Looking Laterally:
Cosmopolitanism and the South Asian Postcolonial Novel

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the idea of “cosmopolitanism” in four South Asian postcolonial novels. In particular, the dissertation traces an arc of the importance of the term from the beginning of the twentieth century to the twenty-first through these selected, key texts. Cosmopolitanism, I argue, has allowed us to “look laterally”—that is, look “beyond” prescribed differences, characterized variously as geography, gender, globally disenfranchised populations, animals, the plurality of human races, nationalities, and literary and cultural traditions. However, such an emphasis on looking “beyond” differences has meant that being “cosmopolitan” has come to be seen as the opposite of having recognizable political affiliations. The rise and celebration of cosmopolitanism has thus come at the expense of a shared sense of community with the capacity for social and political action. Focusing on four novels—Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World* (1916), V.S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* (1979), Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007), this dissertation analyzes the intersections of political and cultural economy in texts explicitly concerned with articulating a cosmopolitan outlook. In each case, I argue that as the term “cosmopolitanism” gains purchase, the ability to develop a shared language of commitment declines.

My first chapter on Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World* investigates an early engagement with the possibilities of cosmopolitanism. The novel, as I argue, is Tagore’s attempt at “reaching beyond” the confines of home
and entering the possibilities of “the world”—a procedure that, in the dissertation, I call “looking laterally.” For Tagore, neither what he called the “colorless vagueness” of cosmopolitanism, nor “the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship,” could be the “goal of human history” (Nationalism 34). In this didactic novel, set up as a debate among the principal characters, Tagore attempts to discover a more “natural” connection to “worldliness” or “being in the world.” I argue that the novel’s fixation on the ideal of “true cosmopolitanism” leads its aristocratic characters to ignore the very (disenfranchised) people on whose behalf they claim to speak and act. Such an analysis of cosmopolitanism as an act of avoidance comes to structure my analysis of the novels in each subsequent chapter.

My second and third chapters—on Naipaul’s A Bend in the River and Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss—argue that in each novel “cosmopolitanism” is posited over and against political commitments and functions as an avoidance of the “messiness” of postcolonial politics. Describing Naipaul’s protagonist, Salim, as a “vagrant cosmopolitan” I show how London becomes the epicenter of an immigrant cosmopolitanism that longs for “the security” of colonial empires (Literary 170). In Desai’s novel, I show how the current generation of South Asian cosmopolitan writers, in tune with academic postcolonial and cultural theories, participate in what I call a “narrative cosmopolitanism.” Here, the “worldly” and cultured reader— not the characters— is hailed as cosmopolitan through the act of reading and decoding a narrative of “loss” in the former colonies.
I end with Indra Sinha’ *Animal’s People* as a more positive and ethical view of cosmopolitanism. Unlike Tagore’s novel, which, too, had attempted to take an ethical position, Sinha’s is a “cosmopolitanism from below,” organized through the vantage point of the global poor. The novel reminds us that, “All things pass, but the poor remain” (366). Sinha’s novel is adamant about the liberatory potential of political and social action in a world faced with global environmental degradation. Such environmental degradation is planetary, even if the instance of the novel is particular: the Bhopal Gas Disaster of 1984. I end the dissertation with this novel, because, as I argue, it posits a worldly solidarity, a “true” cosmopolitanism in the face of environmental harm.
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Introduction
Looking Laterally: Cosmopolitanism and the Postcolonial Novel

In 1976 Raymond Williams published what became a seminal text in the fields of cultural and literary criticism: *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. It was designed as a “record of an inquiry into a *vocabulary*: a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions, in English, of the practices and institutions which we group as *culture* and *society*” (Williams 15). Significantly, neither the first edition, nor the 1984 revised edition, included the term “cosmopolitan(ism).” In the contemporary moment, however, cosmopolitanism has emerged as an ubiquitous term—rivaled only by “transnationalism” and “globalization”—and functions as a foundational concept to describe, analyze, and theorize the global flow of culture and literature. Domna Stanton, in her 2005 presidential address to the Modern Language Association, highlights the term’s prominence when she champions cosmopolitanism as “an imagined community to embrace” (Stanton 638). The Oxford English Dictionary defines cosmopolitanism as embodying “the characteristics which arise from, or are suited to, a range over many different countries” (OED). The term today holds currency in “general and variable usage” (Williams 14), much in the same way that “culture” functioned in Williams’ 1940’s Britain. Displaying a remarkable adaptability and authoritative appeal, cosmopolitanism’s popularity emblematizes a shift in vocabulary and critical terrain across the academy, especially in literary and cultural studies, over the last thirty years. This time frame also coincides with
the rise of postcolonial studies and the dissemination of postcolonial theory\(^1\). In raising issues of postcoloniality and non-western subjectivity, postcolonial studies not only laid the foundations for a more “multi-national” approach to literature, but directly employed and championed the term cosmopolitanism.

This dissertation investigates the idea of “cosmopolitanism” in four South Asian postcolonial novels. In particular, the dissertation traces an arc of the importance of the term from the beginning of the twentieth century to the twenty-first through these selected, key texts. Cosmopolitanism, I argue, has allowed us to “look laterally”—that is, look “beyond” prescribed differences, characterized variously as geography, gender, globally disenfranchised populations, animals, the plurality of human races, nationalities, and literary and cultural traditions. However, such an emphasis on looking “beyond” differences has meant that being “cosmopolitan” has come to be seen as the opposite of having recognizable political affiliations. The rise and celebration of cosmopolitanism has thus come at the expense of a shared sense of community with the capacity for social and political action. Focusing on four novels—Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World* (1916), V.S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* (1979), Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007), this dissertation analyzes the intersections of political and cultural economy in texts explicitly concerned with articulating a cosmopolitan outlook. In each case, I argue that as the term “cosmopolitanism” gains purchase, the ability to develop a shared language of commitment declines.

\(^1\) As Simon Gikandi argues, “the language that enables conjuncture or disjuncture [in discussions of globalization]—hybridity and cultural transition, for example—comes directly from the grammar book of postcolonial theory” (Gikandi 628).
Cosmopolitanism and Postcolonialism

Beginning with the Subaltern Studies Collective formed in the late 1970’s, postcolonial literary theory conferred legibility on particular narratives, and claimed them as representative of “cosmopolitan literature.” Postcolonial studies, spanning the last forty years, has been avowedly concerned with narratives which challenge the hegemony of Western imperialist texts. The Subaltern Studies Collective positioned itself as a corrective to hegemonic western historical narratives of the non-west. For the collective, seeking out the histories of the excluded and marginalized became a way to unravel the logic of colonialism at work in the histories of South Asia. “Re-inscribing” the subaltern into canons that had ignored such narratives, as well as challenging the very definition of “English Literature,” became the framework adopted by postcolonial literary critics, in the U.S. academy and around the world. As the re-inscription of absent figures, narratives, and histories was gaining ground, Gayatri Spivak asked, “What good does re-inscription do?” (Culler 230). In answering her own question, she cautioned that, “the arena of the subaltern’s persistent emergence into hegemony must always and by definition remain heterogeneous to the efforts of the disciplinary historian. The historian must persist in his efforts in this awareness, that the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic” (Culler 230, emphasis in original). The project of early postcolonial studies was therefore centered on the repeated insistence of the subaltern’s (il)legibility as the way to unravel the logic of dominant historical and
literary narratives. Because the subaltern’s absence must be made visible to demonstrate that such legibility has been denied, and because the subaltern’s presence will forever remain “lateral” to the work of a disciplinary scholar, the repercussions of this inherent lacuna at the center of dominant global narratives had very real ramifications across academic disciplines, and sowed the seeds of what was to become an avowed interest in “the other,” “the global,” “the always foreign.”

In the early 1990’s the necessity to “look laterally” took a decisive theoretical turn with the notion of a “contact zone.” Mary Louise Pratt argued that “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 34). Shifting the focus away from complicating what had hitherto been treated as instances of singularly dominant narratives of colonization, the contact zone allowed scholars to broaden their fields of study and investigate how a proliferation of dominant and suppressed narratives functioned in shape shifting “zones of power.” Perhaps more influentially, Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), developed the concept of “hybridity” which, as he argued, “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 7). Such theoretical formulations encouraged the study of so-called minority literatures and cultures without obvious reference to structuring hegemonic principles, and thoroughly reorganized, even fundamentally changed, the English literary canon, opening it up to “new” literatures and the inclusion of neglected authors and works. The
critical discourse, consequently, focused on issues of colony and empire, nation and nationalism, dominant and subaltern.

The new century saw the emergence of a new keyword, “cosmopolitanism,” as the primary term through which to engage “the world.” The cultural critic Timothy Brennan was the first to acknowledge the subtle and pervasive rise of cosmopolitanism as a concept in *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (1997). Critiquing the term as “an act of avoidance if not hostility and disarticulation toward states in formation,” Brennan argued that “cosmopolitanism” was an outcome of the dominance of transnational corporations, and argued further that it was a stand in for the now globally disseminated American culture (Brennan 2). More recently, Robert Spencer has named the “three schools” of postcolonial cosmopolitanism as “the skeptical, the celebratory and the socialist school” (*Rerouting* 37). Following Spencer, I argue both explicitly and implicitly in this dissertation, that postcolonial literature and literary studies belong with the celebratory school. “Cosmopolitanism” in this idiom was most associated with Bhabha, who proposed a very particular articulation of the concept—“vernacular cosmopolitanism”—in his acclaimed *The Location of Culture* (1994); and this was further canonized for the world in the special issue of *Public Culture* on cosmopolitanism (2000). Deeply suspicious of “nations” and “nationalisms,” Bhabha’s cosmopolitanism was centered on the “not-nation”—a world unified by global capitalism, in which mobility was a defining characteristic. Set aside from consideration were political struggles and solidarities of emerging postcolonial nations.
The Arc of the Dissertation

My first chapter on Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World* investigates an early engagement with the possibilities of cosmopolitanism. The novel, as I argue, is Tagore’s attempt at “reaching beyond” the confines of home and entering the possibilities of “the world”—a procedure that, in the dissertation, I call “looking laterally.” For Tagore, neither what he called the “colorless vagueness” of cosmopolitanism, nor “the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship,” should be the “goal of human history” (*Nationalism* 34). In this didactic novel, set up as a debate among the three principal characters, each elaborating a distinctive way of looking, Tagore attempts to discover a more “natural” connection to “worldliness” or “being in the world.” I argue that the novel’s fixation on the ideal of “true cosmopolitanism” leads its aristocratic characters to ignore the very (disenfranchised) people on whose behalf they claim to speak and act. Such an analysis of cosmopolitanism as an act of avoidance comes to structure my analysis of the novels in each subsequent chapter.

My second and third chapters—on Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* and Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*—argue that in each novel “cosmopolitanism” is posited over and against political commitments and functions as an avoidance of the “messiness” of postcolonial politics. Describing Naipaul’s protagonist, Salim, as a “vagrant cosmopolitan” I show how London becomes the epicenter of an immigrant cosmopolitanism that longs for “the security” of colonial empires (*Literary* 170). In Desai’s novel, I show how the current generation of
cosmopolitan writers, in tune with academic postcolonial and cultural theories, participate in what I call a “narrative cosmopolitanism.” Here, the “worldly” and cultured reader—not the characters—is hailed as cosmopolitan through the act of reading and decoding a narrative of “loss” in the former colonies.

I end with Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* as a more positive and ethical view of cosmopolitanism. Unlike Tagore’s novel, which, too, had attempted to take an ethical position, Sinha’s is a “cosmopolitanism from below,” articulated through the vantage point of the global poor. The novel reminds us that, “All things pass, but the poor remain” (366). Sinha’s novel is adamant about the liberatory potential of political and social action in a world faced with global environmental degradation. Such environmental degradation is planetary, even if the instance of the novel is particular: the Bhopal Gas Disaster of 1984. I end the dissertation with this novel, because, as I argue, it posits a worldly solidarity, a “true” cosmopolitanism in the face of environmental harm.

