi's belly, they have to convince the Devi that she has to fulfil one more task in order to save the world from both Time and timelessness. This in fact will be a "long, lonely and loveless vigil" (62), i.e. the domestication of unruly Time by way of its transformation into homogeneous empty time. Shiva succeeds in persuading the Devi to unravel the tapeworm of Time and to release it in regular rhythm and measured bits: "And so Charani Devi sits in the temple and delicately, oh so delicately, coaxes a fraction of a millimetre of the worm from her mouth. She can never close her mouth for if she does, all mankind and devilkind and all godkind will be forever frozen in suspended animation" (62). Thus the Devi is herself transformed into a clock, churning out measured and disciplined time. Time-discipline, Nagarkar's embedded legend seems to suggest, first of all requires that Time itself be disciplined; if the issue of the Devi's ever opened mouth is homogeneous empty time, however, this latter is still firmly inserted into a cosmological framework whose historical supersession is, in Anderson's narrative, the very prerequisite for the modern nation to emerge. Nagarkar, only one of many

Indian writers who tamper with the clock, by contrast underscores how homogeneous empty time gets refracted in its appropriation into a culturally different frame, and how the clock itself gets translated into a goddess residing in a temple. Now if the clock, according to a famous dictum by Lewis Mumford, figures as the “key machine of the modern industrial age”,¹¹ then Charani Devi comes to occasion precisely that kind of machine worship that both Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty highlight as quotidian indicators of the mixed constitution of Indian modernities. Chakrabarty first addresses the issue of machine worship in his study of workers’ struggles in early 20th century Bengali jute mills where he diagnoses that “the worker’s relationship to the machine, instead of being mediated through a technical knowledge, was mediated through the North Indian peasant’s conception of his tools, whereby the tools often took on magical and godly qualities”.¹² If this dichotomisation of ‘technical knowledge’ and ‘the peasant’s conception of his tools’ still relies on an ultimately historicist assumption of fully contemporary forms of knowledge (‘technical’) and residual forms (‘peasant’s conception’), the later Chakrabarty self-critically hurries to rectify this progressivist view: “Like many of my colleagues in labor history, I interpreted worshipping machinery – an everyday fact of life in India, from taxis to scooter-rickshaws, minibuses and lathe machines – as “insurance policy” against accidents and contingencies”; instead of such imputed immediate functionalism, Chakrabarty argues, machine worship much rather needs to be addressed not only in terms of, but much more *as* ideology in the Althusserian sense: “gods are as real as ideology is – that is to say, they are embedded in practices”.¹³ As performed ideology, acts of machine worship then primarily serve to constitute “a tension between the general secular time of history and the singular times of gods and spirits”,¹⁴ they produce, in Foucauldian terms, heterochronic enclaves that disrupt the standard rhythm of normalised time. Chatterjee, in his critique of Benedict Anderson, tacitly refers to these lines of arguments from *Provincializing Europe* when he dismisses homogeneous empty time as the utopian “time of capital”¹⁵ permanently disrupted by the actually heterotopian character of modernity itself: “To call this the copresence of several times – the time of the modern and the times of the premodern – is only to endorse the utopianism of Western modernity”.¹⁶ If Nagarkar, giving the screw one more

¹¹ Quoted in David Landes, *Revolution in Time*. New York (Columbia UP) 1983: xix.

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940*. New Delhi (OUP) 1996: 89.

¹³ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 78.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵ Chatterjee, “The Nation in Heterogeneous Time”, 399.

¹⁶ Chatterjee, “Anderson’s Utopia”, 166.

turn, has the clock-machine itself transformed into an object of worship, then the irruption of the heterochronic now occurs in the very "hidden abode of production" of homogeneous empty time – the "dark, cold and underground temple" (62) where the Devi unleashes regularly measured bits of time.

Hence to enter into the Devi's temple is a step into heterotopia proper: a heterotopia paradoxically located at the geographical nodal point of homogeneous empty time. The cave of the Devi as well as the lair of the novel's other sybilline female figure, Bhootani Mata, are feminine spaces into which males penetrate and get lost. When the Maharaj Kumar approaches the witch-like mother figure, Bhootani Mata, in search for counsel about his wife's rectification, he stops at the threshold of the cave to ask the Mata's permission to enter; after some abuse hurled at him from inside the cave, he "thought of retreating but then decided against it. What did he stand to lose any way? 'I'm coming in,' he told her and didn't wait for her answer" (150). If the unsanctioned passage into the interior – the cave, the vagina, the womb – occurs as rape, i.e. masculinist violence and subjection, it nonetheless effects the opposite of male self-assertion: All too soon, the prince, deceived into thinking that he doesn't 'stand to lose' anything, "realized he was lost" in a space that strips him of all spatial and temporal orientation. He finally regains his sight only to witness an inferno:

He saw dismembered heads held up by the hair with the blood still dripping from them. He saw black feet stomping on the back of a demon lying on his stomach. [...] There were severed limbs writhing on the floor, a hand came down, picked up a leg, shoved it into a mouth without a face which started crunching on it. He opened his eyes. (151)

As the last sentence indicates, the prince's vision of general dismemberment – not a Deleuzian body without organs but a Žižekian phantasmagoria of organs without a body – is not perceived but imagined. In Bhootani Mata's cave, Bhojraj has to learn that it is he himself who produces those images of 'severed limbs', and that it is his very own pre-synthetic imagination that unleashes the "power of disrupting the unity of the Real". Žižek's reading of the Hegelian concept of "understanding" uncovers the violent ruptures implied in that activity "of *tearing apart* sensible elements out of their context, of *dismembering* the immediate experience of an organic Whole", and "violently installing the domain of *membra disjecta*".¹⁷ Most pertinent to any discussion of the explosion of the historicist/progressivist fantasy, Žižek disclaims the commonsensical appellation of such dissolution as 'the primordial' that precedes any order. Rather it is the concomitant shadow of order itself: a de-schematisation built into the very subject of modernity that appears to act as the harbinger and executive agent of schematisation.

¹⁷ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 31.

Articulation, in modern self-description, can occur only as the Titanic gesture of giving form to the fully unformed; since this latter can actually never occur, it has to be *imagined pre-synthetically*. In typically vivid and graphic depiction, Žižek herewith dramatises that imaginary founding moment of complete disarticulation that modernity, according to Fredric Jameson, has to posit as the condition of possibility for its own inauguration as ‘absolute beginning’. What Žižek, other than Jameson, heavily emphasises is the violence involved in the construction of that mythical foundation, that zero degree point of origin: This latter cannot be imagined as the peaceful void of the mystic experience but as the “Big Bang” of complete disarticulation in terms of dismemberment.

Here, obviously, is precisely that ‘primal chaos’ that, in Bhojraj’s teleology, has to be ‘re-established’ before the articulatory practice of nation building can even begin. And yet the internal rupture is shocking for someone so engrossed in establishing unity and articulating the disparate. The underground realms of the female sybils – Charani Devi, Bhootani Mata – form enclaves of a radical difference which, however, will not stay in its exterritorialised place because its actual site is the subject’s imagination itself. Therefore, as the desert meditation sequence has shown, even while Bhojraj is engaged in the formation of the State and the forging of the nation, dismemberment will inhere in these articulatory practices, too, as the inescapable shadow of modernity. As in Chandra’s novel, the military system ranges supreme among the fields of cultural practice where articulation is played out as the inscription of order – not least in the form of schematised time – onto the docile body. When the Maharaj Kumar asserts that he has “removed gallantry and valor from warfare” (252), he does not simply repeat the move performed by de Boigne, the terminator of “all romance” in Chandra; he also concedes to the dissociating effects of an imagination that at a first glance appears to envisage nothing but unification. While meditating on the best tactics for the imminent battle with the Gujarati troops, Bhojraj re-enacts the event of getting ‘lost’ that underlies the experience of the pre-synthetic imagination in Bhootani Mata’s cave; in another sublime space – the desert “which is but another name for nothingness” – the prince again escapes from schematised time: “When he recovered from the sunstroke, he had no way of knowing how many days had gone by” (249), and gains, in that state outside the regime of homogeneous empty time, the insight that his ultimate task lies not in articulation alone but, prior to that, in the violent dissociation of what is.

Modernity, then, however articulatory its telos, requires first an condition of absolute dismemberment. Bhojraj’s plans fail not because of Rajput conservatism, nor because of the ultra-radical fervour with which his visions

are formulated by the prince himself, but because the 'primal chaos' of complete disarticulation remains restricted to the sphere of the pre-synthetic imagination. Accordingly, Bhojraj's antagonist and alter ego, the Mughal conqueror Babur, succeeds in his efforts to unify northern India precisely because he combines the destructive effects of conquest with the articulatory process of state formation. The result, of course, is not a completely modernised structure but a compromise. Yet on the rubble of conquest, Nagarkar resumes, Babur's grandson Akbar, "a great builder" (607), will later play out his own visions of a new type of imagined community derived from synthetic imagination:

He appointed Hindus, Muslims, Jains and Zoroastrians to the highest military and civilian posts in the empire. He believed that different faiths could coexist. As a matter of fact, he tried to found a new religion, Din-i-Ilahi, which was a synthesis of what he thought was the best in the different faiths. (607)

5.3 Beyond measure

Its historical reality effects notwithstanding, Nagarkar's text is deliberately imprecise. Most strikingly, the proper names of the two main protagonists – the heir-apparent and his wife – are never revealed in the text itself but only in the paratextual "Historical Note" appended to the novel. Here we learn (Indian readers will have known all along) that the prince's wife, mostly referred to as "the Little Princess" or the "Little Saint", is popularly known to this day as the *bhakti* poet and saint Meera. Otherwise, Nagarkar's historical note is conspicuously thrifty with information, leaving the uninitiated reader somewhat baffled with the concluding assertion that Meera's "name is on almost every Indian's lips" (609). Why should that be so?

Of all the historiographical references to, and accounts, of Meera's life, Parita Mukta's full-length study of Meera (more commonly known as Mirabai) gives the most satisfying answers to this question – significantly in a close affinity to the notion of heterotemporality as proposed by both Chatterjee and Chakrabarty (even though Mukta does nowhere refer to either of the two). Mukta's effort is not to write a biography of the historical Mirabai but to reflect upon the making of a legendary figure and its strategic value for various socio-historical groups, most of them disempowered strata such as lower castes, Dalits, and women. Mirabai emerges from these readings as a kind of subaltern Hindu mystic (I am using very clumsy 'translations' as shorthand here) propagating anti-patriarchal and anti-casteist visions through ecstatic religious poetry as well as a rebellious, anti-establishment personal conduct that puts her at odds with her historical context. Early hagiography in the *bhakti* tradition emphasises this subversive

aspect of the Mirabai legend; thus the two most important early accounts of Mirabai's life, composed as *bhakti* hagiography, agree on the saint's open refusal to fulfil her role as wife and daughter-in-law:

when Mira, princess of Merta, was married to the son of another royal Rajput family – later tradition said it was the house of Mewar – she mouthed the requisite marriage mantras but in her heart she dedicated them to Krishna, not her earthly groom. When young Mira came to live in her in-laws' house, similarly, she refused to bow to her mother-in-law and honour her in-laws' family goddess, believing that either act would compromise her loyalty to Krishna.¹⁸

John Stratton Hawley emphasises that “there must always remain a question about whether there is any real relation between [...] the Mira we construct – and Mira in any historical sense”; the legendary status of the enigmatic Mirabai figure, however, opens up all the more possibilities for the social imaginary to project a wide range of different versions of which the ‘canonical’ one is, somewhat surprisingly, also the most scandalous: “the ‘canonical’ figure of Mirabai presents us with a radical image of *bhakti* womanhood, an ideal that seems to challenge a woman's *dharma* at its most fundamental points”¹⁹ – in terms of her devotion to husband and in-laws as well as her restriction to the woman's place in the home. Parita Mukta comes to a similar observation: “If one accepts [Mukta suggests] that someone very akin to the Mira legend existed as an actual social being, the power of her convictions broke the brutal feudal relationships which existed at the time”.²⁰ The Mirabai of the popular imaginary, then, is an intensely anachronistic figure by virtue of that ‘anticipatory’ radical democracy which – vaguely akin to the version of Thomas Müntzer that Frederick Engels construes – propels Meera out of the historicity that remains nonetheless ascribed to her: “She goes”, as Mukta states at the very opening of her book, “beyond the shadowy realms of the past to inhabit the very core of a future which is embodied within the suffering of a people who seek an alternative”.²¹ This ‘Meera’, however, would still inhabit an ultimately historicist temporality as the very concept of the anachronistic indicates: Anachronism, Chakrabarty reminds us, “stops us from confronting the problem of the temporal heterogeneity of the ‘now’ in thinking about history”.²² Nagarkar's Meera enacts precisely this radical heterogenisation that defies any historicist reading. While Bhojraj's already disruptive modernism reveals the present in

¹⁸ John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Times and Ours*. Delhi (OUP) 2005: 128; in the passage quoted, Hawley summarises the hagiographical narratives by Nabhadra (ca. 1600) and Priyadas (1712).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 118; 130.

²⁰ Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life*, 35.

²¹ *Ibid.*, ix.

²² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 243.

the past and by implication, the past in the present, his general temporal framework is still based on the sharp distinction between the linearity of a disenchanted, prosaic modernity encoded as *Kali-yuga* on the one hand, and the cosmology of the superior cyclic and repetitive structure on the other, of which *Kali-yuga* forms but one component. It is this sharp distinction that Meera's mysticism subverts. For Bhojraj, *Kali-yuga* bears all the traits of Lukács's Hegelianist, prosaic and "god-forsaken" modernity with which the prince to a large extent is complicit (by which complicity he appears to qualify as an ideal novelistic 'hero'); as the harbinger of clock-time and terminator of the "age of chivalry", the prince styles himself as the necessary executioner of rationalisation. Mirabai effects the very opposite: either, in historicist terms, a relapse into romance, or, in a transmodern reading, the outright exorcism of the last residues of historicism that still taint Bhojraj's version of modernity.

For what renders Mirabai most crucially incommensurate with Bhojraj's modernity is precisely her insistence on the possibility of a communion with gods. Her marriage to the god Krishna explodes not only the internal parameters of *Kali-yuga* as prosaic and "god-forsaken" but furthermore the conventional cosmology of stratified ages, according to which gods and humans do not communicate in the most depraved of ages. Neither linear modernity nor the cyclic framework of Hindu orthodoxy can therefore contain Mirabai. As a consequence, Bhojraj's attempts to reinsert his wife's protestations into his own heterogeneous temporality fail precisely at that point where the prince tries to locate Krishna historically: "But all that was a thousand or two thousand years ago. He had died a tragic earthly death and gone. Why after all these years ... forget it, there's no purchase in that line of thinking" (171). Here, the ghost of European Orientalism resurfaces, perplexed with the intricacies of the 'chronology of the Hindus': Like William Jones before him, Bhojraj attempts to locate the ten avatars of Vishnu in homogeneous empty time. Jones, in his treatise on "The Chronology of the Hindus", had inquired into the precise historical dates of the Buddha (the ninth avatar); Bhojraj tries to do something similar for Krishna, the eighth incarnation. The British orientalist arrives at the triumphalist conclusion that the imprecision of the data of the Buddha's life go to show how "we may be assured that they [the Indians] have no certain Chronology";²³ by contrast, the Rajput modernist interrupts his dizzying reflections of the conditions of possibility of his wife's intercourse with the god. Why? Because Bhojraj, different from Jones, retains a principal openness to temporalities other than historical time: The aporia with which

²³ Jones, "On the Chronology of the Hindus", 22.

the Maharaj Kumar leaves his considerations dangling inconclusively arises from the circumstance that Krishna stands outside the measures of both linear and cyclic temporalities; that his return as the Maharaj Kumar's wife's husband can be accounted for neither in terms of homogeneous empty time nor with the help of the matrix of the *yuga* system.

Mirabai, to be sure, is not an unproblematic Hindu saint; rather, her claims to her marriage to Krishna violate heavily against Brahminical orthodoxy and place this mystic on the margins of Hindu theology. Simultaneously, though, Mirabai remains an exceptionally popular figure in India, partly canonised and domesticated as a *bhakti* poet, partly transformed into an icon of romantic love, but also revered as the founder of the truly popular tradition of an alternative imagined community whose performativity stands outside the paradigms of homogeneous empty time:

Constraints of linear historicity do not bind the Mira tradition. [...] where Mira remains organically linked to the mass of the people, no sharp division exists between the past and the present. The past is evoked and born anew and it returns to form a real part of the present. It is a deepening of time rather than a mere lengthening of it. [...] It is, at one and the same time, a leap into the past and a widening of the present of all those who uphold Mira.²⁴

The Benjaminian overtones of the passage quoted are far from accidental, as Mukta's Mirabai operates as a catalyst of the explosion of homogeneous empty time by way of occasioning a 'leap' – a tiger's leap? – into a past that no longer is held at a temporal distance but becomes part of the present itself. If this, in the arena of Benjamin's theses, engenders the complete rupture of modernity's progressivist time in an exceptional moment of emergency, Mukta's account rather emphasises how temporal heterogeneity serves as the standard time of the Mira community, which, then, inhabits the unevenly dense temporality that Chatterjee posits as the time of India's complex modernity.

In *Cuckold*, Nagarkar heavily draws upon this reading of Mirabai and utilises this figure as the ultimate disclaimer of unilateral entrenched modernity. The general move is transgression: of courtly etiquette as well as caste, class and gender divisions, of temporal linearity as well as subject positions as such. In this capacity, Mira functions as a catalyst that triggers the emergence of an alternative imagined community the scope of which exceeds the Maharaj Kumar's attempts at nation building through military formation. Mirabai's spectacular display of *bhakti* devotion attracts believers not only on a national scale but also from "other states beyond our frontiers" (341):

²⁴ Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life*, 89–90.

Caravans of people from Chanderi, Champaner, Jaipur, Delhi, Agra, Mathura, Ahmedabad, Raisen, Daulatabad, Pune, Vijayanagar, even the valley of Kashmir come by bullock and camel cart, by palanquin and on horseback. Those who can't afford fancy transport, load their bedding and a couple of utensils on their heads and walk all the way to Chittor (394).

Clearly this is an itinerant 'nation' on the move, neither bound up in territory nor contained in the form of the State. This mobility of the Mira community will get fully visible only after Mira herself will become an itinerant with a numerous following that increases rapidly. The geographically determined composition of the Mira community of course transcends the boundaries of sixteenth century Indian kingdoms and sultanates, but it also very obviously anticipates the territorial claims of 20th century Indian nationalism; with this proleptic frame of reference - one that goes far beyond the Maharaj Kumar's vision of a unified Rajput nation - Mira stages an imagined community that stands as a full alternative to the entrenched modern nation - in short, the genealogy of another 'India' not grounded in the simultaneity of homogeneous empty time, but precisely in its explosion. For Mira's vision defies linearity and irreversibility in favour of a chiasmic temporality that instantiates a principal interchangeability of past and future. Beyond the measures of the cyclic, the linear or even the digital, Mira's time abandons the temporal altogether and is rendered as space: "the horizon slipped under your feet and moved behind you so that the future was something that had occurred in a long-forgotten past. A fog floated in now and you couldn't see the present" (366). These spatialised temporal categories engage in a pervasive simultaneity that is not to be confounded with the simultaneity effected by homogeneous empty time: While the latter assembles all points in space in contemporaneity (and hence temporalises space), the former suspends temporality in an all-encompassing co-presence of all that is 'past, or passing, or to come'. This of course is the condition of possibility for Mira's intercourse with Krishna which, for Bhojraj, with necessity remains an enigma. The cohesion of the Mira community, by contrast, is grounded in the adherent's acceptance of this inscrutability, and their common second-degree participation in it. It is, therefore, the prototype of an imagined community in heterogeneous time.

Mirabai puts the Rajput system to permanent scandal - most visibly by her refusal to stick to the prescriptive courtly code of conduct. Her very first mentioning in the novel already introduces Mira as a figure who unabashedly violates established notions of propriety by dancing in public. The princess therefore openly performs as a "nautch girl" (10), i.e. a temple dancer-cum-prostitute. If Mira thus puts shame on the "illustrious family name" of the Sisodias, into whose house she had been married off, this scandalousness does not so much stem from the princess's behaviour as such but from its

unconcealed publicity. Bhojraj is mortified to discover that “a Princess of the House of Mewar, the wife of the Maharaj Kumar, no less, would be singing like a tawaif in the palace itself with an audience of forty or fifty down below” (131); tellingly his authoritative (albeit inconsequential) prohibition is explicitly not on singing in general, but on its open display: “princesses don’t sing for the public” (147). Mira’s refusal to abide by the protocols that hold the private and the public apart put her at odds with the hegemonic code of conduct, but also with the public/private split specific to modernity; if Mira, Pratiba Mukta suggests, “had upheld her love of Krishna quietly in her heart, or within the precincts of a temple, this would have been tolerated. What was not tolerated was her *public* affirmation of this”.²⁵ The crucial, and again scandalous, aspect of Mira’s “love of Krishna” lies in the fact that this relation clearly exceeds the limits of a spiritual devotion, however intense; for Mira conceives of herself as literally “betrothed to someone else” (45), whose impossible name – Krishna – she reveals to her official husband only after an extended “war of nerves” (102). Rationalist Bhojraj, an inhabitant of god-forsaken *Kali-yuga*, needless to say, initially refuses to accept a statement “so far-fetched, so utterly beyond the probable and the possible” (91), and as a consequence keeps suspecting his unyielding wife of entertaining a profane love affair with some rival. Mira’s virtual bigamy effects a reversal of Rajput marriage standards according to which affluent males – and in particular, aristocrats – engage in stratified polygamy which remains prohibited for women. In this transgressive capacity of the bigamist wife who, furthermore, refuses to fulfil her marital duties towards her officially only husband, Mira gets immediately configured with the threatening demonic females whose underground domains can only be penetrated at the price of symbolic castration; for as Bhojraj resorts to raping his reluctant wife on their wedding night, he resurfaces with a broken penis (46). If Bhojraj’s loss of the phallus paves the way for his later transgending (see below), it more essentially prepares the prince for his insertion into the alternative cosmology of Mira’s Krishna *bhakti*: For, according to the adherents of that subversive creed, there is no male in the universe but Krishna himself, “and all others, barring none, were females” (395). The phallus, monopolised by the god, has hence to be surrendered in a process that transforms each devotee, regardless of sex, into a “bride of god” (102). Behind his back, then, the apparently active, assertive and sovereign male is transformed - paradoxically in the process of rape - into a woman: the prince and princess’s grotesquely disastrous wedding night thus turns into a wedding of both members of the couple with the god.

²⁵ Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life*, 65–66.

Not that Bhojraj did not bring his own affinity to the “Blue One” along anyway. Like the Ulysses that Horkheimer and Adorno construct in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, Bhojraj's Krishna stands out from the storehouse of mythology as an exceptionally dynamic and versatile figure: “He was protean and he changed his role according to the circumstances in which he found himself. You could not put your finger on his character and say, yes this is him. He defied definition” (106). This fluidity of the god's ‘character’ that Bhojraj emphasises forms one precondition for the manifold identitarian switches that get enacted in the performance of the curious *ménage à trois*. Yet the Maharaj Kumar's interpretation of Krishna ultimately represents not more than a rewriting, however strong, of mythological material “from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas* and the *Panchatantra*” (105), and hence does not prepare for a literal and immediate intrusion of the god into the present; in fact, Bhojraj still insists that the gulf between the transcendent and the immanent disproves all of Mira's claims to direct intercourse with Krishna. Nevertheless, the elective affinity with the protean god, who is not the dynasty's main deity, fundamentally connects with the prince's own philosophical musings on identity as grounded in “interchangeability”. Again, Bhojraj performs a strong rewriting – this time of “the Upanishadic concepts such as this one which is the corner-stone of my yogic meditations: ‘So’ hum’; I am that” (342). Formulated in the structure of a prototypically metaphysical statement, ‘so’ hum’ turns out as a formula that enables a continuous flow of chiasmic exchanges that operate on the indeterminacy of the “word ‘that’ in ‘I am that’” (342), and by implication the corresponding flexibility of the equated term, ‘I’. For if ‘that’ can be anything – “grief as much as [...] happiness” – then, as a consequence, the same holds true for the subject itself that claims its identity with that protean ‘that’. Deliberately avoiding the mysticist implications of this chiasmus, Bhojraj prefers to give his meditations a genuinely enlightenment twist by reading ‘so’ hum’, in terms of the Kantian sublime, as an assertion of the supremacy of the mind over the *res extensa* of the world: “It is a fine thought as large as the mind which is the most capacious thing in the world” (342). Recuperating the stability of a virtually monadic subjectivity posited – against the grain of the Upanishadic concept – *vis-à-vis* the world, the Maharaj Kumar retreats from the barrier-breaking potentials of the “truly staggering and daring thought [of] interchangeability” (342) into the confines of the subject/object split of Cartesian humanism; Mira's radically alternative modernism will finally break this structure: As “[t]here was no outside for her” (348), it is she who radically adheres to the logic of ‘so’ hum’.

Hence Mira's claims are more daringly grounded in the interchangeability of ‘I’ and ‘that’: Not only do the devotee (whether male

or female) and the god engage in direct encounter as lovers, they also change positions in their chiasmic, see-saw intercourse. In this respect, Bhojraj's cerebral reading of Krishna as protean neatly ties in with Mira's experiential mysticism and the role reversals it implies. The entry on Mirabai in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's *Women Writing in India* hints at one such reversal by stating that, "[i]n Mirabai's poetry it is not the devotee who pursues God, but Krishna who pursues the devotee".²⁶ This observation on historical Mira's poetry ties in with the changes of place that Nagarkar ascribes to Mira's practice of Krishna *bhakti*: It engenders first the performative interchangeability of positions, and finally the full suspension of the ontological distinction between subject and object. At the first level, Mira takes on the role of Krishna who in turn assumes Mira's position; the Maharaj Kumar comes into the picture because he, for his part, had adopted the strategy of regularly sneaking into his wife's rooms in the guise of the blue god for sexual gratification – 'Krishna' therefore is, in fact, Bhojraj, whose impersonation of the god once more aligns him with the adherents of "the fringe sects who worshipped the Blue God" and as part of their arcane rituals, "took turns at being the Flautist [Krishna]" (493). Far from simply enabling some otherwise foreclosed marital intercourse, these elaborate nocturnal masquerades involving peacock feathers, "indigo solution" and a flute (348–349) cannot but refer Bhojraj back to the principle of the interchangeability of identity positions, particularly when Mira – who apparently never sees through her husband's fraud – begins to introduce her own variety of roleplay: "Gender was a fuzzy line and they crossed it continually" (493) as Mira herself disguises as Krishna and 'Krishna'/Bhojraj as the woman. Such transgending is, for Mira, a sign of the *bhakta's* performative participation in the ontological male/female "simultaneity" of the god, for Krishna is not only the only male in the universe but besides, "both man and woman" (491). It only takes one more step – in fact, one "final leap" (568) – from this performative participation to the full appropriation of the god's ontology:

She closed here eyes. 'Worship me,' she told the Flautist. 'There's as much of the divine in me as in you.'

There. She had done it. The Maharaj Kumar was appalled by the gall and audacity of it. And yet he had to admit that it was the most logical and natural thing to say for her. Hadn't he recited and believed in the mantra 'So' hum' all his grown-up years? 'I am that'; that which pervades, inspires and encompasses the universe. And yet they had been nothing but empty shells of words. The Little Saint's faith had made the final leap. She could change roles with the Flautist. She was the substance and the power and the force that was god. (568)

²⁶ Susie Tharu & K. Lalita, *Women Writing In India*. Vol. I. New Delhi (OUP) 1991: 91.

It is only in the hands of Mira that the axiom of 'So' *hum*' is revealed as a radical suspension of the regime of binarisms that principally operate on the differential logic of 'I am *not* that'. Mira's version of 'So' *hum*' can therefore not even be grasped in terms of synthetic imagination since, in a world where everything is always already identical with everything else, where difference, separation and dismemberment are absolutely absent, synthesis will find no object to work on. As Žižek explicates, the violent Big Bang forms the mythical foundation of modern articulation as it proceeds from 'the domain of *membra disjecta*': the impossible domain of the 'primal chaos' that Bhojraj had vainly attempted to establish as a clean slate on which to erect his modernist Rajputana. The lesson of Mira, by contrast, consists in the assumption and praxis of an undivided, non-differential world in which such asymmetrical oppositions as those of gender or the divine-human divide are suspended. Bhojraj's concession that his own Upanishadic axioms have so far only been "empty shells of words" when compared to Mira's praxis prepares for the ultimate role reversal with which Nagarkar closes his narrative: According to legend, Mira took her last refuge in a Krishna temple which then was besieged by her enemies, the emissaries of the king of Mewar; hagiography has it that, in this desolate situation, she "merged herself in the Krishna *murti* [idol]".²⁷ Furthermore, it is – as Mehta adds – "also believed that [...] in the armpit of the Image lies the holy silken upper garment of Mira that is at times exhibited to the view of devotees at the present time".²⁸ It is this merging with Krishna in a moment of lethal danger that Nagarkar displaces from Mira to Bhojraj:

The six were already closing in on him, swords ready for the kill. It was then that the Flautist embraced the Maharaj Kumar. [...] One minute the Maharaj Kumar was there, the next he had become invisible. Had they been dreaming? There was just the end of the Maharaj Kumar's turban, the kesariya bana, showing outside the lower left edge of the Flautist's chest. Every time anybody walks into the temple, the cloth caught in the seamless marble stirs slightly with the draft in the air. (602—603)

I quote this at length in order to demonstrate how painstakingly Nagarkar reproduces the crucial elements of the legend of Mira's death: the absorption into the *murti* at the point of being killed by the enemies, and the piece of cloth – upper garment or turban – that remains visible for posterity as a trace of that which has been concealed. But who is who in Nagarkar's plot resolution? Obviously, Bhojraj performs as the Mira of legend, but at the same time, both Mira *and* Bhojraj have been Krishna all along. Therefore, if Mukta rejects the legendary episode of Mira's merging with the Krishna idol as a radical erasure of the self, Nagarkar by contrast prepares for a reading in

²⁷ Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life*, 225—26.

²⁸ Mehta, *Monograph on Mirabai*, 75.

which this same merging enacts the ultimate removal of the last residues of binarily encoded demarcations of self and Other. The triad in the house of Mewar is thus transposed into a unity: Bhojraj's absorption into the Krishna statue at once signifies his coincidence with the god and – ever since Krishna and Mira's interchangeability had been established – with Mira. In this configuration, in which everybody is (interchangeable with) everybody else, subjectivities cease to be subject to circumscription. If this culmination makes *Cuckold* amenable to certain postmodernist preferences for non-circumscribed, nomadic identity positions in the wake of Deleuze, it has to be emphasised that Nagarkar's text remains consistently transmodern: Even more than Bhojraj's modernising projects, Mira's virtual postmodernism – her anti-identitarianism, her transgending practices – unfold without any reference whatsoever to 'Europe'.²⁹ Instead, they are firmly grounded in a *bhakti* radicalism whose recuperation as an independently developed genre of (post)modernity now appears as the central move of Nagarkar's text: On this reading, the modernism of Bhojraj – stunning as it is in its own right – primarily serves as the ground from which the radical politics of Mirabai can emerge as the figure of an indigenous self-fashioning beyond measure.

²⁹ For a breathtaking discussion of the "cross-dressed lyrics" of the major *bhakti* poets, see John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 170–178.

6 Unimagined Communities

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*

Chandra's and Nagarkar's texts share a transmodern subtext, an insistence on the impossibility of thinking the modern as the outcome of an autonomously Western development: Where Chandra reconfigures the long history of crosscultural interpenetration from which modernity results as a *worldly* formation to be held in a contrapuntal perspective, Nagarkar retrieves the *pensée sauvage* of *bhakti* as a definitely non-derivative genre of modernity in its own right. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) employs an entirely different strategy that pushes genre, now in the narrowest possible sense of literary formula, back on the agenda: For what Seth's novel appears to execute is the docile reproduction of that type of social-realist novel that, according to Benedict Anderson, became instrumental in the forging of the national imaginary.

This social realism of *A Suitable Boy* has often been noted, and so has that novel's contribution to the "narrating [of] India in English".¹ Given both the media hype that accompanied the publication of the book,² and its obviously undiminished popularity, it is surprising that *A Suitable Boy* has received comparatively little scholarly attention – a fact which, as Graham Huggan mischievously conjectures, possibly has to do with that novel's lack of "self-conscious intellectual sophistication that might encourage, as it has certainly done for Rushdie's work, the type of theoretically informed research that is a

¹ Tabish Khair, *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels*. New Delhi (OUP) 2001: 112. See also Mala Pandurang, *Vikram Seth: Multiple Locations, Multiple Affiliations*. Jaipur & Delhi (Rawat) 2001; Jyotsna G. Singh, *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues: "Discoveries" of India in the Language of Colonialism*. London & New York (Routledge) 1996; Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*. Delhi (OUP) 2000.

² See Pandurang, *Vikram Seth*, 103–04; and M. Prabha, *The Waffle of the Toffs: A Sociocultural Critique of Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi & Calcutta (Oxford and IBH Publ.) 2000: 165.

current requirement of the academic profession”.³ Since Huggan’s focus is the commodification, as exotic, of the postcolonial in a global culture industry circuit of consumption, his statement is not intended as an opening for a piece of closer critical consideration of *A Suitable Boy*; yet he hints in passing at some of the qualities of the book that would make it deserving of a more thorough examination. Among these, Huggan mentions the idiosyncrasies of the book “as a late twentieth-century historical novel”; as “a subtle example of [...] generic code-switching – historical novel, political allegory, domestic melodrama, exotic romance, and so forth”; and, by conclusion, as a “more self-conscious work than has generally been supposed”.⁴

With this last proposition, Huggan alludes to a consensus about some “‘clear-window’ narrative aspirations and [...] easy-going transparent style”⁵ that Seth allegedly employs in *A Suitable Boy*. According to Jyotsana Singh, this transparency effects an illusionism in which “the author does not question the *constructed* nature of both the writing of the novel and the history it purports to present”.⁶ At the outset of my reading of *A Suitable Boy* I would like to pick up Huggan’s suggestion and pursue it by questioning the well-nigh naive illusionism ascribed to the book.

6.1 Welcome to reality

In the light of a discussion of the times of India, Seth’s consistent replication of the dead idiom of nineteenth-century realism all too obviously falls into place with the body of work discussed so far: Employing and reanimating precisely that representational apparatus whose structural effects Anderson places at the centre of the construction of the emergent imagined national community, Seth displaces the problematisation of nation-ness fully onto the level of form as such. Unflinchingly, the book keeps simulating and virtually producing exactly that kind of homogeneous empty time that, as Jonathan Culler paraphrases Anderson’s argument, makes the novel “a formal condition of imagining the nation – a structural condition of possibility”.⁷

³ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins*. London & New York (Routledge) 2001: 75.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵ Himansu S. Mohapatra & Jatindra K. Nayak, “Farewell to Jane Austen: Uses of Realism in Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*”. *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*. Ed. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan & You-me Park. London & New York (Routledge) 2000: 189—204; 190.

⁶ Singh, *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues*, 166.

⁷ Jonathan Culler, “Anderson and the Novel”. *Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*. Ed. Jonathan Culler and Pheng Cheah. New York and London (Routledge) 2003: 29—52; 48.

Instead of pondering whether *A Suitable Boy* should be read as parody or pastiche, it therefore becomes mandatory in our context to situate the book in the forcefield of the ongoing renegotiations, through novelistic fiction, of India-as-nation; where, immediately, the 'anachronism' of the monstrous form seems to spell out yet another affirmation of heterogeneous time, now paradoxically introduced and sustained through precisely that medium whose very structural features purportedly ensure homogeneous time: social realism. And yet it is all too obvious that Seth's effort is far from fully simulating a 'period' style, at least not one that refers back to Austen, George Eliot or Trollope – all of whom, when consistently reactivated in a late-twentieth-century text, turn out a far cry from that "easy-going transparent style" that Seth employs in his novel. Readers of Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* or Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* will know. Meenakshi Mukherjee, however, hints at another possible reservoir that Seth might have tapped. She points out that *A Suitable Boy* "might just as well have been written in Bangla where a tradition exists of long three-decker realistic stories about families".⁸ In this perspective, it is not 'the English novel', whether Regency, Victorian or whatever, that Seth so blatantly reanimates but the already appropriated form of the "'Engali' or 'Benglish'"⁹ novel that emerged historically from the migration of that constitutively transmodern genre.¹⁰

Clearly Seth's novel indulges in reality effects; these, however, are continuously subverted within the text by self-references, overt fictionalisation, intertextual recourses to canonised nineteenth-century English novels, highly strained and over-contrived plots, and (probably) deliberate inconsistencies, however subtle. An almost obtrusive strand of self-references gravitates around the minor character of Amit who, as the writer of a monstrously verbose historical novel-in-progress, functions as a double of the author of *A Suitable Boy*. Furthermore, Seth locates his narrative mostly in the fictitious town of Brahmpur, the capital of the equally fictitious state of Purva Pradesh ("Eastern State"). Sojourns to places and milieus with non-fictional resonance – Calcutta, Delhi, Allahabad, Kanpur – only heighten the effect of such imaginary mapping: For all the detailed description and plethora of reality effects, the location of Brahmpur (and its rural hinterlands for that matter) remains markedly constructed. Picking up the tradition, in Indian writing in English, of the imaginary town, Seth

⁸ Mukherjee, *Perishable Empire*, 183.

⁹ I borrow these neologisms from Roger Bromley who applies them to South Asian diasporic idiolects in contemporary Britain; see Roger Bromley, *Narratives for a New Belonging: Diasporic Cultural Fictions*. Edinburgh (Edinburgh UP) 2000: 129. – Furthermore, in a transmodern perspective, it is not only the Bengali realist novel but the 'English' novel itself that deserves to be labelled 'Benglish' or 'Engali'.

¹⁰ See ch.1.

obviously pursues the modelling of a representative chronotope that, however, does not, like Narayan's *Malgudi*, effect a "homogenization [...], a certain flattening out of the complicated and conflicting contours, the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals and groups in a plural community".¹¹ Brahmpur is not the idyllic and historically removed ideal that *Malgudi* represents, but instead a focal point of all sorts of clearly historicised tendencies and tensions that mark the represented period of the early 1950s as well as, by discrete anachronisms, the period from which the novel itself stems: economic and technological modernisation alongside age-old modes of production; constitutional secular integrationalism versus communal hatred and sectarianism; nepotism and corruption in politics, bureaucracy and academia juxtaposed with attempts at redistributive democracy; puritan economies of desire along with traditional cultures of pleasure. However precisely these tendencies are described and arranged as components of one social whole, their locatedness on the markedly fictional maps of Brahmpur and Purva Pradesh persistently underscores that all reality effects in this text (as in any other) are ultimately misleading: What appears as contingent and irreducibly particular is in fact nothing but one more model fleshed out to *simulate* contingency and particularity. This, of course, is structurally realism in its Lukácsian version, only modestly spiced up with a self-referentiality that, after all, might even be reconcilable with Lukács's programme. For Lukács, the realist (historical) novel "must translate social-historical laws directly into characters and destinies which appear uniquely individual".¹² If the result of this operation can be termed a "*vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*" ("mediated immediacy"), then the mediatedness of the apparently immediate needs to be kept visible in the novelistic text. This latter, then, offers a shaped (*gestaltet*) surface of life which "appears as immediacy although at each point the essence is allowed to *shine through*".¹³ The dual task of the novelist, for Lukács, lies in first analysing (historical) social reality to its radicals, and then to re-concretise these radicals, without concealing them entirely, in an act of fleshing-out. To a large extent, this is precisely what Seth is doing; hence the reader is encouraged to interpret the characters in *A Suitable Boy*, their 'uniquely individual' appearances notwithstanding, as representatives of discernible historical trends and tendencies. Would it be farfetched, then, to expect Seth's text to fulfil the claim that Lukács stakes for the historical novel, namely the representation of

¹¹ Mukherjee, *Perishable Empire*, 172.

¹² Georg Lukács [1937], *The Historical Novel*. Tr. Hannah & Stanley Mitchell. Intr. Fredric Jameson. Lincoln & London (U of Nebraska P) 1983: 145.

¹³ Georg Lukács [1937], "Es geht um den Realismus". *Die Expressionismusdebatte: Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption*. Ed. Hans-Jürgen Schmidt. Frankfurt (Suhrkamp) 1973: 192–230, 205; my tr.

the “interactions between individuals and the unity of social existence”,¹⁴ the latter gradually revealing itself as a totality delimited within the national horizon. Thus the ultimate achievement of the Lukácsian ideal historical novel would lie in the reconstruction of a particularly critical or crucial moment in the life of the nation; hence if Scott is singled out by Lukács as the definite pioneer of the modern historical novel (to be brought to perfection by Balzac and Tolstoy), then this praise is based on the assumption that “Scott sees and portrays the complex and intricate path which led to *England's national greatness* and to the *formation of the national character*”.¹⁵ The historical novel in its classical nineteenth-century avatar, then, appears as a pan-European form that is yet primarily tied in with particular nation-building projects. Since those negotiations and renegotiations of the nation are by no means settled for good, the historical novel's capacity to contribute to the formation of the ‘national character’ retains its historical power: Lukács, writing in the mid-1930s, urges for the reappropriation and modification of that particular tradition in an anti-fascist poetics, in which the nation – here always synonymous with ‘the people’ – gets successfully reinscribed into the contemporary context. With respect to a 1930s German readership, then,

the great task of anti-Fascist writing is to bring the ideas of revolutionary democracy and militant humanism near to the people by showing that these ideas are necessary and organic products of German development itself. [...] By conquering German history German revolutionary democracy acquires a concrete national character and a leading national role.¹⁶

Lukács's genre criticism may at times encourage schematic and reductionist generalisations (“*The historical novel is about nation-building*”), but it certainly enables sustained reflections on the historicity and ideology of (literary) forms. This expectation of a totalistic vision in *A Suitable Boy* does not necessarily validate a reading that dogmatically clings to the notion of national allegory and categorises the central character, Lata, as “some kind of personification of India”;¹⁷ in fact, the punchline of *A Suitable Boy* lies precisely in the incommensurability of the social whole (that the text itself tacitly promises to cover) and the multiple individual perspectives in their respective limitations. While the reader is presented with the vast tableau that passes for “India” at a distinct historical moment, that totality of “India” remains strictly out of reach for each of Seth's characters. What the text

¹⁴ Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 54; my emphases.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹⁷ Clint Burnham, *The Jamesonian Unconscious: The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory*. Durham & London (Duke UP) 1995: 160.

presents is therefore the re-concretised historical forces, and most notably the actants' pervasive, by and large inconclusive attempts to cognitively map the structure they are inserted into.

In order to achieve this effect, Seth creates the meticulous simulation of a reality, but in a gesture of cheeky self-consciousness may puncture, every now and then, this coherent surface: If Cuddles, the pet dog of the Chatterji family, is first introduced explicitly as "a small black dog, with some white on his chest and on his paws" (419), only to have, some 800 pages later, his "furry white head" stroked (1193), then the reality effect is disenchantingly deflated, revealing the 'character' as a construct in the virtual reality of fiction. Similarly the description of Lata's lover Kabir as a "tall young man, who had [...] wavy black hair and very good, rather aquiline looks" (50) is picked up again much later in a conversation, where Lata is urged by her friend, Malati, to verbally conjure up the image of Kabir. This impossible task of course refers to the incapacity of any linguistic text to "depict",¹⁸ and this impasse immediately leads on to a further self-reference: "'he's got wavy hair, and broad shoulders, and nice even teeth. Rather a – what do they call it in silly romantic novels? – an aquiline nose. What is the purpose of all this?'" (839) Naturally, the purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate how verbal representation has no access to its referent and can only be a stand-in. The marked signifier, "aquiline", in the introduction of Kabir seemingly apt, is now marked as hackneyed stereotyping, affecting the entire text of *A Suitable Boy* with the verdict on 'silly romantic novels'. And, as if to confirm this suspicion, Seth spices his text with a couple of highly contrived sub-plot resolutions that introduce a further level of self-referentiality: one that pertains to the mechanics of narrativity itself. One such is the episode of the two gold medals that had come down to the heirloom of the Mehra family as trophies of the late father's brilliance at university. Right at the beginning of the novel, a conflict ensues between Mrs Rupa Mehra and her daughter-in-law, Meenakshi. Meenakshi's offence consists of having had one of the two gold medals melted down for a pair of ear pendants. All through the book, Rupa Mehra's hurt caused by this act of irreverence and the ensuing loss of irreplaceable memorabilia is mentioned periodically; a hurt that is intensified when the remaining second medal falls prey to a burglary at Meenakshi's flat. In a most miraculous manner, the first of the two medals – the one deemed melted down – is finally retrieved by Rupa Mehra herself who accidentally happens to visit the very jeweller's shop where Meenakshi had had her earrings made. The jeweller, it turns out, had refrained from fully

¹⁸ For a concise discussion of this medium-specific 'limitation', see Seymour Chatman [1980], "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)". *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Ed. Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen. Oxford (OUP) 1998: 435–451.

obliging to Meenakshi's order ("I could not bear to melt it down", 1452), who, by this twist of events, is transformed into an involuntary preserver of at least that very medal she had by intention doomed to destruction: "For if Meenakshi had not given Mr Jauhri [the jeweller] this medal, it would have been stolen from the house in Sunny Park with the rest of the jewellery, and, like the [other] medal, would have vanished for good" (1453). Such reinterpretation of events after the full disclosure of causes and effects results in a complete rewriting and re-evaluation of characters' actions: not as intentional but, behind their backs, as necessary plot elements. Thus, the contrivance of narrative cohesion is exposed in a move that underscores emplotment itself.