**Chapter One: Looking Laterally for a “Natural” Place in the World: “True” Cosmopolitanism in Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World***

*Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation worship, is the goal of human history.*

My first chapter examines Rabindranath Tagore’s novel *The Home and the World* (1916) as a radical experiment in imagining an alternative to the binary of
nationalism and cosmopolitanism. To many critics and scholars, especially in the West, Tagore’s “solution” was a distinct valorization of cosmopolitanism. Domna Stanton, for example, argues that his novel *The Home and the World* “makes an eloquent plea for cosmopolitanism and underscores the consequences of parochial nationalism in India” (Stanton 637-638). However, in his lifetime Tagore rejected this easy affiliation with cosmopolitanism, saying, “Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship, is the goal of human history” (*Nationalism* 34). The “colorlessness” of cosmopolitanism implied, to Tagore, either an unwillingness to participate in politics or an unprincipled identification with whatever ideology seemed most easily available. On the other hand, “nation-worship”—emerging in Bengal at that time—displayed too much passion, and often a blind commitment to an ideology of exclusion, which far from even prioritizing its own citizens, drew narrow boundaries around communities. For the humanist Tagore, this radical exclusionary nationalism, operating at the expense of all humanity, was an anathema. Instead, Tagore set out to find what I call a “true cosmopolitanism”— “a living communication of hearts” where “no difference of language and customs hindered us in approaching each other heart to heart; no pride of race or insolent consciousness of superiority” (*Nationalism* 8). A “true cosmopolitanism” would thus be a blend of “social regulation of difference [through politics and judicially ensured equity], and the spiritual recognition of unity on the other” (*Nationalism* 34).
The distinguishing factor of a “true cosmopolitanism” in the novel, I argue, is the central place of what each character believes to be “nature” and “the natural.” As the middle term, “nature” comes to symbolize for each character the ideal blend of local/global, political/spiritual, home/world, and nationalism/cosmopolitanism. Thus, “the natural world” becomes a powerful metaphor for all that is truthful and right in the world of the novel. Coded as “outside” the human realm, nature also functions as the resource to access and develop human beings’ truthful behavior in the world. The central problem of the text is therefore how to look for and to the natural world during the social turmoil of Bengal in first decade of the twentieth century, a place still in the process of coming to terms with the partition of Bengal in 1905. Consequently, I read the novel’s dominant dialectic as the give and take between “the human” and “the natural,” and each character’s desire to access the natural, gain sustenance from it, and bequeath its secrets to others who share their cause. Their subsequent attempts to participate in this dialectic and reach this exaggerated and idealized state of the natural — “these lotus eaters of idealism” — ultimately fails when confronted with the “bundle of contradictions” each attempt produces (48, 79).
Chapter Two: Looking Laterally for Empire: Vagrant Cosmopolitanism in V.S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*

*The World is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.*

Marking a sixty year jump in time between Tagore’s *Home and the World* and *A Bend in the River*, the focus of this chapter, V.S. Naipaul’s 1979 novel is the first one in the dissertation that unfolds in the aftermath of the fall of European empires across the global south. Set in what is recognizably, though never explicitly stated as, Zaire in the 1960’s and early 1970’s, the novel centers on a young East African Indian Muslim, most likely Kenyan, Salim, who runs a small goods store in a town, presumably Kisangani, at a bend in the (Congo) river. Arriving at the town in 1963, soon after Zairian independence in 1960, Salim witnesses, but does not participate in the many political upheavals of the area. Throughout the heady mix of promise and trepidation that was sweeping a number of recently independent African countries (Kenya [1963], Tanzania [1960], and Uganda [1962] to name a few), Salim remains a perpetual outsider. Indeed, Salim remains obdurately unwilling to identify as “African,” and consequently he is unable to appreciate the virtues of postcolonial nationalism on offer at the time—solidarity, community, and economic well-being. Feeling trapped in the political and social flux, Salim reminds himself often of his uncle Nazruddin’s saying, “You can always get into those places. What is hard is to get
out” (10). *A Bend in the River*, in short, is the narrative of a man looking for a way out of a postcolonial Africa undergoing seismic change.

This novel is layered and complex, but my focus on this chapter is Salim and his journey through and away from Africa as an example of what Raymond Williams calls “vagrant cosmopolitanism.” Vagrants, in Williams’ elaboration are those “who, deprived of a settled way of living or of a faith, or having rejected those which were inherited, find virtue in a kind of improvised living, and in an assertion of independence” (*Culture* 289). Consequently, vagrants exhibit a distinctive “paradox of exile” (*Culture* 289). On the one hand, they possess “certain qualities of perception: in particular, the ability to distinguish inadequacies in the groups which have been rejected [in the novel’s case ‘Africans’]” (*Culture* 289). Salim, as the first person narrator, is indeed quite an astute “reporter” of the “dull business” of life in the town at the bend in the river (*Culture* 289, *Bend* 11). However, as Williams rightly points out, since vagrants lack “the substance of community,” their reporting tends to highlight the negative aspects of society, and contains “an unusual amount of plausible yet specious generalization” (*Culture* 289, 286). Throughout the novel, Salim engages in negative critiques of Africa precisely through “plausible yet specious generalizations,” which tend to echo generalizations made familiar by colonialism’s ideology of European superiority and African chaos (*Culture* 284). Salim does this in order to reject any identification with African history or culture; he, instead, turns to the recently departed European colonial empires, which he treats with great reverence, as a way to locate himself in the world. At
the end of the novel, Salim leaves Zaire for London, and there, in the heart of the metropole, he finds his own kind: “The population of the Gloucester Road was cosmopolitan, always shifting, with people of all ages” (248). For Salim, Gloucester Road, “where the world met,” holds out the possibility of a life of “vagrant cosmopolitanism.” Indeed, it is for him a way out of and away from Africa and “into the world” (261).

Chapter Three: Looking Laterally for a Worldly Reader: Narrative Cosmopolitanism in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*.

*Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it.*

In this chapter, I argue that *The Inheritance of Loss* hails a specifically “worldly reader” to appreciate and participate in what I call the novel’s “narrative cosmopolitanism.” A “narrative cosmopolitanism” revels in the existence of a profusion of narratives, inviting “us”—knowing, clever, “worldly” readers—to detect and decode such multiple viewpoints rather than having to choose among them—or worse, to identify/empathize with any particular position. Choosing, and especially identifying politically, implies, according to the novel’s ideology, a partisanship unbecoming of cosmopolitan, worldly readers. Rebecca Walkowitz calls such worldliness “cosmopolitan style,” wherein literary style embraces its
“trivial, idiosyncratic, apolitical and anachronistically literary” qualities as an intellectual and “political” project (Cosmopolitan 4). Thus, The Inheritance of Loss teaches its reader how to recognize the codes and conventions of a postcolonial cosmopolitan literature that valorizes reading as the principal form of engaging “the world,” and implies that it is only such self-congratulatory reading that will form a bulwark against the messy and violent praxis of postcolonial politics.

The world of the novel is unified by the cosmopolitan and eponymous notion of “loss.” From the servant Biju who is battered by the hardships of underground kitchen labor of New York City, to the local Nepali population of North East India fighting a violent and deadly battle for sovereignty, to the aging colonial sympathizer forced to reckon with his poverty and lack of power, “loss” here cuts across class boundaries and ethnic identities. Cosmopolitanism in the novel is thus recovered through the “universal” notion of loss. However, as demonstrated in the epigraph above, only the reader, guided by the third person narrator, can appreciate the universal loss of narrative and singularity. None of the characters themselves are capable of, or willing to articulate, such a sentiment. I argue that such exclusive knowledge reserved for the reader typifies contemporary conversations in postcolonial studies, where sublimating global suffering and violence into a personalized vocabulary of generic human emotion guarantees a prized legibility in the Anglophone capitals of London and New York. The “other,” dissimilar to “us,” no longer exists, and difference is characterized as mere variations of a singular “human” theme. These novels
display a marked fatalism toward a world doomed to catastrophic political and environmental violence, subsuming it under the supposedly continual cycle of struggling for and losing our objects of desire—be they natural environments, nations, childhoods, lovers, or money. The much lauded cosmopolitan ethos here emerges as a distinctly uncritical category, and remains unrepresentative of the burden carried by the globally disenfranchised populations of the world.

**Chapter IV: Looking Laterally for Each Other: The Praxis of Daily Living in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People***

*You’ll talk of rights, law, justice. Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don’t mean the same.*

My fourth chapter analyzes a novel which takes up the subject of ecocide caused and managed by multinational companies. *Animal’s People* (2007) has a narrator disfigured by the gas released during the Union Carbide Bhopal Gas Disaster in 1984. In *Animal’s People*, Jaanvar ("animal" in Hindi), the novel’s protagonist and first person narrator, is one of these poisoned slum dwellers. Consequently, throughout the novel, we see him consider the difficulty and yet the absolute necessity of forming bonds of solidarity across a range of differences such as class, gender, religion, and nationality in order to take a stand against such environmental degradation. Unlike the characters discussed in previous chapters, Jaanvar’s impetus to form these bonds is not idealistic in its cosmopolitan
longing, but necessarily materialist in the characters’ need for literal survival in the face of environmental disaster, not to mention the denial of justice to the poorest of citizens by national-political-juridical systems. It is worth noting that this is the only novel of the dissertation which considers cosmopolitanism, as it were, “from below” i.e., from the perspective of the underclass, rather than being “about” them.

The distinctive quality of Jaanvar’s particular form of looking laterally is that it is always also a looking upward. Thus far in the dissertation we have encountered novels whose manner of looking were always a version of looking downward—from the aeroplane for Naipaul’s Salim, through the “higher position” of the third-person narrator in Desai, or toward the beyond and below of the aristocratic Hindu home in Tagore. In this novel, Jaanvar’s disabled physicality—his mangled spine—necessitates a vantage point close to the ground. Jaanvar literally walks on all fours because the poisonous gas released by the Kampani caused “smelting in my spine” and condemned the nineteen-year-old narrator to be always at the eye level of “someone’s crotch” (15). Jaanvar is therefore the very definition of that which has been consigned to “the bottom” of society. He begins from the point of being both literally close to the ground, but also, in a metaphorical sense, “grounded” in the afterlife of the tragedy. It is this “grounding” in both senses of the word that gives Jaanvar a unique perspective and allows him to see through the behavior of “foreign” people using him and his suffering to prove their own humanity (5).
Focusing on the brutal and exploitative mechanisms of class, gender, religion, and nationality, Jaanvar adamantly refuses to sublimate such distinctions into mere “differences” to be overcome through an idealistic longing for community. Quite simply, the most basic necessity for survival—food—allows him to see through the uses of differences and understand how precisely they keep him near starvation. Jaanvar also stubbornly refuses to be trapped in the posture of always “looking up,” whether literally or metaphorically, to the people who exploit him and his story for their own profit. Instead, Jaanvar is continually in the process of developing his own version of looking out toward and interacting with the world. This is a difficult process that forces him to reckon with the hierarchical structures of society, but which also makes him see the possibility of a future premised on human equality.

“Seeing each other” in this novel is premised on being able to see similarities in material realities, not false equivalencies based on some idealistic narrative frame of “humanity.” At the end of the novel, Jaanvar effectively renders the question of “humanity” moot. In effect, he is not interested in expanding notions of “personhood” to the “human and non-human” in order to make an intellectual argument (162). Instead, material action becomes paramount. Here, unlike in every other discussion of cosmopolitanism and nationalism in this dissertation, we have a distinct awareness that people find it nearly impossible to see connections even to people who share very similar material realities, let alone to those who are “different.” The only undeniable and universally recognizable term is “poor”—“All things pass, but the poor remain” (366).
Chapter One

Looking Laterally for a “Natural” Place in the World: “True”

Cosmopolitanism in Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World*

Rabindranath Tagore is undoubtedly the most important Indian writer of the twentieth century, and arguably one of the greatest thinkers anywhere in the world. Ian Jack notes, “A comparable figure is hard to find. Burns in Scotland? Shakespeare, Dickens in England? In their grip on the general population none comes close” (“Winning”). In addition to being a gifted novelist, Tagore was a prominent painter, poet, philosopher, playwright, composer, lecturer, publisher, essayist, and the founder of one of India’s most important universities, Visva Bharati. Furthermore, he has the unique distinction of having composed the national anthems for two counties—India and Bangladesh. A comparable figure is, indeed, hard to find. Among the many strands of thought that run through Tagore’s multifaceted endeavors, the desire to describe and articulate a notion of “worldliness” or “being in the world” remains ever present. As he pithily noted in his lecture on “Nationalism in India,” “There is only one history—the history of man” (*Nationalism* 65).

Such a sense of shared “humanity” was not just an article of faith for Tagore, but a path of active negotiation between passionately, and often violently, delineated differences. The need to study the difficulties and complexities of walking this “middle path” of “humanity” is one of the reasons he set up his university and named it Visva Bharati, which means “communion of the world
with India.” Living under British colonial rule, and observing the rise of an often violent ultra-nationalism to resist this colonial rule, Tagore remained steadfast in his critique of both sides—British/Indian. However, rather than take refuge in an “octopus of abstractions,” or an idealized humanity, Tagore plunged head first into the avowedly partisan politics of his age to find a solution that “protected and nourished our ideals” (Nationalism 41, 14).

To many critics and scholars, especially in the West, Tagore’s “solution” was a distinct valorization of cosmopolitanism. Domna Stanton, for example, argues that his novel The Home and the World “makes an eloquent plea for cosmopolitanism and underscores the consequences of parochial nationalism in India” (Stanton 637-638). However, in his lifetime Tagore rejected this easy affiliation with cosmopolitanism, saying, “Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship, is the goal of human history” (Nationalism 34). The “colorlessness” of cosmopolitanism implied, to Tagore, either an unwillingness to participate in politics or an unprincipled identification with whatever ideology seemed most easily available. On the other hand, “nation-worship” displays too much passion, and often a blind commitment to an ideology of exclusion, prioritizing its own citizens at the expense of all humanity. Instead, Tagore set out to find what I call a “true cosmopolitanism”—“a living communication of hearts” where “no difference of language and customs hindered us in approaching each other heart to heart; no pride of race or insolent consciousness of superiority” (Nationalism 8). A “true cosmopolitanism” would thus be a blend of “social regulation of difference
The central thrust of the novel’s plot revolves around Bimala’s shedding of purdah and taking a more active role in the public affairs of the nation. Nikhil, her husband, an English educated and progressive Bengali aristocrat is desirous that “my home-made Bimala, the product of the confined space and daily routine of small duties,” should “come into the heart of the outer world and meet reality” (41, 23). When Bimala enters “the world,” she encounters a Bengal in the throes of an emerging and violent Swadeshi movement—an economic movement that fought for Indian independence by rejecting foreign made goods, especially English textiles. However, as C.A. Bayly notes, the rejection “of European styles and British goods, partial as it was, transcended purely practical politics and touched on issues of national identity” (Social Life 303). Sandip, Nikhil’s best friend, is one of the leaders of the Swadeshi movement, and is especially focused on how the movement can become a platform to construct and disseminate a powerful “national identity” to fight colonial rule. Consequently, Sandip remains throughout concerned with what the novel repeatedly calls the arousal of “passion” in his fellow countrymen and countrywomen (60). Nikhil, on the other hand, often assumed to be a stand-in for Tagore’s own views on Swadeshi, takes a much more moderate approach. He remains opposed to the “violence of passion” that Sandip so desperately wants to summon because he knows that the greatest impacts of Swadeshi boycotts “would fall on the poor traders and their customers” (60, 101).
Formally, the novel is composed of twenty three sections nested under twelve chapters, and made up of the interweaving first-person prose narratives of the three characters—Bimala, Sandip, and Nikhil. The novel broke new ground in Bengali and English writing in India, not just for its modernist narrative techniques, but also for giving a woman, Bimala, a full one-third of the text\(^1\).

Constructed as a debate about the politics of Swadeshi unfolding in Bengal in the early part of the twentieth century, each character argues for a distinct way of “being in the world” in the way he or she “sees” as the most “natural.” A novel of ideas, *The Home and the World* is thus a radical experiment in displaying—both formally and through the content of the debate—the vivacity and difficulties of negotiating the “middle path” of a “true cosmopolitanism.”

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The distinguishing factor of a “true cosmopolitanism,” I argue, is the central place of what each character believes to be “nature” and “the natural.” As the middle term, “nature” comes to symbolize for each character the ideal blend of local/global, political/spiritual, home/world and so also nationalism/cosmopolitanism. Thus, “the natural world” becomes a powerful metaphor for all that is truthful and right in the world of the novel. Coded as “outside” the human realm, nature also functions as the resource to access and develop human beings’ truthful behavior in the world. The central problem of the

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\(^1\) Originally composed in Bengali, Tagore supervised the novel’s translation into English by his nephew, Surendranath Tagore. As William Radice quotes from one of Tagore letters, “A large part of [the translation] I have done myself and it has been carefully revised” (*Home* viii).
text is therefore how to look for and to the natural world during the social turmoil of Bengal in first decade of the twentieth century, a place still in the process of coming to terms with the partition of Bengal in 1905. Consequently, I read novel’s dominant dialectic as the give and take between “the human” and “the natural,” and each character’s desperate desire to access the natural, gain sustenance from it, and bequeath its secrets to others who share their cause. Their subsequent attempts to participate in this dialectic and reach this exaggerated and idealized state of the natural—“these lotus eaters of idealism”—ultimately falls flat when confronted with the “bundle of contradictions” each attempt produces (48, 79). What the novel is trying to work out therefore is the appropriate methodology with which to participate in the give and take with the natural; to wit Tagore gives us three different approaches embodied in the main characters of Bimala, Sandip, and Nikhil.

The significance of the novel for my dissertation is thus twofold: it shares my desire to work toward, as I do in my last chapter, taking “nature” and what is deemed “natural” as the epistemic ground upon which to build a political world view (especially during a time of great historical and political turmoil). And secondly, by being a novel so heavy on ideas and the processes through which ideas manifest themselves and are found useful (as opposed to dialogue or plot driven), the novel seeks to determine an appropriate methodology to fuse concerns about politics with the natural. In placing nature always next to, beside, and in conversation with the political issues at hand, *The Home and the World* becomes for my dissertation the foundational text to theorize a genealogy of
“looking laterally,” and marks the colonial world as instructive in thinking about cosmopolitanism in the postcolonial novel.

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The first self-acknowledged failure in the attempt at a “true cosmopolitanism” and the task of looking laterally for meaning is its reliance on structural thinking and, specifically, the act of writing in prose as an investigative practice. While Tagore himself was a prolific novelist and essay writer, he infuses all three of his central characters with a distinct distrust of language. Formally, the novel is composed of twenty three sections nested under twelve chapters, and made up of the interweaving first-person prose narratives of each of the three characters. Each character in turn betrays the contradictory emotions of requiring writing to think through his or her daily life, while also being frustrated by its inability to capture and reproduce felt experiences. Writing in prose, with its assumed demands for linearity and factual reporting, becomes the distinctive marker of modern human life. It functions as both the cage from which characters are ever seeking to liberate themselves and look toward a more truthful way of life, but also forms the only mechanism available to them to look laterally toward the truth that, by definition, lies outside this formal cage of language. As we will

2 Not without precedent, in both Tagore’s own writings and the emerging Bengali novel form, the structure of interweaving narratives is nonetheless experimental for the early twentieth century, anywhere in the world. As we will see in Chapter 3, Kiran Desai’s Booker prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* attempts a similar structure of interweaving character narratives, attesting to the form’s relevance today.
see, each character adorns this impossible, but also the only ‘natural,’ destination outside language in a series of garbs, including devotion, desire, delusion, truth, nature, feeling, and pure love.

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Bimala, as the central character of the novel, displays the most tumultuous relationship to the act of looking outside language. On the simplest level, the plot of the novel revolves around Bimala’s shedding of purdah and taking a more active role in the public affairs of the household and the nation. At her husband’s, Nikhil’s, insistence, Bimala lets her feudal household duties of cooking and instructing servants take a back seat and enters into a world of Bengali politics in the throes of a nascent Swadeshi movement. However, before she actually leaves the physical confines of the purdah Nikhil brings in an Englishwoman, Miss Gilby, “to teach [Bimala] and be [her] companion” (19). Nikhil is still away in Calcutta “reading for his M.A. degree” and the primary purpose of Bimala’s literacy seems to her to be to read his letters—“a few lines only, and simple words, but his bold round handwriting would look up into my face, oh, so tenderly!” (19). In writing these words, Bimala acknowledges how a first encounter with written language has the ability to reproduce the very look and feel of a real human being. Very soon, however, “the Prince of the fairy tale had faded” and Bimala feels “introduced to the modern age in its own language, and therefore these words that I write seem to blush with shame in their prose setting”
(19). Somewhat strident in her view that a “woman’s love is not like a hackneyed passage quoted from a romantic poem to be piously written down in round hand in a school girl’s copy-book,” the Bimala at the start of the novel is solely concerned with being the epitome of “absolute devotion” in real life (19). Words written down fail to display the true sense of devotion the astrologers predicted she would embody as “an ideal wife” and it for this reason that she begins to blush with shame when the initial joy of direct access to Nikhil through his words fades (17).

Bimala’s shame stems from her understanding that language is but a vehicle for a person’s thoughts, and once Nikhil returns, his physical presence coming to dinner with her becomes “like the rhyming of a poem” (20). The poetry of daily life arriving “through the path of the meter” of “old-time traditions” allows Bimala to engage with an older form of punctuating life—the prescribed relationship between a husband and wife who, because of purdah, can only meet at certain time of the days, particularly at meals (20). Yet here too she seeks to leave behind the formal structures that mark these customs and give herself over more fully to this role. Pure devotion, it would seem, requires an interpellation so complete that Bimala must forget that she is even performing a role. All structures, be they prose, poetry, tradition, or education cannot get in the way of forgetting herself in her devotion—“But when the physical appearance evades the scrutiny of our sense and enters the sanctuary of our hearts, then it can forget itself” (18). Any recognition of structure, like when Nikhil discovers her making
obeisance to him and taking “the dust off my husband’s feet,” breaks the mystique and she “can never forget the shame of being detected by him” (18).

Consequently, Bimala’s desire to move outside formal structures, particularly language, and into a pure form of devotion marks one significant way in which “the truth” of her life is always at a slight distance from her, marking her natural destination as lateral to her daily activities. And yet, as we see during these discussions of language and devotion early in the novel, she directly addresses her writing to Nikhil—“My beloved, it was worthy of you that you never expected worship from me” (20). Interestingly, since Bimala is the only person writing in the past tense—recounting events from the present at the end of the novel, never once giving away the plot, and always recounting what her feelings are as she re-lives and writes about them—her writing can be read as another symbol of devotion to her husband.

Yet, it is Sandip, who is most able, in the present of the novel, to elicit a new and arguably more powerful form of devotion in Bimala. At the level of plot, Sandip, Nikhil’s best friend, is a leader in the newly emerging nationalist Swadeshi movement who becomes the focal point of Bimala’s encounter with the world and politics. His conversations with Bimala in the drawing room about contemporary events become her way to engage with the ongoing struggle against British Imperial rule. Indeed, Sandip is the impetus for her to finally take-up her husband’s offer to leave purdah. The first time she sees him she is still in purdah “behind a screen” and he is speaking to a large crowd about Swadeshi (30). More significant than the content of his speech, Bimala is struck by how “the hearts of
the crowd swayed and surged to his words, as though they would break all
bounds” (31). So moved by his speech, she removes the screen and “his eyes, like
starts in fateful Orion, flashed full on [her] face,” and Bimala is instantaneously
“no longer the lady of the Rajah’s house, but the sole representative of Bengal’s
womanhood” (31). Sandip’s words, and the promise of devotion, transports
Bimala so much so that she “was utterly unconscious of myself” (31). Earlier in
the novel, while touching her husband’s feet she experiences a similar paroxysm
of devotion and “could feel the vermillion mark upon my forehead shining out
like the morning star,” whereas now she was “trembling lest [Nikhil] should utter
a sound out of tune with the triumphant paean which was still ringing in my ears”
(18, 31). This moment marks the shift in the object of Bimala’s desire from her
husband to Sandip, and thus her entry into the outside world by way of this new
object. Notably the formal mechanism of her movement outward is once again
language—Sandip’s words—but a language shorn of all signification except its
ability to move one to unconscious devotion.

Sandip is not only similarly desirous to escape the bounds of language and
yet doomed to a life of only being able to employ language to mark his natural
destination “outside” it, but also initially shares Bimala’s final destination of
“absolute devotion.” Indeed, when Sandip meets Bimala he is also desirous of an
object of desire and finds it in her. His route to being a devotee of Bimala is the
emergent form of Indian nationalism that takes up the chant of “Bande
Mataram”—Hail to the Mother. The appeal to “Mother India,” while passé in
today’s India, was hugely influential for the first half of the century in providing a
tangible image to sublimate the desires of a nation in formation. Sandip, in the present of the novel, is an early believer in the image’s power and Bimala’s first foray into politics is an argument between Nikhil and Sandip regarding the place “for an appeal to the imagination in patriotic work” (36). Convinced by the need for an imagistic marker of devotion, Sandip argues that his “powers are limited” and that devotion in the form of subjugation to a deistic image is required for such lesser mortals—“What you [Nikhil] call hypnotic texts I call truth. I truly believe my country to be my God. I worship Humanity. God manifests Himself both in man and in his county” (37). In starkly similar language to Bimala who earlier pronounces that her “woman’s heart, which must worship in order to love,” Sandip states that in “the case of one’s own country, it is different. There the heart clearly demands worship” (18, 37). “Truth” for Sandip is clearly within the framework of an imagistic construct. Here, unlike Bimala who desires to leave all constructs behind, Sandip wishes to enter more fully into the image of Mother India and lose himself in such “hypnotic texts of patriotism” (36). The result in both cases, however, is similar—Bimala seeks to be absorbed into her devotion for her husband and Sandip into the worship of his ideal of Mother India.

A master manipulator of language, Sandip cannot stay satisfied with the image of womanhood that gives him “the indomitable courage to go to the bottom of Ruin itself,” and needs a physical object from which to draw inspiration and sustenance of the image (39). That object becomes a Bimala who is all too willing to move from being the worshiper to the worshipped in the instant that she heard Sandip speak and saw in herself “the sole representative of Bengal’s womanhood”

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3 See Sarkar, Tanika.
(31). What we notice here is a marked reversal of the dynamic of moving through and away from language and structures, and instead the drawing of sustenance for, and the shaping of these structures from, the hypnotic, unconscious, and worshiping desires of devotion and love—“the truth.” For Sandip, such truth has a very terrestrial manifestation and it is embodied in what he deems as the greedy “passion” exhibited by and characteristic of all women—“Women feel, in their own heart of hearts, that this indomitable passion is the lifeblood of the world, acknowledging no other law but itself, and therefore victorious” (48). It is he who chastises “these lotus eaters of idealism” who “find no pleasure in [the union between man and woman] unless he screens himself with some phrase—and that is why the word is so overflowing with lies” (48). Fed up with words and images, Sandip desires “the real thing,” and though he is only meant to spend a few days as Nikhil’s guest, he sets up his headquarters there. Bimala’s physical presence is the real manifestation of India that he has been looking for—“Today you have given me the message of my country. Such fire I have never beheld in any man. I shall be able to spread the fire of enthusiasm in my country by borrowing it from you . . . You are the Queen Bee of our hive, and we the workers shall rally around you. You shall be our center, our inspiration” (44).