Four main plots and a host of tributaries are interwoven in Seth's Gangetic enterprise: The story of Lata Mehra's quest for a suitable husband; Maan Kapoor's improper entanglement with Saeeda Bai, the courtesan; the legislative and juridical proceedings around the Zamindari Abolishment Act along with its repercussions in the rural areas; and the mobilisation for the first general elections in India, 1952. Minor narrative strands focus the professional and erotic careers of Haresh Khanna, Pran Kapoor and Ishaq Khan. Obviously, *A Suitable Boy* touches upon an exceptionally wide range of issues and interweaves various distinct domains of the social – from the secluded domesticity of "the world of purdah" to the tumultuous throngs of religious mass ceremonies that may, and will, turn into riots or self-destructive stampedes; from various rungs of material production (including feudally regulated agriculture as well as transnational industry) to political debates in the legislative assembly and the antechambers of powerful ministers; from the slums of the destitute via the mansions of the rich to the Prime Minister's Delhi residence. As even the tagging of the main plots suggests, Seth borrows to some extent from Rushdie inasmuch as he, too, introduces some analogy between the most intimate and the most generally public: Both Lata and India are about to make a decisive choice from among a set of candidates, and both end up opting for some kind of compromise. While the general elections clearly reconfirm Nehru's Congress government (and hence spell out an abstemiousness from political extremes), Lata chooses realistically too. Neither the wealthy, likeable and sensitive poet Amit nor the dashing and erotically attractive Kabir will finally turn out as the suitable boy among her three candidates; it is instead the apparently mediocre and utterly prosaic Haresh, a semi-professional in the shoe industry, who is elected. This choice is marked as a safe banking, a retreat from the imponderabilities associated with the other two suitors – the first one too lofty, the second one too passionate. Haresh, by contrast, embodies (according to Lata) the reality principle, "his feet touch the ground, and he

has dust and sweat and a shadow. The other two are a bit too god-like and ethereal to be any good for me" (1420). At least in terms of romance, the resolution of the Lata plot is therefore heavily flawed. In terms of *realpolitik*, however, it can all the better correspond to the other, public election with which it coincides; for in spite of all the sympathetic rendition of Gandhian and even Nehruvian Congress principles, Seth's representation of Congress party structures and political praxis highlights a fundamental public disillusionment (slightly anachronistic given that the narrative is set in a period only four years after independence). If 'India' all the same embraces the Congress and its already corrupt social-democratic agenda, it is certainly not out of some political enthusiasm but – analogous to Lata's choice – out of a mature insight into the real possibilities of the situation. Neither love nor politics, then, function in Seth's novel as arenas in which disruptive truth-events occur; instead, his novel presents resolutions that overtly affirm the existing order: The capability to compromise, if anything, is what is celebrated in this narrative that basically plays out extremes in order to arrive, finally, at some mellow but conciliatory affirmation of the situation whose transcendence, it seems, holds more perils than promises. In this vein, radical redistribution as intended through the land reform decreed in the Zamindari Abolition Act will be compromised and blunted; similarly, the impossible love affair between Maan – an upper-caste/class *bonvivant* and a State minister's son – and the Muslim courtesan Saeeda Bai will be renounced for reasons of propriety; also, Hindu-Muslim enmities will at least partly be reconciled by compromise, just as caste prejudice will be toned down by civility, so that in the mode of a comedy of manners a general consensus of vague conflict resolution – at the same time consoling and melancholy – descends on the entire scene.

6.2 A sea of language

On the occasion of a party thrown by the sociable Chatterji clan in their Calcutta mansion, Lata finds herself feeling "as if she were swimming in a sea of language" (432). Needless to say, so does the reader all the way through that massive and overcrowded novel with its intricately interconnected subplots and obsession with detail. Yet the 1474 pages that make up the oceanic text of *A Suitable Boy* appear, at least at the surface level, to be as lightly entertaining as the Chatterji party chatter that Lata is 'swimming in'. Of course, there is more to the Ballygunge gathering than meets Lata's ear, and more to its textualisation than a mere reproduction (parody? pastiche?) of comedy-of-manners protocols: In fact the party sequence, both topically and structurally, ties up and subtly reflects upon a

whole set of parameters of the discourse of the (Indian) nation as imagined community. This is not to claim that the Chatterji party were to actually represent the nation – far too selective and exclusive is its composition; since, for Anderson, the novel's implication in nation-building rests on its structural features (i.e., its representational apparatus) and does not require the positive representation of nationhood,¹⁹ such exclusiveness does by no means weaken the pertinence of the party sequence to the invocation of the national horizon.²⁰ In strict Andersonian terms, for the duration of this elite gathering, the mechanisms of nation-building are obviously at work: much of the guests' conversations is preoccupied with various ways of imagining 'India', and much of the representation emphasises that very simultaneity that, according to Anderson, constitutes the time-space of the national imaginary. As the narrator (here not so much a camera but a tape recorder) zooms in on conversational bits and pieces, the imagined community is pasted together from its fragments in what Anderson calls a "complex gloss on the word 'meanwhile'".²¹ It is incidentally that very word 'meanwhile', conveniently capitalised, that opens chapter 7.11: "MEANWHILE Lata, who was in the thickest part of the party, felt as if she were swimming in a sea of language" (432). Proceeding from Lata's sensation (and akin to Saleem Sinai's alternative India represented by the voices of the Midnight' Children's Conference), the narrative subsequently transforms the party into a confluence and coexistence of disembodied enunciations, a discursive space that integrates the domestic ("She keeps two cooks, that is the reason, no other") and the political ("I called the union leaders in and I read them the riot act" - "If the mullahs want war they can have one"), the aesthetic ("I felt like crying when I read the poem") and the philosophically speculative. Of course, the party scene thus also reduplicates the larger text of which it partakes: *A Suitable Boy*, itself a sea of language, organises a loose articulation of discursive splinters and fragments across its textual space, basically operating on the principle of foregrounding alternating particles that appear to be interconnected primarily by way of simultaneity. By no means are all these particles explicitly devoted to the negotiation of nationhood, yet they are without exception engaged in the constitution of its structural preconditions. What is more, their distribution in the synchronicity of empty homogeneous time permanently enforces the homology of text and nation on

¹⁹ See Culler, "Anderson and the Novel", 49.

²⁰ It is obvious that the nation is hardly ever (if at all) thematised in any of, say, Jane Austen's novels – a circumstance that does in no way affect the centrality of Austen in the consolidation of Englishness; see, e.g., Franco Moretti's assertion that only with Austen's work "a symbolic form capable of making sense of the nation state" became available (Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*, 20).

²¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25.

which Anderson's argument hinges; thus, *A Suitable Boy* addresses and constitutes that 'omniscient reader' as a site at which the limited perspectives of the characters conjoin – a site, therefore, of totalisation, or complicity in the process of nation-forging.

Within the party sequence Seth has one self-assured voice, later on identified as "the Grande Dame of Culture" (437), expound the spiritual essence of India as autonomous national culture in terms of numerical paradigms, starting with the assertion that "the fundamental construct of Indian civilization is the Square" (432), only to revoke that proposition in favour of the "Trinity [as] the fundamental paradigm of our civilization" (433), soon to be replaced by "Duality alone that reigns over us here in our ancient land" (433). The next stage predictably asserts that it is "Oneness, yes, [...] Unity that governs our souls, here in our ancient land" (437), but the dizzying culturalist countdown only comes to a halt at "Nullity itself [as] the guiding principle of our existence" (438). If the Grande Dame herself is not deeply puzzled by such breathtaking definitorial leap-jumps, her conversation partner, young Dipankar Chatterji, certainly is, and much so to the reader's amusement. Of course, the pompous 'Grande Dame' discourse serves most immediately for a mockery of a rhetoric of perennialist nationalism impossibly (or rather: tellingly) linked with a promiscuous plurality of concretisations: The Grande Dame is a discourse machine serially producing invented traditions. Along with that genuinely satiric thrust, this micronarrative as well sheds some light on the problematic at the heart of nationalist discourse in *A Suitable Boy*: Never radically calling the existence of the nation into question but rather unperturbedly presupposing the nation's essence as a given, the Grande Dame's promiscuous catalogue consists of a set of formulae, all equally authoritative, that by virtue of their mutual exclusiveness eradicate one another. Nation as culture, therefore, ends up underdetermined paradoxically because it is over-defined, submerged in the sea of language that gravitates around that catachrestic notion. Accordingly, Dipankar, the recipient of the Grande Dame's elaborations, will much later in the text add infinity, the arithmetic equivalent of non-determinacy, to the catalogue when he claims that the formula for "the Entirety of [...] my own soul and the Being of India [...] is not the Zero or Unity or Duality or even the Trinity, but Infinity itself" (778). Thereby totalisation ("Entirety") and its apparent disclaimer ("Infinity") engage in a non-dialectic fusion precisely at that point where subject and nation – "my own soul and the Being of India" – are held together. This tricky operation, reorchestrated time and again all through the novel, appears to be possible only in the epistemic grey area of mysticism. *Meanwhile* back at the party, old Mr Chatterji, involved in another conversational fragment, complains about his incapacity to

geographically and cognitively map the space of the nation: "I can't even draw a map of India now. It seems so unimaginable" (424).

In short, in the party sequence Seth dramatises an engagement with the nation in which the latter emerges by way of discourses that circulate around an absent centre that they cannot present, but that all the same performatively produce the very "condition of possibility of imagining the nation".²² As in Rushdie, the discourse of nation is not about truth but articulation; hence its terrain is contested and fissured by a struggle over what the components are that make up the nation. This struggle clearly transcends the Grande Dame's attempts to loftily formularise a catachresis, or the geographical and cognitive mapping that old Mr Chatterji suddenly finds so difficult; nor is it restricted to civilised conversation, which in fact may appear eerily continuous with physical violence in the perception of a survivor of the Partition massacres on the occasion of the wedding celebrations at the opening of the novel: "The pleasant chatter of the garden in Brahmipur was amplified into the cries of the blood-mad mobs on the streets of Lahore, the lights into fire" (23). In a similar vein, all incantations of the nation's unity as "a team, a family, a battalion" are confronted with the split that explodes – as in *Midnight's Children* – the integrity even of the very core of the individual:

This is India, Hindustan, Bharat, the country where faction was invented before the zero. If even the heart is divided into four parts can you expect us Indians to divide ourselves into less than four hundred? (1112)

Actually the text holds and disclaims two dubious attempts – one religious, one political – to enact the unity of the entire nation: the religious mass gathering of the Pul Mela (based on the Kumbh Mela), and the claim of the Congress Party to politically articulate the nation as a whole. The festival of the Pul Mela, celebrated on the banks of the Ganges near the fictitious city of Brahmipur, brings together "[m]en, women and children, old and young, rich and poor, brahmins and outcasts, Tamils and Kashmiris" (766) in one vast inclusive celebration of unity that cuts across demarcation lines of gender, caste, class, language, ethnicity and region. Yet in this strictly Hindu event, adherents to other creeds have no place; if the mela to some of the participants appears as "the universe in microcosm" (677), they are mistaking, or aggressively substituting, the part for the whole. Dubious in a different way appears the Congress claim to embody "the only cohesive force in the localized and divided web of Indian politics" (1036). Internally fragmented by the contest of factions and lobbying groups, the party in a way actually reproduces precisely the composite and centrifugal character of the nation itself. In that sense, it can in fact figure as representative of 'India': not

²² Culler, "Anderson and the Novel", 48.

as an articulatory force but as a faithful reproduction of the nation's fragmentary condition. In Seth's text, the Congress therefore functions as a permanent reminder to the fundamentally futuristic nature of nation as a project that is never realised but continuously struggled for, and over, in an ongoing effort to bring state and society into alignment. Nowhere in *A Suitable Boy* does the catachrestic status of nation find a clearer profile than in the Congress Party passages: Not only does Congress legitimacy primarily derive from the historical role of the party in the anticolonial freedom struggle and hence from a period in which the nation actually could only figure as a projection onto a future state; it is only in the postcolonial present of the historical moment of the narrative that this proleptic quality of nation reveals itself as its ineluctable futurity, its failure to realise itself in the here-and-now. While this "absence at the heart of nation intensifies the wish for its presence",²³ within the Congress itself various responses to the spectrality of nation emerge. For one, the party is shaken by furious struggles over the question as to what the nation is in the first place. On the "Hindu-chauvinist right wing" a communalist version of nation gains ground which is rhetorically parasitical and mimetically fixated on the declared Other: "So successfully had the two-nation theory – the Muslim League's justification for Partition – taken root in their own minds that they saw Muslim citizens of India as Muslims first and Indians only incidentally" (1037). Other forces within the Congress maintain the secularist view according to which independent India is supposed to give itself the shape of a formal democracy that, in Nehruvian terms, ensures 'unity in diversity'. In Seth's book it is in fact in the figure of Nehru himself that the secularist discourse is anchored. As Prime Minister and most eloquent proponent of secularism, Nehru occupies the very position, within the text, that Lukács prescribes for the "world-historical individual".²⁴ Only a marginal character in the narrative, Nehru yet functions as the very embodiment of an entire historical trend, and is in fact perceived that way by his followers for whom "Nehru is not an ordinary member of the Working Committee; he represents the nation more today than any other individual does" (1078). While eulogies like this are mostly marked as characters' speech, the elevation of Nehru to the status of a "world-historical individual" is finally confirmed by the narrator's characterisation of the Prime Minister as

a man whose greatness of heart won the hearts of others, and whose meandering pleas for mutual tolerance kept a volatile country, not merely in those early and most dangerous years but throughout his own lifetime, safe at least from the systemic clutch of religious fanaticism. (1355)

²³ Easthope, *Englishness*, 50.

²⁴ Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 313.

Obviously Nehru's historical mission corresponds to the narrative's preference for compromise, moderation of passions, and mollification of extremes. Any teleology towards the fulfilment of national desire is implicitly removed from this short appreciation according to which it is not the role of the elder statesman to import the catachrestic nation into the real but to prevent its turning into a self-destructive force. Not so much an embodiment of the imagined national community, the figure of Nehru rather ensures that people do *not* imagine themselves too strongly as parts of contesting (sub-national) communities: Nehruvian Indian-ness resides in the toleration of difference. Peaceful coexistence, at best, instead of emphatic and ritually reinstated communions mark the life of the nation in this attempt to formulate the ineluctably irrational category of nation in terms of reason. No promise of a manifestation of unity in some utopian future is built into such an image; yet however strongly the narrator might sympathise with this Nehruvian containment strategy against imagining communities, the text has to acknowledge the persistence of national desire and the obsession with imagined communities.

6.3 Totality bytes

It is precisely because, as old Mr Chatterji observes, India has become "unimaginable" that the horizons evoked by such claims tend to skip the frame of the nation in favour of some far more vague and underdetermined universality. Cognitive mapping, in Fredric Jameson's usage of that term, is an essentially meta-ideological procedure in which the subject attempts to determine his/her "relation to the social and economic organization of global capitalism".²⁵ Simplistic as this may read, Jameson's strategy is highly complicated because its two levels – that of phenomenological perception on the one hand, that of the social structure as a whole on the other – are both riddled with figures of absence: Global capitalism has created a "reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience" and can therefore only be 'thought' as an absent cause; simultaneously the other entity of Jameson's configuration – the subject itself that is supposed to perform the act of 'mapping' – has been successfully decentred and dispersed in the course of its insertion "into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself".²⁶ Cognitive mapping, then, has to be performed by a fragmented, dispersed subject trying to determine its own location in a radically evasive totality.

²⁵ Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping", 347–360; 358.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

Jameson resolves this play with two indeterminate variables by defining the praxis of cognitive mapping as essentially aesthetic and *productive*; at the heart of it there lies a dual move of *figuration* in which both the subject and the structure are being conceived in relation to one another: “The project of cognitive mapping obviously stands and falls with the conception of some (unrepresentable, imaginary) global social totality that was to have been mapped”. Its result is not an ideological self-placement within the positivity of some definable social structure but the elaboration of a subtext by way of which that structure, ultimately an absent cause, can be processed in such a way that it can finally be imagined. For Jameson, everything depends upon the way the inaccessible whole is figured: His observation that “[a]chieved cognitive mapping will be a matter of form”²⁷ leads us back to *A Suitable Boy* – not only for its manifold instances of attempted cognitive mapping, but more fundamentally for its conspicuously anachronistic form as rerun of social-realist fiction before the advent of High Modernism.

In light of Jameson’s proposals for periodisation, this idiosyncratic choice for realism endows Seth’s novel with an ironic or desperate trait that cannot be grasped in terms of the (playful or nostalgic) recycling of some obsolete ‘clean-window style’; for what Seth rehearses in *A Suitable Boy* is after all the very genre of social realist Victorian fiction that, for Lukács, would epitomise the mode of capturing society as totality, but that, with Jameson, can be reconstructed as already informed by the crisis of metropolitan consciousness under the regime of imperialism.²⁸ This crisis springs precisely from the absence of a contrapuntal perspective, hence the incapacity to think modernity on transmodern terms: In sharp contrast to the transnational frame into which the individual is inserted,

the experience of the individual subject [...] becomes limited to a tiny corner of the world, a fixed-camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British

²⁷ Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping”, 356.

²⁸ Mukherjee’s observation of a potential recourse, on Seth’s side, to the early twentieth-century realist Bengali ‘triple decker’ is not forgotten here; but if we take into account that those novels were appropriations of English novels (themselves products of the colonial ‘rise’ of the genre), the application of Jameson’s periodisation to *A Suitable Boy* does not have to contradict Mukherjee. Though not familiar with the tradition of Bengali realist novels, I could imagine that those texts tend to articulate an elite nationalism and in that respect share much of the ‘limitations’ that Jameson attests to Victorian realism.

empire [...]. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people.²⁹

This parochialism has to be read, as Jameson concedes elsewhere, as an effect of high imperialism itself since “during this period the word ‘imperialism’ designates, not the relationship of metropolis to colony, but rather the rivalry of the various imperial and metropolitan nation-states among themselves”.³⁰ On this strictly Eurocentric ideological scene, structured by the competition of nation-states, social realism can pass for the medium to encapsulate the whole of the social fabric, even if this latter should be irredeemably fissured into ‘two nations’. The damaging limitations of this representational convention become apparent only after the removal of the Eurocentric myopia in favour of a contrapuntal, transmodern perspective, in which, e.g., “Dickens and Thackeray as London authors are read also as writers whose influence is informed by the colonial enterprises in India and Australia”:³¹ Contrapuntal reading of their texts reveals the incapacity of these figurations to cognitively map the relation of the metropolitan subject with the networks and circuits of empire – precisely because they meticulously elaborate the national horizon as totality.

While this last point leads immediately back to Seth's novel, the proviso remains that *A Suitable Boy* as a text is inextricably embedded into that very discursive field within which the postcolonial, contrapuntal, transmodern interrogation of the social-realist discourse of nation has been played out. We therefore have to assume that Seth's text re-employs the ‘dead’ genre not with the expectation to repeat some original achievement of the European realist novel ‘for India’: That ‘achievement’ itself has been dismantled by postcolonial interventions; cognitive mapping cannot succeed within a horizon defined as national. Yet this is exactly what happens, time and again, in *A Suitable Boy*: attempts at cognitive mapping within a national horizon that invariably dissolves into some vague infinity.

Oceanic feelings abound in this sea of language: The desire for the whole retrogrades into a yearning to merge with the infinite. At a self-referential level, where *A Suitable Boy* has its intradiegetic double in the novel-in-progress that the eldest Chatterji son, Amit, is labouring on, this vague longing for the limitless open is subtly designated as the desire of the text itself. Amit's novel overtly refers to Seth's: Like *A Suitable Boy* it will be a wrist-spraining prose excess of “[m]ore than a thousand pages” (1370), a

²⁹ Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping”, 349. More on this theme in “Modernism and Imperialism”. *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Edward W. Said. Minneapolis (U of Minnesota P) 1990: 43–66.

³⁰ Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism”, 47.

³¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 385.

period piece set in a “fictitious town” (449) written in a realist mode that will not be too “different from inspection reports” (483). Writing “about [his] own country” (421) in English, Amit finds himself confronted with the charge of inauthenticity (1369). It may well be with the intention to counter these accusations that he offers a series of ‘vernacular’ similes for his sprawling narrative: the novel can be compared to a Banyan tree, e.g., but its most prominent model is “the Ganga [...] with its tributaries and distributaries and so on” (779). Conceived as a river, the novel of course shares the teleology of the model in its course “from the ice cave of Gaumukh in the glacier to the ocean” (774). Pilgrims, however, know that the river need not be restricted to a correlate of oceanic longings, but that the teleology that it instates may be reversed in a “return journey [...] from Sagar in the delta up to the snows of the Himalaya” (775), an itinerary that turns the point of origin into the final destination, so that “a complete circuit” (775) emerges. It is, as Freud-inflected narratology postulates, not necessarily pious mysticism that brings about such a collapsing of the beginning into the end: in terms of narrativity, the identity of end and beginning as two congruent “moments of quiescence”,³² is always already structurally implied in any plot. If therefore Amit’s metaphorisation of his novel as Ganges implies that circular reversal of source and delta, beginning and ending, birth and death, the narrative drives, oceanically, towards the state beyond narratibility which lies before the beginning and after the end.

Yet what Seth’s novel, though not unaffected by this transcendental narrative desire, finally endorses is, as will be shown, the reality principle whose final prevalence forms the narrative telos. Totality (whether national or cosmic) is a dubious affair in Seth’s novel, where, conspicuously, the only occurrence of the term itself is ascribed to the quack astrologer whom Mrs Rupa Mehra consults in her quest for a suitable boy for her daughter: Having cross-read the horoscopes of Lata and Rupa Mehra’s favourite candidate, the astrologer claims to “have examined the totality of the picture” (1382). Needless to say, Seth’s mentioning of this version of totality is dismissive and derisive, not only inasmuch as the “Astrologer-Royal” turns out to be a smug businessman in the first place (“the use of Uranus was not costless”, 1381), but even more because it is being suggested that the hermeneutics of the two horoscopes had not even been worked out properly. All the same, the astrologer appears in one sense ‘sincere’: totality can be achieved of a ‘picture’ at best, i.e. of an already circumscribed and textualised set of signs. Other characters in *A Suitable Boy* perform that same labour of totalisation in

³² Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 105.

the undelimited, untextualised open – and end up with vague fantasies of ‘the whole’ that reach for the stars.

One such ‘oceanic’ attempt at establishing totality is ascribed to the minor character Rasheed who operates as an unsuccessful intermediary between urban modernity and rural backwardness. Born the second son of a petty zamindar in the remote village of Debaria, Rasheed has opted for a university education in the state capital, Brahmipur. To the extent that such exposure to urbanity substantially loosens his ties with the codes of his background in terms of class, familial, and religious loyalties, he appears as an alienated eccentric in the village framework against whose endemic “poverty and injustice” (583) he attempts to bring up modern ideas of collectivisation, electrification, and the abolishment of untouchability. For all this, though, Rasheed’s position in the urban context of Brahmipur proves as tensely problematic since there he operates as an agent of traditional religious orthodoxy. The straddle across the country/city divide thus engenders a pervasive split instead of a fusion of the two spheres. All the more does such fusion remain the desired object of Rasheed’s aspirations:

He attempted bravely, fervently, and perhaps obsessively, to reconcile everything – family life, learning, calligraphy, personal honour, order, ritual, God, agriculture, history, politics; this world and all the other worlds, in short – into a comprehensible whole. (724)

The attempt at holding together “this world and all the other worlds” clearly pushes this version of totality far beyond the horizon of the national, if not the social altogether; not based in religiosity either (“God” figures as one among many components of the non-system envisaged by Rasheed), it is not structured by any internal hierarchy but rather comprises a potentially inconclusive jumble of items that are connected by nothing but the urgent will to conjoin them, while any totalising category whatsoever is strikingly absent. The self-set task of Rasheed, therefore, lies not in the discovery but the *production* of totality. It is precisely the position of this character both inside and outside the modern and the traditional (even though both these opposite numbers deserve qualification here) that instils the desire for totality as a reconciliation of the irreconcilable. This desire stems from Rasheed’s straddle between his investment in socialist politics as a student functionary at Brahmipur University on the one hand, and his position as a Muslim zamindar’s son on the other. Potentially, this non-position could enable Rasheed himself, in Lukacs’s terms, to occupy the place of the totaliser. Seth’s text in fact underscores explicitly the congruence of Rasheed’s irreconcilable split with the “tragedy of the countryside, of the country itself” (1289), which, then, seems to be allegorised in a figure caught in the irresolvable contradiction of antagonistic forces while simultaneously

dreaming of an unobtainable wholeness. It is, however, not the absence of this wholeness as a positivity that defines the ‘failure’ of Rasheed (and, by extension, ‘India’); it is much rather the incapacity to perceive and valorise the interconnectedness of the apparently disparate that makes up the mixed constitution of the whole. Such an insight would require an “aspectival perception”; this way of seeing, however, may as well entail a further limitation of insight inasmuch as “the aspects we see are so contradictory and manifold as to hide another”.³³ It is due to Rasheed’s incapacity to map the interconnectedness of these positions that their apparent incompatibility engenders the urge to somehow ‘sublate’ them into an encompassing ‘comprehensible whole’. This, however, remains a blank, a fusion in, and with, the infinite. On this reading, Rasheed’s resort to madness and suicide near the end of the text simply transposes that indeterminate, ‘oceanic’ longing for totality onto the level of the performative. For what, if not a self-dissolution in the great wide open, is it that Rasheed enacts in his suicide by drowning himself in the “endless, endless, endless [...] waters of the Ganga” (1438)?

An alternative, far less laborious version of totality is put forward by Maan, Rasheed’s happy-go-lucky Brahmpur friend. Maan is introduced as the son of the progressive State Minister of Revenue, Mahesh Kapoor, who is set apart, by virtue of his integrity and consistent secularism, from the corrupt, nepotistic and power-hungry Congress oligarchy, and who figures across vast stretches of the text as the “prime mover of a bill to abolish large and unproductive landholdings in the state” (19). Maan, himself initially a far less responsible and politically minded figure than his father, gradually turns into a *Bildungsroman* hero: Experiencing the repercussions of the debates around the Zamindari Abolishment Act in the village of Debaria, he gains some insight into the underlying structures of cause and effect by which even remote entities are interconnected. The imminent land reform, pushed forward by Maan’s father in the name of democratic redistribution, entitles tenant farmers who have tilled one plot for a certain period to a priority option to that piece of land; in order to circumvent the implementation, the zamindars preemptively resort to shifting their tenants periodically; in the course of this reaction, one of the tenants of Rasheed’s family, the Dalit Kachheru, is evicted from that little field he had been let for his own tillage for years. For Maan, this event occasions a reflection on the connectedness of the seemingly independent:

³³ Malcolm Bull, *Seeing Things Hidden: Apocalypse, Vision and Totality*. London (Verso) 1999: 249.

Strange to think that even his paltry earnings had been undone by – by what? Perhaps by Maan's own father. The two knew nothing of each other as individuals, but Kachheru was the saddest case of the evil practised under the act, and Mahesh Kapoor was almost directly responsible for his utter devastation, for his reduction to the forsaken status of a landless labourer. Linked though they were in this sense of the former's guilt and the latter's despair, if they were to pass each other in the street, thought Maan, neither would know the other. (1288—1289)

This sense that things are secretly linked is usually and most conveniently decried as symptomatic of postmodern paranoia (as in Pynchon, DeLillo, Eco), in which totality, “in a slippage into sheer theme and content”, regresses to conspiracy: “the poor person's cognitive mapping”.³⁴ A fine specimen of such claustrophobia, in postcolonial writing, can be found in Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* (2002), whose Orlando-type protagonist by the end of the novel

becomes aware that cables and wires are strung between every object and person [...], forming a single interconnected mechanism. Every time he changes position or raises a hand to his face, he also moves other things, a cascade of *effects reaching out into the beyond*. Sometimes those things act on him, moving his arms, his eyelids. If he could free himself, he might be alright. If, at last, he could discover how the system works.³⁵

Here, the “suspicion that everything is connected in a sinister and as yet undiscovered way”³⁶ results in the fantasising of a stifling “system”, whose systematicity has to be accepted but cannot be seen into. Reaching “out into the beyond”, the system instils a metaphysical claustrophobia in which the ‘subject’, at times agent, at times acted on, finds itself literally entangled in an ineluctable interaction with everything – a puppet with no inkling of who is holding the strings. Rushdie in *Fury* and (to far more striking effects) I. Allen Sealy in *The Brainfever Bird* have employed this image in their sceptical meditations on a posthuman agency that cannot coincide with cyberpunk euphoria.³⁷ Seth subtly inverts the puppet theme when he has Rasheed complain how “we are tied to earth by such fine threads” (569). Later in the text, Rasheed is presented with all the symptoms of a fully fledged paranoia, accusing his friend Maan of conspiring against him, and defiantly declaring to have seen through these imagined machinations: “I

³⁴ Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping”, 356; for a more differentiated and sympathetic discussion of this phenomenon, see *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington & Indianapolis (Indiana UP) & London (BFI) 1995.

³⁵ Hari Kunzru, *The Impressionist*. Harmondsworth (Penguin) 2002: 503—504; my emphasis.

³⁶ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 205.

³⁷ I have discussed Rushdie's treatment of the cyborg theme in *Fury* elsewhere as a retreat to humanism that cannot fully escape essentialism; see Dirk Wiemann. “Back to Back Stories: Salman Rushdie, Transnationalism, and *Fury*”. *Mediating Indian Writing in English: German Perspectives*. Ed. Bernd-Peter Lange & Mala Pandurang. Delhi (Rawat) & Münster (Lit) 2005: 141—165.

understand when things are connected. It is not easy to dupe me" (1268). Maan, by contrast, advocates a version of totality without claustrophobic-conspiratorial overtones: He generalises his sense of connectedness into the assertion of a deep structure underlying the visible and tangible, a troubled network of faultlines "beneath the placid surface of things" (1290). The 'system', if there is one, is in Maan's version of cause and effect strictly immanentist and rationalist, which is underpinned precisely in its extension beyond the terrestrial: Far from standing in for what Rasheed would have conceived as 'all the other worlds', for Maan the "stars maintained their courses" (1290) within a basically Newtonian cosmos in which the connective threads and wires are dangling rather loosely. Cognitive mapping in this both ordered and liberal universe necessarily implies the acknowledgement of limited agency, a modest self-determination based on the notion that it was "not true that one could change everything through effort and vehemence and will" (1290): Loosely connected, things don't act on one another immediately. The flipside of a scepticism like this consists of relative freedom.

A third totalising gesture is performed, quite early in the text, by Lata herself, who, though modest and mediocre in every way, enters into a 'geographical' reverie of cosmological scope; on the occasion of her sister's wedding reception, the contemplation of the ceremonial nuptial fire suddenly triggers a concentrically expansive fantasy:

perhaps [Lata muses] this little fire was indeed the centre of the universe. For here it burned, in the middle of this fragrant garden, itself in the heart of Pasand Bagh, the pleasantest locality of Brahmipur, which was the capital of the state of Purva Pradesh, which lay in the centre of the Gangetic plains, which was itself the heartland of India ... and so on through the galaxies to the outer limits of perception and knowledge. (16)

This limitless spatialisation, to be sure, is far from original but much rather an echo from the heyday of High Modernism: Virginia Woolf's "Kew Gardens" with its vision of space as an infinite set of 'Chinese boxes'; James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus placing himself in an expanding geography that ranges from "Clongowes Wood College" via "Sallins", "County Kildare", "Ireland", "Europe" and "The World" to "The Universe";³⁸ Kafka's and Hofmansthal's fantasies of China etc. This specifically modernist sense of the infinite leads back, once again, to Jameson's periodisation. High Modernism, for Jameson, acts as an attempt to formally come to terms with the acute experience of an inaccessible, more accurately: unimaginable, social totality. Other than the precedent resolution of this lacuna in a social

³⁸ James Joyce [1916], *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London (Grafton): 1977, 15—16.

realism that represented the Eurocentric national horizon as totality, High Modernism emerges as a response to the collapse of precisely that mode of cognitive mapping – a proposition that may well help elucidate the oceanic longings in *A Suitable Boy*. Beforehand, however, one important distinction remains to be underscored: Stephen Dedalus (and his postcolonial epigone in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*³⁹) develops a geography centred around the self: "what he had written there: himself, his name and where he was".⁴⁰ Lata, on the other hand, places the wedding fire at the centre of the universe. This cosmology, then, serves not so much the attempt to maintain a self-centred, monadic subjecthood under siege; instead, it affirmatively gravitates around the ritualised and normalised form of living together. While this modification obviously prepares for the gradual acceptance of marriage that Lata will grow into in the course of the narrative, it also specifies the status of marriage itself: Placed at the centre of the open totality, marriage clearly transcends the domain of the purely domestic, or rather, figures as the innermost core of a series of interrelated forms of affiliation and belonging, ranging from the intimate to the communal to the regional, national, cosmopolitan and beyond. In short, difference not in kind but in degree holds apart what the official script of modernity establishes as the incommensurate categories of "the private" and "the public". Therefore Lata, by finally 'succumbing' to the maternal and social demand of marriage, herself steps into the core of her pyrocentric universe – a core that consists *not* of self and proper name but of the radical figure of communion, and from which larger forms of community emanate as extensions.

Though grounded thus in mutual exchange and modes of belonging, Lata's totality is yet as vague as Rasheed's in its emphatic thrust beyond "the outer limits of perception and knowledge". Here, the recourse to modernist precursors may serve as a clue to the understanding of such fuzziness: For Jameson, the emergence, in modernism, of "a new spatial language" that permanently engages "infinity" as its (non-)limit correlates with the spatial disjuncture of the social totality of the then metropolis.⁴¹ This disjuncture, however meticulously traced in the texts of Conrad, Woolf, or even Forster, is still not exhausted in those texts; it rather figures there as the infinite, another name for the incomprehensible and unimaginable. What Jameson is basically talking about is the modernists' acute awareness of colonialism's repercussions on metropolitan consciousness, which is confronted with an explosion of the social (hitherto 'national') totality since "colonialism means that a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is

³⁹ Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* will be discussed in ch. 8.

⁴⁰ Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist*, 15.

⁴¹ Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism", 58.

now located elsewhere [...], outside of the daily life and existential experience of the home country". The effect of this spatial redistribution lies in the concealment of substantial components of the whole, and hence in a strained effort to fill the gaps ensuing from this invisibility: "daily life and existential experience in the metropolis [...] can no longer be grasped immanently"⁴² but tend to be imagined in terms of transcendence ('the infinite'). Readers of Jameson will immediately recognise this diagnosis as isomorphous with that writer's theses on postmodernity, in which geographical displacement and disjuncture has become a general condition. Even more fundamentally, though, such disjuncture and the concomitant incapacity at full cognitive mapping arises from a process that does not require colonialist or postmodernist outsourcing but occurs wherever the 'abode of production' is obscured. Elsewhere, Jameson refers to "Marx's great invitation" to venture straight into "the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice 'No admittance except on business'".⁴³ Such a sojourn certainly entails a transcendence, but of a kind that radically differs from the visions ascribed to Rasheed, Lata, and even Maan: It stages a "journey back beyond the surface appearance of things"⁴⁴ into a more profound and materially concrete immanentism, where the 'surface appearance of things' is not interpreted as so many aspects of some underlying essence but as *produced* in that hidden abode whose disclosure and analysis now turns out as the precondition for any attempt at totalisation. If thus the incompleteness and necessary fuzziness of attempted totalisations in *A Suitable Boy* offer themselves to a basically Marxist critique of ideology (which will highlight the absence of any sense of relations of production on the side of such characters as Lata, Maan and Rasheed), this does by no means imply that the text itself were supportive of such a critique. If anything in Seth's novel comes close to a programmatic affirmation of a critical stance vis-à-vis the 'surface appearance of things', it would rather be the sceptical advice, at the end of the text, that "one might as well try to be cheerful, however sad the core of things might be" (1468). If Seth implies a 'deep structure' underlying the visible world, it is certainly not one determined by modes and relations of production but by an essential quality of temporariness and maybe even futility that impregnates all things. Ultimately, then, Seth does not seem to be interested in a Lukács-type realism that would symbolically reassemble the immanent, in the last resort material forces that make up the socio-historical totality; instead, he unfolds – in the

⁴² Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism", 50.

⁴³ Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 15. Jameson's reference is to Karl Marx [1867], *Das Kapital: Vol. I*. Berlin/GDR (Dietz) 1962: 189.

⁴⁴ Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 15.

guise of historical realism – a transhistorical statement on how all interaction, in love as well as struggle, results in some compromise that mollifies and tones down all radicalisms.

6.4 Walking through fire

All the same it would be difficult to charge *A Suitable Boy*, with Tabish Khair, of simply taking part in the concealment of the anyway “obscured areas of economic productivity in Indian English fiction”.⁴⁵ Labour and production do indeed figure prominently in the text, but their representation is mostly filtered through the perspectives of focalising characters so that the representation is as much about labour as it is about various ways of seeing (or not seeing) it. Covering a wide range of formations from the feudal agricultural system to artisanal as well as industrialised, partly multinational, urban leather and shoe production, Seth's text evokes a mixed constitution of coexisting modes of production. This uneven assemblage is by no means elided at the level of narrative but of focalisation: There is something that remains obscure and unspeakable about the fields of material production, but Seth's novel – far from elision – rather attempts to elucidate the conditions of impossibility of imagining the production circuit. The most noteworthy sequence in this respect is certainly Lata and Rupa Mehra's visit to Haresh Khanna's workplace in a Kanpur shoe factory: a truly Marxian guided excursion, albeit an abortive one, into the “hidden abode”. The tour starts, under the guidance of Haresh who later turns out as Lata's successful suitor, in the tannery with its “temporary storage godwon where the hides lay piled in salt” (623); the soaking pits where “[m]en with orange rubber gloves were pulling the swollen hides out with grappling-hooks” (623). The factory itself, however, is never entered due to the visitors' reluctance to further exposure to the site of production. Lata and Rupa Mehra hence function as guardians of concealment, motivated by an “*atavistic* repulsion against the whole polluting business of hides and carrion and everything associated with leather” (625; my emphasis). Class and, as importantly, ‘atavistic’ caste loyalties prevail and ensure that the full process of production remains hidden from view and absent from the text; this containment strategy, however, is clearly marked as a strained refusal to contemplate, or take cognisance of, the deep structure at work beneath the surface appearance of the social whole; Lata, “who would no more have dreamed of going to Ravidaspur [the Brahmpur tannery area] than to Orion” (625), is thus shown as one engaged in an ideological strategy whose aim it is to exclude a major segment of her

⁴⁵ Khair, *Babu Fictions*, 169.

contemporary social environs from her own mental map: Though neither Haresh's shoe factory nor the local tanneries are located in the elsewhere that colonialism spelt out for the metropolitan modernists, these places all the same might just as well be situated in another galaxy; like Orion, they are therefore, in terms of Lata's own fuzzy cosmology, beyond "the outer limits of perception and knowledge". Such is the heavy limitation that privilege imposes on the social imaginary: Not just the insight into the produced-ness of, say, a shoe is thus withheld; along with it society itself, after such exclusion of its complex composition, is conceived as co-terminus with, in fact replaced by, that tiny upper-class/upper-caste stratum that Lata herself belongs to. Concentric horizontal spatialisation, substituted for social stratification, enforces a truncated vision of the social whole in which only one class is seen. But, as Raymond Williams observes, "where only one class is seen, no classes are seen".⁴⁶

A second instance of an obscured insight into the 'hidden abode' occurs in a short subchapter (8.11), markedly incommensurate with the whole rest of the novel, that describes the working day of the Dalit bondsman, Kachheru, who is introduced as "one of Rasheed's father's chamars, [...] on call at any time he wanted, and not just for farming tasks but for any odd job" (576). In the sequence in question, the focaliser is not a visitor that averts the gaze from the vectors of production and thus refuses cognitive mapping; rather it is the focaliser as labourer from whom the capacity for cognitive mapping is withdrawn precisely because he is positioned at, or rather exposed to, the very centre of the hidden abode of (primary-sector) production. To be sure, Kachheru's insight into the material relationality that master and servant are entangled in by far exceeds Lata's reveries in terms of precision; these are, however, dangerous insights that have to remain clandestine: "Aloud, but so that no one would hear him, he said: 'If it weren't for me, you'd be finished'" (576). As bearer of an "analogue of class-consciousness",⁴⁷ Kachheru thus appears, in terms of the basic antagonism of the production and extraction of value, as probably the most knowledgeable character in the entire book; this knowledge, however, has to go virtually unheard not only because of its explosiveness but even more so because its very condition of possibility - its locatedness at the centre of the productive system - at the same time entails a successive annihilation of the subject. In proportion to the gradual extinction, by labour itself, of the conditions of subjecthood, the entire complex of production is again relegated to the grey area of the unrepresentable, both for the focaliser and the reader of the text. Clearly it is not Rasheed's 'fine threads' but feudalist fetters that tie Kachheru to earth.

⁴⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*. London (Paladin) 1975: 146.

⁴⁷ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 294.

Ploughing his landlord's fields under duress all through a hot summer's day, he has the bullocks "moving anti-clockwise in intersecting circuits around the field, as close to the edge as possible" (578). This circular move is described, for a novel otherwise so obsessed with detail, with conspicuous imprecision; it is in fact impossible to make out how those 'anti-clockwise circuits' might possible intersect *and* keep 'as close to the edge as possible'. Certainly the circular structure re-evokes Lata's vaguely concentric expansionism, with the significant difference that Kachheru's moves are strictly delimited by the borders of the field he is ploughing; furthermore it is at least likely that the circles here are diminishing, approaching the core instead of the limitless layers of peripheries that Lata envisages. Yet both moves, whether expanding or implosive, lead beyond the thinkable: In Lata's case, as discussed above, due to the containment strategies that repress material relations of production; in Kachheru's case because, most literally, labour itself consumes cognition. The short narrative of Kachheru's working day describes a gradual exhaustion by work, up to the point where the serf is reduced to a condition to which not even the term of the "thinking tool" (Marx) could be properly applied – a subjectivity that can neither represent itself nor be represented: "Hardly a coherent thought formed itself in his mind" as he drags along with, and like, his landlord's bullocks with the "only intention [...] to place one foot after the other" while "it seemed to him that he was walking [...] through fire" (580). No greater distance could possibly be put between Lata's 'swimming in a sea of language' and Kachheru's 'walking through fire'. Yet fire also occupies the centre of Lata's cognitive map. In both instances of abortive attempts at cognitive mapping, however remote from one another, fire appears now as the marker of failure.

If my reading has been justifiable and *A Suitable Boy* is primarily about abortive attempts at cognitive mapping – in a feudally organised agriculture; in a mixed modernity riven by a country/city dichotomy; in a fuzzy universe cleansed of class and caste tensions; etc. –, then one aspect which has puzzled other swimmers in that sea of language might possibly be elucidated by that finding: I am thinking of the virtual absence, in Seth's book, of options to empowerment, let alone transformation. This absence has been noted with respect to caste exclusion and exploitation by Angela Atkins who points out that "the push for change from below is missing in this novel",⁴⁸ Mala Pandurang, addressing gender issues in *A Suitable Boy*, similarly observes that "Seth does to some extent problematises [sic!] the inherent spaces allowed to women by patriarchal discourses. He does not however

⁴⁸ Angela Atkins, "Land as Legislative Space in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and Phanishwarnath Renu's *Maila Anchal*". *SOAS Literary Review* 3 (Autumn 2001): 1–14; 8.

invest them with agency to act or to offer resistance”.⁴⁹ These observations clearly refer to characters like Lata and Kachheru, both of whom take ample share in the novel’s many abortive projects of cognitive mapping. If, as Jameson insists, “the incapacity to map socially is [...] crippling to political experience”,⁵⁰ then this crippling effect appears to form the central issue of Seth’s text.

Does the category of solidarity push cognitive mapping to its limits? Or, put another way, is cognitive mapping a fundamentally lonely endeavour that, while aiming at interpretation, does not entail change? Gayatri Spivak, in her sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant sideswipes at Jameson, repeatedly takes cognitive mapping to task precisely for its academicism (coupled with occidentocentrism): “Do you really think that in order for the world to change, everybody must learn how cognitively to map the place of a hotel in Los Angeles on the geopolitical map?”⁵¹ Her alternative programme of “transnational literacy”, based on encounter and cooperation in difference and responsibility, aims at some “command [...] of a diversified historical and geographic information system; a little more than cognitive mapping”.⁵²

In *A Suitable Boy*, characters and focalisers operate primarily as so many agents of various versions of ideological self-localisation on differently defined grids. Meanwhile, the narrative with its interconnected plots and subplots covers (or at least touches upon) all the centrally important tendencies of that particular historical moment – from high politics to the “vortices of domesticity”, from economic details to aesthetic debates; it thus suggests to spread a vast canvas that holds together and rearranges the major components that give shape to the immediate post-independence phase of the Indian nation-state, and hence invites for a reading in which *A Suitable Boy* turns out as a textual re-enactment of those nation-building processes that informed the period it thematises *and* of the enshrined textual genre that (allegedly) had achieved this task in 19th century Britain or early-twentieth-century Bengal. All the more it remains to be emphasised that this affirmative meta-structure is juxtaposed to a permanent proviso: At the level of subjectivity, where the performativity of cognitive mapping takes place, the identification of individual as national subject remains an impossibility as the Indian national community remains unimagined.

⁴⁹ Pandurang, *Vikram Seth*, 116.

⁵⁰ Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping”, 353.

⁵¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The New Criticism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic”. *The New Historicism*. Ed. H. Aram Veesser. New York & London (Routledge) 1989: 277–292; 288.

⁵² Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 398.

7 Two Versions of Sans Souci

The Public Life of Domesticity

The move from *Midnight's Children* to *A Suitable Boy* has produced an itinerary from explorations of the times of India to the essentially spatial procedures of cognitive mapping. What emerges from our reading so far is a series of figurations of the modern nation-state as a fissured and fractured time-space that can neither be captured in any gloss on the word 'meanwhile', however complex, nor be arranged as a grid onto which the individual subject could inscribe his/herself. Anderson's or Jameson's models, we have seen, are kept visible under erasure as the longing for nation and modernity is revealed as a paradoxical dynamics of desire and necessary deferrals. The nation, however, does not exist as an entity prior to its constitution in the collective imaginary. Likewise, cognitive mapping occurs not as scientific analysis but aesthetic figuration: Just as the absent totality requires to be imagined precisely because of its absence, so "the 'self' in this narrative is not an essence or truth concealed by [...] layers of conceit and lying in wait of discovery, revelation, or birth".¹ This last phrase is taken from Libby Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's 1986 essay, "What's Home Got to Do with It?", which bridges the time-space of the nation and that of the domestic. I will punctuate my discussion of Martin and Mohanty with short excursuses on exemplary formulations of home to be found in contemporary Indian 'domestic' fiction, turning to Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan and Vikram Chandra.