Despite claiming that his source of truth is made incarnate in Bimala, Sandip simply fits her into the long line of people who take him as their object of devotion, while still looking for a more natural way of being in the world. He remains through the novel just as he was before her, unable to find “any one source of inspiration . . . that is why I have been constantly moving about, rousing
enthusiasm in the people, from which in turn I draw inspiration” (44). In the process of writing his daily journals Sandip is distinctly and quite earnestly disheartened by his continual substitutions of both objects of desire and the people who make him the subject of their desire. He eventually comes to the conclusion that this might have something to do with language itself. Sandip writes, “When I read these pages of the story of my life I seriously question myself: Is this Sandip? Am I made of words? Am I merely a book with a covering of flesh and blood?” (78). Unlike Bimala, for who the recognition of structure undermines her pure feeling, Sandip both recognizes the necessity for linguistic structure to create and fetishize an object of desire, but is deeply unsatisfied with its ability to truly reflect his confusion and struggle. Rather than be fully absorbed into absolute devotion, it is a more natural and truthful way of being which Sandip seeks—like the “earth [which] is not a dead thing like the moon. She breathes” (78). Drawing a distinction between inside and outside, nature is fundamentally outside the realm of the human, but also precisely the defining characteristic of being human:

The onlooker, gazing upon the earth from the outside, can see only the light reflected from this vapour and this dust. The tracks of the mighty continents are not distinctly visible. The man, who is alive as this earth is, is likewise always enveloped in the mist of the ideas which he is breathing out. His real land and water remain hidden, and he appears to be made of only lights and shadows (78). Trapped in this “malady of ideas which afflicts me,” Sandip cannot but realize “the bundle of contradictions” which emerge in wanting a more natural and
truthful way of life and being unable to live it (79). In a twist of logic which allows him to continue with his daily dose of passion and devotion as the only way to achieve a more truthful way of life, Sandip makes the argument that his desire for the natural is simply a result of being “born in India and the poison of its spirituality runs in my blood” (80). Such an argument is in effect very disheartening to Sandip who, despite his best efforts, must recognize that he had “no choice in regard to my surroundings and so must make the best of such material as come to my hand”—ergo the divine worship of Mother India, given form in the body of Bimala (78).

Consequently, contrary to most readings of Sandip as an avowed nationalist, he is indeed working desperately to leave behind this so called “Indian desire for natural truth,” and instead seek something more cosmopolitan in its appeal and praxis. Thus he writes, “I want the western military style to prevail, not the Indian,” because of its proven ability to dominate and be applicable across the world. Indeed, this is precisely what sways Bimala too, and in her first political argument she makes the case that “Is not the history of every country . . . whether England, France, Germany, or Russia, the history of stealing for the sake of one’s own country?” (81, 37). If we take up the simple dictionary definition of cosmopolitanism as “that which is applicable to many parts of the world,” we see emerging here a practical and proven definition comprised of a passionate and violent praxis (OED). Such an idea of cosmopolitanism nonetheless emerges at great cost to Sandip, who must curb his “Indian instinct” for the natural and cover up the “rifts in the armour through which something peeps out which is extremely

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4 See Sumit Sarkar’s “Ghare Baire in its Times” and Sprinker in Datta.
soft and sensitive” (79). It is no surprise, therefore, that for both Bimala and Sandip for whom “by a curious freak of fate [they have] been created tender and merciful,” absolute, unconscious, and hypnotic devotion which masks their perception of the violence of their own acts is essential for them to be able to carry out their tasks without stumbling (79).

The counterpoint to Sandip and Bimala’s desire to inspire people passionately to devotion is the self-sacrificing, seemingly benign figure of Nikhil, who is never too far from the refreshing and instructive lessons of nature and truth. Nikhil shares Sandip’s realization that one’s surroundings have a profound impact on consciousness, and is consequently more forgiving of the results of a tumultuous and violent world. When the now educated Bimala complains of the petty scorn of her sister-in-law, Bara Rani, Nikhil likens his sister-in-law’s mind to “the feet of Chinese women” where “the pressure of society cramped them into pettiness and crookedness . . . What responsibility have they of their own?” (22). And, indeed, when it is clear to all that Sandip and Bimala have more than just a passing interest in each other, Nikhil refuses to take the advice of his master and send Sandip away or take Bimala up to Darjeeling for a short trip (44). So highly conscious of the effects of one’s surroundings on the mind, Nikhil had pressured Bimala for years to come out of purdah so that that they may know each other “more fully in the outside world” (23). For Nikhil such movement to the “outside” is an unshakable article faith, no matter what the personal consequences:

I must not lose faith: I shall wait. The passage from the narrow to the larger world is stormy. When she is familiar with this freedom,
then I shall know where my place is. If I discover that I do not fit in with the arrangement of the outer world, then I shall not quarrel with my fate, but silently take my leave . . . Use force? But for what? Can force prevail against truth? (45)

“Truth” here is for Nikhil the “natural” equilibrium that a person reaches in the circumstances fate has prescribed for them, but crucially this applies to those who have made the “stormy” passage to the “outside.”

The distinctiveness of Nikhil’s open-mindedness, which allows him to regard the freedom of an individual to interact with his or her surroundings, is that he is the one who “bestows” the freedom in the first place. As “the ideal of zamindari paternalism,” not only does Nikhil “free Bimala” to leave purdah, but he is also the one who literally sustains Sandip with money, even when he is not living in his house as a guest, and much to his wife’s initial chagrin, even when he disagrees with Sandip’s political views and ventures (Sarkar 152).

Nikhil’s social standing as a man of means— a prince in a house “old in dignity from the days of the Badshahs”— and an unshakable moral belief in “Right”—“I am willing . . . to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country”—allows him to wander freely in a world of turmoil without being touched by its stains (18, 29). As such, Nikhil is always already outside the fray of “the outside.” His position is guaranteed at birth by his aristocratic heritage, and it is this privilege that is recognized in the outside world that he desires Bimala to share in—the “equality” which he wishes her to more fully realize (20). From this high position of power which Nikhil
intuitively and instinctively understands to be beyond signification and question—the source of his great article of faith in truth—he wishes Bimala to understand that, come what may with her foray into the world, their position shall always been guaranteed.

Early in the novel Nikhil makes clear that despite his claim that the “outside world may want [Bimala],” he is only “thinking about myself” (23). When challenged to make clear what he means by that he can only summon up enough energy to say, “Can one ever finish a subject in words?” (23). His insistence therefore that Bimala be educated, leave purdah, and “have me more fully in the outside world” is but a precursor for her to leave it all behind once again, achieve their natural equilibrium, and enter a realm where they are the absolute signifiers of privilege, free to roam the outside world as they please. From this vantage point of power, words are but a fool’s enterprise, best left to the charlatans and hypnotists of nationalism.

Consequently it is through Nikhil that the novel achieves it clearest articulation of a nature which is truthful, right, and always already outside the realm of the human. It is worth quoting an entire passage from the novel to see how clearly Nikhil understands the place of nature outside human labor:

During the day I forget myself in my work. As the late autumn afternoon wears on, the colours of the sky become turbid, and so do the feelings of my mind. There are many in this world whose minds dwell in brick-build houses—they can afford to ignore the thing called the outside. But my mind lives under the trees in the
open, directly receives upon itself the messages borne by the free winds, and responds from the bottom of its heart to all the musical cadences of light and darkness. (132)

It is unclear what Nikhil means by saying he cannot “afford to ignore the call of the outside,” when he is precisely the only person in the novel who can afford to ignore whatever he pleases—the flirtatious relationship between Bimala and Sandip, the calls to Swadeshi, or the warnings of sister-in-law and master. But what is clear, however, is that not only is nature the destination for him at the end of the day, but that it is also the starting point of his being—his “mind lives under the trees.” Once again, Nikhil posits his relationship to nature as if it were an article of faith, a reality beyond question.

In writing such sentences, Nikhil is in the process of coming to terms with a Bimala who is lost to Sandip, and who has been avoiding him at meals and by sleeping in another room for quite some time now. When he chances upon her in at dusk in “the inner gardens,” on his way to be “beguiled into a cheerful expectancy at the thought of meeting my chrysanthemums,” he experiences an outpouring of “freedom” and benevolence whilst in the physical outside of the garden (133). Calling to the retreating Bimala, he pronounces her free from “this closed cage of mine” (133). Again, so blinded by his absolute belief in his own power, his reason for doing so is paternalistically selfish, “if I insist on keeping you shackled, my whole life will be reduced to nothing but an iron chain. What pleasure can that be to me?” (133). Yet it is also in this process of writing that Nikhil comes to an understanding that “it was not a generous impulse, nor
indifference. I had simply come to understand that never would I be free until I could set free” (134).

A generous reading of Nikhil’s actions might lead us to take into consideration that he has a very keen sense of the role one’s surroundings and societal position play in the behavior allowed a person. Indeed, throughout the whole novel, Nikhil has been struggling with how to use his role as paternalistic zamindar to help free his people and his wife. Early in the novel he writes,

I longed to find Bimala blossoming fully in all her truth and power.

But the thing I forgot to calculate was, that one must give up all claims based on conventional right, if one would find a person freely revealed in truth. Why did I fail to think of this? Was it because of the husband’s pride of possession over his wife? No. It was because I placed the fullest trust upon love. I was vain enough to think that I had the power in me to bear the sight of truth in its awful nakedness. It was tempting Providence, but still I clung to my proud determination to come out victorious in the trial. (41)

It is unfortunate, therefore, that though he see the “awful nakedness” of “truth” when a person is set free, Nikhil still retreats to the comfort of his romanticization and fetishization of nature. He must insist on believing that he can receive “the messages borne by free winds” and “respond” from the “bottom of [his] heart.” So profound is his “Indian desire for natural truth,” as Sandip might have it, that he exclaims to his master moments after his encounter with Bimala that, “One can understand nothing from books . . . it is only when we get to the point of letting
the bird out of its cage that we realize how free the bird has set us” (134). This brings us full circle back to a Bimala who is ashamed of prose. Nikhil cannot stand his own “bald headed injunctions” to set birds and people free, for when “we put all this into words . . . this is untrue when stated in dry prose” (134-135).

In a particularly evocative simile, Nikhil culminates his desire for a poetry so profound it is able to fuse the human, spiritual, and natural by asking, “oh when shall we be able to sing it? When shall all these most intimate truths of the universe overflow the pages of printed books and leap out in a sacred stream like the Ganges from the Gangotrie [a mythical river]?” (135).

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The structuring principle of the novel, as I have described it thus far, is fundamentally premised on a movement outward towards what each character determines to be a more “truthful” way of being. Adopting the various guises of poetry, devotion, passion, nature, and freedom, each character engages in a desperate attempt to arrive “there,” and claims continually to be beginning from “there.” Such a movement is not surprising in a novel titled Ghare Baire, where the word baire in Bengali means “world.” But what is peculiarly interesting in the novel is that none of the characters ever get to their destination or find their “natural equilibrium” in the world. Despite their best efforts, truth, nature, passion, poetry, etc., remain at a slight distance from them—ever lateral, and always deferred. In Nikhil’s case, as we saw, the truth being always outside is an
article of faith, and Bimala and Sandip are willing to hypnotize themselves into their truths precisely because it is too hard for them to accept a deferred state of being in truth. In the second half of the novel, however, a different “outside” emerges to challenge the internal progress of each character’s praxis of truthful living—what I’m calling the world of “daily living.” The praxis of daily living takes several forms—teachers, servants, lower class/caste people, money, and children (or lack thereof). Each form interrupts the self-enclosed upper-class and upper-caste world of Bimala, Sandip, and Nikhil, breaks their concentrations, and ultimately produces a different set of contradictions in their minds by waking them up to the conventional and material bases of their pursuit of a truth premised on privilege.

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As many critics have shown, Chandranath Babu, Nikhil’s master, is the clearest articulation of an interruptive force in the lives of the three central characters. Arriving on the scene at the psychological moment, Chandranath Babu often diffuses the tension of a scene by embodying the spirit of a wise old man, unperturbed by the personal and political turmoil at play. The first time we see him is during Bimala’s first meeting with Sandip in the reception room. Sandip is in the midst of proclaiming Bimala as “that beautiful spirit of fire, which burns the home of ashes and lights up the larger world with its flame,” and she is the process of accepting his devotion as “she whom he worshipped with his

5 See Shohini Ghosh’s “Passionate Involvement: Love and Politics in Satyajit Ray’s Ghare Baire”
“Bande Mataram” when Chandranath Babu walks in (39). Taking the dust of his feet as instructed by Nikhil, Bimala receives his blessing, “May God protect you always, my little mother” (40). His invocation of her as a mother shatters Bimala’s thrust forward into the role of “Mata,” mother, by highlighting her lack of children. Bimala thus writes, “I was sorely in need of such a blessing at that moment” (40). Purposely left vague by Tagore, her need for the blessing can also be read as Chandranath Babu’s sanctioning of her as “Mata,” but nonetheless produces the effect of breaking Bimala’s easy hailing as the woman of “Bande Mataram.” Indeed, the importance of this moment as an interruptive force is reflected in the form of the novel. Thus far in the novel we have only heard from Bimala, and this sentence of hers ends the section of her writing and we move on to Nikhil’s story—the first time we will hear from another character apart from her.

Tagore’s inclusion of such interruptive moments gestures to his, and the character’s, knowledge of a world outside their own reflections and desires. Yet repeatedly the characters are unable to wrap their brains around such moments, and these moments usually precipitate either a break in writing, a purposeful disavowal of them as irrelevant, or direct evidence that they are right to ignore such moments and charge on with their own pursuits.

In the case of Chandranath Babu, his interruptive force is not one of “daily living,” but instead he is initially the absolute manifestation of “truthful living”—a beacon of “the outside” for everyone. Thus, when Bimala begins to lose faith in her ability to sustain an intense passionate desire for Sandip and “my country,”
she receives regular visits from Chandranath Babu: “He has the power to lift my mind up to an eminence from where I can see in a moment the boundary of my life extended on all sides and so realize that the lines, which I took from my bounds were merely imaginary” (68-69). It matters little that he is very much against Sandip’s version of Swadeshi, and certainly weary of his effect on Bimala. She nonetheless finds his presence salutary. Just as when Nikhil testifies to his master about his new found knowledge of freedom, it is less about what Chandranath Babu does, and more about his very presence that allows the characters to see a different “outside.” As Nikhil writes, “Surprised by my outburst, my master looked up at me in silence” (134). In Sandip’s case, he simply, and correctly, identifies Chandranath Babu as a “school master,” only interested in “the kind of stuff I have read in books,” and not in “man’s chief business . . . the accumulation of outside material” (106). Consequently, because we, as readers, do not have access to the thought process of Chandranath Babu except through the main character’s perspectives, he functions as an “unthreatening other,” reminding them of, and sometimes reinforcing, their inward looking tendencies.

Yet as the novel progresses a different Chandranath Babu emerges, one who is able to participate in the muddy waters of daily living unlike any of the main characters. Despite what abilities the characters may wish to endow him with, structurally, Chandranath Babu functions primarily as the conduit for the story of Panchu. Panchu, “a tenant of a neighboring zamindar,” first comes to Nikhil “with a basketful of cocoa-nuts and greeted me with a profound obeisance”
As is soon revealed, Panchu, who was introduced to Nikhil “through my master,” and “extremely poor,” once, in a moment of dire need, stole cocoa-nuts from Nikhil’s garden. Having a sense that he is at the end of his life, he returns to Nikhil to pay back his debt and settle his earthly accounts. Rejecting Sandip’s earlier proclamation in this moment, Nikhil is so touched by Panchu’s actions that he says, “There are more things in life than the union or separation of man and woman” (88). Going on to list the various little deals and “barters” which Panchu makes in order to “eke out a livelihood,” Nikhil, in his assumed role of paternalistic zamindar has “an idea of making him a charity allowance” (89). In his desire to employ Panchu for his own gratification and pleasure, Nikhil wishes “to free” Panchu. However, Chandranath Babu thwarts his desire, and in language evocative of Nikhil’s position “outside the outside” he says, while “your gift may destroy the man, it cannot destroy the hardship of his lot. Mother Bengal has not only this one Panchu. If the milk in her breasts has run dry, that cannot be supplied from the outside” (89).

Once again, precisely in the moment of interruption, Nikhil takes this thwarting as a sign to join with Bimala to “dedicate our lives to removing the root of this sorrow in our country” (89). Not only is the grand language of such a desire not surprising, but neither is Bimala’s unwillingness to join him, and “the idea passed away in talk” (89). Nikhil attributes Bimala’s hesitancy to her being “a lady,” in possession of distinct class bias toward the poor (89). He states of her:

Though her own people are not well off, she was born a Rani [Princess]. She has no doubts in her mind that there is a lower unit
of measure for the trials and troubles of the ‘lower classes.’ Want is, of course, a permanent feature of their lives, but does not necessarily mean ‘want’ to them. Their very smallness protects them, as the banks protect the pool; by widening bounds only the slime is exposed. (89)

The implication here is that Nikhil, despite his flaws and his class privilege, is able to identify with Panchu, while Bimala is not. Furthermore, the natural imagery of the banks and the pool are meant to signify the normative value of the poor’s “wants.” Yet Panchu forever remains for Nikhil a peripheral story that he monitors, through his master, but never actually gets involved—the slime never actually enters his pool.

Despite Panchu fearing the end of his life, he goes on to reappear at key moments in the text, always exemplifying the idea that Nikhil cannot engage with his life and problems, save as the distant and appreciative zamindar. When Panchu’s wife dies “of a lingering consumption,” and he “succeeded in acquiring philosophy enough to forget that his children were hungry,” he moves away from home and follows “a wandering ascetic” (99). Nikhil “knew nothing of this at the time” and is distracted by his own despondency over the relationship developing between Bimala and Sandip (99). Indeed, when Panchu comes complaining to him about the ridiculously high figure of “one hundred and twenty-three rupees” required to perform the requisite funeral rites for his wife, it is unclear if Nikhil helps him. He simply wonders out loud about who will see too the “purification” of such avaricious and brutal Brahmins who demand such exacting fees (99).
Chandranath Babu, on the other hand, immediately takes in “Panchu’s children under his own roof” (99). On his return after a month as a wandering ascetic, it is Chandranath Babu who, wanting to preserve Panchu’s “self-respect,” gives him “a loan,” not a gift, complete with a receipt, to restart his life again with his children (100). The idea behind such a loan is that Panchu, given his proclivity to feel indebted, should not have “an inward obligation” to Chandranath Babu, which might damage his self-respect. Instead, “to destroy self-respect is to destroy caste, was [Chandranath Babu’s] idea” (100). I will take up this desire to preserve Panchu’s caste shortly, but for now it is worth reiterating that Nikhil takes no part whatsoever in any of these activities. Again, Tagore is careful to point out that such seemingly extraneous activities of daily living are underway right under Nikhil’s nose, and he is kept abreast of all the key events; yet, he takes his place as a spectator and does nothing.

Panchu’s final contribution to the edification of Nikhil occurs when Chandranath Babu relates the story of losing his caste in the process of helping Panchu. Panchu is left completely shorn of all his dignity and money when his zamindar, Harish Kundu, with the aid of Sandip, fines him “a hundred rupees” for “selling foreign cloth” that he “bought with borrowed money” (104). Dismayed by Panchu’s pleading for mercy, Kundu gives “him a shoe-beating” and proceeds to burn his whole bale of cloth (99). This is a significant example of how, historically, the poor faced the burden of the Swadeshi movement—a point made repeatedly by Nikhil—hence his refusal to allow Swadeshi to be practiced in his markets. Sandip, however, pronounces the burning at Panchu’s expense a
“celebration of the last rites of foreign commerce” (104). When Nikhil’s suggestion of “lodg[ing] a [legal] complaint” is met with Sandip’s determination to bear false witness against Panchu, Nikhil finally steps in and “that very day I bought Panchu’s holding and entered into formal possession” (104, 105, 107).

Piqued by the interfering of another zamindar in his own affairs, Kundu dispatches a sham aunt to Panchu’s house to set up shop and demand monies owed from the sale (107). This is when Chandranath Babu steps in and follows suit by staying with “the aunt” in Panchu’s abode. So taken in by the idea “that there could be such an odd character among the gentlefolk as the one who sought their hospitality,” Panchu’s aunt is even more surprised when “she found [Chandranath Babu] had no object to her touch” (135). Given that Panchu himself was “not sure of her caste, and would not let her touch the water-jar, or anything at all of his”— ensuring his safety from her potential pollution— she is so moved that she decides to leave her sham task and return “back to Brindaban.” (135). The upshot is that “Panchu’s respect for [Chandrnath Babu] vanished,” because he could not tolerate “stratagem at the expense of orthodoxy” (135, 136).

Panchu’s symbolizes how the praxis of daily living always remains at a slight distance from the main characters— all they can do is look laterally toward it but never quite reach it. As such, it remains an ideal. An ideal, by its very nature, is easily held aloft and recouped without much effort, save in its articulation. Thus, even though he has done practically nothing to help Panchu, Nikhil can easily pronounce that “we may not be able to save him . . . but if we should perish in the attempt to save the country from the thousand-and-one-snares
we shall at least die happy” (136). Tellingly, again, this sentence ends the section of Nikhil’s writing and we move onto Bimala’s story (136). What is crucial here is that Panchu is a Hindu, and that in the process of his story unfolding, Chandranath Babu is at all times concerned with preserving his caste. The “orthodoxy” of this tale, despite Chandranath Babu putting his own caste at risk of pollution, cannot be disputed. Given that Nikhil, along with all the other characters, place Chandranath Babu on a pedestal of “eminence” in the absolute “outside,” it is not surprising that his caste affiliation is beyond question, and never even comes up as an issue, save in displaying Panchu’s ignorance (69).

Daily living, consequently, for our cast of elite characters is deeply rooted in a conservative movement that always ensures their position of privilege.

Yet Tagore’s inclusion of such daily events occurs repeatedly to confuse the characters and force them to reinforce for themselves their class position. In his despondency over language, much before we get Panchu’s story, Sandip writes, “If someone, who could see right into me, were to write my biography, he would make me out to be no different from that lout of a Panchu” (81-82). This is a deeply disturbing thought for Sandip and forces us to read the later burning of Panchu’s cloth as a malicious attempt on Sandip’s behalf to differentiate himself and demonstrate his class/caste position through willful destruction. Other incidents, including when he strikes the servant Nanku for barring his way to the reception rooms to meet Bimala, likewise emphasize his abhorrence of the lower classes—“What! To be touched by a flunkey! I snatched away my arm and gave the man a sound blow” (53). And as we have seen, Bimala shares a similar
disregard of the lower classes. She writes when confronting her own thievery in the latter half of the novel: “Only a commoner can be a thief, the king conquers and takes his rightful spoil” (138).

Such self-justification regarding money is precisely what causes the breaking apart of Bimala and Sandip’s relationship. Cajoled by Sandip into stealing money from her husband’s safe for “the cause” of Swadeshi, Bimala’s guilt, shame, and attempts to recover the money, particularly by forcing her new found protégé Amulya to rob her husband’s treasury, finally opens her eyes to Sandip’s exploitation of her. Sandip’s naked avariciousness is on full display for the reader in his own writing, but also reported to Bimala through Amulya, “He shut himself in his room, after he left you, gloated over the gold, pouring it out into a heap on the floor. ‘This is not money,’ he exclaimed, ‘but the petals of the divine lotus of power’ crystallized strains of music from the pipes that play in the paradise of wealth!’” (171). Indeed, this evacuation of the significance of money is something Bimala, Sandip, and Amulya share, highlighting their inability to perceive its relationship to the labor of the working classes. Boasting about his ability to procure money for Bimala, Amulya exclaims, “Killing is a mere word. So also is the taking away of money. Whose is the money? No one has created it. No one can take it away with him when he departs this life, for it is no part of his soul” (154). Mere insufficient words, “money” and “killing” cannot replace the “truthful, natural, intangible” quality of the soul. However, it is able to mask the body of the person being killed, and the labor and toil that went into the production of capital.
Again, here, we find that language, or the money form of capital, is at once insufficient as truth, but its daily existence is also necessary to prop up and produce that “natural truth” which sustains the idealism of the characters. Ultimately, all the hullaballoo about money is rendered insignificant. Unworthy of consideration by aristocrats, Nikhil sweeps the thought of money in one sentence when he finds out what has been going on: “I could divine that there was some connection between the taking out of this six thousand and the robbing of the other. But I have no curiosity to learn the nature of it, I shall never ask” (197). Suffice it to say that the very monetary structure that props up the aristocracy’s pursuit of a truth way of life is precisely that which is purposely obscured by them. And when its structure cannot be ignored any longer, Bimala and Sandip, ignorant of Nikhil’s dismissal, come away disillusioned by their attempts at self-hypnosis—which is how each character is left at the end of the novel.

Unsurprising, “home,” embodied in the character of Bara Rani, and the seemingly forgotten beginning of all movement outward and the exemplar of daily living, is another such interruptive force that breaks into Bimala’s movement. Returning from her very first trip outside purdah, Bimala finds her “sister-in-law, standing near a window overlooking the reception rooms, peeping through the venetian shutter” (36). Tagore purposefully deflates the momentousness of the breaking of purdah by inserting this comic exchange, “‘You here?’ I asked in surprise. ‘Eavesdropping!’ she replied” (36). In keeping with the form of such events, this exchange also ends a section of Bimala’s writing. In repeatedly including such moments where a character is made aware
of, and yet fights against, the encroaching of daily, banal existence, Tagore makes his characters acutely and painfully aware that their idealism for a movement outside will not sustain them in the face of such interruptions. Writing in retrospect, Bimala is the one most aware of this fact. Halfway through the novel, just after Bimala realizes that Bara Rani sent Nanku to keep Sandip out, and that her leaving behind of “domestic squabbles” directly influenced Bara Rani’s decision, she writes:

The thing which seems so glorious when viewed from the heights of the country’s cause, looks so muddy when seen from the bottom. Once begins by getting angry, and then feels disgusted. I shut myself into my room, sitting by the window, thinking how easy life would be if only once could keep in harmony with one’s surroundings. (75)

The “slime” and “muddy waters” of daily living have indeed followed the characters throughout—it has been, and always will be, a part of their surroundings.

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I began this chapter by stating that *The Home and the World* is a novel of ideas. And as we have seen, despite the characters’ desperate need to privilege the human-nature dialectic to find the path of truthful, natural living, it is very much the slime ridden human world which occupies the role of “that which is outside.”
The forced supplanting of “surroundings” with “truth” is finally what brings the novel to its gory dénouement, and the unaccounted for figure of “the Mussulman” becomes the exemplary idea of an ignored human surrounding.