In their article, Martin and Mohanty address a feminist autobiographical narrative – Minnie Bruce Pratt's "Identity: Skin Blood Heart" – as an exploration of diverse modes of constructing and living 'home'. Pratt's own text covers three bio-geographically distinct 'scenarios': her childhood as a white middle-class girl in Alabama; North Carolina as the place of her married life and coming out as a lesbian; and her politicised way of living

¹ Libby Martin & Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "What's Home Got to Do with It?". *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Chandra Talpade Mohanty. New Delhi (Zubaan) 2003: 85–105; 91.

home in a predominantly black neighbourhood in Washington, D.C. Without referring to Jameson's model, Martin and Mohanty seem to discuss these reconstructions and rewritings of 'homes' in Pratt's autobiographical account as so many acts of cognitive mapping: Their analysis of Pratt's text focuses on "the manner in which the narrative works by grounding itself in the geography, demography, and architecture of the communities that are her 'homes'".² Far from the (illusory) notion of a self-enclosed and exclusive sphere of intimacy, domesticity, and privacy, Pratt's 'home', according to Martin and Mohanty, is an open construction in at least two respects: as a dynamic, historical process and as an entity that is porous to its 'communal' environs. Much of Pratt's narrative is concerned with the reconstruction of those "local histories of exploitation and struggle" that, in the paternal self-description of her white middle-class family, were strictly excluded from the 'home', structurally rendering it as incomplete as the provincial experience of Jameson's metropolitan subject under the regime of imperialism. For Pratt, it is only a first but necessary step to become a homebreaker as "'not being home' was a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself".³

The originally feminist agenda of politicising the allegedly 'apolitical' private and the urge to question the long-standing Western-bourgeois dichotomy of the private and the public have for some time now reverberated through a wide range of contemporary social criticism and activism in the name of an acknowledgement of "the public life of domesticity and intimacy".⁴ In Pratt, this urge seems to be pursued in a series of projects of cognitive mapping – proceeding from geography, demography and architecture – triggered by "the desire for home, for *synchrony*, for sameness, and the realization of the repressions and violence that make home, harmony, sameness *imaginable*".⁵ The kind of homemaking that Pratt rejects conceives of the family as a unit lived or imagined as the bastion of private individualism. This project runs parallel to Anderson's model of the construction of the nation: Based on sameness in synchrony, both home and nation form exclusive communities that are imagined into existence by 'private individuals'. What Pratt, other than Anderson, heavily emphasises is the violence, the elimination of difference (of Others *and* of the self) involved in this procedure. Hence the quest, performed as cognitive mapping

² Martin & Mohanty, "What's Home Got to Do with It?", 89 (my emphasis).

³ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴ Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge & Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Cosmopolitanisms". *Cosmopolitanism*. Ed. Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha & Dipesh Chakrabarty. Durham & London (Duke UP) 2002: 1–14; 9.

⁵ Martin & Mohanty, "What's Home Got to Do with It?", 102 (my emphases).

with an emphatic stress on community, for other genres of belonging after the initial escape into the unhomely void of 'not being home'. What Avtar Brah has described as "homing desire"⁶ persists but is directed now towards an object for which there are as yet no models.

Taking cognitive mapping back, for the sake of illustration, to its origins in the discipline of Urban Studies,⁷ the home as the site of a non-oxymoronic 'public domesticity' relates to the nation like the 'effective city' ties in with the 'objective city': While the latter exists as a (seemingly) mimetic model of the territorial layout and circumscribes the defined city region as a totality, the former designates the city that individuals actually *use*, it being understood that all inhabitants of any given city (have to) create their own effective city in the processes of daily living.⁸ This latter, experiential level is the site of actual interaction with the built environment where all the tactics and rhetorics of 'walking' occur that Michel de Certeau describes as so many

intersecting writings [that] compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other.⁹

The effective city – Certeau prefers to speak of the city of urban practice as distinct from the 'panorama-city' – is that domain "in which it becomes apparent that the map is not the territory";¹⁰ more precisely, walking the city with Certeau is productive of another text in its own right, a pluralistic counter-text made up of manifold "spatial practices" that put the authority of "the constructed order" of the map into question: "The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order".¹¹ Yet even in such subversive relations, the effective city of everyday practices remains configured with the inaccessible totality of the coherent texture that the map produces.

In *That Long Silence* (1988), Shashi Deshpande has her narrator reflect on "the disorientation that overcomes me when I wake up in a strange place and *can't connect myself to the world*".¹² This lack of orientation necessitates

⁶ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London & New York (Routledge) 1996: 180.

⁷ Fredric Jameson explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*; Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping", 353.

⁸ See Jim Masselos, "Defining Moments/Defining Events: Commonalities of Urban Life". *Bombay and Mubai: The City in Transition*. Ed. Sukata Patel & Jim Masselos. Delhi (OUP) 2002: 31–49; 32–33.

⁹ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City". *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Ed. Simon During. London & New York (Routledge) 1993: 151–160; 153.

¹⁰ Bromley, *Narratives for a New Belonging*, 130.

¹¹ de Certeau, "Walking in the City", 160.

¹² Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence*. New Delhi (Penguin India) 1988: 17–18 (my emphasis).

cognitive mapping at its most basic and literal: an effort that becomes dispensable only where one is 'at home' in a familiar environment already mapped:

The things around me were all familiar and reassuring – the dressing table with its tarnished mirror [...], the large bare table, the high steel bed every squeak of which was known to me. I lay at ease with myself and watched the room grow lighter. Markers, I thought, that's what they are, these things in our lives, telling us where we are.¹³

The familiar room with its things reassuringly in place enables an iterative reading of the same, the repetition of an act of mapping all over again. Placing this process at the innermost location of the effective terrain, Deshpande all the more emphasises how this 'private' procedure is 'telling us where we are' in connection to the 'world'. The bedroom as already mapped is recognisable inasmuch as its 'things' have become 'markers': not of social distinction but literally geographical. In their capacity as markers, the objects in the bedroom enact an iterative interpellation through which the subject gets re-constituted as inserted into a coherence of space that can now be imagined as 'world'.

Topmost on Jameson's agenda is the figuration of a politically empowering interrelation between the two spheres of the effective and the 'objective' terrain – negatively put, the removal of a crippling incapacity to imagine such an interrelation. Though it is true that Jameson does not explicitly mention solidarity, community, or even history, it would be difficult to imagine 'achieved cognitive mapping' as a purely solipsistic enterprise which would only serve to reaffirm the perspectively limited effective city one already inhabits anyway; in fact, with Martin and Mohanty's reading of Pratt, it becomes obvious that the cognitively mapped location of the subject can only be figured as a not-yet established third space that has to be produced in an interactive process of encounters in the here-and-now, and that it requires an openness to histories that are always also histories of the Other. This, it seems, is a 'politically correct' rendition of the circumstance that home is always also mapped on a social grid, sutured into a larger social text, and that the reassuringly familiar things in the home, however intimate, always take part in the social life of things, the public life of domesticity. Even when they are carefully concealed from others' looks, they function as markers: not only spatially, as in Deshpande's text, but also at the level of distinction. Distinction, however, is always addressed to an imagined peer group whose approval the display of status markers and habitual signs is intended to elicit. Built into the environment of home, then, there is also the complex desire for communities larger than home itself. The

¹³ Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, 18.

spatial layout of home becomes readable therefore as a social text of class fantasies of belonging, of upward mobility, or of anxieties of degradation. This becomes almost blatantly obvious in the description of an interior in Vikram Chandra's "Artha", one of the five self-enclosed narratives that make up *Love and Longing in Bombay*:

The drawing room contained Sandhya's new Swedish-looking sofa and couches with white cushions, her glass-topped coffee table, her crystal imported from America, her new blue carpet with the Persian pattern on it, her flowers that looked so real you couldn't tell. It was a perfect room and none of us were allowed to enter it. Even Sandhya hardly went in there.¹⁴

A peculiar conflagration of restriction and display turns the lavishly furnished and decorated room into a spatial text that bespeaks a form of conspicuous consumption which is paradoxically made almost invisible as no one is admitted to this sanctum. Such exclusiveness definitely exceeds even the Victorian (lower) middle-class cult of the "best room" which served as a limited emulation of the upper-middle-class institution of the drawing room: While the latter clearly fulfilled a regular public function as status indicator and embodiment of appropriate taste, the former remained largely removed from household routine and "was kept for best".¹⁵ Even though replete with assorted distinction markers, Sandhya's drawing room showcases these items for no empirical spectator. It could therefore hardly be further removed from the Victorian 'original' which was, however exclusive, the very location where visitors were entertained – hence the site where domesticity merged with regulated sociability. It is the exclusion of this element of sociability that pushes the display function of Sandhya's drawing room to its extremes. Even in their apparently anti-social uselessness, however, the items on display – the 'Swedish-looking sofa', the 'crystal imported from America', the 'Persian carpet' – very much take part in the social life of things. They actually inscribe their owner into a virtual, or "constellated community": another anonymous affiliation that "coheres only by repeated acts of imagination" of a shared bond of aesthetic preference or taste.¹⁶ As a social type, Sandhya now gets readable, without having to appear herself, as a paragon of the new upstarting urban/cosmopolitan Indian middle class with strong propensities to enacting 'globalisation' as conspicuous consumption; at the same time, the sanctity of her drawing room betrays a *nouveau riche* attitude that cannot dispense with the 'best room' inheritance of a much less well-to-do upbringing.

¹⁴ Vikram Chandra, *Love and Longing in Bombay*. New Delhi (Penguin India) 1997: 186.

¹⁵ Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*. London (Harper Perennial) 2003: 137.

¹⁶ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*. London (BFI) 1999: 167.

A few pages further down, the first-person narrator visits a home on the extreme other end of the social spectrum: a tiny flat in a Dharavi *chawl*¹⁷ whose most remarkable and ‘unimaginable’ component consists in a calendar with “a picture of the pristine arc of Marine Drive”: “I had imagined the room and it was exactly as I had imagined it, but I hadn’t known about the calendar”.¹⁸ What should be so surprising, if not unsettling, about slum dwellers decorating their tiny and sparsely furnished flat with a (probably cheap) reproduction of a photograph depicting Bombay’s posh waterfront boulevard? Marine Drive, a ‘marker’ in both geographical and social terms, functions as a metonymy of the Bombay from which the inhabitants of this *chawl* flat are excluded by financial apartheid. Chandra’s text, filtered as it is through the perspective of a narrator who cannot arrive at a thick description of the tactics at work in the decoration of his hosts’ flat, leaves the possible ‘meaning’ of the calendar undetermined: Does it stake a claim to the inhabitants’ belonging to the city as a whole? Does it encapsulate a dream of upward mobility, or does it interpellate slum dwellers into the ideal but inaccessible normativity of upper-middle class existence? The least one can say is that the calendar, like the items assembled in Sandhya’s drawing room, puts the flat on a larger spatial and social map and thus disrupts the illusion of some self-enclosed home removed from the environs in which it is inserted.

According to Martin and Mohanty, Pratt’s mappings, as has been shown, (re)construct homes as provisional and shared spaces of belonging that are inextricably embedded in social relations far beyond the porch steps. Thus placed outside well-maintained boundaries that hold the private and the public apart, belonging holds no guarantees of safety and constancy; rather it implies that which the constricted home as a bastion of privacy tries to exclude in ongoing but ultimately futile efforts at “boundary maintenance”.¹⁹ exposure to the Other, exposure to what Judith Butler calls “the ongoing

¹⁷ The term *chawl* is used for “the peculiarly Mumbai single-room dwelling which has given the city much of its proletarian character”; Darryl D’Monte, *Ripping the Fabric: The Decline of Mumbai and Its Mills*. New Delhi (OUP) 2002: 75. – The Bombay district of Dharavi is allegedly the largest slum in Asia, it being understood that ‘slum’ is first of all a legal designation; see Gita Dewan Verma, *Slumming India: A Chronicle of Slums and Their Saviours*. New Delhi (Penguin) 2002; on Dharavi in particular, see Kalpana Sharma, *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia’s Largest Slum*. New Delhi (Penguin) 2000.

¹⁸ Chandra, *Love and Longing*, 195; 196.

¹⁹ David Morley discusses home as a construct posited on the tense interrelation of “boundary maintenance” and “boundary transgression”; see David Morley, “Bounded Realms: Household, Family, Community, and Nation”. *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*. Ed. Hamid Naficy. New York & London (Routledge) 1999: 151–168; 152.

interpellations of social life”.²⁰ In Butler’s revision of the concept, interpellation, “after the diffusion of sovereign power”, is no longer the prerogative of Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses but is, instead, dispersed across the terrain of the social (and certainly invades the home through the networked capillaries that make it porous to continuous boundary transgression, particularly by mass media); yet Butler retains Althusser’s notion of interpellation as inaugurative in its effect “to indicate and establish a subject in subjection, to produce its social contours in space and time”.²¹ The main issue of *Excitable Speech* is the attempt to delineate how interpellation simultaneously opens a space for the de-victimisation of the ‘subject in subjection’, or, how “name-calling may be the initiating moment of a counter-mobilization” as “[t]he name one is called both subordinates and enables, producing a scene of agency from ambivalence”.²² What interests me more at this point, is the light Butler’s version of interpellation may shed on the question of a mode of belonging that explicitly implies, even relies on, an exposure to ‘the ongoing interpellations of social life’. Pratt realises how ‘home was an illusion’ precisely because ‘home’, vulnerable to boundary transgression, cannot defy or shield off these interpellations; but her urge to break home stems from a sense that the labour of boundary maintenance is crippling because it excludes so many interpellations that are envisaged as necessary moments of a richer, though certainly precarious form of belonging. Complementing Butler with Giorgio Agamben, it becomes possible to take insight how interpellation is not only inaugurative of the ‘subject in subjection’ but of belonging itself, albeit a categorically provisional belonging: “Being-called” provides for Agamben “the property that establishes all possible belongings”. But since the names that one is being called may vary radically – Agamben’s examples are ‘being-called-Italian’, ‘being-called-dog’, ‘being-called-Communist’ – the potentially inexhaustible multiplicity of possible interpellations “is also what brings [all possible belongings] back radically into question”.²³ In a situation of full exposure to the ongoing interpellations of social life, belonging would thus get permanently overwritten by ever new versions of ‘being-called’, none of which can possibly be anticipated, each of which may call all others into question. Home can now be perceived as an institution whose function it is to reduce this exposure by way of boundary maintenance, and to counterbalance it by producing a stability of belonging through constantly reiterated and

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York & London (Routledge) 1997: 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 33; 34.

²² *Ibid.*, 163.

²³ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 10.

hence predictably patterned interpellations: beginning with Deshpande's 'things in our lives' to which the subject wakes up every morning. The subject, Susie Tharu remarks, gets "affirmed in citation-reiteration".²⁴ This, to be sure, is neither a natural nor a necessarily harmonic pattern: Indian domestic fiction abounds with narratives of violent interpellations to which, in particular, the figure of the wife/daughter-in-law tends to be subjected. Typically, the reminiscences of an old servant woman in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) gravitate around the ongoing violence of hate-speech in the home, the iterative repertoire of abusive names available for regular acts of 'being-called': "barren witch", "hussy", "ill-starred slut".²⁵ Inasmuch as the pattern of violent interpellation goes on with variation but not interruption, this is 'home' in the most constricting sense; in order to emphasise how this version of 'home' is restricted neither to lower-class households nor to the early-twentieth century period which the servant woman remembers, Hariharan juxtaposes this brutal interpellative pattern with its more sophisticated latter-day middle-class variant that interpellates the wife/daughter-in-law as pathological embodiment of "women's neuroses and [...] faulty upbringing".²⁶

The subtext underwriting these patterns relegates the wife/daughter-in-law to her multiple *reproductive* functions – of 'dynastic' continuity, of the integrity of the home, and, in the ideology of Indian elite nationalism, of the culture at large.²⁷ The woman as a subject in subjection refers in this perspective to the way in which the home is itself interpellated into specific social functions as the site of (re)production of labour power; of normalised and gendered citizen/subjects; cultural continuity; or even, in minority and diasporic frameworks, as "a line of defense against cultural assimilations".²⁸ In other words, home is produced and reinforced by discourses that assign home its functions and ideals: Even when these are articulated as pure intimacy, they are ultimately social in nature. The notion of 'public domesticity' captures this insertion of the 'intimate' in the larger social context of multiple interpellations as an actively inhabited domain while at the same time keeping the category of 'home' and its underlying dichotomies of inside/outside, private/public visible under erasure – dichotomies that, as

²⁴ Susie Tharu, "The Impossible Subject: Caste and Desire in the Scene of the Family". *Body.City: Siting Contemporary Culture in India*. Ed. Indira Chandrasekhar & Peter C. Seel. Berlin (House of World Cultures) & Delhi (Tulika) 2003: 246–261; 255.

²⁵ Githa Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces of Night*. New Delhi (Penguin India) 1992: 113; 115; 120.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁷ see below.

²⁸ Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings*. New York & London (Routledge) 1997: 88.

Jeff Weintraub suggests, keep informing the landscapes of modern societies and that therefore

can neither be conveniently simplified nor usefully avoided. The variability, ambiguity, and difficulty of the public/private distinction need to be recognized and confronted – but also the richness and apparent indispensability of that grand dichotomy.²⁹

In the following, I will trace two versions of ‘home’ – in *Midnight’s Children* and *The Trotter-Nama* – as paradigmatic exercises in mapping the domestic as continuous with and reproductive of the larger frame into which home is inserted. This is not to say that a relation of direct correspondence should be construed between home and nation: One cannot rely on Saleem Sinai’s assertion according to which, “the history of our family [...] became the fate of a nation” (MC 313). Likewise, it does not suffice to pinpoint the word “independence” in an indirect interior monologue passage of Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* to sustain the claim that “[i]t is impossible for us *not* to read Dina’s story as the story of independent India”.³⁰

7.1 The passages of Methwold’s Estate

The place that Saleem Sinai gets born into is not only “the city of Bombay”,³¹ as is stated with strained exactitude on the first page of *Midnight’s Children*; it is also an absurdly hyperreal Europe: The colonial luxury compound of Methwold’s Estate comprises four mansions “named majestically after the palaces of Europe: Versailles Villa, Buckingham Villa, Escorial Villa and Sans Souci” (MC 95). While the Estate’s architecture is originally designed to transform, for the benefit of its imperial denizens during the Raj period, a corner of a foreign field into some semblance of the English ‘home’, there are clear hints at the perpetual encroachment of the tropical into this temperate enclosure as local flora blends with, and overpowers, the precarious existence of ‘British’ “tiny touch-me-not plants huddled under tamarind trees” (MC 95). Historicist in architectural as well as ideological outlook, Methwold’s Estate not only objectifies colonial power relations but also prefigures a genuinely postmodern (auto)cannibalism that ransacks the past and processes and serialises it into ‘heritage’ for the European consumer/resident:

²⁹ Jeff Weintraub, “The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction”. *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*. Ed. Jeff Weintraub & Krishan Kumar. Chicago (U of Chicago P) 1997: 1—42; 38.

³⁰ This is exactly what Neil Lazarus claims in his otherwise highly perceptive defence of Jameson’s concept of national allegory. Lazarus, “Fredric Jameson on ‘Third-World Literature’”, 59.

³¹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, 1; in this chapter, subsequently quoted as MC + page number.

four identical houses built in a style befitting their original residents (conquerors' houses! Roman mansions [...]) – large, durable mansions with red gabled roofs and turret towers in each corner, ivory-white corner towers wearing pointy red-tiled hats [...] – houses with verandahs, with servants' quarters reached by spiral iron staircases hidden at the back (MC 94).

Yet, transferred into the hands of the postcolonial Indian elite, the grotesque compound immediately sheds its theme-park allure and begins to operate as a spectral afterimage of empire: Not only do the new owners buy themselves into the privileged position of their predecessors; they also have to agree to the capricious terms dictated by Methwold, according to which “the houses be bought complete with every last thing in them, [and] that the entire contents be retained by the new owners” (MC 95). Instead of taking over, then, the new residents are forced to inhabit an imperial museum in which they are interpellated to continuously mimic British cultural practices. In order to make sure that the acquisition of the mansions be inextricably linked with the achievement of political independence, Methwold furthermore insists on selling his estate exactly on August 15, 1947; thus, by late colonial decree, the domestic gets articulated with the national on imperial terms. The new house – both the Sinai's newly acquired Buckingham Villa *and* the nation's state – will remain a copy of ‘Europe’ haunted by the ghost of Methwold. The house, then, would easily lend itself to a reading as a stark allegory of what Chatterjee derides as colonialist historiography of Indian (and ‘third-world’ in general, for that matter) nationalism as a derivative discourse. Yet Rushdie makes sure that allegory itself be exposed as one more imperialist ascription, since it is Methwold, the colonialist, who introduces the stereotype of a “very Indian lust for allegory” (MC 96). Colonialism, therefore, not only determines the architecture of house and state but even the very episteme by way of which those two domains are brought into alignment – an alignment of the political and the domestic that spells out the ultimate horizon of national desire, both imperial and postcolonial. In other words: If Rushdie highlights the correspondence patterns that pertain between Methwold's Estate as postcolonial house and the Indian state as postcolonial polity, he also exposes the extent to which that very allegory itself – as a mode of conceptualisation – stems from the same colonial legacy.

It is a legacy that can, in historical terms, be precisely located in the ideology of the Raj constructing the domestic not as an exact replica of the depoliticised and feminised private sphere prevalent in Victorian England itself, but rather as continuous with the inherently political project of Empire; for, as Rosemary George demonstrates, the idea of the colonial ‘English’ home in India (and elsewhere) differs widely from the hegemonic home concepts applied to the motherland: While, in Britain itself, the feminised

home was posited on “strategies that distinguished private from social life and thus detached sexuality from political history”,³² it is precisely this demarcation of two allegedly distinct spheres that gets suspended in the colonies, where “housework and home management were [considered] valuable national contributions”.³³ It is noteworthy that with respect to both Victorian Britain and the colonial English home, the different predominant domestic ideals implicit in either of the two operated not so much as mimetic reproductions of factual and practiced domesticity but as prescriptive constructions of “the model home”: “both an imposed ideal and a potent cultural, as well as individual, ideal”.³⁴ Clearly, e.g., Ruskin’s eulogy of the home as “a temple of the hearth” shielded off from the “hostile society of the outer world”³⁵ is indicative, not of the actuality of such harmonious privacy, but much rather of the dominant desire for it – a version of ‘homing desire’ that bespeaks the absence of that stable domestic bliss which is continuously invoked, more often than not as preciously fragile and therefore as “the source and object of deep insecurity and anxiety”.³⁶

Equally the ideal colonial home under the authorised *memsahib*’s rule feeds into the myth of control over the colony rather than being descriptive of any positive actuality. The politics of the English model home in the colony, then, is grounded on a homology between household and empire, providing English women in the colonies with a subject position that implicitly partakes of the political authorisation that empire grants its agents. The *memsahib* becomes the home minister of the domestic domain to which she is entitled. In this sense, George argues that “the modern *politically authoritative* Englishwoman was made in the colonies: she was first and foremost an imperialist”.³⁷ George’s point is that British women in the colonies were empowered not *as women* but on racial terms, particularly when their activities, as Indira Ghose observes, took on the semblance of feminist intervention on behalf of “Indian women [constructed] as unfortunates in dire need of saving”.³⁸ It is in difference to her ‘brown sisters’ that the *memsahib* attains her profile as already emancipated. And yet it is through their

³² Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 24.

³³ George, *The Politics of Home*, 37.

³⁴ Gwendolyn Wright, “Prescribing the Model Home”. *Home: A Place in the World*. Ed. Arien Mack. New York (New York UP) 1993: 213–225; 219–20.

³⁵ John Ruskin [1864], “Sesame and Lilies”. *Sesame and Lilies. The Two Paths. The King of the Golden River*. Ed. John Bryson. London (Dent) 1970: 1–77; 59.

³⁶ Rod Edmond, *Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian Poetry and Domestic Narrative*. London & New York (Routledge) 1988: 249.

³⁷ George, *Politics of Home*, 37.

³⁸ Indira Ghose, “Miranda and Caliban in India: The Politics of ‘Race’ and Gender under the Raj”. *Widersprüche des Multikulturalismus (= Gulliver 37)*. Ed. Christiane Harzig & Nora Räthzel. Hamburg (Argument) 1995: 149–161; 155.

insertion into an essentially domestic ideal that partook of the civilising and disciplining mission that British women in colonial India presided a miniature version of empire and hence held an inherently political position; empowered as agents of colonialism, English women in the Raj “were led to believe that their liberation was a completed project even before they won the right to vote”.³⁹ It is this allegorical structure on which the household of Methwold’s Estate is predicated in neat correspondence with the political domain – an allegory that comes as an integral part of the colonial legacy and *not* as the result of some genuinely “Indian lust”.

Yet in Rushdie, the imperialist narrative of the household as a politicised and yet feminised arena where Western civilisation’s standards are kept up in the ‘wilderness’ and coercively enforced onto ‘natives’, gets contested by another, equally feminised and politicised domestic ideal that pertains to the national/modern. It comes into play with the advent of the new, Indian inhabitants who bring along their own concept of the proper home. Indian elite nationalism, as Partha Chatterjee puts it, constructs the home (*ghar*), in a binary opposition to the ‘world’ (*bahir*), as the core of the spiritual cultural sphere: that very domain in which “the East was superior to the West”.⁴⁰ By contrast, the public arena, the field of the political proper, was constructed as a domain in which British supremacy went unquestioned: Elite nationalism in British India, then, initially produces a discourse into which the rule of colonial difference – that is, the exclusion of the colonised from the political – is inextricably inscribed. In his critique of Chatterjee, Sumit Sarkar points out that this narrative not only fails to explain how such a self-disempowering nationalism could at all articulate a political movement when it entailed, as Chatterjee claims, a “surrender[...] to the West on the ‘material plane’”; furthermore Sarkar particularly questions Chatterjee’s account of the rigidly gendered division of labour allegedly implemented by nationalism:

For Chatterjee, women’s initiative or autonomy in the nationalist era apparently found expression only inside the home [...]. He remains silent about the active role of women in virtually every kind of politics, as well as in specific women’s associations, not to mention Indian women’s many anti-patriarchal protests and struggles fought on the domestic scene itself.⁴¹

³⁹ George, *Politics of Home*, 137.

⁴⁰ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 120.

⁴¹ Sumit Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*”. *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. Ed. & intr. Vinayak Chaturvedi. London & New York (Verso) 2000: 300–323; 310; 310–11.

I would not wish to harmonise these objections in an attempt to reconcile Sarkar with Chatterjee (such an attempt is clearly beyond me); what is apparent, however, is that the two historians are after two very different objectives: While Sarkar argues from the position of a social historian dedicated to the reconstruction of political agencies in prestructured contexts, Chatterjee aims at the genealogy of a nationalist discourse projected to assume the hegemonic function of an elite's self-description as (ideally) nationally valid. *The Nation and Its Fragments* is after all about the vicissitudes and antinomies of a discourse of nation through which a particular social group aims to impose, as transparent norm, its specific genre of state and society; the historiographer's task, in this understanding, would be to unmask how that 'norm' is in fact not more than what Stuart Hall has called "the self-representation of the dominant particular".⁴² Among Chatterjee's main concerns is to delineate the relative failure on the side of the (post)colonial elite to fully establish its projected hegemony, the result being an incompletely articulated, 'fragmentary' nation: the condition of possibility of the manifold forms of internal resistance and struggle that Sarkar finds omitted in Chatterjee's account. In her study of nineteenth-century nationalist reform projects formulated by Bengali middle-class men, Judith E. Walsh notes that the discourse of the new patriarchy that Chatterjee excavates "appeared in contexts where the possibilities for dramatically different practices in home and family life were already well known and openly acknowledged".⁴³ In this light, Sarkar's important critique can be read alongside Chatterjee's reconstruction of the emergence of Indian nationalism as a different discourse as a constant reminder that that discourse of nation in the image of the urban elite was always contested from below as well as from inside the home. It is with this proviso that I will in the following take recourse to Chatterjee's version of Indian domesticity as part of modern patriarchal nationalism, which, as Kamala Visweswaran points out, "must be seen not only as a strategy for contesting colonial hegemony, but as a strategy for the containment of women's agency, carrying within it the seeds of colonial assumptions about gender".⁴⁴

The new patriarchy that nineteenth-century Indian nationalism inaugurates (and that remains prevalent, according to Chatterjee, into the present)

⁴² Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities". *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. Ed. Anthony D. King. Houndmills (Macmillan) 1991: 41—68; 67.

⁴³ Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice*. New Delhi (OUP) 2004: 53.

⁴⁴ Kamala Visweswaran, "Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and Its Historiography". *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Ed. Shahid Amin & Dipesh Chakrabarty. New Delhi (OUP) 1996: 83—125; 86.

positions women at the centre of the crucial site of the home and thus politicises the domestic ideal in terms of nationalist self-assertion: “The home was the principal site of expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality”.⁴⁵ Both akin and diametrically opposed to the gender ideologies of the empire, Indian nationalism thus reinvents the domestic sphere in such a way that women, without being empowered to full social or political participation, appear as already liberated: namely, as the responsible and nurturing guardian of that inner arena in which Indian spiritual culture prevails. According to Himani Bannerji, these women, typifying the “new Indian woman”, are posited as “active ‘modernizers’ and inventors of ‘tradition’”. Their domain, however, is social reproduction rather than social production, and they help to crystallize an ideology of ‘home’”.⁴⁶

Hence, for the white *memsahib* as well as the Indian “new woman”, confinement in domesticity is articulated with the overarching political projects of empire or nation. While the *memsahib* is conceived as a figure that shoulders her specific bit of the white man’s burden, the new Indian woman embodies the cultural essence of the nation and anticipates the plenitude of the nation’s realisation at the moment of independence. Strikingly, it is specially this latter, Indian nationalist ideological construction that depends on, and purports to entrench, the (Western-modern) separation of the public and the private with telling consequences for the gender divisions prevalent in Indian modernity: The construction of the domestic as sacred requires, as its flipside, the designation of the public as a tainted and polluting sphere from which women must be ‘protected’ (i.e., banned): “The trauma of publicity and the sanctity of privacy are for women products of the ideology of separate spheres”.⁴⁷

What happens, however, when political independence and the obtaining of the nation state come, as in Rushdie, at the expense of precisely that cultural-spiritual purity into which the ‘new Indian woman’ had been so powerfully interpellated by elite nationalist ideology? For clearly it is not an idealised Indian home but a replica of ‘Europe’ that the new owners of Methwold’s Estate move into. Hence Amina Sinai’s sheer horror at the idea of taking over Buckingham Villa on Methwold’s whimsical terms according to which she “can’t even throw away a spoon” (MC 95) let alone find a place “where to hang [her] own father’s photo on the wall” (MC 96). Overcoded as

⁴⁵ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 126.

⁴⁶ Bannerji, *Inventing Subjects*, 174.

⁴⁷ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, “The Story of Draupadi’s Disrobing: Meanings for Our Times”. *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*. Ed. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. New Delhi (Kali for Women) 1999: 331—358; 335.

it is with a variety of public domesticity defined beforehand by the coloniser, this house, then, will not lend itself to the homemaking expertise that assiduous Amina as a good new Indian woman has learnt to apply to domiciles. Even less will it yield to the nationalist dream according to which independence will bring the material and the spiritual into alignment: Instead, it will eliminate that well-protected sphere of domestic-spiritual purity altogether and thus, ironically, expel the postcolonial subject from 'home' precisely at that moment where home and world were meant to coincide.

If Methwold's own strategy, acted out during his own residentship at the Estate, of creating a pure replica of 'Europe' had failed due to the unconquerable encroachment of tropical flora and fauna, so does the dichotomy, upheld by orthodox Indian nationalism, of the material and the spiritual. The achievement of Independence, according to this conceptualisation, is necessarily fought out in the field of material culture and hence implies a taking over of the Western apparatuses of power – in order to liberate the hitherto concealed 'pure' sphere of the ideal and spiritual embodied and performed in the domestic. In *Midnight's Children*, however, the moment of transfer of political-material power from the coloniser to the formerly colonised reveals the very breakdown of the distinction between the material and the spiritual as envisaged by the nationalist: The coloniser retreats for good from the arena of political contest only on condition that he invades the home – that highly cherished sphere of national culture – as a spectre. At least in the earliest stages of their residence on the compound, the new denizens of the mansions docilely subject themselves to the mimicry of British practices dictated by Methwold:

the Estate, Methwold's Estate, is changing them. Every evening at six they are out in their gardens, celebrating the cocktail hour, and when William Methwold comes to call they slip effortlessly into their imitation of Oxford drawls; and they are learning, about ceiling fans and gas cookers and the correct diets for budgerigars, and Methwold, supervising their transformation, is mumbling under his breath. (MC 99)

Taking possession of a replica of 'Europe', the residents of Methwold's Estate are thus being possessed by the spectre of a 'Europe' that keeps haunting postcolonial writing in theory and fiction, waiting for its provincialisation. Rushdie's decision to utilise the house as a metaphor of postcolonial fixations on the not-so-lost object of colonialism, however, does not exhaust itself in a simple determinism according to which the symbolic power of houses would reside in architectural structures that prefigure sociocultural practices and reflect "the ability of the colonial power structure to impose its forms *in absentia*";⁴⁸ the built environment of Methwold's

⁴⁸ Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, 87.

Estate, rather, embodies a spatial equivalent of interpellation itself: a script that both constrains and enables agencies.

Timothy Brennan's analysis of Rushdie's critique of the postcolonial state and its hegemonic bloc emphasises precisely the complicity of the '*chamcha*' in the "recasting [of] the empire in native form".⁴⁹ Not only do postcolonial elites (have to) inhabit the received scripts, they do more crucially re-enact them in compliance with colonialist role models. Yet, as Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones suggest, "space comes to have meaning through particular practices. It has no fixed meanings outside these".⁵⁰ Not only do the messages encoded in architecture get decoded differently from various (synchronic or diachronic) locations; they also get overwritten and reencoded in the forms of alterations, modifications, additions and removals that, taken together, ensure that houses cannot be conceived as static but much more accurately as processes in their own right. In anthropological research, Lévi-Strauss' notion of the house as a materialised "fusion of categories which are elsewhere held to be in correlation with and opposition to each other"⁵¹ already paves the way for an understanding of houses as hybrid units. His descriptions of the house, however, do not only privilege the aspect of unity over that of internal hierarchies and divisions;⁵² they also omit the dynamic and processual qualities of houses as spatial structures in time. Emphasising the historicity of houses, Carsten and Hugh-Jones do not stop short at

the obvious point that houses must be built and maintained, get modified to fit the needs of their occupants, are extended and rebuilt, and ultimately decay and fall down. It is also to stress that such architectural processes are made to coincide, in various ways, with important events and processes in the lives of their occupants and are thought of in terms of them. [...] houses are continuously under construction.⁵³

For Mary Douglas, it is precisely the temporalisation of the merely spatial that transforms the house into the home, which latter, then, constitutes its own "virtual time" (in the sense of a set of idiosyncratic autonomous and independent temporal patterns), or "makes its time rhythms in response to outside pressures".⁵⁴ Architecture itself is based on concrete spaces of

⁴⁹ Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, 88.

⁵⁰ Janet Carsten & Stephen Hugh-Jones, "Introduction". *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*. Ed. Janet Carsten & Stephen Hugh-Jones. Cambridge (CUP) 1995: 1—46; 41.

⁵¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss [1979], *The Way of the Masks*. Tr. Sylvia Modelski. Seattle (U of Washington P) 1982: 187.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁴ Mary Douglas, "The Idea of Home: A Kind of Space". *Home: A Place in the World*. Ed. Arien Mack, 261—281; 268.

experience and horizons of expectation⁵⁵ so that time gets inscribed into the very fabric of the built environment as, e.g., “the memory of severe winters is translated into a capacity for storage, storm windows, and extra blankets”.⁵⁶ As a core institution of civil society (but also as the site at which, in modernity, the larger imagined community of the nation is being constantly re-produced), the home according to Douglas is best described as an “embryonic community”, and more specifically, a “virtual” one – ‘virtual’ again to be understood in the sense of autonomy and independence with regard to its spatio-temporal patternings. The association with Anderson is looming large here, especially when taking into account that Douglas, too, emphasises the centrality of “synchrony”⁵⁷ in the day-to-day maintenance and continuation of the virtual community that is home. Yet it is important for the focus of our discussion that Douglas does not conceive of the home as a microcosmic representation of the larger politically imagined community into which it is inserted, but that to a certain extent, the home provides a decentralised ‘other time’ within, and yet deviant from, the homogeneity of nation time.

Obviously it is precisely this dynamism and historicity of the house-as-home that Rushdie’s Methwold attempts to arrest in his last sovereign act of interpellation. Even the unborn Saleem (or is it Shiva?), in his chronoclastic act of stopping the steeple clock, already begins to interfere with the given spatial script. This process of accommodation and ensuing re-encoding of domestic space is intensified as, pretty shortly “after the Englishman’s disappearance his successors emptied his palaces of their abandoned contents” (MC 128) and do away with most of the imperially prescribed rituals (except for “the cocktail hour, which was already a habit too powerful to be broken” [MC 128]). Other rituals – such that genuinely belong into the repertoire of Indian nationalism’s domain of ‘spiritual culture’ – are obviously introduced into the compound, as, e.g., the “shrine to the god Ganesh, stuck in the corner of an apartment” (MC 129) in Versailles Villa indicates. Instead of a merely deterministic relation, then, house and inhabitants enter into a complex interplay the result of which is a palimpsestic spatial text suggestive of both continuity and rupture, or, of “the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose”, to recall Judith Butler’s revision of interpellation as both subjecting and enabling.⁵⁸ By no means does such hybridisation, however, imply any break with the

⁵⁵ It is striking how these terms, introduced by Reinhardt Koselleck, already imply the fusion of the spatial and the temporal; see Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Tr. Keith Tribe. Cambridge/Ma. (MIT Press) 1985: 272.

⁵⁶ Douglas, “Idea of Home”, 268.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁵⁸ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 38.

reproduction of the logic of colonialism: The Methwold community, while they are busy 'Indianising' the house, are nonetheless basically engaged in "recasting the empire in native form". Not by accident does Rushdie have Saleem increasingly substitute the genealogical appellation "the heirs of William Methwold" (MC 266) for the merely temporal term "successors" (MC 113), so that a lineage be suggested that overcodes the house with organic ties and reproductive continuities. Yet the heirs have themselves heirs: Methwold's Estate as a shrine to empire and hyperreal Europe finally falls victim to a new phase of modernisation and the new elite it produces. With the money made from land reclamation projects, the Narlikar sisters buy the estate, have the villas demolished and replaced by a futuristic skyscraper "which would soar thirty stories into the skies, a triumphant pink obelisk, a signpost of their future" (MC 266), "a great pink monster of a building [...] standing over and obliterating the circus-ring of childhood" (MC 452). It is only with this event that Methwold's Estate – and along with it, empire itself – can register as a fully fledged lost object of nostalgic desire as Saleem states that "the world of [his] childhood had come to an end" (MC 266).

7.2 The house as third space

The Sans Soucis of Indian writing in English need not always figure as objectifications of imperial continuities; nor do they necessarily house mimic men and women. They may just as well be designed, right from the start, as a third space that was never intended to simulate a spectral Europe in India, nor to embody the essence of Indian national culture. Thus, in I. Allen Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama*, the bizarre and palimpsestic architecture of the Trotter residence to the south-east of 'Nakhlau' (read Lucknow) seems to function as the spatialisation of an alternative mythology beyond both imperialist and Indian nationalist narratives of the domestic ideal. Instead, Sealy's Sans Souci appears to square the circle of providing the homeland for a diasporic community that does not even employ, as a reference point, the notion of displacement from some place of origin. If diaspora cultures mediate, as James Clifford has it, "the experiences of separation and entanglements, of living here and remembering/desiring another place",⁵⁹ then the Trotters of Sealy's novel conspicuously fail to qualify in that respect: They do not refer to any pure place of origin whatsoever but are hybrids right from the start. The complex compound of Sans Souci houses the subnational community of Anglo-Indians, endowed in Sealy's text with an "historical role as

⁵⁹ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge/Ma. & London (Harvard UP) 1997: 255.

mediators”⁶⁰ – both go-betweens and in-betweens who belong neither here nor there. Sans Souci itself, the narrator makes sure, is a far cry from

the fossil near Potsdam. Forever transcending itself, *Sungum* [the main palace of the Trotter estate] escapes the pluperfect fate of the Prussian palace. From one vantage it is Anglo-Saracen, from another Sino-Byzantine, from another Hindu-Gingerbread, from another Gothic-Ecumenical. From all it is a miracle. (TN 253)

Not only a playful and multiple hybrid, the set of buildings comes to figure as a process (‘forever transcending itself’) rather than an assemblage of inert objects; in the perspective of the Trotter founding father, Justin, his life work hence appears as the spatial equivalent of “something altogether new”: neither “a spiritless Provencal château replicated on Indian soil, [n]or a humdrum Nakhla mansion after the traditional manner” (TN 233). Other than Rushdie’s Methwold’s Estate, Sans Souci was never designed as a semblance of some other place that precedes it but as a “third thing” which is neither imperial nor national. In this respect Sans Souci is neatly continuous with the identity construction the Great Trotter envisages for himself and his kind: “Justin [...] decided that he could never, however hard he tried, turn Indian (any more than he could revert to a European), and that it was best if he were reconciled to the fact and became a third thing” (TN 195). Beyond Rushdie’s project of de-claiming the essentialist narratives of both empire and nation as played out in the spaces of Methwold’s Estate, Sealy conjures up a Sans Souci that is neither imitative nor original. The detailed accounts of the initial construction phases of the sprawling and inconclusive structure illustrate vividly the spatial and temporal eclecticism that serves as a guiding principle in the design of the premise. Attracted by the project of building Sans Souci,

there came on foot, by boat, by yak, and on horseback, rock-breakers from Cape Cormorin, tilers from Peiping, earth-movers from Cooch Behar, dome-dressers from Petersburg, gypsy blacksmiths from the Thar desert, spirit-levellers from Isphahan, a plinth-master from Tibet, rampart-setters from Benin, a Scottish mason, plasterers from Cochin China, steeplejacks from Hradcany, master-builders from Ellora and Elephanta, stylites from Memphis and Corinth, Malayan dog-men, terracers from Macchu Picchu, and strawmen and thatchers from the surrounding villages. (TN 137)

Enumeration being one of the prominent features of the genre into whose folds the text purports to fall – the *nama*, or ruler’s chronicle – it comes as no surprise that *The Trotter-Nama* exceeds in endless and more often than not chaotic lists and catalogues such as the one quoted above. The family resemblance with Borges’ wild taxonomy of animals allegedly cited from “a

⁶⁰ I. Allen Sealy, *The Trotter-Nama*, 555; subsequently, in this chapter quoted as TN + page number.

certain Chinese encyclopedia”, is not accidental: As Foucault reflects in the opening pages of *The Order of Things*, such taxonomies shatter received modes of thinking not because they contain ‘impossible’ elements but because they produce ‘impossible’ contiguities.⁶¹ The enumeration of spatio-temporally incompatible members of the workforce involved in the construction of Sans Souci seems to ridicule a well-worn topic of national allegory: the transformation of originally disparate individuals into members of the imagined community by way of the production of contiguity. No nation emerges from the articulation of ‘stylites from Memphis and Corinth’ with ‘terracerers from Macchu Picchu’.

Justin’s multifarious scientific experiments and engineering projects are all summed up in the insight that pure essences are chimerical, and that everything instead is composed of particles that again, for their part, are compounds made up of smaller compounds. The dissection of a leaf reveals that analysis is, very much like Eco’s endless semiosis, inexhaustible and that, besides distinct entities and their contexts, there is always a “third code”: Probing deeper and deeper into the composition of the leaf, Justin arrives at the conclusion that,

no matter how deep he penetrated, there remained a companion of the last thing. If there is always another thing, he asked, then surely it is as vital as the thing itself and the space surrounding it? [...] the Great Trotter began to devise for himself and for Sans Souci a crest with a motto: TERTIUM QUID. (TN 232)

Within the Trotter household, the third code gains its profile as against the binarism of the digital opposition of zero and one, the former associated with Hinduism, the latter with Islam. While the Brahmin servant, Sunya, celebrates the “zero from which all things spring, to which all things tend” (TN 50), his antagonist, the Muslim Yakub, deifies the “one and indivisible, suffering no subtraction” (TN 58). Despite their apparent mutual exclusiveness, both these religiously conceived positions share an essentialist absolutism: “Let there be no alternatives - an end to *or*! No more conjunctions - away with *and*! Down with the hyphen!” (TN 58) The smoothness with which the digital binarism slips into religious universalism leads Justin into the invention of an artificial religion: an “open faith” based not on fixed assumptions, not even on a plurality of creeds, but precisely on “schism and doubt” (TN 162).

If in the spirit of this negative cosmology the Trotters partake of the monstrous hybridity that Kipling has ascribed to India (after all, one of Justin’s sons joins the ‘Little Game’ under the alias of ‘Mik’), then their built environment shares in this monstrosity and violates all expectations of clear-

⁶¹ See Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xv.

cut purities. To the eyes of the visiting English draughtsman, Henry Salt, the ‘miracle’ of Sans Souci appears accordingly as an outrage, “a provoking patchwork seat [...], a veritable hodgepodge” (TN 250). Here, the house becomes a monstrosity in a very precise Victorian sense of the term according to which the monstrous is that which cannot be integrated into the protocols and archives of imperial knowledge, and which by virtue of this eccentricity disrupts the fantasy of a unified continuous world.⁶² As we have seen, this monstrosity is already at work in the heteronomous composition of the workforce engaged in the construction of Sans Souci: a workforce that can be catalogued only in a Borgesian contiguity which articulates the incompatible. Monstrosity, still in keeping with this Victorian anxiety but embracing it with a vengeance, looms large in such textual theories as Judith Halberstam’s readings of *Frankenstein* or *Jekyll and Hyde*; here, the monstrous is elevated to an ideal metaphor of textual inexhaustibility, as that which cannot be arrested into a fixed significance: “Monsters are meaning machines”,⁶³ claims Halberstam, quite deliberately echoing Umberto Eco’s famous formula, in *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*, of the novel as “a machine for generating interpretations”.⁶⁴ Monstrosity, then, constitutes a coherent link between the house and its inhabitants (who partake of India’s ‘monstrous hybridity’), but also the house, its inhabitants, and the text that produces them – a novel, itself necessarily monstrous in Halberstam’s usage of the term.