While we know that most of the poor traders in Nikhil’s market are Muslim, and that he is adamantly against hurting them by demanding them to sell only Swadeshi goods, they appear as a direct subject of conversation only once in the novel. In the discussion which leads Sandip to pronounce his need for worship, Nikhil takes up the place of Muslims by stating, “If the idea of a United India is a true one . . . Mussulmans are a necessary part of it” (120). Sandip, in his desire to rule counters with, “Quite so . . . but we must know their place and keep them there, otherwise they will constantly be giving trouble” (120). Nikhil’s only suggestion to avoid trouble is the mysteriously sounding, “There is only one well-known way of avoiding quarrels” (120). Once more, as with all subjects about daily life that might muddy the characters’ thinking, the topic comes to an abrupt end. Neither Sandip nor Nikhil has any expressible thoughts about how to include Muslims into their idea of India, save through their tried and tested ways of brutality and benevolence, respectively.

Formally, Tagore is forced to take his novel of ideas about “the outside” to its logical conclusion and demonstrate that it is inevitable that the repressed aspects of one’s surroundings will come back to bite his characters. Thus the novel’s dénouement is brought about not through a monetary crisis, a domestic dispute, a caste issue, or even a linguistic issue, but rather through the one vital
component that has not arrived through the “orthodox” guises of the upper class to momentarily interrupt their thinking—the not Hindu, non-caste bound, Muslim.

In a manner of idealist “right” only guaranteed to the benevolent zamindar, Nikhil, at the end of the novel, rushes off to help save his nemesis’, Harish Kundu’s, treasury from being “looted” by “Mussaulmans” (201). Once again, Chandranath Babu is the bearer of such news—the orthodox conduit allowing Nikhil to retain his sense of truth and duty. Nikhil has just finished pontificating that “He who would create [life] must do so with the help of his surroundings, or he will fail” (197). He recognizes that he has ignored his real surroundings—Bimala—and caused more misery than joy in adhering to this article of faith and forcing Bimala into “the outside”: “In trying to manufacture a helpmate, we spoil a wife” (198). Tried and lonely, he desires “to go back to the beginning . . . follow the path of the simple . . . not try to fetter my life’s companion with my ideas, but play the joyous pipes of my love” (198). Yet, “But can even Nature’s nursing heal the open wound, into which our accumulated difference have broken out? The covering veil, beneath the privacy of which Nature’s silent forces alone can work, has been torn asunder” (198). And so finally here we have the defining quality of all movements outward—they expose “differences.” Here the unacknowledged difference between Hindu and Muslim produces the devastating effect of a “wound in the head” for Nikhil, and “a bullet through the heart” for Amulya (203). No conception of Nature, with a capital “N,” can be resuscitated to make sense of this seemingly unjustified violence. Indeed, so out of the ordinary is this violent end, and so beyond any imaginative capacity
for Bimala, who has the last lines of the text, that she can only end with the words “He is done for” (203).

Such an abrupt end would seem befitting of a novel of ideas taken to their logical conclusion and, which I have argued, is concerned always with ‘the outside’ that is not easily recognized, grasped, or reached. However, as I mentioned earlier, Bimala is the only person writing in the past tense, and she has chosen to stop on this abrupt sentence, despite having begun her story from the beginning knowing her final destination. One could ask—why wasn’t there more foreshadowing of the part of Muslims, if she knew the ending? Was there no desire on her part to re-think events in order to have the conclusion make sense? Or, rather, are Tagore’s convictions about the unwavering significance of one’s surroundings and class position so adamant that Bimala is forced to always and continually reach the same unimaginable conclusion? For the purposes of this dissertation, suffice to say that despite every character’s distrust of language, and his or her desire to achieve something unconsciously and romantically natural, the biggest lesson is that human endeavor, whatever form it is allowed to take given the circumstances, is a vital and important part of our attempts to reach beyond ourselves. Politics, ideas, prose, poetry, tradition, caste, class, and money all have their part to play in recognizing difference—whether Natural, natural, or unnaturally human.

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Tagore, in his lecture “Nationalism in Japan,” delivered shortly after the writing of *The Home and the World*, notes that, “India has been trying to accomplish her task through social regulation of differences on the one hand, and the spiritual recognition of unity on the other” (34). This novel, as I have shown, takes up the process of reconciling “differences” with “spirituality” and tries very hard to work out what a “true cosmopolitanism” might look like. As we have seen, the painful conclusion we are forced to make is that the process of “regulation” only reveals more differences, often violent ones, and we are forever severed from a primeval sense of Nature and “being in the world.”

The novel’s overt investment in an idealist form of dialectical thinking forces it to leave behind the more material, historical considerations that give rise to its existence. Such a pursuit of idealism in the face of historical, political, and economic turmoil leads the ignored material to come a calling and knock one’s idealism sideways. Tagore’s self-enclosed aristocratic world of the early twentieth century is still, according to Tagore, bound by the codes of feudalism, tradition, and spirituality. While it is clear that the global colonial economy, particularly of cloth, was central to the rise of Swadeshi, it is equally clear that the characters of this world can afford to ignore its call. Such, more material, considerations remain beside the point, because we can barely see outside the inward looking reflections of the novel’s characters.

However, what is significant in *The Home and the World* is that all the characters engage directly with historical and political events, despite their various blinders. This fact is of vital importance to my dissertation because, in
subsequent chapters, it will be taken for granted that the ideal of cosmopolitanism is opposed to politics, tout court. Furthermore, the linkages between characters to their material surroundings gets more confused as the global economy moves towards its current incarnation of corporate multi-national capitalism, forcing the subsequent authors in my dissertation into more convoluted ways of dismissing material reality and the global exploitation of labor. Tagore’s novel, thus, comes to exemplify the “purest” and most “idealist” form of “looking laterally toward the world,” and, in sum, *The Home and the World*’s methodology of a continuous and building sense of looking laterally outward, unafraid of the potentially deadly consequences, is the hallmark demonstration of a belief in praxis, process, and dynamism.
Chapter Two
Looking Laterally for Empire: Vagrant Cosmopolitanism in V.S. Naipaul’s A Bend in the River

Introduction

Marking a sixty year jump in time since Tagore’s Home and the World, the focus of this chapter, V.S. Naipaul’s 1979 novel A Bend in the River is the first one in the dissertation that unfolds in the aftermath of the fall of European empires across the global south. Set in what is recognizably, though never explicitly stated as, Zaire in the 1960’s and early 1970’s, the novel centers on a young East African Indian Muslim, most likely Kenyan, Salim, who runs a small goods store in a town, presumably Kisangani, at a bend in the (Congo) river. Arriving at the town in 1963, soon after Zairian independence in 1960, Salim witnesses, but does not participate in the many political upheavals of the area—the prolonged Congo Crisis, the Simba Rebellion of 1964, and the rise of President Mobutu and his ultra-nationalist policies that came, after the manifesto of N’sele in 1967, to be known as Mobutism¹. Throughout the heady mix of promise and trepidation that was sweeping a number of recently independent African countries (Kenya [1963], Tanzania [1960], and Uganda [1962] to name a few), Salim remains a perpetual outsider. Indeed, Salim remains obdurately unwilling to identify as “African,” and consequently he is unable to appreciate the

virtues of postcolonial nationalism on offer at the time—solidarity, community, and economic well-being. Feeling trapped in the political and social flux, Salim reminds himself often of his uncle Nazruddin’s saying, “You can always get into those places. What is hard is to get out” (10). *A Bend in the River*, in short, is the narrative of a man looking for a way out of a postcolonial Africa undergoing seismic change.

This novel is layered and complex, but my focus on this chapter is Salim and his journey through and away from Africa as an example of what Raymond Williams calls “vagrant cosmopolitanism.” Vagrants, in Williams’ elaboration are those “who, deprived of a settled way of living or of a faith, or having rejected those which were inherited, find virtue in a kind of improvised living, and in an assertion of independence” (*Culture* 289). Consequently, vagrants exhibit a distinctive “paradox of exile” (*Culture* 289). On the one hand, they possesses “certain qualities of perception: in particular, the ability to distinguish inadequacies in the groups which have been rejected [in the novel’s case “Africans”]” (*Culture* 289). Salim, as the first person narrator, is indeed quite an astute “reporter” of the “dull business” of life in the town at the bend in the river (*Culture* 289, *Bend* 11). However, as Williams rightly points out, since vagrants lack “the substance of community,” their reporting tends to highlight the negative aspects of society, and contains “an unusual amount of plausible yet specious generalization” (*Culture* 289, 286). Throughout the novel, Salim engages in negative critiques of Africa precisely through “plausible yet specious generalizations,” which tend to echo generalizations made familiar by
colonialism’s ideology of European superiority and African chaos. Salim does this in order to reject any identification with African history or culture; he, instead, turns to the recently departed European colonial empires, which he treats with great reverence, as a way to locate himself in the world. At the end of the novel, Salim leaves Zaire for London, and there, in the heart of the metropole, he finds his own kind: “The population of the Gloucester Road was cosmopolitan, always shifting, with people of all ages” (248). For Salim, Gloucester Road, “where the world met” holds out the possibility of a life of “vagrant cosmopolitanism.” Indeed, it is for him a way out of and away from Africa and “into the world” (261).

Naipaul won the Booker Prize for In a Free State in 1971, and in 1979 A Bend in the River was short listed for it. The novel was mostly favorably reviewed in Europe and North America, with Bruce King calling it “his most accomplished novel since The Mimic Men” (“A Vision”). Bernard Levin, whose endorsement was quoted on the book jacket of the earliest Penguin editions, goes so far as to call Naipaul “our greatest war reporter from the front lines of the modern world’s Kulturkampf.” For Levin, A Bend in the River “brings that war inescapably before us.” Naipaul, in fact, had travelled through Zaire in 1975, and reported on his travels and reflections on Mobutism in the essay, “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa,” and whose longer form he published in 1980 as A Congo Diary. As several critics have pointed out, the novel and essay share “many details,” and following closely on the heels of his 1974 essay “Conrad’s Darkness and Mine,” A Bend in the River marks the culmination of a period of
sustained focus on the Congo region, and especially with Joseph Conrad’s novel, *The Heart of Darkness* (*Naipaul* 117). Despite reviewers’ praise of *A Bend in the River*, literary critics found that the novel “not only tendentiously compresses [African history] but seems designed to distort and misinform as well” (*Mustafa* 239). As Rob Nixon forcefully argued, this distortion “reaffirms what we have been schooled [by Conrad’s novel] to believe all along: that time is not of the essence in Africa, for nothing new can happen there anyway” (*London* 99).

Indeed, Nixon’s influential study of Naipaul’s travel writing, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (1992), reads Naipaul as an overt apologist for European empires. In examining Salim’s “vagrant cosmopolitanism,” I build on Nixon’s critique of Naipaul as “a mandarin possessing a penetrating analytic understanding of [by definition, “failed”] Third World societies” and argue that in this novel Naipaul inaugurates a version of cosmopolitanism which subsequently has been refined by Rushdie and others (*London* 4). This kind of cosmopolitanism disdains all forms of communal affiliations, and is especially suspicious of emerging nationalist projects in the so-called “third world.” A close look at the novel reveals that Salim’s claims of rootlessness and displacement are a ruse for rejecting “Africa”—an “Africa” which is recognizably constructed through colonialist discourse of chaos and backwardness, a place where, as Nixon puts it, “nothing new can happen” (99).

However, despite *A Bend in the River*’s tendency, as Mustafa puts it, to “distort and misinform” the reader about African history, the novel possesses a useful clarity about how a cosmopolitan ideal can come into being through a
masochistic, painful, and often brutal process of reverence for what the novel simply calls “Europe” (22). Salim’s path to London and his eventual incorporation into a vagrant cosmopolitanism in Europe is not straight-forwardly pleasurable. Rather, it is a painfully learned process of identification. Salim must teach himself to “see that [his African] past is something in your mind alone, that it doesn’t exist in real life. You trample on the past, you crush it” in order be like “Europeans” (120, 23). Living in the midst of the often violent and bloody convulsions of independence and nationalism in Africa, Salim is acutely aware of how some identities are forged through great personal and communal suffering. The astute reporter that he is, Salim faithfully documents how his own cosmopolitan affiliation comes into being through a blend of domestic violence against others and personal suffering, both of which expose his deep-seated misogyny and racism. For Salim, then, “looking laterally for empire”—that is, out of postcolonial “Africa” and into cosmopolitan and “civilized” Europe—is a dynamic process of concealment and recognition of power. This process is spurred on by a desire for a specific kind of community of outsiders, and culminates in Salim finding in London a cosmopolitan community of vagrants.

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Throughout the novel, Salim takes for granted that there is not, and never will be, a place for him in the newly emerging “imagined communities” of Africa. As Williams notes of vagrants, their “manner is normally to assert, and then to argue within the assertion” (Culture 287). In Salim’s case, the assertion that he is always already excluded from Africa, therefore, becomes both the premise of his narrative, but also the painful, inevitable conclusion of his story. Indeed, historically there is certainly “an element of truth, or at least ground for argument” that Indians were being purposely excluded from the ultra-nationalist politics of the time (Culture 287). Indophobia was on the rise in postcolonial Africa and, even within the timeframe of the novel, culminated in Idi Amin’s expulsion of Indians from Uganda in 1972. Salim’s uncle Nazruddin is part of this expulsion, and has to leave Uganda for Canada, eventually settling, like Salim, in London. However, Salim, in characteristic fashion, does not allude directly to these historical events of discrimination except in vague general terms—“Things were bad in Uganda” (209). Instead, he begins his narrative as if his felt exclusion from Africa was always already a fact of history.