When Henry Salt derides Sungum as ‘a hodgepodge’, he introduces of course a Rushdie association into the text; after all it is the hodgepodge that according to Rushdie forms the strait gate through which newness enters the world, and *The Trotter-Nama* is very much written in the euphoric 1980s spirit of celebratory hybridity most frequently associated with Rushdie and Bhabha. In this tradition, the notion of home itself requires a revision that has to take into account the anti-essentialist notions inherent in hybridity discourses. In this vein, the Trotters tend to figure as epitomes of nomadism and diaspora so that Sans Souci gets increasingly transformed into a base camp from which further departures are planned and conducted: “The Trotters would always live out of trunks; even those who had built almirahs did not know what to do with them. There would always be packers-and-leavers at Sans Souci, even when there was nowhere to go” (TN 501). Yet as in Rushdie’s novel, the advent of independence sets the notion of home – or

⁶² See Richards, *Imperial Archive*, 45–49.

⁶³ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Durham & London (Duke UP) 1995: 21.

⁶⁴ Umberto Eco, *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*. Tr. William Weaver. London (Minerva) 1985: 2.

rather homeland – painfully back on the agenda: While most of the substantial demographic groups of the newly independent subcontinent appear (at least to the eyes of Eustace Trotter) to be engaged in accommodating in newly found homelands, the Anglo-Indian community remains excluded:

Home. [...] The Hindus wanted theirs, the Muslims wanted theirs, the British were going back to theirs. What about us? [...] those who were neither Indian nor European, who spoke English and ate curries with a spoon. Like the Muslims carving out their holy Land of the Pure, and the Hindus dreaming of a once and future Aryan homeland. [...] So many purities! And yet he too wanted a home. He was only half at home here. (TN 491f.)

The third position of in-betweenness that Justin Trotter had celebrated, or at least embraced, is rendered deficient in a pervasive climate of essentialist claims to territorial abodes of collective belonging. Not abandoning the clan's knowledge of the illusory status of all purity, Eustace desires not a 'proper' home conceived in terms of restorative nostalgia⁶⁵ (as India's Muslims and Hindus do) but craves for an invented tradition of Anglo-Indian belonging elsewhere than in the atypical interstices of the in-between. In other words: His is a desire not for an essential but a constructed home derived from a particular and partial reading and appropriation of the "country's past", that inexhaustible and inconclusive raw material that appears to cater to all other communities' national desire:

It went deeper than the ordinary longing for a sense of quiet rootedness – it was the sense of a source or spring, maybe one that had to be invented. Like the Hindu's dreaming, or the Muslim's forgetfulness of all that went before the Prophet. What was the reality of the country's past? (TN 492)

Nothing, of course, than the product of a process of readings and misreadings, the result of which, as far as other groups are concerned, lies in precisely those collective mythologies that make up invented traditions. Home, then, even when it comes not as a truth discourse, keeps haunting the precariously settled as a fundamental lack. This is not the nostalgia of Saleem Sinai for an irretrievably lost Bombay of the fifties but much rather a repetition of the first Trotter's paradoxical sensation of a "nostalgia for the future" (TN 233). *The Trotter-Nama* unfolds a concept of home that partakes, somewhat parasitically, of the official territorialism of Indian nationalism in order to defy any specific territorial claims for the "microscopic" (TN 538) Anglo-Indian community: Instead of a circumscribed homeland assigned to

⁶⁵ Svetlana Boym introduces the term "restorative" nostalgia – in opposition to "reflective nostalgia" – for an attitude that "puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps"; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York (Basic Books) 2001: 41.

the Trotters on the Nicobar Islands, there is the vision of a community that retains its coherence while being dispersed all across the map of India: “there was bound to be a Trotter somewhere in Kashmir and another at Cape Cormorin and not a few between the jungles on the eastern frontier and the marshy Rann of Kuch in the west” (TN 517). Mediators, go-betweens and hyphenated composite subjects, the Trotters turn out as more continuous with ‘India’ than any other community of the subcontinent, however dominant. For India and the Trotters share that palimpsestic and processual hybridity that qualifies the Trotter house, Sans Souci: “what is this India? Is it not a thousand shifting surfaces which enamour the newcomer and then swallow him up?” (TN 134). Multiple surfaces would pertain to any palimpsest, multiple *shifting* surfaces to a body of water that will ‘swallow’ any newcomer. If therefore the Trotters – “that protean people” (TN preface) – spread out all across the many surfaces of this aquatic India, they actually revel in their very element: not as fish but as water themselves. The narrator at one stage registers that “there are wholesome Trotters everywhere, nourishing the body politic” (TN 464). This is not only a reiteration of the historical mission of the community as mediators between the firmly settled blocs that make up the majority of the nation but, by way of the idiosyncratic appellation of the Trotters as ‘wholesome’, a distinct confirmation that the community is associated with water; for only a few sentences earlier, it is stated that “water is wholesome”. And it is water, more even than the wild eclecticism, that transforms the palace of *Sungum* from objectified inertia into a dynamic process and thus distinguishes the Trotter Sans Souci from its Prussian namesake:

The pinnacle is connected with the base by magnetic threads, capillaries of stone up which are drawn and constantly transmuted secretions from the wells below. The process, by night a trickle, by day a surge, distinguishes this Sans Souci from the fossil near Potsdam. (TN 253)

A house that itself is more a continuous process of transmutation than a rigid and stable building, Sealy’s version of Sans Souci functions as the only possible home for a community whose habitat is the in-between.

In the readings that follow, a surprising multiplicity of domestic fictions will be focused. The house/home, in these texts, may operate as a site of the particular (and hence, implicitly, a disclaimer to whatever universalism); it may function as the virtual community through which subjects are gendered and classed; it may, in its gothic version, be represented as a spatialised residual of a past that will not go away; or it may serve as the manageable stage on which global encounters are played out. No one single meaning can

possibly be ascribed to the house – it is, monstrous as Halberstam’s monsters, a “meaning machine”.

As spatial texts, what affinity to literary texts do houses have? Is the house a metaphor of the text or the text a metaphor of the house? Lévi-Strauss discusses the house as an “illusory objectification”⁶⁶ of unstable relations to which it gives solidity. It represents, in this understanding, the cohesion of hitherto apparently heterogeneous components: not simply in terms of the material articulated in the process of building, but more crucially in the fusion of various, often conflicting principles and considerations that go into the process of homemaking/textualisation and may at times turn into its reversal as homebreaking/detextualisation. Deconstruction’s rallying cry according to which there is no outside the text⁶⁷ of course implies that there is no inside either. Since the inside/outside dichotomy, like any binarism, depends on the stability of *both* poles, it implodes with the demise of any one of the two. In this vein, the concept of house/home shares with pre-Derridean textual theories the assumption of a boundedness that allows for the distinction of inside from outside; it is in fact posited, in structuralist anthropology, on that very distinction. The concept of *ghar* as the site of the symbolic production of national culture interferes with this polarity in a historically specific manner, reinventing the domestic as a strictly circumscribed domain that achieves its political symbolism precisely by virtue of its removal from the public. While it thus may serve as an agency that produces a nationalist counter-interpellation polemically vying with colonialist modes of ‘being-called’, it simultaneously constitutes the ‘new Indian woman’ in strict domestic confinement. An immense body of contemporary Indian domestic fiction (not only by women writers like Anita Desai or Githa Hariharan) testifies to the longevity of this invented tradition.

In the following chapters, I will try to trace, selectively, the vicissitudes of house and home in the postcolonial contemporary through the writings of Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy.

⁶⁶ Lévi-Strauss, *Way of the Masks*, 155.

⁶⁷ See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 163.

8 Writing Home

Into the Interior with Amit Chaudhuri

The preceding section suggested that writing the home cannot be delinked from the adjacent project of writing the nation. This is so due to the impossibility of imagining home as a site entirely removed from the grasp of the larger frameworks into which it is embedded; in fact, the very act of excluding this larger framework as an ‘outside’ of home will invariably tacitly testify to that which it intends to suppress – namely that “the domain that home houses has its boundaries drawn for it by the larger culture, as well as by the political economies of race, nation, sexuality, and empire that shape it”.¹ This is emphatically not to deny the historical trajectory of the idea of home as it emerges and mutates in modernity as the site of depoliticised privacy; it is precisely by way of its removal from the political as an allegedly quiet haven that home gains its political stature in the symbolic economy of the modern nation: as the site of production, not of individuals but subjects. In Anderson’s account, one will remember, the nation is imagined in seemingly purely domestic rituals of reading newspapers and novels. It is imagined, then, by a host of isolated subjects who imaginatively insert themselves into, and connect with, the constellated community. These subjects, couched in their homes as they are, yet inhabit a domestic sphere that is necessarily porous to those print capitalist inputs that, produced in the civil/public sphere, transform each individual home into one of so many points in a network of media circuits. The vulnerability of the home to such intrusions is, of course, at odds with the official ideology of the Victorian domestic ideal as proposed by Ruskin, Pater and many of their contemporaries; not surprisingly, therefore, the insertion of the home into public networks met with stiff disapproval at certain conjunctures, as, e.g., British middle-class householders’ discomfiture with the introduction of gas

¹ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*. New York (OUP) 2003: 6.

lighting and cooking in the 1880s.² While such acts of resistance must have been played out in the name of the autonomous home with its own hearth, Anderson's embryonic national citizens, by contrast, engage in an imaginary transgression of the home's autonomy: From within their private sphere they posit themselves as members of an imagined public domain.

National desire, as Antony Easthope puts it, thrives on the gap that opens up between the private/cultural and the public/political: as a dream of collective plenitude achieved through the alignment of those two separate domains. Today, with the ever intensifying consensus on the primacy of the 'cultural' over the political, Easthope's national desire gets less and less imaginable as a desire for the reconciliation of two domains held arbitrarily apart, but much more as a desire for the repoliticisation of the merely cultural. This, of course, is precisely the desire at the heart of Jameson's concept of the national allegory. For Jameson constructs the modern Western (read: US American) reader in striking analogy to what Nancy Armstrong has postulated for the emergence of modern gendered identities in, and through, the field of domestic fiction: as middle-class subject positions based on "strategies that distinguished private from social life and thus detached sexuality from political history".³ Inasmuch as the post-Revolutionary English middle class (similar to the elite nationalism that Chatterjee describes for colonial India) struggled for hegemony in the field of culture rather than that of politics, its idealised subjectivities – polemically pitched against the aristocratic Other – were contained in the domestic ideal that women's conduct books and Richardson's novels advocated; hence, for Armstrong, "the modern individual was first and foremost a female".⁴ Posited not only on the absolute "split between public and private",⁵ but on the depoliticised, "domestic" pole that this split engenders, Jameson's 'Western' therefore corresponds to Armstrong's 'female'; but his ideal 'Third World' text clearly exceeds Armstrong's 'male': While the latter is posited on an overarching division of labour in which it is defined as the external and active pole in a binary framework, the former appears to reconcile all such binaries in an integrative fusion of the 'private' and the 'public', the libidinal and the

² See, e.g., Sarah Milan, "Refracting the Gaselier: Understanding Victorian Responses to Gas Lighting". *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior*. Ed Inga Bryden & Janet Floyd. Manchester (Manchester UP) 1999: 84–101; and Wolfgang Schivelbusch [1983], *Lichtblicke: Die Geschichte der künstlichen Helligkeit im 19. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt/Main (Fischer) 2004.

³ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵ Jameson, "Third-World Literature", 329.

political: “in third-world culture [...] psychology, or more specifically, libidinal investment, is to be read in primarily political and social terms”.⁶

8.1 Home as counter-discourse

Conceiving of the home, with Mary Douglas, as a virtual community that exists and reproduces itself by way of establishing its own idiosyncratic temporal patterns and spatial relations does in fact encourage a reading of domestic fiction as a genre that figures Foucauldian heterotopias *as well as* embryonic germs of Andersonian nations. My readings of Rushdie, Tharoor, Chandra, Seth, and Nagarkar have more or less omitted the domestic scenes included in those texts in order to highlight their status as ironic, self-conscious, dissident national allegories; more precisely, I have so far read the domestic in Andersonian terms as the site of production of nationality in homogeneous empty time. This, of course, entails a suppression of Douglas’s proto- Foucauldian option of reading the domestic as heterotopian.

Hence, while the domestic sections in such paradigmatically ‘national’ novels as *Midnight’s Children* or *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* primarily serve to assert the continuity between the national and the domestic (so that the latter appears as a microcosmic repetition of the former), the texts I will address in this chapter figure the home as a more complicated site – not fully delinked from the larger framework of nation, or even world, but constitutive of a semi-autonomous sphere of belonging. More often than not, therefore, does some polemic against the homogenising inclusiveness of the national allegory inhere in ‘domestic fiction’. This polemic does not have to become explicit as it does in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, where a dichotomy is introduced between the “public turmoil of a nation” and the “cosy and contained, private and limited” domain of the domestic. Whereas Roy suggests and explores how these polarised domains “competed for primacy”,⁷ other texts rely on the implicit polemics in a deliberately parochial focalisation that counters the subsumption of the particular under the general (in this case: the national) exactly by the emphatic endorsement of the specific.

With reference to sixteenth-century Dutch painting – one of the first instances of a cultural lexicon based on a genuinely domestic vocabulary – Simon Schama suggests that the parochial turn performed by these artists cannot be understood as a purely aesthetic preference for “an explicitly domestic landscape that should be visualized without the stylizations and

⁶ Jameson, “Third-World Literature”, 322.

⁷ Roy, *God of Small Things*, 19.

formulaic [...] conventions of the classical and pastoral traditions”.⁸ Dutch landscape painting (and the later emphasis on the *interieur*) more fundamentally communicated a polemic move against a historically concrete dominant formation, namely the Habsburg empire. In this sense, then, “the implicit culture from which all this visual parochialism differentiated itself was [...] universal and imperial”.⁹ To some extent, it may be useful to apply this matrix of oppositional relationality to the nineteenth-century cult of the *ghar* in the Bengali renaissance and its nationalist ramifications: The emphasis on the home, then, would serve not least the rejection of a British-defined universalism in whose hierarchies the ‘native’ could not but appear as the retarded Other. Dipesh Chakrabarty delineates how the Bengali modern discourse of the domestic oscillates, in the course of the nineteenth century, between two paradigms: the historicist, British-infused assumption of educational reform in the service of the creation of future citizens on the one hand, and the extrapolation of a modernised “dharmic code being used to produce and organize an articulation of the relationship between domestic and civil-political life”.¹⁰ Negotiating these two contrary options, nineteenth-century Bengali concepts of domesticity (according to Chakrabarty) vacillate in the logic of the emergent national/modern between historicist and mytho-religious times, and emphatically exceed the paradigms of Western modernity in that they comprise “ideas of personhood that do not owe their existence to the bourgeois projects that European imperialism brought to India”.¹¹

Interestingly, however, domestic fiction still persists in Indian writing in English long after the demise of empire as a genre that disclaims universalist pretensions, now no longer colonialist but national/global. The writing of home in current Indian literature may serve multiple functions and defies a clear-cut identification of *the* function of the house/home; one of these functions, and the first I would like to address in my reading of Chaudhuri’s novels and short stories, is however quite obviously the invocation of the contingent and particular as a polemic against the universalist claims of the nation and its allegories.

In the context of contemporary Indian writing in English, Amit Chaudhuri’s fiction typifies this strategy at its purest. Not only do his texts mainly comprise tiny scenes from inside the home; more fundamentally, the fragmentarisation of narrative into an assemblage of literary equivalents of

⁸ Simon Schama, “Homelands”. *Home: A Place in the World*. Ed. Arien Mack. New York (New York UP) 1993: 7–26; 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Difference-Deferral of (A) Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal”. *History Workshop Journal* 36 (1993): 1–33; 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

genre painting does substantial damage to the narrative device that, according to Anderson, in the first place enables the imagined community to emerge from the book: the emplotment of synchronicity. In Chaudhuri, there is no synchrony and hardly any emplotment. Whatever is represented in these texts gets represented *not* for the sake of some deep-structural function in a plot line nor in order to engage in networked connectivities with other events, entities or characters; instead, everything appears in its own right, or – in Heideggerian terms (that insistently press upon the reader of Chaudhuri's prose) – as “set free into its own essence”.¹² This is for Heidegger a prerequisite for the basic human activity of dwelling, and dwelling – whether in Heideggerian terms or not – is certainly at the centre of all domestic fiction. Chaudhuri more than any other Indian writer today pursues such a rhetoric of dwelling as “saving”; one of the preconditions for this is the refusal to ‘sacrifice’ the contingent in favour of a construed necessity, i.e. a narrative function. Already in his first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), Chaudhuri refers to this anti-narrative textual strategy, and associates it with a poetics of the house:

why did these houses seem to suggest that an infinitely interesting story might be woven around them? And yet the story would never be a satisfying one, because the writer, like Sandeep, would be too caught up in jotting down the irrelevances and digressions that make up lives, and the life of a city, rather than a good story – till the reader would shout ‘Come to the point!’ – and there would be no point, except the girl memorising her rules of grammar, and the old man in the easy-chair fanning himself, and the house with the small, empty porch that was crowded, paradoxically, with many memories and possibilities. The ‘real’ story, with its beginning, middle and conclusion, would never be told, because it did not exist.¹³

Implicit in this programmatic sequence is the assumption that the construction of narrative connections, the insertion of individual impressions into plot structures, entails a violation of the singularities that make up the actually existing reality in its pure condition as “whatever”.¹⁴ The opposition of ‘a good story’ and ‘the irrelevances and digressions that make up lives’ introduces a claim to verity that requires the renunciation of narrativisation as such. The houses, seen only from the outside, may well inspire a weak narrative desire to figure and flesh out all those ‘possibilities’ that are ‘crowding’ the porch; but this desire is already countered by the insight into

¹² Martin Heidegger [1951], “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”. *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco (Harper Collins) 1992: 347–363; 352.

¹³ Amit Chaudhuri [1991], *A Strange and Sublime Address*. London (Vintage) 1998: 57–58; subsequently quoted in my text as SSA + page number.

¹⁴ The term “whatever” is used somewhat idiosyncratically by Agamben as a shorthand for “the figure of pure singularity”; Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 67.

the fundamental fictionality of *all* narrative, and is consequently replaced by a poetics of the contingent factual in its quiddity. In fact, Chaudhuri's texts do not tell any stories; they rather form unemplotted accounts of "inconsequential beginnings",¹⁵ and chronicles of periods spent in very particular places: recollections of the protagonist's childhood vacations in his aunt and uncle's house in Calcutta (*A Strange and Sublime Address*); the narrator's Oxford hostel rooms juxtaposed to his parents' Bombay and Calcutta flats (*Afternoon Raag*); the various residences of distantly related people in different parts of Calcutta (*Freedom Song*); the US-based protagonist's annual visit to his parents in Calcutta (*A New World*). Released to a maximum from narrative function, the microscopic scenes that make up these unspectacular accounts bring the – successful or abortive – attempts at dwelling into sharp relief instead. The focus is therefore on objects, furniture, rooms, the people who inhabit them, and the spatio-temporal rhythms they create by the timings of meals and naps and chores. While these fragments of minutely recorded domesticity do emphatically never add up to a coherent plot (except for the minimum narrative frame of arrival and departure), they yet can by no means be reduced to the reproduction of sheer contingency that Chaudhuri's narrators overtly aspire to in their refusals to relate 'a good story'. For Chaudhuri's homes always exceed such pure contingency by virtue of two aspects:

First, the homes in these texts are represented and explored as sites of the production and reproduction of subjectivities. This, of course, does not occur in Chaudhuri in the fashion of *bildungsroman* teleology but through a process that could tentatively be compared to the concept of cognitive mapping. Needless to say it is through this function of the home that, in Chaudhuri's texts, the domestic scene gets most evidently inserted into the larger social framework within which it is revealed as a particular location, and which it reproduces and reasserts.

Second, the home in Chaudhuri operates as a repository of 'minor' histories access to which is gained through the narrator's acts of remembering. Far from evolving unaffected by the powerful discourses of imperial and national historiographies, these private histories of home prove to be rearticulations of various grand narratives with the particular experience of domestic lives. It is by their necessary dependence on, and porosity for, dominant discourses that their status as entirely idiosyncratic accounts is disclaimed. The house/home, in other words, appears finally as a palimpsest in which a wide range of diachronically emitted interpellations are superimposed one upon the other.

¹⁵ Amit Chaudhuri, *Freedom Song*. London (Picador) 1999: 142; subsequently quoted in my text as FS + page number.

At a more fundamental level, of course, the very textualisation of home tends to do away with the contingency claimed at the texts' surface levels: In fact, Chaudhuri's novels and short sketches form a loosely knit supertext that subtly describes and enacts a curve of representational 'development' from the not yet fully socialised (and nostalgically reinvoked) childhood perspective in *A Strange and Sublime Address* to the disillusioned and alienated focalisations in *Freedom Song* and *A New World*, with the exploratory ethnography of *Afternoon Raag* in between. The trajectory of these texts hints at a process of full interpellation into a socially symbolic order whose efficacy gets measurable in terms of the distance from, or else arrival at, 'correct' decodings of social signs. These, more often than not, are encoded into spatial arrangements so that houses, rooms, interiors are gradually revealed as complex and increasingly legible sign systems.

8.2 Mappings

The eponymous 'strange and sublime address' of Chaudhuri's first novel is scribbled on the first page of one of the school books of the narrator's cousin:

Abhijit Das,
17 Vivekananda Road,
Calcutta (South),
West Bengal,
India,
Asia,
Earth,
The Solar System,
The Universe. (SSA 85)

Like Vikram Seth, who has his protagonist, Lata, in *A Suitable Boy* attempt to locate herself in ever widening concentric circles that end up at 'Infinity' (see ch. 6), Chaudhuri's Abhijit goes back to Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and his procedure of writing "himself, his name, and where he was".¹⁶ Not only does such a procedure ensure the subject's place with the help of geographical and astronomical techniques; it just as much places home firmly in the larger framework of space without reducing it to the latter's microcosm. Home, now conceived of as a place in the world, partakes of a continuous and extensive structure within which the domestic is contained, retaining its very own features as a self-organising system. Clearly, the child's self-localisation requires nothing but sheer space while remaining blind to the socially distinctive connotations of 'address'; Abhijit, like the subject waking up to

¹⁶ Joyce, *Portrait*, 15.

the merely geographical ‘markers’ of the familiar room in Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*, defines his own position on a spatial grid not (yet) invested with sociality and historicity. Yet it is precisely such distinction markers that Chaudhuri’s homes incorporate and convey, so that the *interieurs* gradually take on the quality of sociological sketches whose every component – pieces of furniture, electronic devices, people themselves – is fraught and loaded with a socially and historically distinctive significance that cancels out its singularity. In this sense, Amitava Kumar observes that Chaudhuri evokes “the nation’s passage” towards its full insertion into global capitalism by subtly cataloguing how “life [is] arranged around new things in India”: all this by way of simple references to “Aquafresh toothpaste and Head and Shoulders shampoo, to MTV, to ads for ATM machines”.¹⁷ It is only in the pre-social child’s perspective as simulated in *A Strange and Sublime Address* that objects, people, the world can be encountered not as signifiers of some socially hierarchical value but ‘in their own right’ as singularities:

The room, with its ancient brown furniture, the clothes hanging from the clothes-horse, the timeless wall-lizard, the clock and the radio on the cupboard, the photographs and portraits of grandfathers and grandmothers, surrounded them, giving them a sense of objects and things that always lived in the present. [...] The furniture and the wall-lizard symbolized another world, another order of calm, inviolable existence. (SSA 113-14)

Access to “this other existence, this bottomless being” (SSA 114) appears to dwindle away with the acquisition of embodied subjectivity, or, the insertion into the symbolic order of the social life of things. To the boy, “having spent only six years on this planet, clothes were still a relatively puzzling and uncomfortable phenomenon” (SSA 4). Such creaturely and immediate relation to the ‘planet’ gets increasingly replaced by an intricate system of encoded social values; only in sleep and stupor do Chaudhuri’s grown-ups regain access to their pre-subjective worldliness. When, e.g., the narrator’s mother and her visiting friend take their siesta in the family’s Bombay apartment, the distinctive value of the fact that the flat is located in a Marine Drive highrise gets suspended and annulled in the face of the purely creaturely state of sleep: “Beneath them the Arabian Sea rushed and the earth moved, while their heads rested on pillows so soft that they were like bodies of pure flesh without skeletons”.¹⁸ In *Freedom Song*, the ritual of the afternoon nap reduces a teenage girl to some vegetable state that underscores

¹⁷ Amitava Kumar, *Bombay – London – New York: A Literary Journey*. New Delhi (Penguin) 2002: 48.

¹⁸ Amit Chaudhuri, *Afternoon Raag*. London (Minerva) 1993: 44; subsequently quoted in my texts as AR + page numbers.

unquestionable belonging and rootedness in the given object world of the house; this latter, however, immediately attains its own animistic vitality as a protective guardian against change as such:

Piyu [...] was fair and fresh-faced, a plant that had been nurtured in this garden, in the shadow of pillows, cupboards, shelves, clothes-horses, untouched as yet by life. Let it always be so, the house around her seemed to say, the four walls and the beam on the ceiling, let us always keep her as she is. Let her not leave us. (FS 28)

Both Eden and prison, the house hovers between protection and arrested development. As a bulwark against change, it enfolds – or fossilises – its inhabitants in a perpetual present that gains its attractive charms only on the condition that change itself be perceived as a dark and indeterminate threat. This threat seems to consist in Chaudhuri's texts in the potential to social decline – a potentiality that, of course, only reveals itself to the grown-up gaze. In this perspective, the 'bottomless being' of the child's perspective translates into the "fathomless darkness" (FS 48) that lies beyond middle-class existence: Where the child can conceive of shivering rickshaw pullers as elements of an unstratified continuous world, the adult maps out his own precarious location permanently

on the border that separated middle-classness from a fathomless darkness, on the border where a street of middle-class houses ran out to the railway lines and to the makeshift huts beyond, the fathomless cricket- and firefly-haunted darkness in which paraffin lanterns were lit [...]. (FS 48)

Nor can this 'darkness' be successfully exterritorialised as it forms a constitutive though hushed up part of the middle-class home itself. In *Afternoon Raag*, the narrator describes the difference between the lane in which his parents' second flat is located, and the adjacent main road in terms of a conspicuous chronodiversity that stems precisely from the presence of domestic rhythms in the residential area, and their absence in the main road:

The sense of time on the main road, where Ambassadors passed by, and small, silent Marutis with spiteful ease, was different from that in the lane, where minutes and hours were connected to the conclusions and beginnings of phases of domestic routine. On the main road, which was [...] not the Bombay people lived in, but the one into which people emerged every day from their houses [...] there were cake shops, video 'parlours', 'burger inns'. (AR 53–54)

The temporal disparity, then, obviously does not primarily spring from the density of traffic; this density, rather, is owed to the circumstance that the main road is not a zone of dwelling but a transit area on which domestic routines have no effect. As a contrast, the world of the lane with its purely residential functions is structured precisely by those rhythms of the household that are absent on the main road. In a later sequence, however, the

narrator emphasises how these apparently incompatible worlds are in fact interwoven as

[t]here was commerce between our building and the shops on the main road, from which barefoot errand boys would come carrying newspapers, provisions, video cassettes, and bottles of soda, taciturn, dark adolescents who wore t-shirts handed down by their employers, with 'USA', 'Smile', or 'Beat King' printed upon them. (AR 79)

It is here that the former distinction between the two areas in terms of time becomes legible as the displacement of an altogether different hiatus, namely a distinction along the line of class. As I will demonstrate later, Chaudhuri's texts (*Afternoon Raag* in particular) do rely to a certain extent on the genuinely colonial employment of the temporal as a category of naturalising socially imposed hierarchies; what is striking in the context of the passage quoted above, however, is the inversion of this tradition inasmuch as the 'errand boys' who penetrate the posh residential area do enter a 'retarded' time zone whereas their own habitat – the main road (which is, of course, not really a habitation) – is marked as 'advanced'. Such valuations, though, do only hold within the confines of precisely those grand narratives of progress, evolution or development that Chaudhuri writes to disclaim; the allegedly minor narratives of home instead are posited on the *privilege* to an own and markedly slower rhythm than the one that pertains to the rather unroofed areas of the open road, where the errand boys 'dwell' along with all those "maidservants, sweepers, and part-time servants, who too, in a sense, 'lived' in Bombay" (AR 109). The inverted commas that seem to put the poors' residence in Bombay under erasure should not be read as a refusal to acknowledge their presence nor even as a concession to middle-class bad faith about complicity in the naturalisation of a brutal financial apartheid. They much rather signal the fact that, from a middle-class standpoint, such forms of accommodation as are available to 'maidservants, sweepers, and part-time servants' can hardly pass for dwellings, so that the statement is as much about the subject position from which it is uttered as it is about sweepers' abodes. As a contrast, in the childhood perspective of *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the presence of the poor gets integrated into the unstratified continuum of the object world, testifying to a subjectivity not yet interpellated into the symbolic order of the social: Along with the furniture and curios assembled in a room, the "tuneless songs and [...] clapping hands [of the rickshaw pullers outside in the cold] were also part of this other existence, this bottomless being" (SSA 114).

The interpellated middle-class subject is, by contrast, initiated into the technique of decoding the different forms of housing according to their position in the tiered continuum of dwelling in Bombay. The 'sweepers' thus can be located on the borderline between the most deprived forms of

dwelling and literally “spectral housing, housing that exists only by implication and by imputation”.¹⁹ Chaudhuri’s narrator, in *Afternoon Raag*, unblinkingly registers and relates the hierarchies of such spectral housing, from the “improvised shelters” in which the construction workers live, to a pavement-dwelling woman nursing her baby while holding one end of her sari aloft “as a kind of curtain to an imaginary room” (AR 83). Housing as such, in Chaudhuri, occurs in relation to its negative Other – ‘spectral housing’; it is therefore heavily loaded with references to class and hence a spatial marker of the subject’s position within the stratified socius at large. In keeping with this sociological perspective on housing, Chaudhuri’s interiors become legible as themselves minute and precise sketches of middle class and upper-middle class circumstances. Thus, Chaudhuri’s narrator in *Afternoon Raag* almost obtrusively drives home the fact that his parents’ flat in Bombay boasts of significant spatial differentiations:

While my mother is, like a magician, making untidy sheets disappear in the bedroom and producing fresh towels in the bathroom, or braving bad weather in the kitchen, my father, in the extraordinary Chinese calm of the drawing room is admiring the cartoon by R.K. Laxman. (AR 56)

Not only does this sequence reveal a division of the flat into rooms with particular functions ascribed to them, thus marking the parents’ flat as a modern middle-class dwelling that is clearly set apart from, e.g., the Calcutta house of Sandeep’s vacations in *A Strange and Sublime Address*; it also – and conspicuously so – suggests a starkly gendered division of labour according to which the male task consists of joining in the ‘modern’ and ‘national’ Andersonian mass ceremony of reading the morning paper (it is not surprisingly *The Times of India* with its daily R.K. Laxman cartoon) in the quiet of the drawing room, while the housewife performs her duties and chores in the more palpably functional and productive regions of the home. There is, however, a complication here that tends to unsettle the simple gender dichotomy of this arrangement: For what exactly is the ‘bad weather’ that the narrator’s mother has to ‘brave’ in the kitchen? It will in fact take a sojourn into this hidden abode of domestic production itself to detect the more fundamental operating principle that keeps this household going and ensures the ‘extraordinary Chinese calm of the drawing room’. This sojourn is ironically instigated by the mother’s friend Chitrakaki who, envious of the former’s talents as a cook, embarks on a project of production espionage: “[S]he would loiter carelessly in the kitchen, looking askance as *my mother gave instructions to the cook*, vainly, and stealthily, trying to sniff out the

¹⁹ Arjun Appadurai, “Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Bombay”. *Cosmopolitanism*. Ed. Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty. Durham & London (Duke UP) 2002: 54–81, 65.

recipe" (AR 82; my emphasis). It is only in an aside that we learn what exactly the mother's cooking consists of: giving instructions. No wonder, then, that the mother fulfils her morning chores in the bedroom and bathroom "like a magician", since it is more likely than not that those 'untidy sheets' will disappear and those fresh towels materialise without her moving a finger (though not by way of magic). Like talking about sweepers' dwellings in inverted commas, the silence about domestic servants is first of all an expression of the naturalisation of a particular set of hierarchical relations in which servants, if mentioned at all, are, "like the furniture in the house, [...] represented as belongings of the family".²⁰

The obscure presence of domestic servants is prevalent in all of Chaudhuri's texts. If they are mentioned at all, it is either in terms of their functionality ("Two sisters, Chhaya and Maya, take turns to clean the bathroom in our house in Bombay" [AR 43]; "Ponchoo then *silently* brings out the tablas" [AR 47; my emphasis]), or when there is 'bad weather in the kitchen' – in which case these silent presences may even burst into sound, however inarticulate, as the domestic help in the parents' flat in *A New World* overhearing a conversation about her imminent dismissal: "Maya, as if in belated response, let fall a utensil with a crash into the kitchen sink".²¹ Chaudhuri's middle-class homes, then, are – similar to the tranquil havens of Victorianism – "not quiet refuges but busy workplaces".²² And yet, belonging to the family not as members but belongings, these servants' presences do not interrupt the privacy of the home but ensure it instead; like other 'things', they may be granted visibility as scopophilic or aesthetic objects: "Maya is silent, ebony-dark, and wears clothes made from a shimmering synthetic material with silvery or purple hues, so that, even while collecting rubbish, she looks minty and refreshing" (AR 43). It is on condition of their prior objectification that servants may be present, without intruding, in the most private situations of the domestic scene.

Other employees of the family, by contrast, may inhabit more complicated spaces. "White Lies", one of the short prose texts that make up the collection *Real Time*, portrays the relation of a private music teacher to a childless wealthy Bombay married couple. The 'guru' clearly enjoys a relatively privileged position thanks to the cultural capital he both displays and promises to pass on to his student, the housewife. At the same time, though, disparities in terms of economic capital ensure that the power

²⁰ Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*, 45.

²¹ Amit Chaudhuri, *A New World*. Basingstoke (Macmillan) 2000: 143.

²² Moira Donald, "Tranquil Havens? Critiquing the Idea of the Home as the Middle-Class Sanctuary". *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior*. Ed. Inga Bryden & Janet Floyd. Manchester (Manchester UP) 1999: 103–120; 109.

relations between teacher and student remain indefinitely disadvantageous to the guru: "Although he was, indeed, her guru [...] he had also the mildly discomfited air of a schoolboy in her presence and in this flat: this had to do [...] with the power that people like her exercised over people like him".²³ The wife of a highly successful chief executive, Ruma is equipped with all the potentials to agency that are withheld from the relatively disadvantaged guru; significantly, this asymmetry is primarily articulated by reference to 'address': While the music teacher resides in a modest Dadar groundfloor *chawl* with a wife, two children, and his mother (WL 148), Ruma and her husband own a spacious and "particularly beautiful flat" (WL 124) off Marine Drive "that gave the illusion from certain angles that the sea approached very near it" (WL 126). Up here, on the fourteenth floor, traffic noises become as irrelevant as other intrusions from outside, so that the music lessons will be disturbed by nothing but "the activity in the kitchen that indicated the essentials were being attended to" (WL 125). Obviously the guru occupies a social position in-between the extremes on which the household is structured. Being an employee, appointed on the basis of a formal "interview", but without any contractual security ("there was no formal, ceremonial seal on the relationship" [WL 127]), the guru may be discarded at any time and without further notice; in spite of such informal work relations and the concomitant dependency on the employers' goodwill, the teacher still exerts a specific authority over his student due to the cultural capital he wields: Hence the imperative with which he demands a glass of water or the air conditioner to be switched off. Other than the domestic servant whose task it is to run the household without being seen, the function that such a figure fulfils within the economy of the household cannot be reduced to the materiality of domesticity: "What spiritual want he met was not clear, though it was certain he met some need; and his own life had become more and more dependent, materially, on fulfilling it" (AR 131). The guru is tacitly assigned a task pertinent to the 'spiritual' enhancement of the *ghar*. The education of the housewife is to result in her presentability as an accomplished performer of heritage, as her husband aspires to "his wife's voice [being] heard more widely" (WL 126). Mrs Chatterjee, then, is in the process of being moulded into a latter-day version of the 'new Indian woman': the musically educated housewife in charge of the visible, even accountable cultural integrity of the home. Of course, the very fact of the couple's childlessness seriously damages Mrs Chatterjee's qualification for this role of the domestic ideal, whose cornerstone remains motherhood. The

²³ Amit Chaudhuri, "White Lies". *Real Time: Stories and a Reminiscence*. New York (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) 2002: 124–152; 125; subsequently quoted in my text as WL + page numbers.

educational efforts, then, serve primarily to compensate for this crucial flaw, and the guru's task could in this perspective be boiled down to provide Mrs Chatterjee with surrogate 'children'. Is it merely accidental, in this light, that the music lessons take place "[i]n the bedroom, next to the huge double bed" (WL 125)? Certainly not too much should be deducted from this arrangement as it might simply indicate how, in many Indian homes including upper middle-class ones, the bedrooms are not associated with notions of the same intimacy and seclusion that traditionally applies to the kitchen as the innermost sanctum of the household. Yet the fact remains that the guru's job consists basically of compensating for childlessness, a 'defect' that unmercifully finds its continuation in Mrs Chatterjee's insurmountable shortcomings as a singer: "She had a weak voice, admittedly. It managed one and a half octaves with some difficulty" (WL 126). How, then, can the lack be overcome if the guru's mission will necessarily remain unsuccessful?

Chaudhuri's narrative takes an ironic twist by which the guru, unable to transform Mrs Chatterjee into the symbolic mother and preserver of symbolic children, transforms himself into the Chatterjee's 'child' by developing an unspecific disease that makes him "sleep more and more of the time" (WL 151). With increasing regularity the guru stays back at the Chatterjees' after lessons sleeping "on one of the wicker sofas on the balcony" and, through his own weakness, allows his student to act as his mother: "Now and again, she'd go to the verandah to check on the guru; she would put her hand on his forehead, shake her head well-meaningly, and say, 'No fever.'" (WL 151) The narrative closes on the Chatterjees, going out for dinner, talking about the guru "as if he were a child they were leaving behind" (WL 152) – and, by implication, expecting to find still in his place on their return home. Chaudhuri's story, it seems, emphasises how the middle-class household remains incomplete without the insertion of the employee; its completion, however, always implies that others be denied this domestic/familial integrity: For the guru to become his masters' child, he would have to abandon his own home and family in their Dadar chawl – a habitation that, all its frugality notwithstanding, is equipped with the dignified connotations of the ancestral home: In the neighbourhood, the guru's residence "had come to be known in the chawl as "Panditji's house." It was here, when he was nine or ten years old, that his father had taught him kheyal and tappa and other forms of classical music" (AR 148–49). According to the logic of the narrative, the guru will give up this own domesticity in order to fulfil his job of 'meeting the spiritual needs' of his employers: not as one among many of their pieces of belonging but as a surrogate child.

Whereas "White Lies" focuses on the interpersonal dynamics through which a 'deficient' household gets symbolically 'completed', Chaudhuri's texts are

mostly concerned with detecting interpellative patterns built into spatial arrangements of houses, neighbourhoods, and entire city districts. The Oxford passages in *Afternoon Raag* clearly indicate the narrator's application of this sociologising decoding of built environments to the foreign "place that is not home" (AR 67). What ensues is a social ethnography of English urbanity which explicitly reasserts the nineteenth-century 'two nations' paradigm: Oxford's working-class fringes form a 'small world' "that is a different world from that of the University; they never meet" (AR 94). While the "perpetual present" (AR 92) of working class life is predicated on a highly routinised consumerism (at supermarkets, pubs, and in the typical "houses with small gardens"), University life is heterotopian as it "clings to its own time and definition and is changed by no one" (AR 75). This is, however, a heterotopia that rests emphatically not on the rhythms and routines of its inhabitants but on the architectural layout: The students are merely transitory figures "who, in truth, vanish, are strangely negated". It is apparently the architecture and spatial organisation itself that defines the University as a "world" apart, where "a certain light and space and greyness of stone, and at night, a certain balance of lamplight, stone and darkness, co-exist almost eternally" (AR 75). The perpetual present of working-class life, then, depends on permanent re-enactments of rituals of shopping, pubbing and soap opera watching; for its continuity it does not, and cannot, rely on apparently timeless spatial layouts ("Not for them [...] old buildings"; AR 92) but on "endless runs of Eastenders and Coronation Street" (AR 92). By contrast, the university as a heterotopia can assume a character verging on eternity precisely because it blots out, or marginalises, its inhabitants and their activities and reduces them to transitory visitors of a timeless spatial complex. The narrator, an ethnographer equipped with literature and popular culture instead of native informants as sources of information about the English working class, attempts to figure "what goes on inside these houses", and has to rely on the premediated stereotyped representation of working-class domesticity:

It Always Rains On Sunday, both the title and the film express what goes on inside these houses, women with husbands they both love and do not love, memories of old beaux, old sweethearts, sudden extremities, sudden panic, then routine reasserting itself, and the rain that hangs always over these streets. (AR 96—97)

In spite of the factual obscurity of the object, this narrator obviously has no scruples about representing it with an authority that is borrowed from prior representations – in films like the one mentioned in the passage quoted above, but also in canonical English writing from which the narrator derives the idea that "[t]his is the tribe that belonged to Dickensian alleys, the aboriginal community that led its island-life" (AR 92). The continuous

present, the ever reasserted routine, and the historical continuity of the 'aboriginal' all add up to a construction of timelessness that seems to permeate the life of a working class conceived as a people without History; strikingly, though, this very timelessness is perceived and evaluated from a perspective that partakes itself of historical time: The disturbingly allochronic and essentialising construction of an eternal working class that anachronistically survives in its "lost world" (AR 95) is again more a statement about the subject position from which such constructions are possible than one about English working-class domesticity. What, in Chaudhuri's poetics of the house, appeared as a veristic sensitivity to the non-narratable contingencies of the everyday is now exposed as informed by deeply historicist narratives that attempt to naturalise class hierarchies in temporal terms. If one of the two worlds that Oxford contains is marked out as a "lost world" – a clear allusion to Conan Doyle's imperial romance – then Chaudhuri's narrator produces a cognitive map of the foreign terrain that is predicated on the denial of coevalness: a white mythology that historically not only represents the non-European Other as pre-modern and retarded, but stigmatises just as well, in its Social Darwinistic articulations, the underclass at home as a repository of atavism. In this collusion, "it is clear that for the British upper classes class was increasingly thought of in terms of race".²⁴ Why does Chaudhuri have his narrator tap such an abject reservoir in which the inhabitants of Oxford's industrial fringes figure, again, as 'aboriginal tribes'? The effect is of course a reversal of the allochronic gaze in which now the British is held by the erstwhile colonised subject; yet, "[t]o reverse the stereotype is not necessarily to overturn or subvert it".²⁵ Chaudhuri's narrator obviously has to reinforce a speaking position that confounds class with 'race' in order to perform his own self-assertion as modern in contrast to his 'non-civilised' Other. As historicism looms large in this scenario of classist discrimination abroad, the Oxford sequences in *Afternoon Raag* tie in with the equally allochronic configurations that mark, and flaw, Chaudhuri's representations of the Indian home. In the following I will try to demonstrate how the historicist narrative suffuses Chaudhuri's representations not only of English urbanity but also of the Indian settings he focuses.

²⁴ Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London & New York (Routledge) 1995: 96.

²⁵ Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other". *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London (Sage) 1997: 223–279; 272.

8.3 Imperial and national archives

Not only a repository of social distinction markers but of its own temporal dimension, the home in Chaudhuri's texts functions as an archive of narratives that tacitly but ineluctably endow it with its historicity. Commenting on the erotic entanglement of one of the family's maidservants, the narrator in *Afternoon Raag* concludes: "Romance was dead among the middle classes, but among domestic servants it was still a disruptive force, giving them a secret life that had the fraught emotions, the atmosphere and the singing beauty of old Hindi films." (AR 84)

There is the clear understanding that 'servants' inhabit another, retarded time – hence the application of a genuinely allochronic discourse along classist lines: a discourse that emphasises the temporal developmental curve from romance to disenchantment. Not that the post-romance condition of the middle classes were enviable (far from it); it is in fact by virtue of their 'secret lives' that the underclasses can be constructed as objects of a fascinated desire. Yet they remain safely located in the past of the middle classes who, then, are the occupants of the present. This construction, of course, is derived from colonial discourses with their racialised and allochronically posited Others that ensure white supremacy in the temporally grounded binary of the modern self and its pre-modern Other; this power-structured relation, however, may occasion – besides abjection – fascination, nostalgia and erotic desire.²⁶

In another context, Calcutta as a whole becomes the nodal point of an abbreviated narrative of degeneration:

Calcutta, in spite of fetid industrialisation, was really part of that primitive, terracotta landscape of Bengal, Tagore's and the travelling Vaishnav poet's Bengal – the Bengal of the bullock-cart and the earthen lamp. It had pretended to be otherwise, but now it had grown old and was returning to that original darkness: in time people would forget that electricity had ever existed, and earthen lamps would burn again in the houses. (SSA 33)

Read as a fantasy of degeneration – the anxiety of a retrogression back to an 'original darkness' – this passage definitely feeds off the same angsty late-Victorian discourse formation that had informed the representation of the British working class inhabiting their 'lost world'. "After the mid-Victorian years [writes Patrick Brantlinger] the British found it increasingly difficult to think of themselves as inevitably progressive; they began worrying instead about the degeneration of their institutions, their culture, their racial

²⁶ See e.g. Said's observations on the ambivalences of Orientalism; Young's discussion of colonial desire; and McClure's analysis of the libidinal economy of imperial romance.

‘stock’”.²⁷ It is noteworthy that the quoted sequence from *A Strange and Sublime Address* is triggered by the typical middle-class complaint about inefficient amenities on those occasions “when the fans stopped turning because of a power-cut, when the telephone went dead because of a cable-fault, when the taps became dry because there was no power to pump the water” (SSA 33): Calcutta, however modern its facades, is thus revealed as retarded in its development. This incompletely modernised Calcutta appears to be measured against a normative modernity defined elsewhere, hence as a signature of India’s participation in the scramble for modernity. In this light, Calcutta would figure as a site of transition towards the goal of a fully accomplished modernisation in a narrative that, as Sudipta Kaviraj succinctly puts it, “create[s] the increasingly untenable illusion that given all the right conditions, Calcutta would turn into London”.²⁸

The sequence above can, however, just as well be read as the invocation of some timeless essence of Bengal – a proper name that is, after all, actualised three times in the space of one short sentence as a stand-in not so much for a particular geographical entity but rather for a temporally *different*, enduring, sustainable and culturally dignified condition: “a primitive, unpretentious means of subsistence” (SSA 33) as eternalised by Tagore. If, as Chakrabarty influentially complains, the postcolonial is posited to inescapable disadvantage in relation to a spectral and hyperreal ‘Europe’, then Chaudhuri might cross out this double bind by countering ‘Europe’ with an equally hyperreal ‘Bengal’ as a figure of the mind. Calcutta and its aspirations to modernity would then appear as temporary (and ultimately abortive) deviations from a more substantial reality to which they must finally return. The original darkness, in other words, need not be read dogmatically in Conradian terms (even though those will not go away). It also signifies a nostalgia for an imagined ‘autonomy’ of the home that modernisation had done damage to with its supplies of electricity, municipal water and telecommunication networks: amenities that in fact entail so many boundary transgressions and hence render the home more vulnerable to the ongoing interpellations of modern social life. ‘Primitive subsistence’, we are encouraged to assume, would re-replace these modern pretentious amenities with the hearth, the earthen lamp, the bore well and face-to-face communication, all of which are contained in the name of Bengal. It is important to note that this latter is not presented, in the mode of ethnographic pastoral, as some nostalgically invoked past but very much as the present into which Calcutta, as a modernising site, is heterotopically inserted, and to

²⁷ Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 230.

²⁸ Sudipta Kaviraj, “Filtth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta”. *Public Culture* 10.1 (1997): 83–114; 113.

which it actually belongs. Two competing narratives are thus confronted in this short passage about the city as well as the domestic terrain: First, the progressivist historicism that measures and condemns the ineffectual adoption of the modern, and second, the assertion of difference by way of recourse to an essentialised and emphatically transhistorical substratum of 'Bengal'. Both these narratives, to be sure, hark back to 19th-century constructions, either as appropriations of British/European progressivism on the side of Bengal renaissance reformers, or as the production of an invented tradition as a polemical interrogation of precisely that progressivism.²⁹ Neither of the two cancels the other one out, so that the aporias of nationalist subjectivities so eloquently excavated by Chatterjee, Guha and Chakrabarty find their continuation in the postcolonial modern.

Chaudhuri, however, returns to the registers of imperial romance with such frequency that a further point needs to be made. How does one make sense of a sequence like the following, summing up an episode from the childhood of the narrator's music teacher in *Afternoon Raag*:

Sohanlal was born in a kingdom in Rajasthan and, as a boy, he became a court dancer. There were times when he had to perform before the king, when his guru would take him and another boy to dance as Radha and Krishna at the court. When the dance was over, the audience would bow to the two children as if they *were* Radha and Krishna. That world, of gestures and wonder, existing in the wide, silent margins of the land, is gone now. All has been named and brought to consciousness, the colours, the words and their meanings, but Sohanlal is one of those few people who remember the darkness of what was there before, the old language and its life. (AR 105).

Again the darkness that precedes modernity is evoked here, eliciting a reading in terms of imperial romance and its melancholy dirges to the obscurities it itself illuminates, and hence destroys. Andrew Lang's complaint about how the "world is disenchanted" seems to ring through such passages in Chaudhuri that declare romance to be dead among the middle classes, and everything named and charted. Lang, the Victorian literatus, however put the blame on Europe sending "her spies through all the land", urging the mysterious (and, taking Thomas Richards' strong reading of Victoriana into account, the monstrous) to take shelter in the Gothic underworld of Ayesha's necropolis, Kôr, in Rider Haggard's *She*. It is, after all, 'Europe' that posits the premodern as darkness in imperial romance.

Chaudhuri partakes of this register but he re-evaluates it in a way that both differs from and feeds off the nostalgia of late Victorian imperial romance. 'Darkness' here and there produces the non-modern Other as fascinating and alluringly attractive, and thus occasions a severe interrogation of the project of global rationalisation; while, however, Haggard and Lang

²⁹ See Chakrabarty, "Difference-Deferral", 24.

and even Conrad basically conjure up a stylised and prefabricated 'dark' Other, the projection of European fantasies, Chaudhuri's 'darkness' falls precisely into place with historically documentable discourse formations of pre-nationalist subjectivities as they were debated in early 19th-century Bengal. What Sohanlal as a child performs is not simply a 'court dance' but an activity that pertains to the most privileged of the three fields of action ascribed to the Hindu male according to Bengal reformist scripture: "*daivakarma* (actions to do with the realm of gods), *pitrikarma* (actions pertaining to the realm of one's ancestors), and *vishayakarma* (action to do with the realm of worldly interests [...])".³⁰ This trichotomy constitutes a field of practices that are not strictly topicalised and that do not require the concepts of private/domestic and public/political. Acts of *daivakarma*, though performed mostly in the home, may well be enacted extramurally: in temples, on pilgrimages, or, as in this case, in the court, i.e. that place where the political proper is usually played out. This political, significantly, is not epitomised in the nation-state but in the princely state of a Rajasthani kingdom: one of those vanished marginal domains that constituted a 'world of gestures and wonder' because, we may conjecture, in them the apex of *vishayakarma* willingly succumbed to the priority of *daivakarma*. The court transforms itself into a temple for the transsubstantiation of two children into Radha and Krishna with the help of music and dance. Such pre-nationalist concepts of subjectivity survive, in Chaudhuri, precisely through the old languages and the classical music into which they are inscribed. Sohanlal, as the narrator's guru, much later can conjure up distant places by his singing in "Adhavi, an older version of Hindi, still spoken in the villages": "Its discontinuous grammar and incomplete sentences are the product of the consciousness that existed before there was any difference between the past and the present" (AR 106). Again it is asserted that, like the 'perpetual presence' of the British working class and the persistence of 'terracotta Bengal', the premodern is all around as Adhavi is by no means extinct and thus will ensure the continuation of that different temporality that its paradoxically 'discontinuous' grammar prescribes. The musical compositions of the *raag* form similarly ensure subjectivities other than the ones interpellated by the modern national agenda. In fact, the "raags, woven together, are a history, a map, a calendar, of Northern India, they are territorial and temporal, [...] they are evidence of the palimpsest-like texture of Northern India" (AR 107). Within this art form, then, a notion of collective belonging is expressed that can be contained within neither the national nor the domestic:

³⁰ Chakrabarty, "Difference-Deferral", 17—18.

when a Rajasthani sings *Maand*, or a Punjabi sings *Sindhi Bhairavi*, he returns to his homeland, which for him is a certain landscape influenced by seasons, a certain style of dressing and speaking, a web of interrelationships and festive occasions. (AR 107)

The 'return' enacted by way of performing a musical composition is a return to a homeland which is clearly not to be subsumed under the rubric of 'India'. Returns, in Chaudhuri, signify departures from a superficial dominant to the more fundamental, clandestinely persisting reality that endures regardless of ongoing waves of modernisation: terracotta Bengal as opposed to industrialised Calcutta, *Adhavi* as opposed to national Hindi, the homeland as opposed to the national territory. For similar to Simon Schama's discussion of the emergence of 'domestic landscape' in sixteenth-century Dutch painting, the art of the *raag* asserts and evokes the regionally specific as distinct from the general national, which latter, then, does not figure as 'homeland'. This particularist thrust gets further emphasised with the subsequent elaboration of the *raags*' significances that gradually zoom in on ever narrowing circles of domesticity. The rhythms that the *raags* punctuate and partake of are incommensurate with nation time but do, instead, support the autonomous temporal structures of the home:

Each *raag* has its time of day, a cluster of hours called 'prahar' [...]. The notes *sa re ma re ma pa* of *Shudh Sarang*, with the sharp and yearning accent of the second *ma*, its resolution in *pancham*, define the bright inactivity of midday, its ablutions and rest, the peace of a household. Twilight cools the veranda; midday's boundary of protective shade separating household from street, inside from outside is dissolved, the sad, flat *rishab* in conjunction with the sharp *madhyam* and *pancham* [...] calm the mind during the withdrawal of light. (AR 108)

The homeland, then, is essentially the home itself: household images abound in the *raags*' evocations. Home, however, is not congruent with some purist domesticity dependent on persistent boundary maintenance; the evening *raag* symbolically enacts the gradual dissolution of the private into the public as the boundary between inside and outside is dissolved. Home, then, merges with its alleged 'outside' which, decidedly, is not the nation. In order to extrapolate how these images of domesticity are not subsumed under the national, it might be helpful to contrast Chaudhuri's handling of this theme with a strikingly similar sequence from Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (for the context, see ch. 4):

how in English can one say roses, doomed love, chaste passion, my father my mother, their love which never spoke [...], the enfolding trust of aunts and uncles and cousins, winter bonfires and fresh chapattis, in English all this, the true shape and contour of a nation's heart, all this left unsaid and unspeakable.³¹

³¹ Chandra, *Red Earth*, 334.

All the particulars and domestic images that Chandra's speaker conjures up in this passage are basically summoned in order to underscore their incommensurability with the imperial language, English; simultaneously, they are presented as so many components of the national culture – 'the true shape and contours of a nation's heart' – that cannot be represented within the paradigms of the imperial culture. The domestic, here, immediately feeds into the national. The sequence, of course, is set in the period of the Raj and delineates the cultural agenda of embryonic Indian nationalism: the enlisting of the *ghar* in the struggle for political self-empowerment. Chandra's configuration highlights how the domestic becomes politically charged: by its alleged incommensurability with an Other ('English') that has to be visible as the foil against which such politicisation can occur in the first place. Chaudhuri, as a contrast, presents a structure apparently with no such Other: his domestic imagery unfolds, as it seems, non-polemically and yet intervenes into the discourse of nation. The *raags*, while constitutive of the rhythms of home, as a whole, make up an alternative archive of a decentralised plurality that exceeds the myths of both national unity and historical determinacy: A 'map' and 'calendar' of Northern India, the *raags* make a history that is marked by "its absence of written texts and its peculiar memory, so that no record of people like Sohanlal, or my guru and guru's father, exists unequivocally, or without rhythm and music" (AR 107-8). The implicit Other of a statement like this is the determinate archive (itself a myth) on which official and dominant historiography draws and relies. Given that the entire reflection on the *raag* pattern is overcoded as one more 'return' (in this case, to the homeland); and that the return, in Chaudhuri, is one to the pervasive if marginalised underlying, quasi timeless reality behind the temporary facades of modernity – the whole sequence can now be read as an assertion of the pre- and sub-national attested to by the regional, the decentralised, and the domestic.

9 The Aquatic Ideal

The House as Archive in Amitav Ghosh's Writings

If Amit Chaudhuri's novels loosely connect into one extended narrative of the complex interpellations organised through the agency of 'home', Amitav Ghosh's writings – here I will mainly focus on *The Shadow Lines* (1988), with occasional glances at *In An Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) – can be read as an ongoing archaeology of silence. Ghosh's narrators are typically engaged in quests for suppressed histories hidden in the folds of overarching official historical accounts, and they come up with revisionist strategies that question "the dominance of one particular genre of historical narrative over all the others".¹ What, in Ghosh's writing, is that one particular genre that dominates 'all the others'? Further, what exactly are those 'other' genres, and how, if at all, does Ghosh recuperate them from the silence organised around them? Taking genre as a category that "embrace[s] all types of discourse, not only literary",² Ghosh's plots of retrieval are structured in close affinity to the tripartite moves that give shape to what we have called the 'critique of modernity' text: the exposure of the universalist pretensions of the dominant; the recuperation of the silenced Other; and the claim to a heterogeneous, unified but uneven modernity. More than any other of the fiction writers discussed in this study, Ghosh addresses these issues in relatively direct engagements with the discursive regimes that 'produce' and regulate the "historical *a priori*s"³ – that is, the possibility or impossibility – of statements as discursive and articulatory events. The consultation of the archive – a regular topic in Ghosh's texts – can therefore be read as a post-Foucauldian version of the sojourn into the 'hidden abode of production'.

¹ Guha, *History at the Limit of World History*, 49.

² David Duff, "Intertextuality versus Genre Theory: Bakhtin, Kristeva and the Question of Genre". *Paragraph* 25.1 (2002): 54–73; 58.

³ Michel Foucault [1969], *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Tr. A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York & London (Routledge) 2004: 142.

My reading will trace Ghosh's critique of the monopolistic archive of modernity, nationalism and the State, without, however, subscribing to the temptingly convincing notion that Ghosh's agenda could be satisfactorily described as (merely) micropolitical. I will suggest that Ghosh's archival endeavours, while devoted to the retrieval of some decentering and subversive "microstorias",⁴ do not stop short at that point. It goes without saying that much of Ghosh's writing is concerned with a shift from the given grand narratives of nation and citizenship towards "the little stories of small places", whose uncovering from "family chronicles and neighbourhood yarns"⁵ forms a leitmotif in Ghosh's texts. Yet the ensuing discoveries invariably result in the reconstruction of fully fledged *grand* counter-narratives that contest the hegemonic discourse formations of nation, modernity, or postmodern cosmopolitanism.

9.1 Alternative archives

In a well-known and frequently discussed passage in *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh has his narrator find out about the monopoly and exclusiveness of the official archive and the concomitant suppression of any other form of recording: Searching for evidence of a 1964 riot in Calcutta which he himself had witnessed as a child, the narrator (at that point a Delhi University student in 1979) finds himself caught in "a struggle with silence".⁶ Yet it is not that the riot in question had not been covered in the dailies. Far from it: The consultation of the neatly filed newspapers of the University Library retrieves, on the front page of the January 11 edition of an unnamed newspaper (should it have been the *Times of India*?), a "huge banner headline which said: *Curfew in Calcutta, Police Open Fire, 10 dead, 15 wounded*" (SL 224),⁷ and the editions of the subsequent days keep continuously reporting the gruesome events of communal violence in both West Bengal and East Pakistan. Why, given such coverage, should the narrator style himself as a researcher combatting an organised 'silence'? Ghosh's quasi-

⁴ Anjali Roy, "Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's 'Little Stories' in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35.2 (2000): 35–49, 35.

⁵ Anjali Gera, "Des Kothay? Amitav Ghosh Tells Old Wives Tales," *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*. Ed. Tabish Khair. Delhi (Permanent Black) 2003:109–127; 110.

⁶ Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 218. In the following, quotes in my own text with SL + page number.

⁷ It is striking that Anjali Roy should call this "a short report on the bottom of a back page mixed with cricket news and speech coverage" (Roy, "Microstoria", 45). Such misreading obviously stems from the predication that Ghosh's text were organised along a rigid binarism of official and microstorial/alternative archives when, in fact, *The Shadow Lines* no less than *In an Antique Land* emphasises the necessity of recuperating that which is buried and silenced *within* the hegemonic archive.

authorial reflections on his narrator's archival research point out that the 1964 riots fall into that unnamed category of those "other things" for which

we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent, for to look for words of any other kind would be to give them meaning, and that is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness. (SL 228)

Very much like a natural catastrophe or an air disaster, a riot, then, remains ultimately contingent and insignificant: It will never gain the status of a necessary or functional plot element in the dominant historicist narrative to which 'we' have apparently subscribed. In this very vein, the narrator's cosmopolitan London-based cousin, Ila, remarks in an earlier passage of the novel that "nothing really important ever happens where you are" except, "of course [...] famines and riots and disasters" (SL 104). Assuming a genuinely historicist stance, Ila thus relegates the multiplicity of global subaltern experience to the "silence of voiceless events in a backward world" (SL 104), i.e. to the status of a Hegelian condition "without history".

The meaninglessness and irreducible pointlessness of such mere happenings is sharply contrasted, by Ila, with those exemplary, highly charged events like "revolutions or anti-fascist wars" engagement in which results in "knowing that you're a part of history" (SL 104) – a position that is, in other words, the effect of a self-insertion, or self-inscription, into a pre-existent master narrative (of nation, revolution, development etc.) as co-agent, however modest. Ila, for her part, has joined a Fourth International splinter group in late-seventies London and stages her activism as a contribution to a grand cause which, in future, will be revealed as central: "We may not achieve much [...], but we know that in the future political people everywhere will look to us – in Nigeria, Malaysia, India, wherever" (SL 104). Such self-inscription into a narrative forms a recurrent theme in *The Shadow Lines*, and is as such not at all profiled as problematic but much rather as necessary. In fact, the text as a whole appears as one long exercise in narrative-turn epistemology, programmatically put forth by the narrator's uncle and mentor, Tridib:⁸

Everyone lives in a story, he says, my grandmother, my father, *his* father, Lenin, Einstein, and lots of other names I hadn't heard of; they all lived in stories because stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which one you chose ... (SL 182).

⁸ Himself the point of origin of many of the stories that the narrator lives by, Tridib is introduced as some embodiment of narrative: an unruly encyclopaedia holding forth, at South Calcutta's open tea stalls or in the presence of impressionable children, "on all kinds of subjects – Mesopotamian stelae, East European jazz, the habits of arboreal apes, the plays of García Lorca, there seemed to be no end to the things he could talk about" (SL 9).

Ila, for once, appears to have chosen the wrong story: the historicist master plot that equates the out there (“where you are”) with the back then. So do the archived newspapers the narrator consults in the Delhi University Library. Their reductively descriptive coverage of the 1964 riot is a logical product of, and contribution to, a discourse that organises any event’s inclusion in, and exclusion from, the narrative of History: a discourse “that makes all those things called ‘politics’ so eloquent and these other unnameable things so silent” (SL 228). Inside the material archive of the university library, the narrator thus gains a glimpse of the Foucauldian archive which regulates the entire discursive economy of inclusion and exclusion prior to any concrete instance of speaking: The archive, for Foucault, provides “the system of discursivity, [and] the enunciative possibilities and impossibilities that it lays down. The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events”.⁹ The archive is an atopic and non-totalistic system formative of discourses which emanate from it as ‘specified practices’ – and as objects of archaeological knowledge. Such archaeology, of course, consists primarily of the consultation of material archives, those preserving containers of past ‘statements as distinct events’: In Ghosh’s archaeological texts, these material archives – university libraries in *The Shadow Lines* and *In an Antique Land*, the data filed in the Ava computer in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and the journals left behind by a long-dead man in *The Hungry Tide* – invariably point at the mechanics of the Foucauldian archive that informs the dominant reading of their collections. In all cases, Ghosh’s archaeology aims at the retrieval of that which is silenced by the laws of the current archive-as-system but still contained, as a residual trace, within the folds of the material archive. Thus, in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the rewriting of the history of malaria research in terms of a recuperated ‘subaltern’ knowledge system is triggered by the recovery of fragmentary data concerning one L. Murugan who, as it turns out, in 1995 sets out on a detection of the works of the Victorian officer Ronald Ross, officially held to have “discovered the manner in which malaria is conveyed by mosquitoes” (CC 197). If, as I claim, Ghosh does not simply work against the monumentality of ‘politics’ and History by summoning subversive micronarratives but by unfolding an entire “counter-myth”,¹⁰ then this revision of medicinal history will not simply confront the acknowledged version of the story (Ross as heroic and ingenious researcher) with some episodic debunking but much rather reveal an altogether different narrative: one that will be posited on an alternative archive-as-system but still tractable

⁹ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 187.

¹⁰ Gaurav Desai, “Old World Orders: Amitav Ghosh and the Writing of Nostalgia.” *Representations* 85 (2004): 125–148; 132.

in the depths of the material archive, which is, in this case, located in the futuristic computer networks of the 'International Water Council'. The fragments churned out by Ava the computer can be pieced together to a coherent narrative that defies the laws of the dominant archive: Ross's research is in this version remote controlled by a 'native' group of technologists of "interpersonal transference" (CC 106) which allows them to enter new bodies periodically. Clearly this kind of knowledge resonates with Western stereotypes of the Hindu belief in reincarnation, and is thus susceptible to the more general verdict on religion, pre-scientific irrationality and superstition; furthermore, this obscure group around Lakhaan/Lakshman and Mangala-bibi gets represented very much in terms of a primordial cult involving human sacrifices to a mother goddess. Such Othering rhetorics, however, can now be identified as the outpour of the mechanics of the dominant archive whose laws cannot account for such excessive deviances from the set of 'specified practices' it enables. The disenabled practice of the chromosome people can only be contained by way of its exclusion from the range of the accountable, lest the archive itself be exploded. This of course is what Ghosh is after in his repetitive figurations of the impossible. In the science fiction mode of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, this kind of figuration is played out in the realm of the fully virtual: no historical referentiality is involved in the construction of the myth that counters the history of modern medicine. In the other books, historical records are summoned in order to validate and testify to the past, and potentially still residual, existence of alternative archives.

In this endeavour, the silenced riot retrieved by the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* must be endowed with a significance that exceeds the merely descriptive report of what happened. In his conclusion of the archive consultation, the narrator offers such a counter-narrative by claiming that

the madness of a riot is a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder, of that *indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments*. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of government, for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples. (SL 230; my emphasis)

The riot as symptom of some underlying conflictuality gets immediately charged with meaning within a narrative that can only be addressed as larger than the dominant, modern-historicist one for it includes this latter inasmuch as it juxtaposes it to an other logic: a mode of collectivity and affiliation that is independent of, and prior to, the state. This mode of affiliation departs from the standardising dominant modernity that reduces collectivity to nationhood, and subjectivity to citizenship, as the narrator's subsequent geographical speculations point out: His experiments with the compass and

the Atlas reveal that in Europe – the paradigmatic abode of the normalised, transparent citizen/subject – “there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all” (SL 233).

The violent mob, to be sure, does not function here as the idealised Other of this normalised formation: It is the dark flip side, the ‘pathological inversion’ of a form of self-expression of the multitude that, as such, is grounded in an ‘indivisible sanity’. Hardly ever is Ghosh closer to Partha Chatterjee’s notion of community as a factually existent alternative to the nation. From this angle, the riot sheds its contingency and achieves the status of a symptom – a pathological signifier whose referent is the narrator’s true object of archaeological desire. Meenakshi Mukherjee has persuasively pointed out how *The Shadow Lines* gravitates around the two tropes of maps and mirrors; yet she does not touch upon this unexpected looking-glass inversion that occurs in the act of retrieving the riot’s significance. For the riot here is clearly the distorted mirror image of something else, but what would be the original object that is thus reflected?

In his essay, “The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi” (1995),¹¹ Ghosh himself traces the conception and execution of *The Shadow Lines* back to his own experience of the massive anti-Sikh riots in Delhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, 1984. Cautiously differentiating the evasive totality of the violent event from “[w]hat I saw at first hand”,¹² Ghosh again opens up a mirror-image binarism between the large-scale, state-sponsored carnage on the one hand, and “the affirmation of humanity” on the other: “My experience of the violence was overwhelmingly and memorably the resistance to it”. It is not in order to belittle the violence but to reassert its otherwise silenced, humane counterpart that Ghosh in his article highlights acts of civility and resistance; thus his essay is designed to contribute to an alternative archive that would preserve the testimony to a complementarity of violence and humanity which gets lost “within the dominant aesthetics of our time – the aesthetic of [...] ‘indifference’ – [which tends] to present violence as an apocalyptic spectacle, while the resistance to it can easily figure as mere sentimentality”.¹³

For clarification of this positive reference point in *The Shadow Lines*, it would be necessary to recount what the 1964 riots were all about, and Ghosh has his narrator fulfil this task without fail: The theft of the relic known as the prophet’s hair from a mosque in Srinagar (Kashmir) sent tremors all through the northern part of the subcontinent but caused communal riots only in

¹¹ Repr. Amitav Ghosh, *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*. Delhi (Ravi Dayal) 2002: 46–62.

¹² *Ibid.*, 61.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

Bengal, erupting first in what was then East Pakistan and subsequently spilling into West Bengal. In Kashmir itself, as a contrast, “there was not one recorded incident of animosity between Kashmiri Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs” (SL 225). What the narrator excavates from the archive, therefore, is nothing less than the testimony of an astonishing communal harmony that stems from a sustained tradition of ecumenicalism within which the ‘Muslim’ relic used to function as an object of reverence shared by all three major religious groups of the province, irrespective of what the narrator sharply exposes as an outraged “Christian sense of the necessity of the quarantine between doctrines” (SL 225). The common peaceful reaction to the disappearance of the prophet’s hair, then, manifests itself in “a spontaneous show of collective grief” (SL 225), which, again, testifies to the “power of syncretic civilisations” (SL 225). It is this concept of pluralistic conviviality that the rioting mob mirrors back in pathological inversion, and it is these vestiges of ‘syncretic civilisations’ that Ghosh’s texts excavate time and again: the medieval Indian Ocean trading cultures of *In an Antique Land* as much as the hybrid religions of the Dalit fisherfolk of the Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide*. Opposing both the nation form and communalist exclusivism, they are invoked as the alternative traditions that a possible India as well as a sustainable globalisation might take recourse to.

The border as a line that organises a neat territorial distinction between inside and outside undergoes a heavy interrogation in these texts by way of its confrontation with what I will call Ghosh’s aquatic ideal. This is fully invoked in the opening pages of *The Hungry Tide*, where the natural scenery of the Gangetic delta synechdochically refers to a borderless state of fluidity “where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable”.¹⁴ Similarly, the recuperation of the vanquished Indian Ocean trading cultures of the Middle Ages from the heaped up material of the archive uncovers an aquatic civilisation to which the idea of a “proprietary right”¹⁵ over territory is alien. In a principally sympathetic reading of *In an Antique Land*, Gaurav Desai convincingly demonstrates to what extent Ghosh’s ‘friendly sea’ is itself a figuration, the product of a “nostalgic optimism”¹⁶ whose reading of the archival material is informed by the desire to make out/make up a workable alternative reference point in the past: “for Ghosh’s project to work, it must flatten out the [disturbing] micropolitics of the world before what he sees as the intrusive arrival of the Western powers

¹⁴ Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*. London (Harper Collins) 2004: 7.

¹⁵ Amitav Ghosh [1992], *In an Antique Land*. London (Granta) 1994: 288; subsequently quotes in my own text as AL + page number.

¹⁶ Desai, “Old World Orders”, 140.

in this setting".¹⁷ More precisely, Desai disclaims Ghosh's eulogy of the Indian Ocean civilisations' idyllic conviviality by pointing out that it "may be true, as Ghosh suggests, that before the arrival of the Europeans no political power in the Indian Ocean ultimately *succeeded* in dictating the terms of trade, but it was not for lack of trying".¹⁸ In this reading, then, the alleged fluidity of the trading cultures would simply be owed to the failure of each of its member states to achieve a domineering position; by no means would it be, as Ghosh suggests, "the product of a rare cultural choice" (AL 287). In Nietzschean terms, therefore, Ghosh employs a 'monumentalist' approach to a history that, as such, provides not so much a factual but a strategic reference point in the service of the present; amplifying the pathos of 'syncretic civilisations', Ghosh's figurations of "cultures of accommodation and compromise" (AL 288) function in order to re-open the conditions of possibility for discourses to emerge that the dominant archive forecloses. And the main agent of such foreclosure is the modern state.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the border (between West Bengal/India and East Pakistan) bespeaks a governmental project to consolidate distinct national identities by way of spatial compartmentalisation, and tellingly Ghosh has his narrator comment on this endeavour in the Huntingtonian terms of geological formations: The definition of state borders occurs in the hope "that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland" (SL 233). This urge to construe distinct territorial and national entities gets subverted by the ironical fact "that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines" (SL 233). The border, then, engenders not separation from but fixation on the newly created Other. This irreversible symmetry of the "looking-glass border" spells out the futility of a politics bent on the implementation of a rigid dichotomy of inside and outside, since that which in the governmental logic has been externalised remains indelibly integrated into the inside, albeit as an inverted image of the newly rearranged national self. Long before this breakdown of demarcation lines between inside and outside gets applied to the territories of states, the text of *The Shadow Lines* craftily prepares for this twist by providing a plethora of such blurs played out in that other cultural field that is predicated on this very same inside/outside distinction: the house/home. It is obvious that Ghosh's narrative works towards a similar destabilisation of demarcations with regard to the house as a purely domestic site: The porosity of the house to its alleged

¹⁷ Desai, "Old World Orders", 132.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

Other – the outside – inscribes the home subtly (and at times emphatically) in the aquatic ideal of blurred and suspended boundaries. Needless to say, this destabilisation, then, will at a more fundamental level involve the opposition of private and public, one of modernity's founding dichotomies.

9.2 Paradise Lost in Colombo

On the narrator's "own secret map of the world" (SL 194), there are numerous places that, though never having been visited in the flesh, have gained a graphic solidity due to the detailed descriptive and narrative accounts he has received about them. To some extent, the first section of the novel addresses the narrator's initiation, under his uncle Tridib's tutorship, into the craft of using his "imagination with precision" (SL 24): that is, not to vaguely fancy but to minutely re-produce imaginatively the referents of the received texts. 'Precise imagination' thus aims at the translation of abstract space into a semblance of 'effective' terrain in the sense of an *environment* with which one interacts. It is significantly in the context of the 'precise imagining' of a house that Tridib's method gets elucidated.

Ila's mother relates her young daughter's narrow escape from an encounter with a snake in the family residence garden in Colombo: a gripping story distantly reminiscent of Kipling's "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" episode in *The Jungle Books* (whose eponymous heroic and servile mongoose has, however, been replaced by an absurdly ugly giant lizard). To Tridib, the most important point of this narrative lies neither in the duel between the snake and the lizard nor in the mortal danger that the child was (allegedly) in, but instead in the amazingly mundane fact that "Ila's house had a sloping roof" (SL 29). This detail of course can qualify as little for a plot element in Ila's mother's story as the riot can in the master narrative of historicism; and yet it is Tridib's ambition to alert the narrator to the central relevance of this seemingly contingent observation: "He [...] asked me whether I could imagine what it would be like to live under a sloping roof – no place to fly kites, nowhere to hide when one wanted to sulk, nowhere to shout across to one's friends" (SL 29). Far more than just some architectural detail, the sloping roof is thus revealed as a feature that sets the imagined built environment of unseen Colombo substantially apart from the narrator's own surroundings to the extent of embodying, as Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, "a new way of life to be imagined with effort by a boy who has grown up in a flat-roof culture".¹⁹ In this light, Tridib's observation calls attention to the basic circumstance that space comes to have meaning only through particular

¹⁹ Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*." *The Shadow Lines*. *Educational ed.*: 255–267; 261.

practices, and that “it is not the space itself, the house, but the way of inhabiting it that [makes] it home”.²⁰

In some ways, the sloping roof of the Colombo house occupies the same place as the riot: It tacitly refers to a ‘normalcy’ that it interrupts, in this case, the taken-for-granted normalcy of the flat roofs of Northern India. These roofs provide a space which belongs to the house as well as to the outside: The flat roof is an intimate and protective place in which one can ‘hide when one wanted to sulk’ as well as a space for ‘outside’ activities; most of all it is, like front gardens or verandas, a liminal space that communicates with that which is not part of the interior. A spatial/architectural equivalent of the aquatic ideal, the flat roof provides an “‘interstitial space’ of sociability”²¹ – the sphere where private and public overlap or interpenetrate –, which ensures the house’s insertion into a wide “network of social activities and social institutions”.²²

The deep impact of Ila’s mother’s story, therefore, lies in the very material cultural differences that are concealed in its folds: The sloping roof, only mentioned in passing by Ila’s mother, comes to stand in for an architectural layout that defies the liminality of the aquatic ideal; as if to drive this point home, Ghosh’s narrator emphasises that “the garden was at the back”, and that “the house was surrounded by a very high wall” (SL 24) so that the notion of a fortified structure emerges that primarily serves to exclude an outside which, in fact, is in this case heavily marked as either unnerving (there is a poultry farm on the other side of the high wall) or outright dangerous (the intrusion of the snake). Yet the rigidity of this enforced binarism of inside and outside gets seemingly mollified, in Ila’s mother’s account, in two ways: The garden, we learn, “seemed to stretch out from inside the house; when the french [sic!] windows were open the tiled floor of the drawing room merged without a break into the lawn” (SL 24). It is, however, evident that this blurred demarcation does not suspend the inside/outside dichotomy since the “quiet, secluded garden” belongs itself to the intramural territory of the estate. Only on condition of its incorporation into the controlled sphere of the inside can the garden thus merge with the space of the house. This same incorporative logic applies to the second instance of blurring the boundaries, namely the treatment of the snake-

²⁰ Svetlana Boym, “Unsettling Homecoming”. *Field Work: Sites in Literary and Cultural Studies*. Ed. Marjorie Garber, Rebecca L. Walkowitz & Paul B. Franklin. New York & London (Routledge) 1996: 262–267; 266.

²¹ Krishan Kumar, “Home: The Promise and Predicament of Private Life at the End of the Twentieth Century.” *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*. Ed. Jeff Weintraub & Krishan Kumar. Chicago & London (U of Chicago P) 1997: 204–236; 231.

²² *Ibid.*, 231.

combatting monitor lizard. This reptile, initially considered a tedious intrusion, gets due to its usefulness elevated to the status of “a part of her [Ila’s mother’s] household” (SL 26). In both these cases the outside is subjected to domestication that thoroughly does away with its essential ‘outsideness’. What thus emerges is a notion of house and home as largely compatible with the hegemonic (albeit illusory) Western bourgeois concept of the ‘quiet haven’, which the incident of the snake in the garden – amplified by its Biblical overtones – subverts most poignantly. Like the tip of an iceberg, then, the sloping roof indexically refers to the underlying drama of normalised domesticity as a paradise always already lost: the conflict between boundary maintenance and boundary transgression. Ghosh’s text is replete with indicators of houses’ vulnerabilities to outside threats: most dramatically in form of the memories of bombed-out houses in the Blitz of London, but just as much in reference to the oppressive encroachment of anxieties of social degradation upon the (Indian) middle-class home. On a visit to an impoverished relative stranded in a poor neighbourhood, the narrator takes in the vista of a gigantic waste dump alive with ragpickers, and reflects upon a social geography with the vulnerable genteel house at its centre:

It was true of course that I could not see that landscape or anything like it from my own window, but its presence was palpable everywhere in our house [...]. It was that landscape that lent the note of hysteria to my mother’s voice when she drilled me for my examinations; it was to those slopes she pointed when she told me that if I didn’t study hard I would end over *there* [...]: that landscape was the quicksand that seethed beneath the polished floors of our house; it was that sludge which gave our genteel decorum its fine edge of frenzy. (SL 134)

The deep irony of this classist relationality, then, lies in the fact that the threatening outside (which is in terms of social stratification a ‘below’) has to be ceaselessly invoked – and thus granted admission to the premises – in order to be held at a distance; it has to be continually spelled out in order to be repressed. If, in the middle-class home, the underclass’s unroofedness is spectrally present as a permanent threat, then the house itself, with the ‘quicksand seething beneath its polished floors’, comes to stand in, as a spatialised materialisation, for the classist fixation on the respective Other – a ghostly configuration of internalised Others in which, as Fredric Jameson has it, “each of the opposing classes necessarily carries the Other around in its head and is internally torn and conflicted by a foreign body it cannot exorcise”.²³

In Ila’s mother’s story, it is ironically only with the help from the former transgressor (the lizard) that the boundary can be maintained against the

²³ Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter”, 49.

potentially dangerous intruder (the snake), about which it never gets quite clear “whether it was poisonous or not” (SL 28). At face value, Ila’s mother’s embedded narrative rehearses the successful maintenance of an imperilled boundary without, however, allowing for a questioning of the boundary itself. As a contrast, Tridib’s focusing on the sloping roof subtly problematises the exclusiveness inscribed into a spatial layout that serves to eliminate sociability and to occlude “the balance [...], the interpenetration of public and private”.²⁴

9.3 Partition in Dhaka

From his grandmother (his ‘Tha’mma’) does the narrator learn about her own ancestral home in Dhaka, at the time of that account still the capital of East Pakistan. Again a house is conjured up that is informed by absurdly rigid demarcation lines – in fact a ‘looking-glass border’ in the most striking sense that not only divides the house spatially but interrupts the family’s precedent unity for good. In contradistinction from the Colombo residence, the Dhaka house is initially invested with all the nostalgic value of home, but also all the ambivalences of home as a “repressive space”.²⁵ Introduced as a building that had “evolved slowly, growing like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions” (SL 121), the Dhaka house evokes processuality, organic wholeness and familial unity: Like ‘Hanuman House’ in Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*, it houses a widely extended family under the patriarchal regime of Tha’mma’s grandfather, who operates as a central, almost sovereign interpellative agency: “terrifying though he was, he managed to keep the house together” (SL 121). After the grandfather’s death, however, severe and unceasing quarrels among the various branches of the family lead to a radical rearrangement of the hitherto undemarcated domestic space: “they decided to divide the house with a wooden partition wall” (SL 123) in order to segregate the irreconcilable family members from one another. Needless to say, the very signifier, ‘partition’, resonates with the national trauma of the subcontinent’s postcolonial division and, in particular, the break-up of the territorial integrity of Bengal as one of its components. Ghosh, in other words, here activates the long-standing tradition of the house as a *synecdoche* of nation.²⁶

²⁴ Kumar, “Home: The Promise and Predicament of Private Life”, 231.

²⁵ Martin & Mohanty, “What’s Home Got to Do with It?”, 92.

²⁶ See Mukherjee, “Maps and Mirrors”, 262; Inga Bryden & Janet Floyd. “Introduction.” *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior*. Ed. Inga Bryden & Janet Floyd. Manchester & New York (Manchester UP) 1999: 1—17; 2.

Tha'mma, who can remember the undivided house of her early childhood days, thus grows up into a partitioned home on which "a strange, eerie silence had descended" (SL 123). The unsurmountable division engenders fantasies about that which lies on its other side as Tha'mma makes up stories for her younger sister about the other portion of the house: "Everything's upside-down there, I'd tell her; at their meals they start with the sweets and end with the dal, their books go backwards and end at the beginning, they sleep under their beds and eat on the sheets [...]" (SL 125). It is Tha'mma, then, who imagines and thereby produces the other side as the exact mirror image of her own part of the house. The "upside-down house" (SL 125) is initially invoked playfully but gradually attains, due to the logic of narrative's productivity of reality, the status of an independent object in its own right: As Tha'mma confides in the narrator, "the strange thing was that as we grew older even I almost came to believe in our story" (SL 126). What the grandmother thus provides is, in some ways, a glimpse into the hidden abode of the production of Otherness through narrative. Yet while the fantastic stories about the upside-down house are predicated on the rigid separation that bisects the house as a whole, they very obviously ensure the children's continuous orientation on that exterritorialised Other – thus preparing for the fixation of post-Partition subjects on that which lies beyond the looking-glass border. The Other thus remains a spectral but constitutive part of the self, in the case of the Dhaka house belying the myth of achieved separation. Even as it is styled literally as an inversion (for that is what 'upside-down' translates into), the upside-down house continues to cause not only horror and contempt but just as much a fascinated desire: "It seemed a better place to us then and we wished we could escape into it too" (SL 126).

The national dimension of the house's partition notwithstanding, the radical division of the building does first of all affect the traditional familial structure: At least on Tha'mma's side of the wall, the extended family is replaced by the more 'advanced' form of the nuclear family which, however, fails to live up to the demands of that myth of intimacy and close-knit community in which the domestic ideal of the Western bourgeois home as a sanctuary from the world is couched.²⁷ At least in Tha'mma herself, the split of the extended family engenders a fundamental mistrust in family as such, in fact an unlearning of the conventional precepts about the moral and affective dimensions of kinship:

²⁷ See, e.g., Wright, "Prescribing the Model Home."; Tamara K. Hareven, "The Home and the Family in Historical Perspective". *Home: A Place in the World*. Ed. Arien Mack. New York & London (New York UP) 1993 227–259; Peter Gay, *The Naked Heart: The Bourgeois Experience Victoria to Freud*. Vol. IV. London (Harper Collins)1998.

In later years, it always made my grandmother a little nervous when she heard people saying: We're like brothers. What does that mean? she would ask hurriedly. Does that mean you're friends? As for herself, having learnt the meaning of brotherhood very early, she had not dared to take the risk of providing my father with one. (SL 123)

If the grandmother for these reasons “had never pretended to have much family feeling”, there are clearly “larger, more abstract entities” towards which her loyalties are directed; having worked as a schoolmistress ever since her early widowhood, Tha'mma, with all her lack of features of conventional femininity, certainly invites for a reading of that character as represented in terms of an outright “gender reversal” – active, aggressive, tending towards the public instead of the domestic sphere.²⁸ It is important to note, though, that Tha'mma in many respects abides by the idealised icon of the ‘new Indian woman’ epitomised in the period of the Bengal renaissance and the earliest phases of Indian nationalism. Anjali Roy points out to what extent Tha'mma, as a paragon of physical education, time discipline, patriotic zeal, and manichean nationalism participates “in the civilizing mission of nationalism in the domestic sphere through inculcating the highly revered ‘discipline’ of the European home maintained through a regimented routine”.²⁹ Femininity, then, has attained, in the context of Indian nationalism (that is, in the context that is formative for a character like Tha'mma), a complexity similar to that of the house itself as a fusion of categories which elsewhere are held to be in correlation with and opposition to each other. If the notion of house “combines together a series of opposing principles or social forms”,³⁰ then it functionally occupies a similar space as the composite notion of femininity that Indian nationalism produces, and that Tha'mma to some extent embodies. What appears, Anjali Roy's reading notwithstanding, entirely irreconcilable with the notion of the ‘new Indian woman’ is Tha'mma's rejection of the category of family and kinship in favour of those ‘larger, more abstract entities’, i.e. nationalism. Both as schoolmistress and member of the narrator's household she evidently acts in the name of what Homi Bhabha has called “a nationalist pedagogy”.³¹ This latter strives to subsume the domestic under the national: As headmistress of a girls' school, Tha'mma had implemented the rule that “every girl who opted for Home Science ought to be taught to cook at least one dish that was a speciality of some part of the country not her own” (SL 116), thereby transforming cooking into a lesson “about the vastness and diversity of the country” (SL

²⁸ See Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, “The Division of Experience in *The Shadow Lines*.” *The Shadow Lines. Educational ed.*: 287–298, esp. 288–9.

²⁹ Roy, “Microstoria”, 44.

³⁰ Carsten & Hugh-Jones, “Introduction”, 8.

³¹ Bhabha, “DissemiNation”, 294.

116). In the home, Tha'mma ensures a rigorous work ethic, time discipline, and a politically charged ideal of physical fitness ("You can't build a strong country [...] without building a strong body" [SL 8]). Very different from the Colombo house with its politics of a strained boundary maintenance, Tha'mma's household, then, is predicated on the fundamental integration of the private and the public, albeit in the restrictive and disciplinary fashion of a rigorous subsumption of the former under the latter.

This politicisation of family life clearly privileges the national over kinship, and it is only on these grounds that Tha'mma at the end of her life embarks upon her abortive mission of 'rescuing' her last surviving Dhaka relative from the perils of 'living abroad'. Only at face value are the motives behind that project familial. For if Tha'mma claims that "we're the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone" (SL 129), then the imagined community that is thus invoked appears to be primarily the organic nation metaphorised as family: a community founded on 'blood' for which Tha'mma envies the British, who, in her imagination, have "become a family born of the same pool of blood" (SL 78). Blood is not only the glue that gives coherence to such an achieved nation status, but also the very stuff of which national borders are drawn: The British, Tha'mma claims, "know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood" (SL 78). Having grown up in a partitioned house with a wall running through it, Tha'mma may have learned to disregard the immured private sphere fetishised by middle classes world-wide, and yet remains fixated on boundary maintenance on a larger, namely national scale. Her virtually unknown relative who had stayed behind in Dhaka after Partition (and therefore, in one sense, never left home), has to be brought "back where he belonged, to her invented country" (SL 137). The ties of 'blood' that bind Tha'mma to this aged stranger – "It doesn't matter whether we recognize each other or not" (SL 129) – are not so much the ties of kinship but the imagined participation of the common 'pool of blood' that constitutes Tha'mma's nation: a nation that, for all the overtly primordial rhetorics with which it is evoked, does not precede its members but needs to be constructed by them: "That is what *you* have to achieve for India" (SL 78). Tha'mma's nation, therefore, abides in every way by the Andersonian model of a construction that, once 'achieved', conceals its constructedness under thick layers of invented traditions, including in particular primordialist myths of origin. Blood, kinship and family serve as vehicles in such constructions, and it is only in this function that Tha'mma employs them. Paradoxically, therefore, the family is most radically disclaimed where it is most overtly invoked.

The disclaimer of family reoccurs in Ghosh's text, and even forms the very opening of the narrative as a whole. Here it is the narrator himself who,

however subtly, severs those ties of kinship that, at a first glance, seem to remain sacrosanct throughout the book:

It startles me now to discover how readily the name comes off my pen as 'Mayadebi', for I have never spoken of her thus; not aloud at any rate: as my grandmother's sister, she was always Maya-thakuma to me. But still, from as far back as I can remember, I have known her, in the secrecy of my mind, as 'Mayadebi' – as though she were a well-known stranger, like a filmstar or a politician whose picture I had seen in a newspaper. Perhaps it was merely because I knew her very little, for she was not often in Calcutta. That explanation seems likely enough, but I know it to be untrue. The truth is that I did not *want* to think of her as a relative: to have done that would have diminished her and her family – I could not bring myself to believe that their worth in my eyes could be reduced to something so arbitrary and unimportant as a blood relationship. (SL 3).

The narrator imaginatively erases kinship ("I did not *want* to think of her as a relative") and must, in order to do so, to some extent side with Tha'mma in her general disregard for family. However, while Tha'mma leaves the authority of 'blood' intact in order to displace it from kinship onto nation, the narrator disclaims 'blood' as altogether "arbitrary and unimportant". How is this family-disruptive fantasy motivated, and how does it relate to a novel that apparently gravitates around the multiple ramifications of family? Furthermore, how does the narrator's opening confession of his own manipulation of family ties connect with the third instance of such revisionism, namely his uncle Tridib's claim that the Price family were his "English relatives through marriage" (SL 11) when, in fact, they had 'only' been close family friends for some generations? Strikingly, the narrator's and Tridib's gestures again form inverted mirror images of each other: one exclusive (substituting 'Mayadebi' for 'Maya-thakuma'), one inclusive (transmuting friends into relatives), but both supplanting given patterns of kinship with imagined relationships.