Early in the novel, Salim’s fellow Indian-African friend, Indar, gives voice to their shared fear of exclusion. One day after playing squash together, Indar casually expresses his view that, “‘We’re washed up here, you know. To be in Africa you have to be strong. We’re not strong. We don’t even have a flag.’” Salim notes that Indar had “mentioned the unmentionable.” As soon as Indar
verbalized his fear, Salim “saw the wall of his compound as useless” (24). Here, it is at first unclear why “we”—that is the Indian community—did not have the ability to live in Africa, given that Salim also asserts that “Africa was my home, had been the home of my family for centuries,” and his family “felt like people of Africa” (17). The presumption could be that Indar’s and Salim’s fear relates directly to the rise of Indophobia at that time, yet neither man makes mention of it. Instead, under the guise of claiming that their community was “not strong,” Indar actually reveals two related and unspoken assumptions of the text. The first is that the Indian community, and especially Salim, faces a new challenge, hitherto unseen on the continent, something they “wouldn’t be able to keep out [and is] the true danger” (24). The second unspoken assumption is that life was much better under the colonial rule that existed for centuries in Africa. Looked at closely, it becomes evident that the two are causally linked: the departure of Europeans is now precipitating new, and not altogether positive, changes and set of challenges. Until now, Indar, Salim and other Indian-Africans had “simply lived.” They had done “what was expected of us, what we had seen the previous generation do. We never asked why.” In the new Africa, in a time of rapid political changes, “this was no longer going to be sufficient” (17). It is noteworthy, of course, that while Salim asserts that “Africa was my home,” he refuses to call himself “African”—claiming instead that he “felt like people of Africa” (17). This subtle distinction—feeling like but not being—which simultaneously claims and rejects Africa is, of course, a calculated repudiation of what Williams calls “inherited affiliations” (Culture 289). Also, Indar’s (and by
extension Salim’s) assertion of weakness, or of a lack of community and its impending failure, always has the corollary effect of raising the specter of what Salim will later, and repeatedly call, “African rage, the wish to destroy, regardless of consequences” (32).

Living in the midst of great political turmoil, where “the political system [colonialism] we had known was coming to an end,” and having a sense that “another tide of history [African independence] was coming to wash us away,” it remains vital, therefore, for Salim to possess some kind of knowledge to survive what he perceives as an oncoming onslaught (22, 26). Indeed, the terror of being “washed away” and the need to survive it haunts the entire novel, and is summed up in the very first sentence: “The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it” (9). To gain some knowledge of how to resist becoming “nothing,” and how not to be “washed away,” Salim turns to the people who have, in his mind, proven themselves to be survivors: Europeans. He tells us that, “Because they could assess themselves, the Europeans were better equipped to cope with the changes than we were” (23). Salim, therefore, immediately sets about “assessing” himself, and does so by analyzing his relationship to community.

Living on the amorphously identified “east coast” of Africa, Salim is ethnically an Indian Muslim who would like to think of himself as Indian, but admits that “we could no longer say that we were Arabians, or Indians or Persians; when we compared ourselves with these people, we felt like people of Africa” (17). Such a heterogeneous identity was typical of seemingly all the
people in this “Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese” place where people “simply lived.” While the people here are diverse and “felt like people of Africa,” Salim maintains that “[t]he coast was not truly African” (17). In fact, rather than positively hailing this heterogeneity of people coming together—the very antithesis of the growing ultra-nationalism in the region—Salim, thinks of it as a mark of failure. Unlike Europeans, these diverse communities did not possess, according to Salim, any written or spoken histories because “we never recorded” (17). Such a sweeping claim, what Williams identifies as “plausible yet specious generalizations” of the vagrant cosmopolitan, allows Salim to then claim that, “All I know of our history and the history of the Indian Ocean I have got from books written by Europeans” (18). It was only through these European textbooks that Salim, in the first instance, is able to understand himself as “Indian”: “In our customs and attitudes we were closer to the Hindus of north-western India, from which we had originally come” (17). As in his refusal to call himself African, here we again see Salim echoing Naipaul’s own “rhetoric of displacement”, a continual claim to not-quite fit anywhere in the “third world” (Nixon 27).

Thus, setting out to “assess himself,” Salim finds that he can only do so through the records of Europeans, because without them, “I feel all our past would have been washed away, like the scuff-marks of fishermen on the beach outside our town” (18). Because he measures himself through European records, Salim, slowly but surely, begins to adopt the viewpoint of colonial narratives of

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2 As Nixon argues about Naipaul the author, “for the myth of Naipaul’s detachment to be sustained it is essential that he appears unassimilable, awkwardly placed, hopelessly oblique” (27). A similar argument can be made for the character Salim.
Africa, sharing, in Williams’ formulation, “certain qualities of perception”
especially in the “ability to distinguish inadequacies in the [African] groups which
have been rejected” (Culture 289). Thus, the heterogeneous quality of his
hometown and community, his mixed and diverse cultural heritage, cannot be cast
in a positive light or embraced wholeheartedly because, presumably, these ways
of defining cultures and histories were never to be found in the colonial textbooks.
Instead, the “African cosmopolitanism” of the east coast—a place where Salim
can be a Muslim with Hindu customs, and can be both Indian and African—
becomes a marker of “nothing,” because it was never recorded by Europeans as
“something.”

Salim’s recording of his own life thus becomes his way to stave off being
“nothing.” In his carefully observed description of his home life within the local
Indian community—yet another heterogeneous place of “nothing”—we see
Salim’s blend of “plausible but specious generalizations” and the fear of being
“washed away”:

the squalor of our family compound, a mixture of school yard and back
yard: all these people, someone always shrieking . . . the sour smell of
those stones running into the smell of the latrine and the barred-off urinal
corner . . . There were too many people in the servants’ quarters. But they
weren’t ordinary servants, and there was no question of getting rid of
them. We were stuck with them. That was how it was on the east coast.
The slaves could take over, and in more than one way. (20)
Not only does Salim highlight the “mixture” of his family compound in distinctly negative terms (“squalor,” “sour smells”), but he describes it as though it were a microcosm of the political history of the region, where the “slaves [read: Africans] could take over,” and “wash away” his people, even if who “his” people are is never entirely clear in the novel. Just as he attempts to reach out and describe his community, Salim finds himself instead describing how his community is prone to being wiped out by Africa/slaves. Rather than the community being “different” from “Africa,” as ultra-nationalist Indophobic narratives maintained, or “different” because of a long history of the described mixing of peoples, perhaps the problem might be that the Indian community is too close to the African one:

The people in our servants’ houses were no longer pure African. It wasn’t acknowledged by the family, but somewhere along the line, or at many places along the line, the blood of Asia had been added to those people. Mustafa [a servant] had the blood of Gujarat in his veins; so had Metty [another servant], the boy who later came all the way across the continent to join me. This, though, was a transferring of blood from master to slave. With the Arabs on our coast the process had worked the other way. The slaves swamped the masters; the Arabian race of the master had virtually disappeared. (20)

Displaying a great awareness of structures of power, Salim here emphasizes that the Indian masters have slept with their slaves. However, “lacking the substance
of community”—in this case a clear unwillingness to identify with or be identified as related to slaves/Africans—Salim employs a dry, clinical language to describe what we can assume with a fair degree of certainty was not an entirely consensual sexual act. Without this distinction of power, as Salim reports of the Arabs, an entire race can “virtually disappear,” thus ensuring that “mixing” with “pure Africa” is definitively something negative and undesirable.

Salim thus moves continually between two seemingly opposite reasons for rejecting the imagined community of Africa. One the one hand, his community and the larger heterogeneous society on the “coast was not truly African” when compared with “true Africa [which] was at our back [inland]” (17). On the other hand, he is possibly so “mixed” with the “squalor” of Africa, that to acknowledge or identify with its “weakness” is to condemn himself to becoming “nothing.”

Having closed off all possibilities for identification, he takes on the task of “recording” and “assessing” as a way to stave off being “washed away.” What he chooses to record, of course, are the failures and weaknesses of a postcolonial African society. This “reporting” has the effect of keeping him awake to the possible terrors of Africa, but also has the advantage of aligning him, to his mind, with a distinctly European method of survival.

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A Habit of Looking

As a reporter who rejects identifying with communities around him, Salim purposefully cultivates what he calls a “habit of looking” (22). This “habit” allows him to maintain a vital “distance” from Africa so that he is not “washed away.” He learns from the recently departed colonial power, the British, this technique of “detaching . . . from a familiar scene” in order to “consider it as from a distance.” (21-22). It was the British, Salim tells the reader who “gave us beautiful stamps” which “depicted local scenes and local things” such as the ordinary sailing vessel, the “Arab Dhow”:

> It was as though, in those stamps, a foreigner had said, ‘This is what is most striking about this place.’ Without that stamp of the dhow I might have taken the dhows for granted. As it was, I learned to look at them. Whenever I saw them tied up at the waterfront I thought of them as something peculiar to our region, quaint, something a foreigner would remark on, something not quite modern, and certainly nothing like the liners and cargo ships that berthed in their own modern docks. (21)

The passage is remarkable for its precise analysis of how the ordinary, everyday objects of a local community are exoticized. If not for the British separating the dhows from their surroundings, and placing them on postage stamps, Salim might never have noticed the ships. Made to represent what is “striking” about a whole place, the stamp also teaches Salim to look at his own surroundings as a foreigner
might, superficially and from a distance. In learning the “habit” of looking in this way, is also to replicate the ideologically inflected practice of the colonizer: to contrast the “quaint” dhows as “something not quite modern” in comparison to the superior “cargo ships that berthed in their own modern docks.” The relational quality of this looking, therefore, demands that it focus on everyday objects and understand them as evidence of the backwardness of life in Africa compared to the modernity of colonial powers. It should come as no surprise therefore, that Salim immediately tells us that “It was from this habit of looking that the idea came to me that as a community we had fallen behind. And that was the beginning of my insecurity” (22, emphasis added). The “habit of looking,” as we see, is neither neutral nor innocent. The adoption of such a perspective inevitably leads Salim to his conclusion: “we had fallen behind” which in turn produces a lifelong “insecurity.”

Yet, Salim also places his greatest hope in this habit of looking, and uses Father Huismans as an exemplar of its success. A Belgian priest who runs the lycée in the town at the bend in the river, Huismans is also an art collector with a “reputation for being a lover of Africa” (69). Huismans “liked to go away for a few days from time to time . . . into the bush” to collect mostly “wooden carvings” (65, 89). To Salim, he is the definition of “a man apart,” a phrase that Salim repeatedly, and with a sense of awe, employs in describing Huismans (66). According to Salim, it is a sense of “distance” that allows Huismans the freedom to roam Africa without the terror that Salim possesses. Unlike Salim, Huisman “seemed indifferent to the state of the country”; his only interest in Africa was as
a source for carvings and in that “Africa was a wonderful place, full of new things” (67). To Huismans, these objects have a “religious quality,” and he teaches Salim to see that “every carving, every mask, served a specific religious purpose” and to appreciate that “without that quality the things were dead and without beauty” (61). Huismans is able to decode the sacred meaning of the artifacts which to Salim appears “strange, that a Christian priest should have such a regard for African beliefs” (67). He is also able to distinguish the “originals” from counterfeits: “Copies were copies; there was no magical feeling of power in them” (67). Of Huismans’ anthropological interest in Africa, and his seemingly vast knowledge about African religion, Salim comments, “he seemed indifferent to the state of the country,” adding, “I envied him that indifference” (67). The “Africa” of the present is not of much interest to the priest. What he values is an “authentic” Africa of the past which is to be discovered through wood carvings.

Through such patterns of looking, Salim begins to see how the process of exoticizing the everyday can alter his relationship with “the new.” While in the past he feared the new Africa, Huismans here touts an “ancient Roman writer [who] had written that out of Africa there was ‘always something new,’ *semper aliquid novi’” (67). Of course, Huismans’ “new” and Salim’s “new” are very different. For Salim, the “new” signals the new politics of “black men assuming the lies of white men,” which is terrifying to him (22). For Huismans, the “new” does not correspond with the contemporary moment; rather, it is precisely what is, in fact, “old,” “something not quite modern.” For Huismans, “true Africa [is] dying or about to die. That was why it was so necessary, while that Africa still
lived, to understand and collect and preserves its things” (70). Simply put, Huisman’s is invested in a complete disavowal of contemporary Africa, and a fetishizing of an African past that is “new,” exotic, “imaginative and full of meaning” (67), but only from the Belgian colonial perspective.

Indeed, Salim’s reverence for Huismans as “a pure man” comes directly from his avowedly colonialist point of view (67). As Salim points out, “for everything connected with the European colonization, the opening up of the river, Father Huismans had a reverence” (69). Despite Huismans’ colonialist ideas, “people in the town . . . gave him the reputation of being a lover of Africa and therefore, in their way of thinking, a man who rejected the colonial past” (69) because he collected African artifacts. Huismans, in fact, does find that “colonial relics were as precious as the things of Africa,” and he has filled “the inner courtyard of the lycée” with “junk and rust” from “the late 1890s” (69-70).