Right in the novel's opening paragraphs the narrator goes out of his way to establish himself as reliable: the confessional tone, the stance of self-searching honesty and the ostentatious devotion to accurate reconstructions of past events mark not only this sequence but the whole novel. Nivedita Bagchi has pointed out that it is the self-set "narratorial task of Ghosh's novel to examine every narrative, establish its credibility [...] and, finally, suggest the veracity of one narrative over other narratives".³² Thus, in the context of his own manipulations with his relationship to Mayadebi, the narrator first offers a temptingly 'likely' explanation only to dismiss it as 'untrue' and present, in the second go, a version that we are encouraged to take for 'the truth', especially since it is put forth in the gesture of a confession of guilt.

³² Nivedita Bagchi, "The Process of Validation in Relation to Materiality and Historical Reconstruction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*". *Modern Fiction Studies* 39.1 (Winter 1993): 187–202; 195.

The validation of the second version thus hinges on nothing more than the rejection of the first one. Why, however, did the narrator 'not *want*' to see his grand-aunt as a relative? His own version ("that would have diminished her *and her family*") is not quite satisfying and yet – or rather therefore – revealing: At no point in the entire novel does the narrator give voice to that high esteem for Mayadebi that he professes in this opening argument; there is, however, one central figure from 'her family' whom the narrator relates to with an intense libidinous energy that would fall under the verdict of the incest taboo as long as 'something so arbitrary and unimportant as a blood relationship' binds the subject to this libidinous object: Ila. The case of Ila is explicitly played out throughout the book whose first section culminates in the narrator's realisation that he "could no longer hide the truth from [himself]" (SL 94), and his subsequent rejection – however compassionate – by Ila: "I didn't know, she said. You were always the brother I never had. I'm sorry. If I'd known I wouldn't have behaved like that" (SL 111). In one single move, Ila thus, not only re-establishes, but heavily intensifies the forbidding kinship relation that the narrator, in his family-disruptive fantasy, had striven to undo. (At the same time, of course, this designation of the narrator as 'brother' resonates with Tha'mma's anxiety about the meaning of that term ...)

Given this clash of manipulations, Tridib's counterfactual claim to be related to the Price family must appear all the more astounding; after all, this revision would render his love affair with May Price no less incestuous than the narrator's craving for Ila. At a close look, though, Tridib's manipulation is revealed as the exact though subtle expression of a wish-fulfilment, for in his claim to "have relatives in England through marriage" he simply fantasises to have already married into the Price family. Much later Tridib's counterfactual claim gets validated – not by way of his marriage with May (which in fact never happens) but Ila's to Nick Price.

9.4 Con-fusion in London

Like the upside-down house in Dhaka, the Prices' family home in West Hampstead is introduced as a fantasy. It is conjured up by Ila before the narrator's eyes in "a game called Houses" (SL 49) played by the two cousins when they are children. It seems that Ila's game performatively simulates that aspect that had already marked the Colombo residence: a strong emphasis on exclusive inside/outside demarcations. 'Houses' is hence a game that requires to be performed "somewhere dark and secret"; by no means, Ila instructs the narrator, can it be played "out in the garden" (SL 70), the site where the porosity of boundaries became most manifest in the Colombo episode. It is in

a doubly secluded, 'dark and secret' hiding place – under a gigantic table stored in a removed cavernous cellar room – that the two cousins play their game of intimacy: a simulation of nuclear family life as husband and wife in the Prices' Hampstead house whose ground plan Ila sketches with a few lines drawn in the dust on the cellar floor. Even though Ila, who is in India only on a visit while staying with the Prices in London, can theoretically rely on her actual familiarity with the Hampstead house, her sketching of the ground plan immediately leads to fundamental protest from the narrator's side. Initially, his queries concern the verisimilitude of Ila's (necessarily) two-dimensional sketch: "You're lying, I shouted at her. That can't be a staircase because it's flat. And that can't be upstairs because upstairs has to be above and that isn't above; that's right beside the [ground-floor] drawing room" (SL 70). Superimposing the top floor on to the ground floor, Ila's drawing of the ground plan is literally a palimpsest. In this sense it anticipates the multi-layered quality of the Hampstead house as a scene on which, for the narrator-as-adult, past and present, memory and imagination, presence and absence will conjoin in multiple configurations: the house, then, as a spatialisation of the aquatic ideal. This comes all the more astounding in light of the narrator's second complaint about Ila's drawing of its ground plan: "It can't be a real house, I said at last, because it doesn't have a veranda" (SL 70). After the discussion of the Colombo episode, it is evident that this complaint translates as an insistence on the necessity of the interstitial space of sociability which the Hampstead house is, obviously, lacking: "Of course we must have a veranda, I said. Otherwise how will we know what's going on outside? [...] To me the necessity of verandas was no more accountable than the need for doors and walls" (SL 70f.). The narrator's protest, then, targets an architecture that privileges the protected inside, and hence a concept of isolated privacy, over the interaction with the outside. Nevertheless, the ground plan as sketched by Ila will be memorised by the narrator and enable him, many years later, to find his way through the Hampstead house when he finally comes to visit the Prices himself. Ila's already palimpsestic drawing now coalesces with the actual domestic space into a second palimpsest that superimposes the hitherto imagined house upon the three-dimensional space of 44, Lymington Road. Inscribed into this palimpsest are shards of narratives, memories and fantasies about goings-on in and around the house in various, disconnected periods when members of the narrator's family had stayed at the Prices': Mayadebi, her husband and the young Tridib in 1939 and into the Blitz; 8-year old Ila and her mother in the early sixties; both the narrator and Ila, enrolled as students in London, as regular visitors at the house in the late seventies.

The narrator's first visit, in the flesh, to Lymington Road is thus overcoded with thick layers of narratives about the place, among which, again, Tridib's recounts of his own boyhood experience of Blitz-torn North London range most prominently. Thus, when the narrator on his way to the Prices' house passes a by-lane which had been hit by an incendiary bomb in 1940, those images of post-air raid devastation – vividly conjured up by Tridib long ago – spill over into the actual late-seventies scenery of “pretty houses on that tranquil road” (SL 57). Significantly, Solent Road in 1979 presents itself not simply as a peaceful environment but just as much as one that is designed to foster precisely that secluded privacy that had marked the Colombo house: The road is lined “with trees and *hedges* on either side” as well as with “red brick houses [...] all exactly the same[...] with *sharply pointed roofs*” (SL 56, my emphases). The recurrence of the sloping roof, here heightened to sharp pointedness, strikingly reinvoles the critique of a location fortified against sociability. By way of contrast, the war-time memories that Tridib had handed down to the narrator construe a suburban landscape marked by the breakdown of all such fortifications, composed as it is of blown-up houses, walls reduced to “rubble”, “splintered windows”, and “a miraculously undamaged bathtub” marooned atop the debris: in other words, a world turned inside-out, however violently. It is against the foil of this imagined inside-out scenery that the narrator confronts the late-seventies orderliness and well-maintained privacy of the reconstructed Solent Road as a condition less ‘true’ than the earlier state of devastation:

I could not still believe in the truth of what I did see [...]. I could see all of that, and yet, despite the clear testimony of my eyes, it seemed to me still that Tridib had shown me something truer about Solent Road a long time ago in Calcutta, something I could not have seen had I waited at that corner for years [...]. (SL 57)

The ‘truth’ of Solent Road, and by extension, ‘England’, appears to lie beyond both the visible and the quotidian; yet what exactly does it consist of? However violent and destructive the impact of the Blitz may be, it obviously operates, in *The Shadow Lines*, as a *pharmakon* that pushes ‘England’ into a state of intense self-realisation of its otherwise dormant potentials – a state of emergency as well as emergence that the narrator, playing on Churchill's war-time rhetoric, designates ‘England's finest hour’: “I wanted to know England not as *I* saw her, but in her finest hour” (SL 57). After Dunkirk and France's surrender to Germany, Churchill had in his BBC appeal to the nation on June 18, 1940, if not coined then at least tremendously popularised the phrase of the imminent Battle of Britain as the ‘finest hour’:

the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. [...] Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British

Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'³³

Churchill's, of course, is a rhetoric of military formation that in an *en passant* fashion integrates the 'Empire and its Commonwealth' into the nation now defined as a community of combatants in the line of duty, fighting for posterity. The finest hour, then, is the historical moment of a thorough evacuation of civil society and a suspension of privacy in favour of an all-encompassing politicisation of the socius in the image of the army. It is on condition of such disciplinary (and hence restrictive) politicisation as mobilisation that 'the Empire and its Commonwealth' may be granted a place, as rank-and-file, inside this factually trans-national community.

Deliberately reactivating the Churchillian stock quotation, Ghosh's narrator subjects the phrase of the 'finest hour' to a substantial revaluation even while principally subscribing to the notion that "England had chosen hers in a war" (SL 57). It is, however, not the supersession of liberal civil society by a restrictively articulated public politicisation in the course of the nation's transformation into an army but the upsurge of sociability that marks out the early phases of the Blitz as England's finest hour. In the narrator's imagination, Mayadebi, staying with the Prices in 1940, claims that she "couldn't have chosen any better time to come to England" (SL 66) – an "England coming alive" with "a kind of exhilaration in the air" (SL 66):

the atmosphere had changed so dramatically [...] People were becoming *friendlier*; in the shops, on the streets, she couldn't help noticing. Everyone was so much *nicer* now; often when she and Tridib were out walking people would pat him on the head and stop to have a little *chat* with her. [...] But it wasn't just her – *everyone was being friendly with everyone* else; why just that morning [...] old Mrs. Dunbar who lived down the road had actually been *civil* for the first time in living memory. (SL 66; my emphases)

Neighbourly conviviality and *civility* are the parameters of this version of the finest hour: the transformation of that part of the public sphere that is immediately at hand into an extension of the home, which latter virtually spills out into the streets that are now signatures of an aquatic ideal temporarily realised all over the city in its state of emergency. Mayadebi's finest-hour England is therefore continuous with Tridib's much more cataclysmic inside-out narratives of bombed houses in roads whose very names – Solent Road, Lymington Road – associate them with water.³⁴ The 'truth' about Solent Road in the sense of a congruity of signifier and referent can therefore only become manifest in instances of the aquatic ideal realised with houses torn open, and bathtubs catapulted into the road. However, is this

³³ Quoted in Angus Calder. *The People's War*. London (Jonathan Cape) 1969: 128.

³⁴ I am grateful to Bernd-Peter Lange for bringing this point to my notice.

in truth the cherished opening-up of the 'repressive space' of home to the sociability surrounding it? It would be more apt to read Mayadebi and Tridib's fascinating accounts of a Second-World-War Hampstead turned into involuntary sociability as another violent reverse of that ideal (just as the riot had figured as a distortion of some 'underlying sanity'). In this perspective, the Second World War memories and fantasies highlight not so much the permeability of the domestic and the public, but emphasise the vulnerability of the institutionalised private sphere to the ongoing interpellations of social life. They serve, in short, as reminders to the precariousness inherent in notions of home not grounded in efficient boundary maintenance.

Ila's accounts of her own experience at the Prices' in the early sixties introduce a truly traumatic aspect of such porosities. Other than Mayadebi, who appreciates the presence of the domestic in the public during the Blitz period, Ila undergoes one more painful exposure to the presence of the (menacing) outside within the boundaries of the house, with British racism taking the place of the snake in the garden. The dark flipside of Mayadebi and Tridib's cherished inside-out spill-over is the outside-in boundary transgression that opens the hitherto protective private sphere to distorting impulses, abject ways of 'being-called', whose original locus is the public domain.

With significant alterations does Ila, in the course of their playing 'Houses' under the table in the cellar of the Raibajar house, tell the narrator the story of her harassment by some of her schoolmates. The narrative is manipulated in two crucial respects: first, Ila substitutes her doll, Magda, for herself as victim; second, the role of the Prices' son, Nick, is changed from that of a clandestine accomplice in the racist assault to that of a gallant knight coming to the rescue of Magda/Ila in distress. Both these fictionalising interventions hint at Ila's traumatic experience of unsuccessful boundary maintenance: The circumstance that "Nick didn't stop to help Ila" and, more generally, "didn't want to be seen with Ila" by his friends (SL 76), points to the fact that racism does not stop at the threshold of the Prices' house but has taken an inroad via Nick. Ila's revision of this episode, with Nick as protector from her tormentors, bespeaks not only a desire to render the event as romance but even more the urge to re-establish the lost integrity of the house by way of fictitiously claiming an intact dichotomy of outside (racist) and inside (non-racist). It is not accidentally that Nick, in Ila's version, "helped Magda to her feet and [...] said, Come on, I'll take you home now" (SL 75): 'home' to the yearned-for safe haven beyond the reach of xenophobic menace. Yet, due to the presence of the latently racist Nick in the Hampstead house, this home is revealed as radically unhomey as the Other has always already encroached upon the self. Like the Hampstead house, Ila herself has

obviously been thus invaded by racism: Why else should she, in her version told to the narrator, displace her own experience onto Magda-the-doll, the blonde epitome of a white supremacist beauty ideal with “hair that shone [...] like a bright golden light [...], deep blue eyes, [...] cheeks pink and healthy and smiling” (SL 73). Without resistance, it seems, does Ila internalise this external model as her ego-ideal. With Frantz Fanon, this brown girl’s identification with a white beauty ideal rendered transparent and ‘normal’ by powerful discourse formations would result in the traumatic experience of “epidermalization”:³⁵ the internalisation of that hegemonic asymmetry that predicates the racialised Other’s inferiority. In reference to class, Jameson suggests that “the ‘lower classes’ carry about within their heads unconscious convictions as to the superiority of hegemonic or ruling-class expressions and values”³⁶ – the inverted complement to spectral presence of the underclasses in the middle-class home discussed above.

Paul Gilroy, in a sympathetic historicisation of Fanon, calls attention to the fact that epidermalised power (particularly in the colonial context) operates as boundary maintenance inasmuch as it organises “the line between inside and out” by elevating the category of ‘skin’ as the privileged “threshold of identity”.³⁷ The encapsulation of the self within a skin that is overdetermined with value does, in an epidermalised/epidermalising system, define identities; Ila’s private myth of herself as Magda would, in this light, make manifest her internalisation of those values as inferiority complex: a failed boundary management on the side of the self. Or, and this might be a more productive reading of Ila’s narrative, does her employment of Magda as victim of racist assaults set a revenge fantasy in motion in which the ‘Caucasian’ herself falls prey to white supremacists? Or, more likely, does the concrete rendition of Ila’s version hint at a complicated self-assertion on the side of the racialised Other by locating the motivations behind the racist violations in a collective envy? This, at least, is what Ila goes out of her way to emphasise: “The reason they stared like that, all of them, girls, boys, even the teachers, was that they’d never seen anyone as beautiful as Magda” (SL 73).

The two disconnected periods discussed so far (World War II and early sixties) showed the Hampstead house in its inside-out and its outside-in aspects, so that it has by now gained the qualities almost of an exhaling/inhaling organism: a location that, regardless of its rigid

³⁵ Frantz Fanon [1952], *Black Skin, White Masks*. Tr. Charles Lam Markman. New York (Grove Press) 1967: 11.

³⁶ Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter”, 47.

³⁷ Paul Gilroy, “Scales and Eyes: ‘Race’ Making Difference”. *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*. Ed. Sue Golding. London & New York (Routledge) 1997: 190–196; 196.

architecture, is in continuous interaction with its environment. That the house is introduced first as a palimpsest under erasure only adds to its compliance with the aquatic ideal, even though that ideal has so far been displaced by the violent interpellations that rendered the house porous to the social surroundings (bombs, racism). As a scene on which the ideal comes into full realisation, the house requires obviously the actual intervention of the narrator himself. This realisation occurs as the text's most explicit moment of merging on the occasion of the narrator's last visit to the house in the company of Ila. The visit culminates in one last descent into the house's most intensely inscribed room in the cellar to which a plethora of memories and narratives are cathected. Not only is this, as former air raid shelter, the site of tense and suspenseful hours of waiting through the Blitz; it is also the room in which the narrator and Ila had negotiated their asymmetrical relationship; furthermore, the room immediately blends with the cellar in which Ila, years earlier, had sketched the ground plan of the Hampstead house: "So here we are, she said. Back in Raibajar" (SL 181). Most importantly, however, the Hampstead cellar room is the place where that "wonderful, sad little story" (SL 186) that forms the central subtext to the text's concept of love and freedom is told to the young Tridib by Mr Price during an air raid – a story that, itself, gets introduced as boundary-transgressive common property, a narrative manifestation of the aquatic ideal:

It happened everywhere, wherever you wish it. [...] it was a German story in what we call Germany, Nordic in the north, French in France, Welsh in Wales, Cornish in Cornwall: it was the story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-seas (SL 186)

In the concluding section of this chapter will I try to delineate how the Tristan and Iseult story³⁸ functions as a guiding matrix for the evolution of the novel's idealised concepts of love and freedom; at this stage of the discussion, it is only the boundary-transgressive impetus of the story which I am interested in: not only as a travelling narrative that belongs to all regions (of Europe) but also as a narrative that thematises and celebrates love as a transgression of political and communal affiliations. Charged with the echoes of this story, the memories of that other cellar in Raibajar, the reminiscences of the night of the dramatic disclosure of the narrator's love for Ila, and the fantasies of air raids, the Hampstead cellar room suddenly acts as a sphere of ghostly conjunctures, if not con-fusions of time and space. While (in the

³⁸ Meenakshi Mukherjee claims that the story "is never narrated to [Tridib]" (Mukherjee, "Maps and Mirrors", 264) while the text of the novel clearly states that Tridib "forgot all about the air raid while [Mr Price] was telling it to [him]" (SL 186); furthermore, the narrator remembers how Tridib, for his part, later hands down the story to him: "it was the last story Tridib ever told me" (SL 186).

diegetic present) sitting on a camp bed, the narrator “heard [Tridib’s] voice again, in that cellar, while Ila cried beside me” (SL 186). In fact, the entire setting turns into an externalisation of the narrator’s ‘inner world’ of memories, remembered stories and fictions:

Those empty corners filled up [...] with the ghosts who had been handed down to me by time: the ghost of the nine-year-old Tridib, sitting on a camp bed, just as I was, his small face intent, listening to the bombs; [...] the ghost of the eight-year-old Ila, sitting with me under the vast table in Raibajar. They were all around me, we were together at last, not ghosts at all: the ghostliness was merely the absence of time and distance – for that is all that a ghost is, a presence displaced in time. (SL 181)

The suspension of tempo-spatial boundaries as a precondition for such an ‘aquatic’ confluence clearly resonates with the psychoanalytical discourse of the unconscious as timeless (and by extension spaceless). The *locus classicus* for such determinations would certainly be Freud’s 1915 study of *The Unconscious* with its claim that the processes of the “system *Ucs.*” “are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all”.³⁹ A Freudian reading of Ghosh’s cellar scene gets complicated, however, by the circumstance that it entirely inverts one of the other aspects of the unconscious according to Freud, namely the “*replacement of external by psychological reality*”.⁴⁰ Rather to the contrary do the gentle epiphanies in the cellar indicate an inside-out turn in the course of which the inner dramas of memory and fantasy manifest themselves, outside the subject, as ‘presences displaced in time’: a displacement that, furthermore, can only be measured as such on condition that there be time. This latter, however, is explicitly ‘absent’ in the cellar, thus constituting a sphere where the absence of time enables the presence of that which under the normalised temporal regime has to remain absent from the present, namely the past. Ghosh, I would claim, does not so much encourage a reading in terms of psychoanalysis – whether classically Freudian or post-Lacanian in the vein of Žižek – but rather in terms of a tempo-politics as suggested by Dipesh Chakrabarty: In this light, the epiphanies in the cellar would indicate a “time-knot”, a conjuncture of different temporalities that exceeds pure *chronos* (without having any connotations of this latter’s traditional Other, *kairos*) and “makes the present non-contemporaneous with itself”.⁴¹ Ghosh’s cellar scene would thus tie in with a larger project of anti-historicist polemics that, in Chakrabarty and elsewhere, relies more often

³⁹ Sigmund. Freud [1915], “The Unconscious.” *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*. Tr. C.M. Baines. Ed. Angela Richards. (= *The Penguin Freud Library*. Vol II. Ed. James Strachey). Harmondsworth (Penguin) 1991: 159–222; 191.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 191; emphasis i.o.

⁴¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 112.

than not on the principal figure that I have called the 'aquatic ideal'. Chakrabarty, somewhat irritatingly, goes as far as to claim that supernatural beings (and Ghosh's 'ghosts' would certainly qualify for that designation) "are parts of the different ways of being through which we make the present manifold; it is precisely the disjunctures in the present that allow us to be with them".⁴² Chakrabarty speaks in the name of the logic of an alternative and pluralistic modernity that, from the dominant standpoint, must be dismissed or exorcised as 'primordial'. The suspension of 'time' in the cellar, then, does by no means imply the absolute a-temporality that Freud ascribes to the unconscious but rather the momentary unhinging of one particular hegemonic version of time that, in light of the discussions in the first chapter of this book, can easily be identified with the time of historicism. In the 'ghost' episode, which with Chakrabarty dramatises the pluralisation of an otherwise absolutist presentist regime, the normalised relation between chronology and presence/absence is implicitly interrogated as it organises "the vanishing [...] of sequential human temporality into a catachresis named Time".⁴³ It is precisely the exposure of 'Time' as a catachresis, i.e. a metaphor without referentiality, that occurs in this highly – and of course deliberately – underdetermined passage of the book which inverts the chronological order of presence and absence. Textual underdetermination corresponds to the absence or weakness of clear demarcations between possible readings, so that – apart from the thematic and structural fluidities of the text – the implied reader gets increasingly positioned in such a way that he/she has to participate in, and thus co-produce, the aquatic ideal.

9.5 Through the looking glass

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan observes that Ghosh's novel ends on a "curiously religious"⁴⁴ note with Tridib's death in a riot in Dhaka interpreted in terms of "sacrifice", which then, for the narrator, figures as a "final redemptive mystery" (SL 252). Sunder Rajan's point is that Ghosh, by taking recourse to such cloudy concepts, provides a "sentimental resolution instead of the authentic resonance of historical contradiction".⁴⁵ Similarly, Jon Mee gives voice to his "unease"⁴⁶ with what he detects in the ending of *The Shadow Lines* as a potentially Wordsworthian romanticism, and takes pains to

⁴² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 111–12

⁴³ Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 53.

⁴⁴ Sunder Rajan, "Division of Experience", 298.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁴⁶ Jon Mee, "'The Burthen of the Mystery': Imagination and Difference in *The Shadow Lines*". Amitav Ghosh: *A Critical Companion*. Ed Tabish Khair. Delhi (Permanent Black) 2003: 90–108; 90.

highlight the differences between Ghosh's and Wordsworth's usages of such terms as 'glimpse' or 'imagination'. Both Sunder Rajan and Mee appear to be somewhat perplexed by this ending and go out of their ways to 'safeguard' the main part of the novel against the problematic implications of its religious/romantic 'resolution': either by dismissing this latter altogether (Sunder Rajan), or by cautiously trying to demonstrate how Ghosh's text forecloses the "prestige [conventionally ascribed] to endings".⁴⁷

While I sympathise with these critiques (and will finally subscribe to them), I still feel that they constitute a misleading opposition between an ending marked out as unsatisfactory and an otherwise productive text. My contention, by way of contrast, is that the two cannot be thus held apart but are seamlessly continuous.⁴⁸ Their continuity gets visible only, however, when the more disturbing aspects of Ghosh's aquatic ideal are taken into account; when, as the text itself suggests, the movement of boundary transgression is taken to its extreme and turns into radical self-transcendence – a mystical, religious, or romantic concept, for sure, but one for whose utterance the whole text of *The Shadow Lines* strives.

How exactly, one will have to inquire, does Tridib's death come about, and how does it tie in, as a culminating event, with the text's pervasive preoccupation with boundary maintenance and boundary transgression? Tridib gets killed by a communalist anti-Hindu mob in Muslim-dominated Dhaka in the course of the crisis over the theft of the prophet's hair from the Srinagar mosque in 1964. That event, as was demonstrated above, is split into two: the spectacular communal riots in East Pakistan and West Bengal on the one hand, and the peaceful ecumenical demonstrations of a 'syncretic civilisation' in Kashmir itself. While the former is the distorted double of the latter, both share one decisive trait: They cannot be accounted for within the discourse of official 'politics'; the actors involved in either of the two mass events cannot be described in terms of transparent citizenship and hence stand outside the script of official modernity. Ghosh's abjection with riots and his consistent anti-communalism notwithstanding, the fact remains that *The Shadow Lines* at this point equips the riot with a meaning that is derived

⁴⁷ Mee, "'Burthen of the Mystery'", 107.

⁴⁸ Of course I am aware that both Mee and Sunder Rajan's arguments comprise acknowledgments of the continuity of the entire text including its ending: Sunder Rajan does by no means restrict her political/ideological critique to the religious overtones applied to Tridib's death but also interrogates the pervasive liberal individualism of *The Shadow Lines* with which, then, the ending would tie in; Mee, arguing from the other end, emphatically integrates the resolution into the fabric of the whole text by reading it as one among four versions of Tridib's death.

from the trope of the mirror⁴⁹ and that grants the riot, albeit as a sombre reverse of the 'humane', a place in the counter-narrative of the syncretic civilisation. Tridib's death, in this light, repeats and fulfils the reflexivity of these mutual inversions in the gesture of an ultimate collapse into identity. Or at least it is this that Tridib is after.

May Price's account of this event forecloses a reading of Tridib as mere victim of collective violence; rather, he seems to figure as a voluntary participant in his own murder. What are his motives at this point? Is he trying to rescue Tha'mma's uncle and the rickshaw puller from the thugs, or is he primarily preventing May from getting involved? Such would be the conjectures of a reader supporting May's own interpretation of Tridib's death as a 'sacrifice'. However, one is not obliged to grant May the privilege of the last say (which is where I definitely side with Jon Mee). Her rather lofty interpretation appears conspicuously disconnected from her otherwise matter-of-factly account of the event itself: "The mob had surrounded the rickshaw. They had pulled the old man off it. I could hear him screaming. Tridib ran into the mob [...]. Then the mob dragged him in. He vanished" (SL 250).

This account encourages the – equally 'religious' – reading according to which Tridib finally steps, not into some sacrificial fire that is lit out of thin air at the moment of narrative closure, but into the mirror to unite with the dark image on the other side of the looking-glass border around which the entire text is gravitating. Tridib, one will have to remember, had been introduced not only as syncretic encyclopaedia and agent of narrativity but furthermore as the most radical transgressor of boundaries:

He said to me once that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (SL 29)

When Tridib 'runs into the mob and vanishes', does he not perform an act of ultimate self-transcendence which, of course, will have to entail the annihilation of the self? The mob as the dark inversion of the 'humane' would then figure as that mirror image with which the self communes by smashing the looking-glass border that upheld the illusion that the two could be held apart. The Other, however, is always already there within the self: even the rioting mob.

One last look at Ghosh's account of his own experience of the Delhi riots that, as he himself claims, gave rise to his writing of *The Shadow Lines*,

⁴⁹ It may well be thanks to a gesture of discretion that Meenakshi Mukherjee remains silent about this crucial mirroring in Ghosh's text.

might shed some further light on the possible ‘function’ of Tridib’s otherwise unaccountable death. In my reading, Tridib’s act of self-annihilation spells out a radical immersion in the aquatic ideal – not in the ‘friendly sea’ but the Conradian ‘destructive element’. Tridib, in this light, takes the road not taken by Ghosh himself in his account of the Delhi riots.

Beside the programmatic aspects of that essay – the poetics of anti-indifference in the face of violence – Ghosh describes himself as split, during the riots, into his writerly and his citizen self, with the latter actively engaging in relief work and anti-communalist campaigning, while the former tends to artistic aloofness: “Writers don’t join crowds – Naipaul and so many others teach us that”, however strong the “wish to go out, to join, to merge”.⁵⁰ Ghosh’s narrative is about joining and merging despite the impulse to artistic detachment, but it is a merging very different from the act performed by Tridib: Where the latter transcends all boundaries in order to embrace his deadly Other-in-the self, the former performs an act of taking sides, which of course depends on the reassertion of precisely those demarcation lines that the fictional character overcomes. The illicit desire to ‘join crowds’ is certainly *not* fully gratified in Ghosh’s participation in anti-communalist campaigning with a “forlorn little group” (GM 57) of intellectuals, professionals and opposition politicians; underneath this ‘humane’ activity, we must assume after reading *The Shadow Lines*, there lurks a truly illicit fascination with the real crowds, a fascination that has to be repressed by way of Othering its object.

It is significant how Ghosh, however subtly, represents the two sides in terms of class: The violent mobs that stall public busses and assault Sikhs on the day of Indira Gandhi’s assassination “consist mostly of red-eyed young men in half-unbuttoned shirts”, “young men dressed in bright, sharp synthetics” (GM 49), whereas their victims and opponents reside in “neatly and solid middle-class” (GM 50) neighbourhoods and go attired in “chiffon saris” (GM 54). In Ghosh’s reconstruction, the Delhi riots tend to appear as an assault of the underclasses on the middle-classes. Interestingly, Ghosh positions himself, at the opening of the short text, in a socially indeterminate position between these two blocs – a positionality that is once again expressed through the description of the house and its location:

I was living in a part of New Delhi called Defence Colony – a neighbourhood of large, labyrinthine houses, with little self-contained warrens of servants’ rooms tucked away on rooftops and above garages. When I lived there, those rooms had come to house a floating population of the young and straitened – journalists, copywriters, minor executives, and university people like myself. We batted upon this wealthy enclave

⁵⁰ Ghosh, “The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi”, 61; 56; hereafter quoted in my text as GM + page number.

like mites in a honeycomb [...], our ramshackle lives curtained from our landlords by chiffon-draped washing lines and thickets of TV aerials. (GM 46)

Inhabiting temporarily the quarters of the poor but equipped with professional distinction and prospects for upward social mobility, Ghosh and his highly educated fellow 'mites' compensate for the exclusion – by chiffon laundry – from the world of financial capital through accumulated symbolic capital; from this position, the dwelling in former servants' quarters can easily be translated as bohemianism: "I was writing my first novel, in the classic fashion, perched in a garret" (GM 47). While this self-localisation emphasises (not without romanticisation) the fact of not being part of the posh Defence Colony establishment, it cannot account for the absence of the former underclass inhabitants from their abodes now taken by upward-moving professionals in the earliest stages of their promising careers. These former inhabitants are never mentioned, but their likes appear in the text as the mob against whom Ghosh decides to take sides. It is not this side-taking which I would like to problematise – far from it – but its staging as a side-taking *against the underclass*. If, as Ghosh claims, *The Shadow Lines* was conceived in riot-torn Delhi, 1984, then it is this problematic and incomplete self-localisation of the middle-class citizen Ghosh – complicit in the structural disarticulation of the subaltern – that the author Ghosh tries to compensate for in his book: Tridib's tiger's leap through the mirror is meant to symbolically undo and redeem this classist complicity. Tridib transgresses precisely that class-defined demarcation line that Ghosh himself, in his account, permanently re-consolidates as the border between the humane and the lethally violent: Not a self-sacrifice (as May Price has it) but sacrificed by his author, Tridib now takes on the epic dimensions of a scapegoat whose murder, at the hands of his author, is compensated by its mythologisation.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Can one discuss *The God of Small Things* without addressing the Roy phenomenon that, as Graham Huggan tells us, paradigmatically exemplifies how the production and dissemination of Indian Writing in English colludes with the construction and marketing of 'Indo-chic'? On Huggan's reading, Roy stands in metonymically for the majority of Indian writers in English – as an object of, or more likely an accomplice in, the exoticisation and transnational commodification of 'India':

'Indo-chic', and Roy's contribution to it, are not simply to be seen as naive Western constructs; they are products of the globalisation of Western-capitalist consumer culture, in which 'India' functions not just as a polyvalent cultural sign but as a highly mobile cultural good.¹

Already in 2000, Saadia Toor had argued that in the course of the hype around *The God of Small Things*, "the concrete, identifiable author becomes a commodity", and she links this process with the cultural logic of a 'New Orientalism' which – unlike in Huggan's account – is to a large extent employed by elite Indian diasporics as consumers of 'Indo-chic':

It is impossible to abstract the sale of *GOST* [*The God of Small Things*] from the publicity posters of Roy; it is Roy that carries the 'aura' [...] in this case, not so much her artistic production. In fact, one could argue that the cultural commodity being produced, circulated and 'consumed' is also not *GOST* but Roy as the authentic postcolonial female subject, embodying the (post)modern pastiche that makes Indo-chic simultaneously 'new' and 'Orientalist'.²

The Roy phenomenon, to be sure, is not primarily textual but paratextual in nature,³ comprising as it does the marketing of the book as a tangible object,

¹ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 67.

² Saadia Toor, "Indo-Chic: The Cultural Politics of Consumption in Post-Liberalization India". *SOAS Literary Review* 2 (July 2000): 1–36; 26.

³ Rashmi Varma's brief footnote on the Roy phenomenon in his inspiring article on the figure of the tribal in Indian Writing in English forms an exception as it addresses the textual practice of *The God of Small Things* as an example for how "contemporary Indian writing

the promotion of a mythical author persona, the accretion of the novel's nimbus by international awards from London and an obscenity suit from Thiruvananthapuram. Loved from the beginning like the unfortunate Sophie Mol, *The God of Small Things* itself tends to be obscured, paradoxically, by the very limelight shed on the novel: "The hype and the promotion [ponders Makarand Paranjape] has attained such discursive power and penetration that any independent evaluation of the book calls for a special level of clarity and candour".⁴ With good reason, Huggan, Toor, and any good cultural materialist would retort that all hope for an "independent evaluation" is necessarily futile; that it could only be performed – as Spivak does à propos the Rushdie affair – when bracketed as an "attempt [to do] the impossible": in Spivak's case, "a reading of *The Satanic Verses* as if nothing has happened since 1988".⁵ Why, however, should one have to read Roy 'as if nothing had happened since 1998', when the global hype around *The God of Small Things* was on its height, and when Roy herself appeared to be not much more than an extraordinarily photogenic icon readily available for exoticisation? If Roy's image, as Bernd-Peter Lange argues, has undergone significant transformations "from that of a bestselling novelist into that of a political polemicist",⁶ the Roy phenomenon itself has proved to be a bit more complex than the permanent (and highly predictable) reiteration of its implication in the global culture industry can account for.

While focusing on the function of the author as public persona but reducing that function (along with the embodied subject performing it) to complicity, as commodity, in the production and marketing of Indo-chic, this argument runs the risk of occluding the dynamics at work in the interplay of commodification/cooptation and Roy's attempts to make subversive usage of the celebrity status thrust upon her. When Toor, à propos the Roy phenomenon, claims that "the question of authorial intention becomes moot when there is a field of meaning already constructed for Indian cultural

makes productive use of the tribal in order to appropriate the figure for th[e] new hegemony of a neoliberal economic agenda in the era of globalization". Despite this analytical proposition, Varma's article primarily demonstrates how Roy and other writers offer counter-hegemonic representations of the tribal. Rashmi Varma, "Developing Fictions: The 'Tribal' in the New Indian Writing in English". *World Bank Literature*. Ed. Amitava Kumar. Foreword John Berger. Afterword Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis & London (U of Minnesota P) 2003: 216–233; 217; 231.

⁴ Paranjape, *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*, 119.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Reading the *Satanic Verses*". *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. London & New York (Routledge) 1993: 217–241; 219.

⁶ Bernd-Peter Lange, "Mediating Indian English Writing: The Case of Arundhati Roy". *Mediating Indian Writing in English: German Perspectives*. Ed. Bernd-Peter Lange & Mala Pandurang. New Delhi (Rawat) & Münster (Lit) 2005: 65–85; 80.

artefacts in the global cultural economy",⁷ a determinism creeps in that rules out, with relish, all options for authorial agency even while at a second glance merely stating the obvious, namely that subjectivities are scripted and sutured into structures that precede them. Roy's interpellation into literary stardom gets thus rendered as an ineluctable and unconditional surrender to the demands of a 'global cultural economy' whose omnific powers get heavily fetishised in this argument. Meanwhile Arundhati Roy explores the spaces that this interpellation opens for an authorial agency within and simultaneously against that script prepared for her, speaking as a grassroots activist while simultaneously insisting to be speaking from precisely that highly empowered position which the transnational literary circuit has assigned her: The rhetoric of Roy's tracts and interviews invariably involves the claim to be 'a writer' who speaks, for the occasion as it were, *on behalf of* but *not with the mandate of* the pressure group or movement in question. This is important because it makes apparent how Roy never claims to speak in the name of a larger collective that would authorise her enunciation as not simply her own so that, as a representative, she would occupy a speaking position as herself and not herself; instead, Roy emphasises that she speaks as herself and only herself – but as a self that is always already boosted up as celebrity.

In the logic of Toor's, and by extension Huggan's, argument, the very mundane fact of Roy's having her hair shorn and thus her photogeneity deliberately damaged, would already sit awkwardly with the notion of the collaborative author-commodity; more substantially, texts like "The Greater Common Good" or "The Algebra of Infinite Justice" could hardly be reconciled with the glossy iconic Roy that forms the central object and reference point for the dissection of Indo-chic. All the more, then, does it seem called for to update the Roy phenomenon and to mark out the significantly different paratextual scenario that, in the course of a few years, has evolved around *The God of Small Things* precisely because of the politics of authorship and publicly committed figure practised by Arundhati Roy: What happens when the alleged icon of Indo-chic transmutes into a garrulous anti-World Bank, anti-Bush, anti-neoliberalism activist whose every published word strategically feeds on the international prestige bestowed on the author for one single novel? In Bourdieu-inflected descriptive terms, Roy has ever since her Booker award been busy transferring her immense symbolic capital from one field of symbolic production (literature) onto another ('politics', of the grassroots variety). Her tracts and tirades against the Narmada Valley project, India's nuclear bomb, the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, World Bank / IMF policies etc. have all achieved international

⁷ Toor, "Indo-chic", 20.

visibility for the one and only reason that the author of those tracts had already been codified as a virtual brand name promising 'Indo-chic'. However, what kind of Indo-chic is this that forces readers to take in lengthy accounts and statistics of state investments and World Bank interventions in favour of big dams in India ("The Greater Common Good")? How palatable is it to transform a vote of thanks, given on the occasion of an international literary award, into a call for solidarity with the armed resistance in US-occupied Iraq?

My reading of *The God of Small Things*, then, will proceed from, not a denial but a revision of, the Roy phenomenon in the hope of being able to offer a more nuanced discussion of the dynamic relation between the novel, Roy's other texts *and* the authorial stance cultivated by Roy. Other than Huggan or Toor, I will take the text of *The God of Small Things* for my starting point and only in the conclusion to this chapter try to connect my findings to the paratextual manoeuvres that Roy performs within, and to some extent against, the script designed for her by the culture industry.

10.1 Yellow lace: Capital letters and other transactions

Twenty-one years after the events that form the main plot of *The God of Small Things*, Rahel, returned to Ayemenem to meet her twin brother, browses among the books in her deceased grandfather's abandoned library. When picking up one of those long neglected volumes of *The Insect Wealth of India*, she discovers how "[s]ilverfish tunnelled through the pages, burrowing arbitrarily from species to species, turning organized information into yellow lace" (155). Nature itself, then, punctuates and finally undoes the very text that attempts to control it by way of morphological compartmentalisation. This endeavour, based on the identification and systematic distinction of one species from the next, gets literally subverted by the *tunnelling, burrowing* silverfish whose activity is, however, not simply negative: Their tunnels do more than just perforate the page, they also form connectors between those species that taxonomic knowledge had assiduously held apart in the quest for the imperial archive. Not by coincidence had Pappachi, whose books are being processed into 'yellow lace' by the silverfish, "been an Imperial Entomologist" (48), whose "job of collecting, preserving, and indexing India's fauna for the colonial archive, puts him at the heart of the colonial enterprise".⁸ Of course, the archive organises not only rigid compartmentalisation but has, for its ultimate telos, the insertion of all creatures into the modern version of the idea of the great chain of being.

⁸ Julie Mullaney, *The God of Small Things: A Reader's Guide*. New York & London (Continuum) 2002: 33.

In the face of immense gaps of positive knowledge, it was the task of the “fictions of morphology” (a discipline that *The Insect Wealth of India* partakes of) “to construct lines to join together the established points of positive knowledge into a projected network of comprehensive knowledge”.⁹ The archival text, itself triggered by those ‘gaps’ it is designed to ‘fill’,¹⁰ is in this respect not simply undone by the burrowing silverfish, not only exposed as always already porous and punctuated: More astonishingly, the silverfish themselves engage in their very own labour of ‘joining together’ and ‘projecting networks’. What appears as pure disarticulation is revealed as itself articulatory. The mask of continuity as contained in the concept of the great chain of being is removed as the text’s discontinuous ‘nature’ gets revealed. Simultaneously, even while effacing the networks produced by the imperial archivists, decomposition produces a new connective textuality that is itself expressed in terms of the fragile textility of lace: a structure conspicuous for its discontinuity and looseness, but also its ornamentality.

Roy’s text, I wish to show, is auto-subversively modelled on this networked, lace-like texture: It abounds with widely dispersed attributes and semantic mirrorings that produce, like the silverfish tunnels, surprising subterranean connections between figures that, at the surface level, appear to be distinctly at variance with each other; it is precisely these connective textual tunnels that disorganise the text’s own taxonomies – its economy of ascribing villainy, rebellion and victimhood to individual characters – and reveal well-nigh invisible correspondence patterns and constellations that seem to figure as indicators of the Real.

Roy’s text takes on a revelatory quality as it works to disclose how such indeterminacy is not only allied with but actually grounded in nature itself, as the opening sequence of the novel anticipates: The monsoon transforms the Kerala land- and cityscapes to the effect of a thorough suspension of all demarcations between wilderness and civilisation. “Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads” (1). Soon this natural process of blurring boundaries gets aligned with the fuzzy childhood identities of the twin protagonists: “Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities” (2). This, it is later asserted, is a world in which “there *was* no Each, no Other” (225). It is against this fuzziness that a whole battery of capitalised concepts has got summoned in order to interpellate the twins – as individuals – into

⁹ Richards, *Imperial Archive*, 46.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 46: “morphology provided filler for the great gaps of knowledge.”

circumscribed identities: “Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons”, effectively ensuring that the twins’ “lives have a size and a shape now. Estha has his and Rahel hers” (3). Tracing the constitution of the subject through its insertion into the symbolic order, Roy’s text foregrounds the constructedness of the dominant order through its discrepancy from the Real, which here figures as order’s ‘natural’ Other. In principle, it is this latter which prevails – or, rather, whose principal prevalence the text strives to affirm. Thus, even on the very first pages of the book, after the assertion that the twins have successfully been normalised into the order of fixed identities, the grown-up Estha subtly collides first with another character (Comrade Pillai, a minor villain in Roy’s plot), and then even with the main instigator of havoc, resentful Baby Kochamma. Estha, we learn, “had acquired the ability to blend into the background of wherever he was – into bookshelves, gardens, curtains, doorways, streets – to appear inanimate, almost invisible to the untrained eye” (10). What if not a chameleon is it that is thus described? Only a few pages further down, however, it is Comrade Pillai of whom the narrator has to relate that “he walked through the world like a chameleon” (14). At the airport scene, when the Ayemenem family members receive Sophie Mol and her mother, Baby Kochamma’s neckmole begins to “change colour like a chameleon” (147). Such multiple applications of one vehicle to apparently incompatible tenors do not only interconnect characters that otherwise appear fundamentally opposed to each other; it more basically undoes the distinctions and demarcations that hold characters apart and associates them in unison with the protean quality (or absence of quality) that the vehicle ‘chameleon’ imparts on them. Similarly, at least five characters get appellated as ‘monsters’ at various points: Vellya Paapen, Velutha’s father, asks “God’s forgiveness for having spawned a monster [i.e., Velutha]” (78) but then he himself displays “an immutable monstrous wink” after having removed his glass eye in order to give it back to Mammachi (254); a little later Chacko, when banishing Ammu and the twins from the house after the revelation of the illicit love affair between Ammu and Velutha, “had disappeared and left a monster in his place” (302); finally, the twins themselves appear to their mother like “two small monsters” as they sleep “with their eyes half open” (331). These are not unruly similes in an overwritten over-ornamental text but widely dispersed, subtle indicators of the deep actuality of overall connectivity that the text attempts to retrieve from, and uphold against, the implemented order of neat demarcations and unbearable polarities. At other such instances, Ammu and Velutha coalesce by virtue of their shared dream of stepping out of the given normativities: While Ammu occasionally “walked out of the world like a witch to a happier,

better place" (44), Velutha yearns to "sleep and wake up in another world" (285). Mammachi and Vellya Paapen perform the very same gesture towards their respective sons: "Vellya Paapen tried to caution Velutha" (76); "Mammachi tried to caution Chacko" (122) – in both cases, parents unsuccessfully remind their sons about their proper place in the given order, either as Untouchable or upper-caste, upper-class entrepreneur. Vellya Paapen, however, also merges with Baby Kochamma as the latter almost verbatim repeats the former's misgivings about Velutha's improper conduct: "It was not *what* he said, but the *way* he said it" (Vellya Paapen, 76); "it was not just *what* Velutha had said that had made her come to the police, but the *way* he said it" (Baby Kochamma; 260–61).

Silverfish tunnels, we have seen, form connectors between species defined as distinct, thus undoing the morphological taxonomies of the imperial archive. When a textual tunnel appears to connect such apparently incompatible characters as Vellya Paapen and Baby Kochamma, allowing the former to resurface in the latter's position, then another discipline's contribution to the imperial archive is brought to the point of collapse: colonial anthropology along with its rearticulation in current casteism. Nicholas Dirks has demonstrated how caste emerges only with and through the imperial archive as the central category for any understanding of Indian society; this is not the same as saying that caste had been invented by the British but that it gets rewritten as a "unitary signifier"¹¹ only under the totalising and taxonomic epistemic regime that British colonialism applied to India in the course of the nineteenth century. Dirks' concept of the imperial archive appears to have evolved without reference to Thomas Richards' earlier work but shares with it the basic assumption that the archive (whether morphological or ethnographic) strives towards the hierarchical placement of clearly circumscribed units (species, social groups) in a continuous system (the great chain of being, Indian society).

This system, in Dirks' account as much as in *The God of Small Things*, figures as a proto-morphological edifice of knowledge in which caste discrimination engenders the denial of a common biology shared by all humans. Baby Kochamma's "olfactory observation", after an encounter with Vellya Paapen, that "*they have a particular smell, these Paravans*" (257) could well contribute to the classification of a species; in this vein, Velutha's 'Touchable' tormentors can unleash their brutality on their Dalit victim precisely because "any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago" (309).

¹¹ Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. New Delhi (Permanent Black) 2001: 121.

If Roy's text burrows a tunnel between the Dalit and the upper-caste Christian, it organises an interchangeability of these two allegedly incommensurate positions and confronts the entrenched system of casteist apartheid with the underlying 'truth' of commonality – a commonality of which neither of the two characters involved is conscious. At a superior level, as it were, the text thus produces a transactional network that, behind the actors' backs, subtly reconfigures relations beyond, and against, the polarising paradigms into whose reproduction the characters are interpellated as accomplices.

In this function, the 'tunnels' collude with the more obvious textual procedures of reversals whose rhetorical expression would be the trope of the chiasmus. Chiasmus, Paul de Man observes, organises an interminable rotating movement between polar radicals, which enter into a relationship of exchange, even interchangeability; it is, in short, the effect of chiasma to "put in question the irrevocability of [...] compelling polarity".¹² Such moves of reversals, mirrorings and inversions abound in *The God of Small Things* at all levels: The river is in the boat (title of ch. 10); repose becomes movement when a "room went round in the calm, chrome centre of the silver ceiling fan" (239); presences ("black cats") become absences ("black cat-shaped holes in the Universe" [82]); Velutha is called Velutha "which means White in Malayalam – because he was so black" (73). Yet these chiasmic transactions – both structurally encoded and thematised – are counterbalanced by a category that tends to arrest them: the capital letter. Though written in English, the 'first language' of the novel's fictional world is Malayalam: a language whose very name forms a palindrome, hence a chiasmus. However, when Estha and Rahel as children explain to the visiting Miss Mitten "how it was possible to read both *Malayalam* and *Madam I'm Adam* backwards as well as forwards" (60), they overlook the asymmetry introduced by the capital letter that blocks the seemingly easy move to and fro. In a self-consciously stark and provisional hypothesis I will suggest that Roy's text is organised around this tension between the chiasmic flow (which will serve as the text's utopian horizon inasmuch as it organises an underlying all-embracing connectivity of everything with everything else in a non-hierarchical continuity) and the capital letter that insists on the proper place of things in "the smug, ordered world" (176). The conspicuous capitalisations that commentators have repeatedly noted would in this reading correspond to the novel's stature as a story of two children's traumatic initiation into the gruesome order of things; as a novel of transgression, however, *The God of Small Things* upholds the chiasmus as a medium of free

¹² Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven & London (Yale UP) 1979: 49.

exchange between those poles that the order of the capital letter attempts to keep apart. It would be unviable, though, to construe a strictly dichotomic rhetorical structure in which chiasmus and capitalisation were operative as radical opposites: Roy's text, as we shall see, blurs even the very boundaries on which it is posited.

In most neutral terms, the capital letter in Roy's novel indicates conventionalisation, assigning the status of proper names to concepts, incidents, or objects otherwise unmarked. It is within private or collective mythologies that such capitalisations occur. Thus Baby Kochamma keeps an "organized, careful account of Things She's Done For People, and Things People Hadn't Done For Her" (98). Accountancy and 'organized information' here coincide with the mythology of a private neurosis. For all practical purposes the heiress to the Ayemenem house, Baby Kochamma "used her windows for specific purposes. For a Breath of Fresh Air. To Pay for the Milk. To Let Out a Trapped Wasp" (28). These highly quotidian activities attain the status of ritual in the service of an elaborate domestic politics of border maintenance that bespeaks an underlying private mythology of emphatically non-public domesticity according to which the ideal house would be a fortress couched in the clear-cut distinction of outside from inside. Notably, all three codified activities regulate the exchange between the internal and the external, either controlling influx or expelling the Othered outsider (the wasp). Ironically, though, Baby Kochamma has unwittingly allowed the whole world, as it were, to invade the house by having a satellite dish installed through which "[b]londes, wars, famines, football, sex, music, coups d'état" (27) gain entrance to the elaborately protected terrain of the domestic. Baby Kochamma deludes herself into imagining these scopophilic objects could be mastered and "summoned up like servants" (27), while in fact the threat of media invasion is always lurking in the wings:

what would Hulk Hogan and Bam Bam Bigelow do? If their dish were occupied, where would *they* go? Would they slip through the chimney into Baby Kochamma's life and TV? Would they land on the old stove with a *Heeaagh!*, in their muscles and spangled clothes? Would the Thin People – the famine victims and refugees – slip through the cracks in the doors? Would Genocide slide between the tiles? (188)

Private space, obviously Baby Kochamma's fetishised domestic ideal, gets irredeemably interrupted by the house's insertion into the current mediascape that "bring[s] the outside world into the home via TV" whose effect it is "to transgress the (always, of course, potentially sacred) boundary which protects the privacy and solidarity of the home from the flux and threat of the outside

world”.¹³ In the Ayemenem house, communication technology’s boundary transgression opens inroads for further invasions since the last remaining inhabitants, Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria, turn into TV addicts and hence neglect their labours of physical boundary maintenance: “Filth had laid siege to the Ayemenem house like a medieval army on an enemy castle”, and in fact nature has long since penetrated across the sacred boundary as “[m]idges whirled in teapots. Dead insects lay in empty vases” (88). Transgressions like these, though clearly adverse to Baby Kochamma’s private myth of well-maintained boundaries, do however in some sense return the house to its own ‘nature’ which consists of a deep connectedness with its outside. In a striking simile, Roy’s narrator succeeds in fusing the notion of the house-as-fortress (the shell) with the idea of the house as osmotically linked with the world (the retention of the sound of the sea inside the shell): “Though you couldn’t see the river from the house any more, like a sea-shell always has a sea-sense, the Ayemenem house still had a river sense” (30). The house, then, is not posited on the strained exclusion of the outside but, rather to the contrary, on the latter’s internalisation. As opposed to Baby Kochamma’s capitalised ritualistic manoeuvres of controlled and regulated exchange, this notion is based on an interminable chiasmic inside/outside transaction according to which the shell is as much in the sea as the sea is inside the shell, the house as much in the world as the world inside the house. Baby Kochamma’s defenceless self-insertion into the circuits of global television is at best a prosthetic caricature of this ontological truth.

Two further instances play out the imagery of the house: in one case (the History House), as a metaphor of postcolonial history, in the other (the architecture of kathakali), as a blueprint for narrative as such. When Chacko tries to explain to the young twins “that history was like an old house at night” (52), he invokes one more version of the house as posited on the demarcation of outside from inside. His imagery at the same time construes the domestic sphere of house and family as a vehicle for the national: It is as “a *family* of Anglophiles” that the Ipes are “trapped outside their own history” (52), with the impossible image of being – other than Baby Kochamma’s ritualistic wasp – *trapped outside* already undermining the consistency of the allegory, or, rather, hinting at an underlying chiasmus of inside and outside. This reversal assumes the open sphere as confinement, and entrance to circumscribed domesticity (the inside of the house) as an escape from that paradoxical agoraphobic claustrophobia. At the same time Roy’s text abounds with situations that mark domesticity as imprisonment in

¹³ Morley, “Bounded Realms: Household, Family, Community, and Nation”, 153.

the 'repressive space' of home: Ammu's confinement in her room ("like the family lunatic in a medieval household" [252]), Baby Kochamma's self-immuring in the decaying Ayemenem house, Velutha's brother Kuttappen fettered to his sickbed in the "corner of his home that Death had reserved to administer her deathly affairs" (206). Such scenes make the reversal enacted through Chacko's imagery all the more conspicuous:

'We can't go in [into the History House],' Chacko explained, 'because we have been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try to listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war. [...] A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that makes us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves. [...] We're Prisoners of War,' Chacko said. 'Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas.' (53)

When the state of being locked out spells out imprisonment, then freedom appears to lie in confinement. Of course, Chacko's image of the inaccessible History House is designed to illustrate the colonial/postcolonial subjects' exclusion from 'History' in the emphatic sense of the European Enlightenment tradition as well as the postcolonial fixation on that cherished but always withheld object. Anglophilia, then, stands in for the predicament of a postcolonial melancholia that remains ensnared in the value systems of hyperreal Europe.¹⁴ It can hardly go unnoticed, however, that Chacko's formulation of imprisonment functions *at the same time* as a description of a state of freedom, at least in a novel that sides with its main characters' rage against rigid identitarianism, a rage that has for its positive reference point the complete suspension of history in the hope to arrive at that very state that Chacko bemoans: to 'belong nowhere'.

Chacko's allegory, flawed as it is by internal antinomies, typifies the text's strategy of multiple constructions, palimpsestifications, and polyvalent images. Thus, when Chacko claims that the Anglophile postcolonials are "unable to retrace their steps because their *footprints had been swept away*" (52; my emphasis), his narrative of historical victimhood unwittingly connects with a very different history of exclusion and denial – the time "when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint" (73–4). Immediatly, this juxtaposition of the denial of history to the (post)colonial subject with the politics of Untouchability engenders a further reversal: While Chacko can pose, in his own narrative, as the victim of an epistemic violence that 'invades our dreams' and effaces even the vestiges of vernacular knowledge systems, the second instance articulates this narrative

¹⁴ See ch.1.

of victimhood with Chacko's historical involvement, now as perpetrator, in another (by implication: more abject) history of exclusion. Velutha, though the "Crawling Backwards Days" (76) have long been declared over, does not even require a broom: "He left no ripples in the water. No footprints on the shore" (289–90). Here the image of the swept-away footprint begins to oscillate between absolute effacement and radical freedom. On the one hand, Velutha figures as the "only one victim" (191) of the whole plot of *The God of Small Things*, in whose betrayal and brutal murder all other characters are, however differently, implicated. Reading the effacement of the footprint as a token of victimhood (claimed by Chacko for himself, ascribed to the Paravan community by casteist exclusion), the fact that Velutha does not even produce any traces of his presence appears to underscore his exceptional and singular victimhood, but would also – quite inconsistent with the profile of that rebellious character – render him an epitome of an "Old World Paravan" (76) who actively reproduces his fully internalised complete disenfranchisement as a docile body. This reading would, in other words, remain loyal to the parameters of the institution of Untouchability that constructs the footprint as pollution, and exposes the Dalit, as an impossible subject, to ceaseless chains of interpellation as annihilation.

However, immediately before it is being asserted that Velutha leaves no footprint, the very concept of purity gets itself subjected to a complete reversal in which the Touchable's touch appears as offensively polluting to the (former) Untouchable: "Though the rain washed Mammachi's spit off his face, it didn't stop the feeling that somebody had lifted off his head and vomited into his body" (286). Without fully displacing the victimising associations of the absent footprint, Velutha's tracelessness is also a mark of his deification. It is in Ammu's afternoon dream, immediately subsequent of the recognition scene (see below), that Velutha first figures as one who "left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors" (216), and then gets identified as the "God of Loss" (217). Both victim and god, then, Velutha may, in a reading inflected by René Girard, be conceived as the victim of a *collective* murder: a victim that will get deified posthumously. He would, on this reading, function as "a scapegoat both *in* and *for* the text".¹⁵ The image of the swept-away footprint would then receive a complex genealogy that would accommodate both its apparently contradictory aspects of radical exclusion and idealisation. But, irritatingly, this reading would emphatically list Ammu, as the one who authors/dreams Velutha's deification, with the perpetrators of the collective murder.

¹⁵ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*. Tr. Yvonne Treccero. Baltimore (Johns Hopkins UP) 1986: 118.

Not all the text's palimpsests can be equipped with such clearly retrievable itineraries. The image of the house (that has, in pursuit of Roy's rhizomatic connectivities, triggered an excursus into the adjacent imagery of the footprint) obviously multiplies into a rather literal emblem of domesticity as fetish and prison as well as an allegory of the postcolonial fixation with history. To complicate matters further, Chacko's lofty allegory of that withheld privileged site of history as a house from which one is locked out gets immediately projected by the young twins onto a concrete building in the vicinity that from then on figures as "the History House" in the private mythology of the children; this concrete house gets simultaneously overwritten with an intertextual reference to Joseph Conrad so that Chacko's postcolonial melancholia fuses with late imperial anxiety of 'degeneration' by going native:

Estha and Rahel had no doubt that the house Chacko meant was the house on the other side of the river [...]. Kari Saipu's house. The Black Sahib. The Englishman who had 'gone native'. Who spoke Malayalam and wore mundus. Ayemenem's own Kurtz. Ayemenem his private Heart of Darkness. (52)

Elsewhere in the novel, the house figures also, at a metanarrative level, as a metaphor of the text itself. Kathakali, the elaborately narrative Keralite dance form, gets introduced in terms of architecture:

kathakali discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they *have* no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and thick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. (229)

Based on the suspension of suspense, the absence of narrative desire due to the iteration of reading again and again, the 'Great Stories' take on a spatial form. In the kathakali chapter, it is two well-known episodes from the *Mahabharata* that are performed by a dancing troupe whose members have been degraded to marketable "Regional Flavour" (231) offering "truncated swimming pool performances" (229) at the erstwhile History House now turned into a de luxe Heritage hotel. Kathakali processed into palatable folklore – 'Indo-chic', no doubt – might well stand in here for the anxiety with which Roy's text suspects itself of its potential to become itself such a commodity. Against this suspicion, it resurrects 'authentic' kathakali as an intricate architecture of ancient (for Indian audiences well-known) stories interwoven in the medium of stylised corporeal performance. For the practitioner, the mythological stories that the dance time and again re-enacts, "are the house that he was raised in" (229–30). Yet such invocations of

authenticity surely bespeak authenticity's loss,¹⁶ and even while romanticising the beauty and magic of the Kathkali Man, Roy is alert enough to acknowledge this circumstance. Like everything in *The God of Small Things*, kathakali is imbued with a deep and unsublatable ambivalence. For the performance that Estha and Rahel witness, *because* it is 'authentic', all too easily blurs into the beating-up of Velutha on the verandah of the History House twenty-one years earlier. The two *Mahabharata* episodes performed by the troupe narrate tragic entrapments in the complexities of the Love Laws, and enact excessively violent murders:

It was no performance. Esthappen and Rahel recognized it. They had seen it work before. Another morning. Another stage. Another kind of frenzy [...]. The brutal extravagance of this [the kathakali performance] matched by the savage economy of that [the police posse's assault on Velutha]. (235)

The edifice of kathakali, then, is not simply "a warm house sheltering from a storm" (234). It is rather the true History House, inside which the excesses of history are re-enacted time and again as well-known, familiar stories. Yet it is exactly this iterative narration that gives kathakali its allure as the form that matches the compulsion to repeat at the heart of trauma. Rahel and Estha, after the cataclysm at the History House and their implication in the betrayal of Velutha, "would replay this scene in their heads. As children. As teenagers. As adults" (318). Unable to "exorcise the memories that haunted them", the twins remain "trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative" (191). Into this extended post-traumatic impasse, kathakali reimports the "promise of a story" (192), the possibility to retrieve (or construe) a narrative coherence that the traumatising rupture had effectively foreclosed.

Capital letters in *The God of Small Things* indicate convention, more precisely, the mythical foundation of the order of things. They translate and 'explain', in an alliance of classism, casteism and sexism, Chacko's proto-feudalist sexual exploitation of pickle-factory workers as "Men's Needs"; they distinguish, in official Communist-Party terminology, between "the Overthrowers" and the "treacherous ranks of the To Be Overthrown" (280); they codify social hierarchies in terms of class and caste by identifying "people from Good Families" (181) and differentiating "Touchable workers" (121) from their Untouchable colleagues; and they crystallise most pointedly in the set of unwritten, unspoken rules formularised as "the Love Laws" that "lay down who should be loved and how. And how much" (33), it being

¹⁶ See Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions*. Norman & London (U of Oklahoma P) 1988: 164.

understood that some, like unlucky Sophie Mol, deserve to be “Loved from the Beginning” (135).

The majority of capitalisations, however, occurs in the focalised perspective of the twins as children being increasingly inserted into an order structured by a largely obscure language. Theirs is an entirely different mythology that is grounded in the opacity of the signifier and to some extent reminiscent of the prior phase of ‘magical thinking’. Thus, when the arm of the railway level-crossing gate comes down and threatens to prevent the family from reaching the cinema in time, young Rahel “knew that this had happened because she had been hoping that it wouldn’t” (58). Similarly, Estha as a boy can still remember his own animistic “impression that you had to say ‘Bow’ when you bowed. That you had to *say* it to do it” (97). In the period of the main events (i.e., in 1969) the twins are seven years old and have largely outgrown this magical approach to language and speech; instead, their languaging now comprises, as Cynthia Vanden Dreisen convincingly points out,¹⁷ those procedures that Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin had classically defined as “the abrogation of the received English which speaks from the centre, and the act of appropriation which brings it under the influence of a vernacular tongue, the complex of speech habits which characterize the local language”.¹⁸

This, of course, is not the intentional agenda of Estha and Rahel as fictional characters but may serve as an apt description of both their characterological agency and their actantial function within the textual politics of Roy’s novel. Thus, in the fallible filtration through the young twins’ focalisation, the funeral formula of “*Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust*” reads “*Dus to dus to dus to dus to dus*” (7) so that the tautological quality of the formula gets highlighted in its distortion to an interminable series of empty signifiers. One may, as David Punter suggests, read such idiosyncracies as indicators of a radical exclusion from language. Punter reads *The God of Small Things* in the logic of his own agenda as a text that is primarily about its own impossibility: “the language used to recount the story is haunted by the languages in which the protagonists might have told the tale – had they had their own language, or indeed in this case *any* language at their disposal”.¹⁹ While such a reading would neatly match the privilege that Roy generally confers on the marginalised and victimised (see below), it overlooks the fact that Roy’s text, modelled on the subversive

¹⁷ Cynthia Vanden Dreisen, “When Language Dances: The Subversive Power of Roy’s Text in *The God of Small Things*”, *Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary*. Ed. R. K. Dhawan. London (Sangam) 1999: 365–377.

¹⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London & New York (Routledge) 1989: 39.

¹⁹ Punter, *Postcolonial Imaginings*, 75.

burrowing of the silverfish that undo the imperial text, is designed to follow the structure of lace: told as a text that has already been subjected to subversion, it thrives on the new configurations enabled by the decomposition of 'organised information'. Punter is therefore right to observe that the text as it is is "haunted, always and forever, by the text that might have been",²⁰ but the impossibility of that other text does by no means mark a lack of language; it rather testifies to the effective undoing of that other text – which is *imperial* – being unravelled and reprocessed into the loose, lace-like structure of *The God of Small Things*. In this laceing process, the childrens' languageing with its both critical/abrogative and productive/appropriative potentials plays a vital role as a marker of agency as an effect of disciplinary interpellation.

This agential potential manifests in their reading backwards habits – an affront to the normalising efforts of the family, and hence heavily disciplined²¹ – as well as in their morphological and orthographic deviances. These enact, by virtue of the abrogative and appropriative thrust of this mode of languaging, a revaluation of the capital letter as a means for the construction of a private universe.

Similarly, the chiasmus may operate in unison with the capital letter (both formally and in terms of content), as in the apodictic slogan above the entrance door to Comrade Pillai's house: "*Work is Struggle. Struggle is Work*" (268), or when the police platoon combing the island in search for Velutha comes to figure as "Dark of Heartness [that] tiptoed into the Heart of Darkness" (306). Most significantly, however, the unfolding of the Love Laws reveals how these most restrictive codifications of rigid identity unleash a series of compressed chiasma: The Love Laws are those "laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly" (30). The Love Laws, then, dictate that the simple proposition of identity be universally applied: 'jam is jam', after all, follows that radical pattern of 'A equals A'. Structurally a pure chiasmus, the axiomatic equation yet operates as the opposite of the transactive chiasmus but rather forms, in Hegel's terms, the "expression of an empty tautology"²² that attempts to occlude and render unthinkable that which holds the potential of exploding it: difference. Difference activates and animates the otherwise merely claimed basic condition of unclassifiability that is captured in the

²⁰ Punter, *Postcolonial Imagings*, 75.

²¹ See 60: "They were made to write *In future I will not read backwards. In future I will not read backwards*. A hundred times. Forwards."

²² "*Ausdruck der leeren Tautologie*"; see G.W.F. Hegel [1816], *Wissenschaft der Logik. Zweiter Band: Die subjektive Logik oder die Lehre vom Begriff*. [Hauptwerke in sechs Bänden: Band 4]. Hamburg (Felix Meiner) 1999: 26.

metaphor of a domestic product that cannot be contained within the empty tautology of the proposition of identity:

They used to make pickles, squashes, jams, curry powders and canned pineapples. And banana jam (illegally) after the FPO (Food Products Organization) banned it because according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said. As per their books. (30)

Whatever exceeds categorisation 'as per the book' is declared illegal. In this case, however, the whole family conspires in the collective act of bypassing the law by continuously producing the unclassifiable substance; yet even while transgressing, they obviously keep up the appearance of legality (and fixed identity) inasmuch as they insist on the ostensibly unambiguous signification of the actually indeterminate referent. They thus both circumvent and reaffirm the law of identity. This dual (and duplicitous) gesture is expressive, as Rahel as an adult reflects, of the basic condition of the family at large: "this difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question":

Perhaps, Ammu, Estha and she [Rahel] were the worst transgressors. But it wasn't just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly. (30)

Under the regime of the Love Laws, themselves expressed as the tautological chiasma of metaphysical identity, chiasmus again steps in as a subversive tool. As children, Estha and Rahel develop a highly productive misapprehension of the logics of English, a misreading expressed precisely by the logical figure of equation that the Love Laws render tautological. The English language in its articulatory capacity to form compounds (i.e., to connect distinct semantic entities) appears to be governed by "the precision and logic of mathematics" as "*Cuff+link = cuff-link*" (51). In mathematical terms, of course, this equation of plus and minus would pass as invalid; in the logic of Roy's text, however, it figures as the formal equivalent to a debunking of the identitarian claims of the Love Laws; in other words, as the reinstitutionalisation of chiasmus as the trope of interchangeability and transaction between *different* entities. As such, chiasmus opens up ways to evade the identitarianism of the Love Laws, and Roy's text relishes in situations that make such fluidities manifest. Thus, when Rahel as a woman watches her bathing twin, Estha, she does so from a multiplicity of perspectives none of which gains ascendancy over the others:

Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin. She flew these several kites at once. He was a

naked stranger met in a chance encounter. He was the one that she had known before Life began. The one who had once led her (swimming) through their lovely mother's cunt. Both things *unbearable in their polarity*. In their irreconcilable far-apartness. (93; my emphasis)

Polarity is *unbearable* because it is posited on determinacy and fixed identity. Rahel, in the quoted passage, defies such identifications as she hovers between mother and sister, woman and twin, just as Estha is complete stranger and most intimate companion both at the same time.

10.2 Theatres of looks

In one of the few genuinely funny passages of the novel, Mammachi inspects her recently arrived granddaughter, Sophie Mol. Mammachi, however, is almost blind “even after her cornea transplant”, and therefore “could only see light and shadow” (174): a polarising vision that levels out all indeterminacies in-between the dark and the light, and that hence colludes, in the field of the visual, with the identitarianism laid down by the Love Laws. Extreme myopia notwithstanding, Mammachi's is still a highly acquisitive look that transforms seeing into stocktaking and accountancy: Rahel “saw Mammachi draw Sophie Mol close to her eyes to look at her. To read her like a cheque. To check her like a bank note” (174). Paradoxically, it is her near blindness that guarantees Mammachi the gratification of her scopophilic desire, for the lack of eyesight allows for the construction of the not-seen object of visual pleasure according to the wishes of the non-spectator. These wishes, of course, are emphatically not self-chosen but highly overdetermined. In order to render legible the complex visual transactions at work in this scene, a critical theory of the look appears indispensable; it is for this reason that I turn to Kaja Silverman's *Threshold of the Visible World* as a political re-reading of Jacques Lacan's observations on the field of vision.

In the configuration paraphrased above, the near absence of the embodied look of the subject (Mammachi) gives all the more room for the operations of what Lacan called the *screen*. In Lacan's construction of the field of vision, the act of looking gets refracted in at least two crucial respects: First, access to the object of the look occurs only through the always intervening image; second, the ‘subject-as-look’ is simultaneously the ‘subject-as-spectacle’ inasmuch as it inserts itself, even in the allegedly agential, ‘sovereign’ act of perspectival looking, into the field of vision as object of the gaze. This latter does not coincide with any embodied look – it is in fact not an actual look at all – but rather stands in for the culturally defined way of

seeing, and affects all acts of looking with “the presence of others as such”.²³ Even the sentry in Bentham’s panopticon, though positioned as to be invisible from all points of the architectural structure, would still be subject to the gaze, this presence of others as such: because the gaze is not empirical but inscribed into the subject itself as the inescapable fantasy of being seen that the subject itself produces: Even in the very act of looking, the subject gets therefore simultaneously rendered as object of the cultural gaze and projected, as image, onto the screen. As in the mirror, it appears as both a unified ‘whole’ and a normative Other on the screen. Kaja Silverman politicises the categories and configurations that Lacan proposed in *Four Fundamental Concepts*; for Silverman, the screen does not simply figure (as in Lacan himself) as that opaque site onto which the subject gets externally represented as spectacle to the effect of its ‘captation’, which, then, ensures the subject’s identity in the field of vision. Instead, the screen functions, on Silverman’s reading, as “the site at which the gaze is defined for a particular society, and is consequently responsible both for the way in which the inhabitants of that society experience the gaze’s effects, and for much of the seeming particularity of that society’s visual regime”.²⁴ The welcome scene in *The God of Small Things*, obviously, is overdetermined by a normative figure of whiteness that cannot be reduced to such physical properties or even ideological connotations (even though all these get intensely invoked in the process); whiteness functions rather as an empty signifier “that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusion and exclusion constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference”.²⁵

In Mammachi’s look, the Anglo-Indian girl can appear as the ideal child precisely because she remains largely unseen. Though not quite: “Mammachi (with her better eye) saw redbrown hair (N...almost blond), the curve of two fatfreckled cheeks (Nnnn...almost rosy)” (174). Obviously, the inspecting grandmother, driven by an inverted Anglophile racism that craves for whiteness, actively takes refuge to blindness in order not to have to see Sophie’s undesirable racial hybridity (her not-quite blondness, her not-quite rosy cheeks) that threatens to frustrate her visual pleasure. Soon the girl herself is subjected to a catechism in whose course her words, instead of her visible appearance, come to serve as testimony to her ideality – in other words, as consolidation of the *image* of Sophie in conformity to the screen:

²³ Jacques Lacan [1973], *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Boox XI*. Tr. Alan Sheridan. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. New York (Norton) 1998: 91.

²⁴ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*. New York & London (Routledge) 1996: 135.

²⁵ Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*. New York & London (Routledge) 2000: 4.

'Tell me, are you a pretty girl?' she [Mammachi] asked Sophie Mol.

'Yes,' Sophie Mol said.

'And tall?'

'Tall for my age,' Sophie Mol said. (174)

This switch from inspection to friendly interrogation ensures the containment of the ultimately dissatisfactory object within the protocols of a racist value system: the socio-historically particular screen of a visual regime aligned with hierarchies in terms of race and caste; further informants – Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria – will have to step in to second in the construction and consolidation of the Sophie ideal: "'She has her mother's colour,' Kochu Maria said. [...] 'she's very beautiful [...]. *Sundarikutty*. She's a little angel'" (179). Here, the strategic misrepresentation of the present referent easily moves from the physical feature of an allegedly 'white' complexion ('her mother's colour') to the ideological elevation of the girl as beatific – an equation of the white female as angel.²⁶ All these are attempts to insert Sophie Mol into the script prepared for her as much as for everyone else. Mammachi, because she lacks the embodied look almost completely, can function in this scene as an embodied agent of the cultural gaze, that immediately captures Rahel and restrictively reinserts her in the hierarchical visual regime. For it is by anticipation of the gaze that Rahel, in relation to Sophie, comes to see herself as screened, and (d)evaluated, by the Other primarily in terms of complexion: "Kochu Maria watched with her cake-crumbs. The Fond Smiles watched Fondly. Little Girls Playing. Sweet. One beach-coloured. One brown. One Loved. One Loved a Little Less" (186).

The welcome scene heavily emphasises how these mechanics of overdetermined identitarianism depend on their enactment in staged and ritualised performance: The young Rahel "*looked* around her and *saw* that she was in a Play" (172; my emphases). Hers, other than Sophie's, is "only a small part. She was just the landscape. A flower perhaps. Or a tree. A face in the crowd. A townspeople" (172–73). Again vision is of crucial importance, but in the case of Rahel it is not a wish-fulfilling blindness but a seeing through the logic of the script within which she is granted only a highly marginal position as part of the ground from which Sophie is to emerge as the figure. While this marginality clearly effects a narcissistic insult, it does not necessarily result in the successful captation of the subject. In Roy's politicisation of the visual field, it also opens up avenues for an evasion of the screen; even the relative indeterminacy of Rahel's potential role within the 'Play' as an unspecified bit part (landscape, flower, face in the crowd,

²⁶ For a survey of this tradition in Victorianism, see Richard Dyer, *White*. London & New York (Routledge) 1997: 122–131.

townspeople) allows for a minimal space for self-fashioning (whereas the allegedly privileged, central figure of Sophie gets relentlessly overdetermined as embodiment of to the position of the 'little angel'). More importantly, Rahel – other than Sophie – can step out of the interpellative Play altogether for the duration, and enter into her own, self-designed rituals. This escape off stage, however, is itself made possible by another act of seeing: "Rahel saw [Velutha] and slipped out of the Play and went to him" (175), an exit that is, in turn, seen by Ammu who "saw her go". Rahel and Velutha now enact their own private play, a counter-performance of resistance through ritual unwittingly held in Ammu's gaze:

Off stage, she watched them perform their elaborate Official Greeting. Velutha curtsied as he had been taught to, his mundu spread like a skirt, like the English dairymaid in *The King's Breakfast*. Rahel bowed (and said 'Bow'). Then they hooked little fingers and shook hands gravely with the mien of bankers at a convention. (175)

Rahel and Velutha's rituals playfully unsettle precisely those fixed identities that the welcome Play organised around Sophie Mol attempts to ossify. This counter-ritual involves a series of playful impersonations in which gender, race and class assignments get suspended as Velutha performs as English dairymaid and, later, banker. Thus, the Official Greeting functions as a hailing that does not arrest subjectivity. Instead it prepares for a full suspension of the screen: In Ammu's look, Velutha and Rahel's debunking of fixed identity serves as a prerequisite for the revelation of a true identity that can only be disclosed once the parameters of convention and interpellation have been removed in the subversive ritual of the Official Greeting. In this temporary clearing 'off stage', the socially stigmatised 'Untouchable' can appear to the gaze as a scopophilic object rendered in a language that attempts to convey the arousal of sexual appetite as epiphanically revealed newness and yet cannot escape the stereotypes of late-20th century male beauty ideals:²⁷

She saw the ridges of muscle on Velutha's stomach grow taught and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate. She wondered at how his body had changed – so quietly, from a flatmuscl'd boy's body into a man's body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. A swimmer-carpenter's body. Polished with a high-wax body polish. (175)

Roy's text attempts to mark this situation as the opening up of a clearing in which an un-screened theatre of looks can be played out. Yet it is all too

²⁷ Rani Dharker, e.g., gives vent to her exasperation with the "extremely puerile" imagery that renders Velutha's pectoral muscles as "the divisions on a slab of chocolate"; Rani Dharker, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Booker? The Making of Small Gods in Our Times". *Rethinking Indian English Literature*. Ed. U.M. Nanavati & Prafulla C. Kar. Delhi (Pencraft International) 2000: 140–45; 142.

apparent that Velutha, even in Ammu's allegedly unmediated epiphanic look, remains an *image*, and that the screen of the represented society's visual regime, posited basically on the privileging of whiteness, is simply overwritten here by another screen: one that idealises differently but no less in compliance with culturally defined norms. Velutha's desirable athleticism may well interrupt the operations of the racist visual regime enacted by Mammachi's gaze, but it can only do so because it conforms to the norms of the visual regime that the text ascribes to its implied reader: a regime that valorises, above all, physical fitness. The problem is not that idealisation is at work here but that this idealisation should so blatantly depend on readily available, overdetermined images of bodily perfection, reinscribing "the colonization of idealization by the screen"²⁸ while claiming the full removal of the screen as such.

The gaze that renders its object with such voyeuristic fascination is, of course, conventionally gendered male,²⁹ so that Ammu's scopophilic investment of Velutha may be read as the appropriation of the male gaze by the woman, hence one more inversion that the text sets in motion. In this logic, it would even be consistent that this woman's look coinciding with the male gaze should be structured by those very ('Hollywood-style') overdeterminations that conventionally prefigure and shape male scopophilia through "the skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure".³⁰ Polished, contoured and muscled, Velutha is of course an embodiment of accomplished physical capital: a figure that is rampant in the cultural environment of the text as a whole, but that does not figure in the world of the diegesis. Far from it: The evolution of this ideal male body is clearly marked as not a product of the will but a side-effect of a physically active, mostly working life; as the text later reasserts, "his labour had shaped him" (334). Displayed to the reader through Ammu's appreciative look, however, Velutha becomes an object for consumption ('a slab of chocolate') precisely as his appearance begins to meet the demands of a conventionalised scopophilic regime. Though this encounter, then, is heavily 'screened', Roy's text yet tries to translate it into a moment of epiphanic recognition fully outside the script, or, in the terms employed by Alain Badiou, as a truth-event that disrupts "the ontological schema of the situation".³¹ In this vein, Velutha's conventionalised representation as an embodiment of a culturally

²⁸ Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World*, 37.

²⁹ The *locus classicus* for this determination remains Laura Mulvey's 1975 article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Repr. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Ed. Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen. New York & Oxford (OUP) 1999: 833–844.

³⁰ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 835.

³¹ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*. Tr. & ed. Oliver Feltham & Justin Clemens. New York (Continuum) 2003: 134.

enforced, screened male beauty ideal would not necessarily have to undo the status of the encounter as a truth-event but rather function as its unavoidable “nomination”, its translation into the world of the subject involved in – or rather produced by – the event. This subject will only be constituted inasmuch as it is ‘faithful to the event’: committed to the ongoing “exercise of fidelity” to the event within the schematised situation. This kind of fidelity is, no doubt, exercised by the two lovers in their pursuit of the anti-systemic truth inherent in their “amorous encounter which changes a whole life”.³² In the case of Ammu and Velutha, the event requires that the look be responded to so that subject and object of the look can enter into a configuration of mutual and interminable exchange – the ultimate chiasmus in Roy's text. Thus Velutha, up to then the object on display, “glanced up and caught Ammu's gaze” (176), turning himself into a subject of the look without shedding his status as spectacle. Likewise Ammu, formerly merely the subject of the look, is now also held object in Velutha's responding look. While still being looked at, Velutha now also sees

things that he hadn't seen before. Things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history's blinkers. Simple things. For instance, he saw that Rahel's mother was a woman. That she had deep dimples when she smiled [...]. He saw that her brown arms were round and firm and perfect. That her shoulders shone, but her eyes were somewhere else. [...] He saw too that he was not necessarily the only giver of gifts. That *she* had gifts to give him too. This knowing slid into him cleanly [...]. (176–77).

As seeing slides into knowing (the biblical term for sexual consummation: “Adam knew his wife”), the chiasmic exchange of looks and object/subject positions gets sealed with a tacit contract: “Ammu saw that he saw. She looked away. He did too” (177). For the duration, as both are object and subject at the same time, for “one evanescent moment” the terror of the script seems to fall away altogether: “History was wrong-footed, caught off guard. [...] In its absence it left an aura, a palpable shimmering that was as plain to see as the water in a river or the sun in the sky” (176).

As against these truth-claims, one could rather speak of the substitution of one interpellative visual regime (scripted consumerism) for another, older one (the Love Laws): If the Love Laws had prescriptively laid down and channelled the choice of the object of desire – “who should be loved. And how. And how much” – the new regime, though apparently introducing free choice, still insists on the encoded exchange value of conventionalised notions of beauty, or, more pointedly with Bourdieu, physical capital that here matches male pectoral muscles and sheen with female dimples and perfect round arms. The animal magnetism in this theatre of looks is hence

³² Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 47; 46.

strongly determined by the entrenched economy of visual pleasure as codified not by the temporarily suspended Love Laws but by the value system of late capitalist body culture and the iconic repertoire of its beauty industry. Plainly speaking, in Roy's text it would be inconceivable to have Ammu be attracted in a similar way to Velutha's handicapped brother (which would however be expectable in a writer like Ondaatje). Tabish Khair lucidly points out that this idealising construction of Velutha as "built like a god"³³ partakes of the "tendency – ranging from Mulk Raj Anand to Arundhati Roy – to raise the main low-caste, low-class protagonist to a privileged intellectual, spiritual, physical and moral plane" to the effect that this protagonist, then, "is *not* representative of his class or caste and, hence, the class and the caste remain *unnarrated* while ostensibly being narrated".³⁴ The scene of initial recognition in the theatre of gaze, however, is meant to defy exactly those claims to any representative status whatsoever. Velutha's function in Roy's text is not to stand in for a particular group or community but to rehearse the complete stepping-out of all such scripts. In that sense, Khair's argument falls short of Roy's textual politics that in fact seems to advocate the embracing of the radically anti-social and transhistorical realm of pure 'biology'.

At the end of the book, whose concluding chapter finally gives an account of the first illicit intercourse between Ammu and Velutha, this trajectory from bad sociality to good raw nature gets fully fleshed out as the couple enter into the ultimate ritual scripted by an unquestionable authority: "Biology designed the dance" (335). "Once he was inside her, fear was derailed and biology took over" (336). Confusingly, Roy's text pitches this biological substratum of pure species being against the category of an essentially corruptible "human nature". In grotesque stylisation, this gets enacted both in the kathakali performance and the ultraviolent assault on Velutha. The former shows, according to Comrade Pillai, how the madly enraged Bhima (one of the Pandava heroes from the *Mahabharata*) "is searching for the beast that lives in him", and in the brutal act of dismembering his antagonist, lets this beast out. The narrator intervenes at this point to rectify Pillai's allegedly imprecise interpretation by offering a no less underdetermined one:

Which beast in particular, Comrade Pillai didn't say. Searching for the *man* who lives in him was perhaps what he really meant, because certainly no beast has essayed the boundless, infinitely inventive art of human hatred. No beast can match its rage and power. (236)

³³ Khair, *Babu Fictions*, 142

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 156–157, n 38.

Underneath the mask of the socially interpellated subject, then, the artful man-beast lurks persistently as an essence in marked difference from the biological animal. It manifests not necessarily in violent excesses but also in the – ostensibly inevitable – self-deformation of originally emancipatory grand narratives such as communism that, at the hands of technocrats like Comrade Pillai, gets reduced to “another religion turned against itself. Another edifice of the human mind, decimated by human nature” (287).

There are other performances in *The God of Small Things* in which ‘human nature’ aggressively forecloses the ideal communion in a shared biology: The brutality of the police squad beating Velutha to death is possible only because “any implication that, if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago” (309). Again, the entire scene turns into a play, a grotesque *Lehrstück* enacted, as it were, for “an under-age audience” in a theatre of terrified looks: “History in live performance” (309). That the denial of a shared biology refers to the casteist assumption of Paravan inferiority, does not interrupt the essentially *modern* characteristics of this atrocity: Roy’s narrator heavily emphasises that the gruesome procedure is not an atavistic ritual but “a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions [...] of human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly” (309). The assault in the name of ‘human nature’ is acted out “with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria” (309). The killing of Velutha is a containment mission in the service of communal purity, a weeding-out of the seeds of transgression: “After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak” (309). Zygmunt Bauman’s discussion of modernity’s obsession with order and othering comes to mind here, not least as it helps to connect Baby Kochamma, the scheming instigator of the police mission, with the underlying project of modern order conceived as “civilization’s fear of nature” (308). Bauman illustrates his critique of modernity with the concept metaphor of the garden which, in his description, is like the house posited on processes of inclusion and exclusion, which latter can take on the radical form of extinction:

the artificial *order* of the garden needs tools and raw materials. It also needs defence – against the unrelenting danger of what is, obviously, disorder. The order, first conceived of as a design, determines what is a tool, what is a raw material, what is useless, what is a [...] weed or a pest. It classifies all elements of the universe by their relation to itself. [...] All visions of society-as-garden define parts of the social habitat as human weeds.³⁵

Is it by coincidence that Baby Kochamma had returned from her short sojourn to the US “with a diploma in Ornamental Gardening” (26)? Baby

³⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge (CUP) 1991: 92.

Kochamma's every word and action is, after all, "designed to exclude [...] and to inform [people] of their place in the scheme of things" (329). If Baby Kochamma thus appears as a genuinely modern figure, she does so exactly because she forms a site at which the anxiety-ridden gardener's vision aligns with an older – in fact, in Roy's text, transhistorical – disposition: "Hers, too, was an ancient, age-old fear. The fear of being dispossessed" (70). Predicated on "civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness" (309), Roy's modernity throws its shadows far back into its own antecedent past; it articulates, in other words, a continuity of power relations based on aggressive performances of ousting and Othering that are enacted, in the domestic as much as in the political spheres, for the containment of fear of the Other. It is the hypostasation of such a continuity that enables Roy to have her narrator elevate this process of inclusion/exclusion to the fundamental theme of all history, and all history to the authoritative imprint of this invariable theme; hence, what Rahel and Estha witness on the verandah of the History House is not just the outcome of complex familial machinations but History in live performance. This, of course, merely reasserts what had been suggested at the end of the introductory chapter – namely, that the entire narrative would have to be interpreted as one more enactment of that age-old theme:

it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendancy, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before the Zamorin's conquest of Calicut. Before three purple-robed Syrian Bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea [...]. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag. That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. (33)

Read in light of the rest of the novel, this passage clearly enthrones the Love Laws as the metahistorical blueprint that ultimately overcodes and absorbs even those forces and tendencies – such as Christianity, nationalism, Marxism – that seem to pursue the mission of its suspension. In this respect, Roy's text massively de-historicises the very concept of 'History' which now appears as a space fully determined by the mechanics of the Love Laws that inform, or express, an equally timeless 'human nature'. In terms of gender and caste – for these are the most visible differential categories institutionalised by the Love Laws – this model of 'History' enforces the current regime of hierarchies and exclusions as grounded in the transhistorical, and hence immutable in spite of all the 'living breathing anger' rallied against it. Casteism, clearly the most blatantly 'archaic' and idiosyncratic manifestation of the Love Laws, comes to figure as the touchstone of this theme, and Roy thereby unwittingly sides with all positions

that equip caste with a historical 'agency' all its own. Caste, in *The God of Small Things*, seems to emanate directly from the *Manu Dharma Sastras* (the *Laws of Manu*) as if the enforcing power that anthropologists like Louis Dumont still ascribe to such "normative literature"³⁶ were not itself a product of the archival projects of nineteenth-century British anthropology. From this perspective, neither colonisation, Christian missionaryism, decolonisation or Marxist infiltration can alter the normative script in any significant way: A position that has been most impressively dismantled by the interventions of Nicholas Dirks who, in *Castes of Mind*, demonstrates that it was "colonial ethnology [that] constructed caste as the centrepiece of Indian society"³⁷ in the first place. This, of course, is not the same as saying that caste were a British invention altogether, but that the emergence of caste as a "unitary signifier" was indispensable in the "colonial struggle to know and to rule India" from the mid-nineteenth century onwards as it systematically implemented a new understanding of that term that successfully did away with the fuzziness of caste that had prevailed up to then:

Caste was as variable as the Indian social world in the early, still tentative grip of colonial knowledge; it was far from being the comprehensive means for specification of the social order or for the interpretation of the cultural cartography of the subcontinent. Caste, as we have come to know it, did not yet exist.³⁸

Dirks is emphatically not trying to belittle caste as an oppressive differential category but to retrieve its historicity in a climate that takes it for granted that caste be a primordial remnant of an age-old regime that refuses to go away. As against this effectively essentialising approach to caste, Dirks insists on the relative newness of this category as it gets rewritten – through complex collaborations of British administrators, anthropologists and demographers with their (almost exclusively) Brahminical native informants – as a component of colonial modernity in the subcontinent. Roy's text is not wholly unaware of this relative modernity of caste as the rendition of the police assault on Velutha indicates, and yet it precisely inverts the nexus of modernity and caste that Dirks excavates: While the latter tries to show how 'caste' emerges as a central concept for the implementation of indirect colonial rule, governmentality, and demographic control (and hence owes its

³⁶ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications. Complete and Revised English Edition*. Tr. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont & Basia Gulati. Chicago & London (U of Chicago P) 1980: 49 and passim.

³⁷ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 80

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 122. Dirks' position echoes Sudipta Kaviraj's more general observation that, prior to the massive British intervention, Indian "society, despite its obvious hierarchies, is less integrated in terms of its ordering discourses, and [...] can be likened to a circle of circles of caste and regional communities"; Kaviraj, "On the Construction of Colonial Power". *Politics in India*. Ed. Sudipta Kaviraj. New Delhi (OUP) 1997: 141–158; 144.

career to its functionality in the service of a modern regime), Roy subordinates the modern to the superior category of caste, as all historically distinct regimes – including modernity – in the final instance merely form variations of that fundamental theme laid down in the Love Laws. Thus, ‘History’ emerges as the site not of struggle but relentless oppression; agency therefore has to evacuate history altogether, and gets exiled to those rare epiphanic and ‘evanescent’ moments in which history is ‘caught off guard’.

10.3 Beautiful losers

Reading *The God of Small Things* thus reveals an ideological thrust that spells out a politics of disempowerment while simultaneously upholding the claim to transgressive and dissident agency. The critique of the existing order gets powerfully supported by the textual procedures that unmask all demarcations and boundaries as ultimately fictitious and subject to subversion. Those structural and rhetorical devices that I have called the tunnels of the text, in addition to the productive chiasmuses that collapse polarities, enact a kind of subterranean network in which all sorts of connections appear that belie institutionalised compartmentalisation. At the level of its rhetorical praxis, the text itself – other than all the instances of transgression, revolt or mobilisation it narrates – clearly becomes the only site of subversion that is not immediately tinged with futility.

There are, besides Ammu and Velutha’s dramatic excursion into pure, a-social ontology, two more politically encoded instances that exemplify how bad sociality crushes all germs of possible empowerment. One is the demonstration of communist “party workers, students, the labourers themselves. Touchables and Untouchables. On their shoulders they carried a keg of ancient anger, lit with a recent fuse. There was an edge to this anger that was Naxalite, and new” (69). Before, the agenda of the demonstrators had been described as a combination of classical demands about the length of the working day and daily wages on the one hand, and the more ‘ideological’ demand that “Untouchables be no longer addressed by their caste names” (69). Ancient anger – probably with caste discrimination – *fuses* with the classical terms of the class-struggle as well as the militancy of the Naxalite movement into a new configuration in which communists, trade unionists and students join, irrespective of caste divisions, under the shared symbol of the red flag and an emphatically assertive slogan: “the loudest word they said was *Zindabad* [i.e. “long live”]” (70). The text, however, brackets this moment as part of a larger process; in a rough survey of the trajectories of the Communist Parties in Kerala, the demonstrators appear as pawns in the intricate game of power politics and factionism played out by party bosses

and technocrats like Comrade Pillai, the Ayemenem representative of the Communist Party, who ensure the containment of the potentially transgressive thrust of the spontaneous articulation at the grassroots level. It is in this logic that the red flag, which on Pillai's house "had grown limp and old" (13), passes into the hands of the children to signal a "Mobile Republic. A Twin Revolution" (202). Here, in a second evanescent moment, the vocabulary of political mobilisation is appropriated by the twins for their attempt to escape from the 'smug, ordered world' in which they are assigned only marginal roles; like the inclusive demonstration, so does this transgressive act entail the suspension of divisions as the twins include their privileged cousin, Sophie, in their plan to cross the river and go into hiding in the History House.³⁹ The disastrous outcome of the "Red Agenda" (200) links this episode with the catastrophic termination of the Ammu-Velutha entanglement as much as with the abortive grassroots demonstration at Cochin in their situational intensity and beauty as truth-events *and* their tragic futility. Highlighting these moments' pathetic defencelessness vis-à-vis the entrenched powers that be, the text all the more defiantly upholds – remains 'faithful to' – these instances that "made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happen" (256). These are the words with which Vellya Paapen reveals the illicit affair of Velutha and Ammu to Mammachi; while meant to express scandal and mortification, they equally trace – behind the speaker's back – the trajectory of utopian politics as the "passage from the virtual through the possible to the real".⁴⁰ Roy, however, circumscribes the space of such realisation so restrictively that tragical failure appears as the inevitable concomitant of all attempts to empowerment. One could go further and suspect that the novel's representation of political acts is so thoroughly governed by an anxiety with corruption that, all its rage against Brahminical casteism notwithstanding, the text bears its own share of obsessive purism – with *realpolitik* as the irredeemably polluting *bête noir*. Victimisation therefore becomes the clandestine prerequisite for valorisation when any implication in the mechanics of 'running the world' necessarily entails dirty hands. Again, the proximity of Roy's most beautiful loser, Velutha, to the concept of the *bouc émissaire* as proposed by René Girard is revealing: Girard suggests that mythology is in fact the displacement, by way of narration, of the haunting guilt of collective murder: In an act of symbolic

³⁹ Inclusiveness ranks high in Roy's political tracts, too; see, e.g., the mobilising passage from "The Greater Common Good": "All sorts of warriors from all over the world, anyone who wishes to enlist, will be honoured and welcomed. [...] Doctors, lawyers, teachers, judges, journalists, students, sportsmen, painters, actors, singers, lovers ... The borders are open, folks! Come on in"; Arundhati Roy, *The Greater Common Good*. Bombay (India Book Distributors) 1999: 29.

⁴⁰ Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, 357.

atonement, the murderous community posthumously elevates its victim(s) to the status of ideality or divinity. This model is obviously derived from Freud's hypothesis, in *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, about the genesis of the super-ego from the (male) subject's parricidal wish. In a Girardian reading, Velutha's victimisation would *effect* his idealisation, which latter does arguably take on mythological dimensions as it links Velutha, however loosely, with at least two idealised heroes of the Western canon, Siegfried and Jesus⁴¹ – both, like Velutha, abandoned by cowards and betrayed by scheming agents of the establishment.

In her passionate verdict on Indian nuclear armaments, Roy picks up one of the affectionate phrases from *The God of Small Things* and applies it to herself: "If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain is anti-Hindu and anti-national, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic".⁴² This, I argue, is the stance which Roy has successfully cultivated over the past eight years, and the lengthy reflections on her only novel (so far) should shed some light on this politics which, ever since the publication of *The God of Small Things*, is ineluctably paratextual in nature even when the text itself is not as visibly invoked as in the quote from "The End of Imagination". Roy has consistently attacked current imperialism, be it in the guise of neoliberalist privatisation ("Power Politics"), World-Bank inflicted structural adjustment schemes ("The Greater Common Good"), or military geopolitics ("War is Peace"). What is striking – but, after reading the novel, no longer surprising – is the tragic tone that pervades all these essays: Every cause that Roy embraces as a pamphleteer gets rendered as a lost cause. Like the victimised characters from her novel, Roy thus presents herself as a beautiful loser who, precisely because of that position, can claim idealisation. Instead of reiterating the charge of Indo-chic, I would suggest to read this stance as an embodied political statement: as a necessary and consistent refusal to participate in what John Berger, in a different but not entirely incommensurate context, has called the globally predominant "style of winners":

Like all aesthetics, this one entails an anaesthetic: a numbed area without feeling. The winning aesthetic excludes experience of loss, defeat, affliction [...]. The anaesthetic

⁴¹ With the former, Velutha shares the leaf-shaped spot on his back which he himself (mis-) interprets as "a lucky leaf, that made the monsoons come on time" (73), while the German pre-text imparts a sense of foreboding upon this motif: In the Siegfried myth, the leaf-shaped mark indicates the one vulnerable spot on the hero's body. In order to consolidate the Siegfried-Velutha connection, Roy equips Velutha with an apprenticeship under a German tutor, and "a distinctly German design sensibility" (75) (whatever that may be); Jesus is, like Velutha, a carpenter by profession

⁴² Arundhati Roy [1998], "The End of Imagination". *The Algebra of Infinite Justice. Revised & Updated*. Intr. John Berger. New Delhi (Penguin India) 2002: 1–43; 21.

protects from any assertion or evidence or cry which shows life as a site of hopes forever deferred. And it does this despite the fact that such a vision of life remains the experience of the majority of people in the world today.⁴³

A quote from “The End of Imagination” may serve here as the perhaps most explicit (but by no means idiosyncratic) example of this strategy of employing an aesthetics of losing that transforms empowerment – the symbolic declaration of independence as a mobile republic – into an obituary: “My world has died. And I write to mourn its passing”.⁴⁴ Maybe Roy’s contribution to the debate and critique of modernity consists primarily in her effort to elevate the obituary to the status of a paradigmatic genre of modernity.

⁴³ John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous*. London (Granta) 1992: 248.

⁴⁴ Roy, “End of Imagination”, 21.

11 Still Postcolonial after All These Years

Instead of a Conclusion

The preceding chapters have been underpinned by the assumption that Indian writing in English takes part in the larger project of interrogating modernity in some of its crucial aspects. Of these, modern concepts of time and the public/private split were selected as the most conspicuous objects of critique or revision, with the concept of nationhood providing a pervasive and overarching problematic. Thus, Rushdie, Tharoor and Seth pick up, but substantially question and rewrite, the notion of homogeneous empty time as the temporal medium through which the modern nation emerges as an imagined community. Where Benedict Anderson constructs a pattern of iterative receptive mass ceremonies performed individually and anonymously, but resulting in the production of national subjects who imagine their community in synchrony, Rushdie, Tharoor and Seth employ this paradigm only to puncture its mechanism: What gets connected in the medium of the Andersonian ‘meanwhile’ is revealed as fundamentally incommensurate. Instead of depending on the thorough implementation of homogeneous empty time, the nation rather emerges from a plurality of chronotypes that cannot be ordered into a hierarchy of relative ‘advancement’ or ‘retardedness’. Therefore, the other crucial aspect of modern temporality, namely historicism as the myth of progress, gets heavily interrogated in the writings of Amitav Ghosh who emphasises the epistemic violence involved in the language of progress, while texts like *Midnight’s Children*, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* or *Cuckold* configure radically different temporalities without allowing for their ordering in terms of anachronism.

Similarly, the grand dichotomy of the private and the public gets subverted in a postcolonial variety of domestic fiction that exposes the home not as the haven of intimacy but rather the site of production of citizen/subjects. In Chaudhuri, Ghosh and Roy, the home itself functions as an interpellative agency that normalises individuals in terms of gender, class and caste. Simultaneously, the specifically Indian ideology of home as a result of the nationalist struggle for hegemony is inscribed into the very

texture of the private sphere, making visible the extent to which the home itself is interpellated into the larger context of region, nation and state. Underneath, and contrary to, these affirmative functions of the home, however, the novels in question open up to alternative ways of mapping subjectivities beyond the rigidities of the indise/outside divide on which home concepts rely: In Ghosh, fluid shadow lines instead of fixed boundaries prevail between the public and the private, while Roy dramatises a desire to explode the walls of the home-as-prison in the name of unthinkable communions in the course of disruptive truth-events.

The outcome of the preceding readings of contemporary Indian fiction in English, then, is the assertion of a claim common to all the texts involved here: a claim to multiple and deviant ways of being modern, primarily played out in the arenas of being in time and being at home with a difference from what is posited as entrenched modernity. The affinities to various theoretical and critical projects in the Subcontinent have been delineated extensively. What remains to be addressed is the question of relevance. For it is obvious that postcolonial theory and fiction, if they constitute themselves as a critique of entrenched modernity, are running a serious risk: They depend on the vitality of their object of critique. Their *raison d'être*, in other words, would evaporate along with the regime of modernity itself – a regime in the name of whose supersession its postcolonial critics have been writing consistently. Paradoxically, then, the postcolonial critique of modernity depends on the actual power of its antagonist, while simultaneously working towards the dispensation of precisely that power, hence towards its own obsolescence. This, to be sure, is nothing more than the description of a rhetorical relation that Terry Eagleton has long ago succinctly identified as the matrix of “any emancipatory theory [that will invariably have to be] preoccupied with putting itself progressively out of business”:

Emancipatory politics exist to bring about the material conditions that will spell their own demise, and so always have some peculiar self-destruct device built into them. [...] All oppositional politics thus move under the sign of irony, knowing themselves ineluctably parasitic on their antagonists.¹

The postcolonial assault, parasitic as it is on the universal modern, would immediately become pointless with the demise of its antagonist. As it is precisely this demise of the modern that much of postmodern theory has been heralding for some time, the relevancy of the postcolonial critique of modernity requires to be reassessed.

¹ Terry Eagleton, “Nationalism: Irony and Commitment”. *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Ed. & intr. Seamus Deane. Minneapolis (U of Minnesota P) 1990: 23–39; 26.

11.1 The postcolonial strawman

Is modernity over? Has not, for example, the regime of empty homogeneous time as the utopian time of capital been superseded by a temporally flexible economy that privileges precisely the heterogeneous time that Partha Chatterjee invokes for his critique of the nation's monopoly?² In light of current agendas of post-Taylorist time management, which actually thrive on multidimensional temporalities, Chatterjee's assault on the universalist claims of one particular historicist temporal regime may appear as pathetically belated. Such a verdict, however, would itself depend on a periodising, hence essentially historicist framework in which, then, the dominant model of temporality would have shifted from an ideal homogeneity to an ideal heterogeneity. Let us, for the sake of the argument, assume for a moment that such a mutation of the dominant temporal regime had actually taken place: Would it render Chatterjee's critique obsolete? The question is rather whether or not the (alleged) inthronisation of heterogeneous time as the dominant model has actually done away with the tempolitics of modernity grounded in the hierarchisation of temporalities on a global scale. It should never be forgotten that modernity not only never achieved but more crucially never aimed at the overall implementation of homogeneous empty time; rather to the contrary, it required the coexistence of 'other times' as figures of alterity in relation to which Eurocentric time could be thrown into relief as the normative standard. Modernity's tempolitics, therefore, create a hierarchical configuration in which, as Stuart Hall has pointed out,

all the different temporalities, while remaining 'present' and 'real' in their differential effects, are also rupturally convened *in relation to*, and must mark their 'difference' in terms of, the over-determining effects of Eurocentric temporalities, systems of representation and power.³

What emerges through Hall's argument is a centred heterogeneity, in other words, a plurality of coexisting temporalities evaluated in relation to one dominant model of time. Historically, the privilege of homogeneous empty time as the 'utopian time of capital' now appears as the correlate of a particular articulation of capital, more precisely, a specific mode of extracting and determining value in the medium of "socially necessary labour time".⁴

² For the employment of heterogeneous time in capitalist organisation and management of production, see e.g. Christian Gollier & Richard Zeckhauser, "Aggregation of Heterogeneous Time Preferences". *Journal of Political Economy* 113.4 (2005): 878—896.

³ Stuart Hall, "When Was 'the Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit". *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*. Ed. Iain Chambers & Lidia Curti. London & New York (Routledge) 1996: 242—260; 251.

⁴ Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. Cambridge (CUP) 1998: 191.

This latter is not simply ideal, ‘abstract time’ in the sense of some quasi-objective temporal measure, but always also necessarily mediated (Chakrabarty would prefer to speak of ‘refracted’) in its concrete realisation as productive practice. The relatively recent passages of production from (homogeneous) rigid Taylorist time to (heterogeneous) flexible Toyotist time signal a passage of the modes of value extraction but *not* a liberalisation of the temporal regime: There is a transformation but not a suspension of dominant temporalities.

Similar passages and transformations *without suspension* could be observed with respect to other points on the agenda of the ‘critique of modernity’ school, including the nation as a defining horizon of the political imaginary, and the locally produced modes of belonging that conventionally go under the name of ‘home’. All these issues may seem, from a cutting-edge postmodernist perspective, to be hopelessly out of sync with the postnational, transcultural, post-identitarian present. Or has their obsolescence, in fact, only been declared in particular fields of critical theory? Even the most eloquent and consistent critiques of modernity will not make it go away: Such expectations can derive only from nominalist and reductionist fallacies. What Stuart Hall so poignantly formulates with regard to old-style essentialism, may well hold true for modernity at large, namely, that “[i]t is only too tempting to fall into the trap of assuming that, because essentialism has been deconstructed *theoretically*, therefore it has been displaced *politically*”.⁵

In this light, it is due to their ‘entrapment’ in a reductionist fallacy that both triumphalist *and* radically critical analyses of postmodern-global capital tend to spell out the demise of the postcolonial demand for a recognition of multiple genres of modernity – a demand that, in globalisation, paradoxically appears to be always already fulfilled *and yet* categorically illusory. While globalisation refractures modernity into so many ‘glocal’ articulations, effectively projecting the semblance of a multitude of “popular self-fashionings”,⁶ the underlying and all-encompassing process of real subsumption under the logic of capital in fact produces a “real universality”⁷ – i.e. a globally identical regime of general exchangeability. Fredric Jameson has repeatedly pointed towards the contradictory duality of homogeneity and diversity as the hallmark of the postmodern formation; in his analysis, the deep antinomy of the postmodern begins to take shape when

we begin to ask ourselves how it is possible for the most standardized and uniform social reality in history, by the merest ideological flick of the thumbnail, the most

⁵ Hall, “When was ‘the Post-Colonial’?”, 249.

⁶ Scott, *Re-Fashioning Futures*, 219.

⁷ Balibar, “Ambiguous Universality”, 49.

imperceptible of displacements, to emerge as the rich oil-smear sheen of absolute diversity and of the most unimaginable and unclassifiable forms of human freedom.⁸

It is thanks to his avoidance of oversimplifying this complex configuration by privileging either of its aspects (uniformity and diversity) over the other that Jameson's description of the postmodern remains reconcilable with critical analyses of the present from postcolonial locations. By contrast, any one-sided construction that would posit the globalised present as a realm of actual uniformity would mistake the ultimately heuristic concept of capital's universality for its real praxis, while the complementary error of representing globalisation as a process towards increasing diversification would simply subscribe uncritically to the self-description of the neoliberal dominant. From both these angles, postcolonial theory has been heavily interrogated.

In the name of globalisation, postcolonialism has been charged of clinging to the interrogation of the by-gone power relations of colonialism that, in fact, had long been replaced by the atopic regime of postmodern subsumption. Fixated on the lost object of old-style imperialism, postcolonialism thus puts itself out of touch with the present and accordingly fails to live up to the claims to subversion or emancipation by which it is measured by this radical critique. Blind to the actual processes through which globality emerges and consolidates itself as a concrete universality, "most postcolonial critics remain lagging behind, still touting the virtues of reading history 'against the grain', against the declared 'white mythologies' of totality and causality".⁹ In this radical line of thought, the current neoliberal global hegemony has rendered the central objects of postcolonial critique – old-style imperialism and 'old' modernity – obsolete and ushered in an entirely new and altogether different global regime of decentralised power/knowledge. As the erstwhile peripheries get increasingly subsumed under postmodern capital, the former geography of privilege, along with its hierarchies of centres and margins, abdicates in the name of the newly unified globe conceived as "one smooth surface" that allows for no outside. As we have seen, Fredric Jameson as one of the most eloquent precursors of this vision of a globally entrenched postmodernity still admits to the actually extant difference of "Third-World" realities precisely when he addresses the postcolonial.¹⁰ As a contrast, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – arguably the most influential protagonists of the thesis of the one world entirely subjected to real subsumption – will concede not more than that "postcolonialist theory [may be] a very productive tool for rereading history", only to immediately assert in the same sentence that "it is entirely insufficient

⁸ Jameson, "The Antinomies of Postmodernity", 72.

⁹ Ganguly, "Temporality and Postcolonial Critique", 167.

¹⁰ See ch. 2.

for theorizing contemporary global power”.¹¹ This insufficiency, of course, is owed to the very fact that the power formations interrogated by colonial discourse studies as well as transcultural theory have given way to a seemingly more permissive yet in fact far more subtly interpellative system. On this newly established scene, that Hardt and Negri transform into a theatre of war, a farcical drama unfolds in which the postcolonial critics,

who advocate a politics of difference, fluidity, and hybridity in order to challenge the binaries and essentialism of modern sovereignty have been outflanked by the strategies of power. Power has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference.¹²

Rendered as pathetic guerrilleros who, their verbal militancy notwithstanding, unwittingly carry coals to the Newcastle of Empire, postcolonial critics figure as helpmeets of overdetermination: Where difference is the order of the day, and power itself no longer articulated as binaries of exclusion and inclusion, hybridity will not subvert but reaffirm the dominant. Two things are plain to see: First, Hardt and Negri attack (only) a particular sort of postcolonial theory erected for the occasion as a strawman to burn – namely, the dilution of Bhabha to a shallow cult of the diasporic margins that, according to Hardt and Negri, have long ceased to be marginal. Second, the narrative of *Empire* tends, due to the emphasis put on the internal hybridity (the ‘mixed constitution’) of capital itself, to equate difference as such with conformity as if all difference were rendered merely ‘cultural’ and hence non-conflictual in the postmodern dominant. These observations do certainly point towards the inevitable but unacknowledged locational limitations of Hardt and Negri’s theoretical *tour de force*: The well-nigh exclusive focus on a particularly metropolitan form of postcolonial theory on the one hand, the assertion of an – however unequally – subsumed world with no outside on the other hand, both bespeak a latent Eurocentrism. The postcolonial enters Hardt and Negri’s scenario tellingly in the form of what Gayatri Spivak has consistently unmasked as the “wave of academico-political ‘postcolonialism’ that seems to be hitting the elite migrants in Europe”,¹³ and as the function of the postcolonial as native informant fuelling the metropolitan machinery of knowledge production. This view, obviously, still allows for an ‘outside’ which in Spivak, far from being romanticised, figures as the site of radical disempowerment and marginalisation – the classical locus from which the subaltern cannot speak while being increasingly spoken *for* by the postcolonial informant:

¹¹ Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, 146.

¹² *Ibid.*, 138.

¹³ Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 358.

The postcolonial informant has rather little to say about the oppressed minorities *in* the decolonized nation as such [...]. Yet the aura of identification with those distant objects of oppression clings to those informants as [...] they identify with the other racial and ethnic minorities in metropolitan space.¹⁴

Spivak's relentless interrogation of such mechanics in which elite postcolonialism actively serves to obscure "the other of the question of diaspora"¹⁵ in fact straddles the apparent gap between the radical and the accommodationist critiques of postcolonialism: The privilege of the native informant, generalised as the postcolonial as such, can, from a radical platform like the one that Hardt and Negri occupy, easily be conceptualised as one among so many instances of nonconflictual differences that postmodern capital permits. On the other hand, the uncritical reliance on the native informant tends to reduce, precisely as if to reconfirm the timeliness of Spivak's warning, postcolonial studies to diaspora studies and instils in the liberal critique of the postcolonial a "post-struggle" consensus that is markedly visible in Western mainstream academic poco, where the celebration of situationist, hybrid identity micropolitics goes hand in hand with an ever more explicit aversion to committed theorising.

I principally endorse both the alertness to the newness of the globalised regime of postmodern capital as expressed in Hardt and Negri *and* the revisionist urge to overcome all-too-predictable and dogmatic equations of postcolonialism with potted 'emancipatory' schemes.¹⁶ What I would wish to call into question, however, is the strong modernity-is-over assumption that underpins both these otherwise incompatible positions with their shared reliance on some absolute discontinuity of the postmodern global present with the architecture of modernity. Instead of utilising the analysis or implicit assumption of an altogether new postmodern/global regime for a dispensation with postcolonialism, I would like to take recourse to a suggestion reiterated by Ato Quayson who, somewhat apodictically, claims that "postmodernism can never fully explain the state of the contemporary world without first becoming postcolonial, and vice versa".¹⁷ On my reading, this maxim is supportive of any theory that takes cognisance of the global real as a postcolonial space in which not only the former colonies are now coerced

¹⁴ Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 360.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 402.

¹⁶ A nice aside on revisionism in an entirely different context comes from Marxist historian James Holstun, who recuperates the etymology of the loaded term, 'revisionism': "who save the most hidebound mythologizing liberal, the most myopic relic of the Second International, could object to 'looking again'? Who resists revision, other than purblind dogmaticists?" James Holstun, *Ehud's Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution*. London & New York (Verso) 2000: 10.

¹⁷ Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* London (Polity) 2000: 154.

into the capitalist world-market, effectively inserting the so-called “Third World” into the postmodern,¹⁸ but in which in the same go the postcolonial enters and satiates the erstwhile centres in multiple ways, most evidently in terms of shifting ethno- and ideoscapes. In this light, postcolonialism and postmodernity cease to function as opposite numbers in some illusory binarism; instead, the term ‘postcolonialism’ may now be employed “to capture the notion that the distinct social formations which have emerged [in the global South as well as the former colonising centres] are a result of the way in which the aftermath of colonialism interacts with forces of globalisation and responds to it”.¹⁹ I have read the novels and theoretical elaborations analysed in this study more or less as precisely such ‘responses’ to the interplay of decolonisation and globalisation, now conceivable also as postcolonialism and postmodernity, with the proviso that the agents involved in such an ‘interaction’ do not preexist, as given entities, the processes they engage in but rather emerge along with their interaction.²⁰ Postcoloniality, then, would be very much part of globalisation (instead of being suspended by that process); equally, globalisation would be a postcolonial affair, producing a postcolonial world. The novels discussed in this study are deeply involved in this process: not only as ‘global texts’ with far-flung international circulation, but also as figurations of the transnational present, even if (and perhaps especially when) they come in the guise of national allegories.

The various ways of engaging with time, as exemplified by the novels of Rushdie, Tharoor, Chandra, Nagarkar and Seth, take history for an entry point, or a pretext, to formulate eminently relevant commentaries on the present. This relevance lies in the politicisation of the concept of chronodiversity: As the multiplicity and simultaneity of different temporalities can neither be restricted to the primarily individual and singular experience that Western modernism was so obsessed with, nor be reduced to the polemic interrogation of allochronic discourses, the heterotemporal becomes a precondition for the evolution of new communities, affiliations and solidarities alternative to the modular nation-form. Nagarkar’s recourse to the Mirabai legend and the *bhakti* movement forms the most obvious and affirmative move in this direction, but Sealy’s Trotter community or even Rushdie’s ethnographic pastoral of immediate post-Independence India fall

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson emphasises how “on the one hand, nothing but the modern henceforth exists in Third World societies; but it is also [necessary] to correct this statement, on the other, with the qualification that under such circumstances, where only the modern exists, ‘modern’ must now be rebaptized ‘postmodern’”. “Antinomies of Postmodernity”, 61–62.

¹⁹ Ankie Hoogvelt, *Globalisation and the Postcolonial World: The New Political Economy of Development*. Houndmills (Macmillan) 1997: 240.

²⁰ For a constructivist analysis of current North-South relations, see Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters*. Minneapolis (U of Minnesota P) 1996.

into this same category. The insistence on 'collective' temporalities that differ from homogeneous empty time pose a problematic that, on the one hand, is highly prominent in contemporary Indian cultural and political debates while it simultaneously exceeds the specificities of 'India'. Postcolonial heterotemporality rather raises issues that are crucial to post-national and transcultural conditions in general: Insisting on the collective element inscribed into temporal diversity, it allows for the alignment of the singular and the common beyond the normativity of both old-style Western universalism and modernist/postmodernist 'placeless individualism'. 'Other times' are neither deficient nor reserved for splendid isolation but instead the very condition of the global manifold, or, in a more radical phrasing, the global multitude. This latter, however, does not appear in the texts read in this book as a collection of disjunct singularities, but rather, to paraphrase Hardt and Negri from their (much less Eurocentric) sequel to *Empire*, as "an open network of singularities that links together on the basis of the common they share and the common they produce".²¹

11.2 The long shadow of modernity

How over is modernity? In the empire of signs, the very fact of ongoing efforts, on the side of postcolonial critics as well as other committed practitioners, to unhinge entrenched modernity testifies to the longevity of that formation in spite of its alleged demise. Analysts of modes of representation of the South in Western mass media as well as academic discourses emphasise the uninterrupted power of well-worn economies of Otherness. Media theorist McKenzie Wark starts his still breathtaking study on the fabrication of global media events, *Virtual Geography*, with a reassertion of John Hartley's diagnosis according to which Western media construct the world along the crude binary demarcation line of 'us' vs. 'them': "Individuals in Theydom are treated as being all the same; their identity consists in being 'unlike us,' so they are 'like each other.'"²² Wark refers to this very vital binarism not only in order to point out the occidentocentric affective economy enforced by a representational apparatus organised on notions of Theydom; he also hints at the "deep historical roots" that anchor this apparatus in genuinely modern regimes of representation so that the coverage of non-Western regions tends to perpetuate and operate on images established by discourses and iconographies from the heyday of

²¹ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York (Penguin Press) 2004: 128.

²² John Hartley, quoted in McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography: Living With Global Media Events*. Bloomington & Indianapolis (Indiana UP) 1994: 10.

colonialism. In Wark's example, – the coverage of Iraq immediately before the 'Desert Storm' campaign of 1992 – "the Theydom of the Arabs still hinges in Western fantasy on venerable Orientalist archetypes".²³ The hierarchical affective economy produced by such modes of distantiation had been extensively discussed already by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky who analyse the production of "worthy and unworthy victims" by print and broadcast mass media.²⁴ While Herman and Chomsky locate this technology of representation primarily within the parameters of the geopolitical confrontation of the Cold War, Paul Gilroy alerts us to the racist underpinnings and colonialist continuities of telesthetic regimes of Theydom. In an aside on the coverage of the 9/11 Twin Towers attack and the subsequent identification and detention of 'War on Terror' 'enemy combatants', Gilroy points out that

Old, modern notions of racial difference appear to be quietly active within the calculus that assign differential value to lives lost according to their locations and racial origins [...]. These obvious distinctions revived a colonial economy in which inhumanity, measured against the benchmark of healthier imperial standards, diminished rights and deferred recognition.²⁵

Going far beyond the field of mass-mediated iconographies of discriminatory Otherness, Gilroy addresses in his latest work the reintensification of "the raciological ordering of the world" under the aegis of that impersonal, discursive arrangement which he calls the "racial nomos – a legal, governmental, and spatial order – that [...] is now *reviving the old imperial system*".²⁶ *Postcolonial Melancholia* is thus underwritten by the notion of a persistence, albeit in rearticulated formations, of the entrenched modern regime of colonialism and racism that, as Gilroy vividly demonstrates, runs through the fabric of the postmodern from geopolitics to biopolitics. Nor is academic writing itself unaffected by the long shadow of modernity. Addressing the discourse of foreign aid in Western post-Cold War political science, Roxanne Lynn Doty comes to discomfiting insights: The representation of the South, thus Doty's conclusion to her close readings across the disciplinary field of International Relations, to a large extent still relies and thrives on "the power of earlier representations":

²³ Wark, *Virtual Geography*, 10.

²⁴ Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Media*. Revsd. ed. New York (Pantheon) 2002: 37–86.

²⁵ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 39 (my emphasis).

They [the analysed texts] form a sort of cultural unconscious that always comes back to the presumption, generally unstated, especially in more recent texts, of different kinds of human beings with different capacities and perhaps different inherent worth and value.²⁷

The subtext inferred by Doty might easily stem from any postcolonial polemics against Eurocentrism. Like Wark, Doty explicates this continuity of current descriptions of the non-West as modernity's Other:

The North is constituted vis-à-vis the South as modern, efficient, competent. The South is constituted as its lack, its other. Imperial encounters have always contained the element of "modern man" confronting his "traditional" other, characterized alternatively as uncivilized, incompetent, childlike, and incapable of handling power and authority. The incapacity to exercise agency in the same manner as the Western "self" is repeatedly inscribed in the identity of the non-Western "other".²⁸

I quote this passage at length not for its originality but rather for the uncanny ring of familiarity it evokes, I guess, in many a reader acquainted with colonial discourse studies. If Doty's analysis, mainly focusing on the discourses of foreign aid, is correct in bringing to the fore the persistent productivity of discourses that constitute a world ordered along the demarcation line of the modern vs. the pre-modern, then it is anything but outdated to invest some amount of critical attention to, and intervention in, this discursive formation and its modified articulations in the postmodern present. Again in the field of International Relations Theory, Lily Ling interrogates "neoliberal neocolonialism" by delineating – like Doty and Wark – how the postmodern neoliberal discourse "re-invokes an all-too familiar relationship between Asia and the West. That is, Asia is backward, degenerate, emotional, and sensuous; whereas, the West is progressive, virtuous, stoic, and rational".²⁹ Mark Terkessidis, addressing the post-Cold War dominant of neo-racist, culturalist differentialism in Germany, claims that in the Western imaginary the opposition of self and Other has, for the past 500 years, been organised by "the well-worn hierarchical opposition of modernity and primitivism. It is only the contents and the modes of articulation of this binary that have been modified";³⁰ in current Western

²⁷ Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, 162.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁹ L.H.M. Ling, "Neoliberal Neocolonialism: Comparing Enron With Asia's 'Crony Capitalism'". *Discourses of Violence – Violence of Discourses: Critical Interventions, Transgressive Readings, and Post-National Negotiations*. Ed. Dirk Wiemann et al. Frankfurt/Main (Lang) 2005: 93–105; 95.

³⁰ Mark Terkessidis, "Wir selbst sind die Andren: Globalisierung, multikulturelle Gesellschaft und Neorassismus". *Zuwanderung im Zeichen der Globalisierung: Migrations-, Integrations- und Minderheitenpolitik*. Ed. Christoph Butterwegge & Gudrun Hentges. Opladen (SWV) 2003: 231–252; 241; my tr. The German original reads: "Die Grundlage der Unterscheidung zwischen dem Eigenen und dem Anderen hat sich letztendlich seit fast

societies, Terkessidis points out, the ‘modernness’ of the minoritarian is measured against the ideal of elusive privacy so that alterity, now constructed not biologically but culturally, becomes palatable as individualised lifestyle but threateningly ‘traditionalist’ as publicly visible collectivity, as ‘parallel society’: a specifically German designation that no doubt refers us back to Chatterjee’s observations on the systematic relegation of ‘community’ to the primordial.

Such observations first of all testify to the long shadow of modernity’s white mythologies even if these now come in a new, postmodernist guise. Whatever the undeniable modifications and mollifications of old-style colonial discourses, the West has remained in many respects the privileged site of the production of knowledge about other worlds. Not only that: As Edward Said has painstakingly demonstrated, the representation of “the rest of the world” is still persistently organised in a strictly hierarchical subject-object relationship, performed by institutionally backed experts that are *not* “answerable to and in uncoercive contact with the culture and the people being studied”.³¹ Gayatri Spivak has repeatedly drawn attention to such representational imbalances as “irresponsibilities”. Needless to say, these Eurocentric modes of representation do not pass entirely uncontested in the West itself, let alone in the formerly colonised regions of the world. What seems to be necessary is a hypothesis that might account for the unbroken virulence of modern/(neo)colonial discourses.

In this context it would be helpful to remember that modernity should not be constructed as a formation based primarily on those rigidities and stable binaries that classical postmodern thought has ventured heroically to dismantle;³² rather, the inception of such fixities as identity, sexual difference, the subject, the nation, race, the Orient etc. deserves itself to be historicised as, to put it crudely, so many compensatory gestures in an environment fundamentally marked by the exact opposite of the imaginary stability such concepts offer. For modernity itself is a formation posited on permanent crisis, ‘innovation’, and dynamic change, producing a sense of evanescence with which the fixities and the transhistorical depth inscribed into many modern key concepts are apparently at odds. In this vein, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid argue that gender as a naturalised differential

500 Jahren nur wenig verändert: Es handelt sich um die bekannte hierarchische Opposition zwischen Modernität und Primitivität. Lediglich die Inhalte und Artikulationsweisen dieser Binarität wurden modifiziert.”

³¹ Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. Revsd. ed. New York (Vintage) 1997: 163.

³² I am thinking here of the polarising periodisation exemplarily proposed by Ihab Hassan in “The Culture of Postmodernism”. *Theory, Culture and Society* 2.3 (1985): 119–132; esp. 123–124.

category has served, and continues to serve, to “disguise, mitigate, compensate, contest, actual changes taking place. Womanhood is often part of an asserted or desired, not an actual cultural continuity”.³³ The distinction between desired/imagined continuity and actual continuity applies to other moments of modernity as well: The myths of, say, nation, race and Orient need to be located in modernity not only in terms of the genealogy of their historical emergence in the long eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but more importantly as ideological solutions to the aporias produced by modernity’s relentless dynamism. Their (always only partially accomplished) task, it seems, lies in the creation of imaginary solidities that do not melt into air, and latent solidarities and affiliations located at levels beyond the measure of the cold cash nexus. If modernity’s myths thus function as guarantors of fixity, as grand stabilising narratemes and ideologemes, they (have to) do so precisely because of the unsettling fluidity prevalent in modernity. To reduce modernity (in a periodising opposition to postmodernity) to a formation based on such fixities would simply mean to ahistorically focus only on its ideological self-descriptions and the institutions and representations arising from them.

Not only among Marxists, it has often been noted how useful the classical description of capitalist modernity’s relentless dynamism as laid down by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* has remained as an anticipation of current processes of globalisation.³⁴ The “purely fungible” (Jameson), “vanishing” (Spivak) present of the postmodern moment is already captured in the pages of the *Manifesto* addressing the massive restructurings inaugurated by a henceforth interminable and ever-accelerating process of ceaseless disembeddings and reembeddings. On this reading, the evanescence of all relations is always already inscribed into even the most rigidly assertive concepts of identity and difference that mark modernist thought – as an effort to create “continuity amid discontinuity”.³⁵ The persistence of this old modern discursive legacy correlates quite starkly to the persistence of the dynamism of modernity at large, now conceived as globalisation. It is in this vein that Vaswant Kaiwar and Sucheta Mazumdar state that “[s]o-called nineteenth-century concepts have a great and continued vitality [...] because they are thoroughly integral to the overall cultural and

³³ Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid, “Recasting Women: An Introduction”. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Ed. Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid. New Delhi (Kali for Women) 1989: 1–26; 17.

³⁴ The classical analysis is Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. London (Verso) 1983. The most spectacular application of the *Manifesto* to the post-Cold War world is arguably Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*.

³⁵ Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, 162.

political economy of the capitalist world-system".³⁶ This, to be sure, does *not* legitimate the potential claim that all critical interventions into the modern/postmodern discursive regime were necessarily and 'objectively' anti-capitalist 'by nature'. However, with respect to postcolonial interrogations of modernity, it becomes now possible to read them as contributions to the challenge of Eurocentrism that Enrique Dussel has persuasively called "transmodernity". The theoretical and fictional texts addressed in this volume can, with Dussel, be understood as contributions to "a 'planetary' description of the phenomenon of modernity",³⁷ that is, a process of conceptualising the globally imposed model of modernity from a multiplicity of locations hitherto interpellated as muted objects of European description. The transmodern, then, emerges not as the 'radical' negation of modernity but as the limit of an entrenched modernity posited as 'the only story'.

It was the main aspiration of this study to demonstrate how both theory and fiction consistently move beyond the critique of the established hegemonic formation of the modern and begin to figure multiple and manifold ways of being modern. The various genres of modernity that these texts figure cannot be summarised or formularised in any other way than in the overly general assertion that they operate at the interface of the virtual and the real, particularly when they refer to actually existent modes of being and belonging as embodied alternatives to the unilateral entrenched form of the modern. Thus, in Chatterjee, the concept of community is both descriptive and programmatic; likewise, in Nagarkar's *Cuckold*, the cult of Mirabai points towards the alternative formation of an oxymoronically nomadic and non-territorialised nation, while simultaneously referring to a community that is very much part of the real historical and present here and now.

11.3 Multilateral universalities

The transmodern disclaims the entrenched real universality of the globalised world-system by way of a recourse to what Javeed Alam has called "the untapped resources of modernity". Many of these untapped resources, it needs to be added even at the risk of repetition, have not been elaborated in the West but in the regions of the planet that were subjected to conquest and colonisation, and now to world-systemic hyper-exploitation. As 'subaltern'

³⁶ Vasant Kaiwar & Sucheta Mazumdar, "Race, Orient, Nation in the Time-Space of Modernity". *Antinomies of Modernity: Essays on Race, Orient, Nation*. New Delhi (Tulika) 2003: 261—298; 263.

³⁷ Dussel, "Beyond Eurocentrism", 18.

forms and systems of knowledge, these resources have largely remained 'untapped' on a global scale. This is why figures of the virtual surface time and again in these texts as an ethico-political reference: Potentiality, claims Giorgio Agamben, "is the most proper mode of human existence", as "the only ethical experience [...] is the experience of being (one's own) potentiality, of being (one's own) possibility".³⁸ As with the concept of heterogeneous time, the notion of the 'potential' takes on a political quality in the transmodern.

Etienne Balibar, though hardly ever focusing on postcolonial struggles, proposes a systematic political theory of an inherently insurrectionist "ideal universality" that has nothing to do with the cosmopolitan utopias enshrined in the modern imaginary right from the moment of its inception, but all the more with a transmodern postcolonialism. By "posing the infinite question of equality *and* liberty together, or the impossibility of actually achieving freedom *without* equality, or equality *without* liberty",³⁹ ideal universality emerges, for Balibar, as a historically irrepressible, but decidedly non-essential figure that cannot be articulated other than negatively, that is, as a truth-effect that occurs through "struggles directed in a concrete form against the *negations* whose theoretical negation this proposition [freedom = equality] itself represents".⁴⁰ Such struggles differ radically from 'mere' struggles for recognition, entitlement, inclusion, or empowerment in the interest of particular communities or groups: The struggles through which equalibertarian ideal universality enters the world as a truth-effect are, even though they are of course fought by particular groups, in excess of those groups' particular interests because those groups' "discrimination or exclusion appears to involve a negation of human universality as such".⁴¹ Historically, Balibar exemplifies this with a recourse to the classical proletariat and the feminist movements, whose respective demands for parity or difference-in-equality could neither have been achieved nor contained within the existing fabrics of society but would have required its complete transformation. The universality of these movements becomes manifest precisely in their inbuilt necessity to "transform the very notion of politics, including forms of authority and representation, which suddenly appear particularistic" despite their fictional universality. Such an unmasking of the allegedly universal as actually particular, of course, forms a key effect of the critique of modernity put forward in the texts analysed in this study. Applying Balibar's theoretical model, it is easy to see how these texts may

³⁸ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 44.

³⁹ Balibar, "Ambiguous Universality", 72.

⁴⁰ Etienne Balibar [1990], "'Rights of Man' and 'Rights of the Citizen'", 50.

⁴¹ Balibar, "Ambiguous Universality", 72.

collude with anti-racist and postcolonial politics, conceived as transmodern interventions in the name of the global manifold, that clearly “have a universal component in this sense, i.e. aim at removing some universal discrimination by asserting the rights of (and to) some fundamental difference”.⁴² The negativity of these movements – articulated as they are *against* coercion and discrimination – implies their references to that which coercion and discrimination negate: freedom and equality. These implicit reference points, seemingly totalistic in their projection of some undivided humanity, do in fact render ideal universality infinitely indeterminate, precisely because equaliberty is not an essence inherent in a preexisting ‘human nature’ but much rather the condition of possibility for humanity to emerge in the first place. The proleptic nature of both equaliberty and humanity itself therefore ensures that ideal universality “is *multiple* by nature, [...] in the sense of being always already beyond any simple or ‘absolute’ unity, therefore a source of conflicts forever”.⁴³ It is especially by virtue of this differentiality inscribed into the concept of the universal itself that Balibar becomes fruitful for those postcolonial theorists and writers who have begun to reconsider universality, as catachresis, from transmodern locations. Paul Gilroy’s invocation of a “planetary humanism”⁴⁴ may come to mind here as much as Rajgopalram Radhakrishnan’s plea for a “potentially multilateral universalism”,⁴⁵ or Gayatri Spivak’s reference to “that impossible, undivided world of which one must dream, in view of the impossibility of which one must work, obsessively”.⁴⁶ Needless to say, such equalibertarian points of reference imply ethicopolitical imperatives lest they serve as mere figments of a complacently romantic imagination; hence Gilroy’s insistence on “translocal solidarity”, Spivak’s repeated emphasis on “transnational literacy”, or Radhakrishnan’s critique of “an understanding of *location* in opposition to global relationality”: Immured in the newly-valorised singularity of his/her particular, allegedly incommensurate location, the postmodern subject is, in this perspective, another version of the monad, by necessity ‘transnationally illiterate’, and fully legitimised in such parochialism as long as location in ‘pure’ difference is taken for an “alibi for one’s nonpresence in other realities”.⁴⁷

I take recourse to these examples of a critically universalist transmodernism in order to grapple with the question of an ethics of reading the texts in question here as parts of a world literature that is yet to come.

⁴² Balibar, “Ambiguous Universality”, 68; 72.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁴ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 80.

⁴⁵ Radhakrishnan, “Postmodernism and the Rest of the World”, 59.

⁴⁶ Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 382.

⁴⁷ Radhakrishnan, “Postmodernism and the Rest of the World”, 44; 56.

This question, to be sure, involves the function of the reader as much as that of the text since, to recall Stephen Heath's observation, world literature can only emerge as the effect of an appropriate praxis of reading with "a migrant's-eye view".⁴⁸ As Madhava Prasad points out, "a theory of (Third) World Literature cannot be produced either from the position of a Western reader or from that of a 'native', for even the former is a kind of nativism".⁴⁹ Keeping in mind that, according to Edward Said, all varieties of nativism do in fact imply an acceptance of the consequences of imperialism – and in particular the "racial, religious, and political divisions imposed by imperialism"⁵⁰ – it becomes obvious that locational criticism alone can easily turn into mere identitarianism. Both the merits and limits of locational criticism are clearly visible in Jameson's insistence on reading third-world literature from a Western perspective: Siting the act of reading at a specific conjuncture that involves an entire genealogy of differential cultures of literary value judgements and 'tastes', Jameson manages to construct his ideal Western reader as an effect of history; such locationism, of course, immediately does away with any assumptions to some Olympian world-wide view from nowhere⁵¹ – no blindness to Eurocentrism here – but might yet run the risk of reasserting the different ('Third-World' and Western) locations, arrived at with whatever circumspection, as insurmountable scripted subject positions. In effect, then, the confrontation of the Western reader with the Third-World text would invariably have to result in an experience of alterity grounded in the reconfirmation of identity. This identitarianism, to be sure, does not only stem from the (alleged) ascriptive gesture of confining 'the Third World' political imaginary to the horizon of national identities⁵² but as much, now with reference to the Western reader, from the assertion of the anti-social privatism of the postmodern metropolitan subject. Such incommensurate subjectivities, needless to say, can only be accounted for in a discourse of Otherness. Jameson, however, is not out to assert that never the twain shall meet but that, and how, Third-World texts 'speak to us'. They can do so on the condition that mere locationism be experienced as limitation; that the privilege of the Western position of 'placeless individuality' be made conceivable as loss, i.e. as the profound lack of any "experience of the

⁴⁸ Heath, "The Politics of Genre", 174.

⁴⁹ Prasad, "On the Question of a Theory of (Third) World Literature", 158.

⁵⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 276.

⁵¹ See Christopher Prendergast, "The World Republic of Letters". *Debating World Literature*. Ed. Christopher Prendergast. London & New York (Verso) 2004: 1–24.

⁵² This appears to be Spivak's point of critique, recently reformulated in *Death of a Discipline*, where she summons both Jameson and Ahmad as "politically correct metropolitan multiculturalists [who] want the world's others to be identitarians; nationalist (Jameson) or class (Ahmad)"; Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 55–56.

collectivity itself”.⁵³ In this light, of course, the Third-World text no longer lends itself to ultimately allochronic readings that posit it as figurations of a political imaginary already obsolete in the Western perspective; nor can it be exhausted by way of a necessary critique of its commodity status, as postcolonial exotic, within the circuits of an omnivorous global culture industry. Instead, as a contribution to the emergent description of the present as transmodern, the third-world text for Jameson figures “a social world of collective cooperation”⁵⁴ and thus achieves an essentially proleptic thrust towards the impossible undivided world of multilateral universalism. To read the Third-World text in this way implies the acknowledgement of the specificities of its conditions of emergence – with regards to Indian writing in English, then, its insertion into the national/modern. Implied in this framework of reading is, to return to Madhava Prasad’s insightful argument, the concession that a theory of world literature (and hence a consistent reception of concrete texts *as world literature*) has to simultaneously produce the very position from which it can be elaborated.

Meanwhile, the transmodern text still anticipates its reader.

⁵³ Jameson, “Third-World Literature”, 336.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 331.

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