Huismans’ “distance” therefore comes from more than just “a habit of looking.” It arises from a clear understanding of, and a siding with, the colonial powers. But it also has the distinct quality of allowing Huismans to be a kind of “cosmopolitan” for whom the Latin motto carved on the town dock gates help him “see himself in Africa”:

*Miscerique probat populous et foedera jungi:* ‘He approves of the mingling of people and their bonds of union’; that was what the words meant, and again they were very old words, from the days of ancient Rome . . . the great Roman god might not approve of a
settlement in Africa, of a mingling of people there...In the motto, though, three words were altered to reverse the meaning. (68)

These words sanction, as it were, a particular kind of “mingling” between the people of Europe and Africa. However, in Huismans’ own interpretation they come to represent a very specific power structure where he can simply “collect” African carvings for his own pleasure and see “himself as part of an immense flow of [colonial] history”—from Rome to the Belgian Congo (68). To Salim, this motto simply provokes, as anything that might suggest a connection to Africa, “some little anxiety” (68). And so, from Salim’s perspective, Husimans pays the price for seeming to approve of “the mingling of people” and for his connection to Africa for one day when he “went out on one of his trips” he was killed (86).

Underestimating “the rage” of this new Africa, Huismans had placed too much faith in the power of “his [colonial] civilization”: “It had made him read too much in that mingling of peoples by the river; and he had paid the price for it” (86, 87).

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The Absence of a Community

Salim’s love affair with the Belgian Yvette becomes another instance of his rejection of Africa. Yvette “was young, in her later twenties, near [Salim’s] age” and the wife of the much older Raymond, a “historian,” also known as “the Big Man’s white man” (132). Raymond and Yvette come into Salim’s life when
Mobutu (the Big Man) gives Raymond the job to head up “the New Domain”—an intellectual center and make-shift university for the new generation of postcolonial civil servants. Indar also comes to the New Domain as a lecturer, and it is through him that Salim makes the acquaintance of the couple. Having heard the “the President reads everything [Raymond] writes . . . [and that] Raymond knows more about the country than anyone on earth,” Salim is initially completely taken in by being, through association, so close to “the seat of power” (132). Yet, very soon, in the very place where the “new Africa” is being forged under the tutelage of a Belgian historian of the Congo, Salim focuses instead on Yvette. Engaging in a three-year adulterous affair conducted via seclusion and subterfuge, Salim enjoys for the first time what he calls, “the absence of [African] community” (210). Through his relationship with a white woman, Salim addresses the distinctly masculine aspect of his terror: “Men who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in [the world]” (9, emphasis added). With Yvette, Salim hopes to finally access some semblance of “secure,” “European” manhood, and therefore become “something.”

Until his affair with Yvette, Salim has only ever slept with prostitutes, in particular, African prostitutes. As he writes, all “my adult life I had looked for release in the bars of the town. I knew only women who had to be paid for” (133). In this regard, Salim is similar to his servant Metty: “Man and master sometimes met, as equals with equal needs, in the dark little bars that began to appear in our town” (38). Always careful “not to be seen with African woman,” Salim’s interactions with women always take place in the dark and in secret (45). As we
saw in regards to his family’s shared “blood” with their African slaves, Salim employs a similar distanced language to describe his liaisons with African women. In this case, he deflects his attitudes onto the town where, “about women, the attitude [of the town] was just as matter-of-fact . . . women slept with men whenever they were asked; a man could knock on any woman’s door and sleep with her . . . the sexual casualness was part of the chaos and corruption of the place” (44). For Salim, any interaction with African-ness can only have the negative connotations of “chaos” and “corruption.” Sexually, Salim also emphasizes his own presumed power: He imagines “fantasies of conquest and degradation, with the woman as the willing victim, the accomplice in her own degradation” (180). Thus, when Salim discovers that Metty has a wife and child with an African woman that he does not know about, he is “shocked . . . betrayed” and flies into a rage at the thought of being corrupted by proxy: “Don’t you think it’s disgusting to have a little African child running about in somebody’s yard, with its toto swinging from side to side? Aren’t you ashamed [Metty], a boy like you?” (112, 113).

Salim’s relationship with Yvette allows him hope that he will cease his interactions with the African women who take care of his “needs.” When Salim first sees Yvette he is mesmerized by her “beautiful feet, and the whiteness was wonderful against the black of her slacks” (135). Indeed, he goes so far as to say that seeing Yvette is like “seeing a woman for the first time” (180). It is as if Yvette’s stark whiteness cancels out the African women he has known; therefore, to his great surprise, Salim finds that sex with Yvette remains a violent act, as it
was with the prostitutes: “It wasn’t tender . . . It became a brute physical act, an act almost of labour, and as it developed it became full of deliberate brutality” (181). Very soon then, his idealized vision of Yvette begins to fray, and his insecurity takes over: “I had my first alarm about myself, the beginning of the decay of the man I had known myself to be. I had visions of beggary and decrepitude: the man not of Africa lost in Africa, no longer with strength or purpose to hold his own” (184). Salim, as we already know, has always thought that relationships with African woman can very easily spell disaster. He is now beginning to see this possibility with white women too.

Yet, in the manner we have repeatedly seen with Salim, a misogynistic fear of women is blamed on Africa, and on African women. One night when Yvette surprises Salim at his apartment, she innocently suggests after sex that Salim “might have been in your old haunts [brothels]” when she showed up unannounced (226). Despite already seeing the “deliberate brutality” which characterizes all of his sexual relationships, Salim is incensed at Yvette’s conflation of, to his mind, two different kinds of sexual acts—“It blasted the moment. Opposites: again this communication by opposites” (226). In what is undoubtedly the climax of the novel, Salim beats Yvette so hard that her “skin was blue-black in parts” and her face was so “dreadful” that she “will have to hide for days” (228, 229). It is unclear why right before this moment he “found myself in tears,” but it certainly adds to his anger that he was in a very different mood than Yvette’s own initial nonchalance (226).
In his description of hitting Yvette Salim writes, “she was hit so hard and so often about the face, even though [she had] raised, protecting arms, that she staggered back and allowed herself to fall on the floor” (226). The use of the passive voice here is similar to the distanced language Salim often employs. Nonetheless, after this first exertion he goes on to use the active voice to describe how he “used my foot then” and “spat on her between the legs until I had no more spit” (226, 228). However, Salim tries to mask his culpability for this act by telling Metty, “she made me spit on her” (228). In so doing, Salim finally responds to his own dictum that “men who allow themselves to be nothing, have no place in [the world].” Learning from the mistakes of Huismans, he cannot risk being made into nothing, and is finally forced to act, to separate himself from any form of relationship in which his behavior could be construed as “weak” or, amounting to the same thing, be considered “African.”

There is another predetermining cause to Salim’s violent behavior, and that is his sudden dislike of Raymond’s historical writing. Often remarking, rather sarcastically, that he and Yvette “have Raymond in common,” Salim reluctantly but genuinely remains in awe of Raymond throughout his affair with Yvette (188). Salim mistakenly takes Raymond to be similar to Huismans in terms of intimate knowledge of the Congo. During their first meeting, Raymond remarks: “However much the rest of us study Africa, however deep our sympathy, we will remain outsiders” (141-142). Considering him also “a man apart,” Salim is fascinated by what “made [Raymond] unusual—I would even say extraordinary . . . the quality of his despair” (139). Avowing that Raymond does not have the
“comfort of knowing that his subject [Africa] was a great one,” Salim understands him to be in the tradition of Europeans who share a despair over the fate of Africa—“We have no idea where the continent is going. We can only carry on” (143).

When he finally gets around to reading some of Raymond’s articles, Salim finds, to his surprise, that the historian does not accord Africa a special “religious quality.” Instead, Raymond writes about an event in Africa, “but he might have been writing about Europe” (186). Taking African history as seriously as European history, Raymond studies in detail “government decrees and quotations from newspapers” (186). This turns out to be absolute anathema for Salim. While Salim admits to being “especially interested in [articles about] missionaries and slaves,” he nonetheless remains surprised that Raymond’s account of a “race riot” is so “formal” (185, 186, 186). To Salim, “A race riot in the capital in the 1930s—that ought to have been a strong story: gun talk in the European cafés and clubs, hysteria and terror in the African cites. But Raymond wasn’t interested in that side” (186). Indeed, Salim cannot help but spend a considerable amount of the narrative taking umbrage with the historian’s “un-hysterical” method, remarking that Raymond “has nothing like Father Huismans’s instinct for the strangeness and wonder of the place. Yet he had made Africa his subject” (187). Finally, in a marked reversal of his original position about the lack of communal records of non-Europeans, Salim displays a deep disdain for “recorded History”:

History was something dead and gone, part of the world of our grandfathers, and we didn’t pay too much attention to it; even
though, among the trading families like ours, there were still vague stories—so vague that they didn’t feel real—of European priests buying slaves cheap from the caravans before they got to the depots on the coast. The Africans (and this was the point of the stories) had been scared out of their skins—they thought the missionaries were buying them in order to eat them. (186-187)

Definitely now we see how, for Salim, history and looking is meant to embody the ideological position of the white colonizer who possesses a marked disdain for Africans/slaves—“the point of the stories [of Africa]” was that Africans are ignorant. Once disabused of his fascination with Raymond, Salim can only see Yvette as “inexperienced”; thus it is only a matter of time before she too becomes a symbol of being “too close” to Africa, thus shattering the illusion of an “absence of community” (188).

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**Looking Laterally for Empire**

Over the course of Salim’s narrative, what possibly began as genuine fear of the rise of Indophobia in Africa, soon turns into an almost paranoid terror emerging out of an insecurity that is both a masculine fear of castration (“nothing”) and a distinctly colonial, racist fear of Africans with power. Salim cannot shake himself of this paranoia, and soon enough, despite his growing
wealth and affair with Yvette, his “weakness” becomes almost an article of faith. Responding to Nazruddin’s letter informing him that he left Uganda for England, Salim writes, “I took some time to reply, and when I did I found myself writing passionately, offering Nazruddin the picture of myself as someone incompetent and helpless, one of his ‘mathematicians.’ And nothing that I wrote wasn’t true. I was as helpless as I presented myself” (209). Thus, when his relationship with Yvette reaches its violent end, Salim stays up all night and “with the coming of the light,” raises his despair to the level of objective wisdom:

I had an illumination. It didn’t come in words; the words I attempted to fit to it were confused and caused the illumination itself to vanish. It seemed to me that men were born only to grow old, to live out their span, to acquire experience. Men lived to acquire experience; the quality of the experience was immaterial; pleasure and pain—and, above all, pain—had no meaning; to possess pain was as meaningless as to chase peace. And even when the illumination vanished, became as thin and half nonsensical as a dream, I remembered that I had had it, that knowledge about the illusion of pain. (229)

Entering fully into the “nothing,” he has been attempting to avoid his whole life, Salim sees himself as the very definition of a failed man. Life was “immaterial,” “had no meaning,” and neither does his (and, tellingly, not Yvette’s) “pain” mean anything, and even these realizations cannot be set down into words properly. Yet later that same day, Salim resorts, once again, to his convenient scapegoat for the
source of all his problems—Africa. Having a meal with his Indian-African friends Mahesh and Shobha, he sees them as “empty in Africa, and unprotected, with nothing to fall back on. They had begun to rot. I was like them. Unless I acted now, my fate would be like theirs . . . lunacy in a small room” (235). For Salim one can only ever be “empty in Africa,” and so he can only see one way out—to simply leave:

I decided to rejoin the world, to break out of the narrow geography of the town, to do my duty by those who depended on me. I wrote to Nazruddin that I was coming to London for a visit, leaving him to interpret that simple message. What a decision, though! When no other choice was left to me, when family and community hardly existed, when duty hardly had meaning, and there were no safe houses. (235)

Salim’s “duty” in this case is his long standing understanding with his uncle that “in me he saw the prospective husband of one of his daughters”—Kareisha (27). However, far from being as surprising as Salim would like it to sound, this move is seemingly inevitable for someone with a “British passport”—a fact Salim only mentions once in passing (75). As his uncle reminds him when they meet in London, his entire family had these “British passports [taken] out as protection against the Africans” (247). So when Salim finally feels he can no longer stand the perceived threat of Africans, he leaves Africa for “the world” i.e., the capital of his former colonial rulers, London.
When Salim boards the plane to London, he seemingly follows in the footsteps of Indar in claiming to head to a place where “family and community hardly existed.” Indar, after university in England, cultivated himself as “a man without a side,” an intellectual who sold his skills to people who “would like to keep some kind of intellectual life going without getting involved in local politics” (160). This is, indeed, how Indar ended up as a lecturer at the New Domain. As he tells Salim, one of the ways he was able to make himself into a “vagrant cosmopolitan” is by “crushing the past,” and specifically by travelling by plane:

…the aeroplane is a wonderful thing. You are still in one place when you arrive at the other. The aeroplane is faster than the heart. You arrive quickly and you leave quickly. You don’t grieve too much. And there is something else about the aeroplane. You can go back many ties to the same place. And something strange happens if you go back often enough. You stop grieving for the past. You see that the past is something in your mind alone, that it doesn’t exist in real life. You trample on the past, you crush it. In the beginning it is like trampling on a garden. In the end you are just walking on ground. That is the way we have to learn to live now. (119-120)

Though unspoken, Indar here specifically means his “African past.” Much like Salim, Indar attempts to identify with the colonial power of England, and then subsequently with America, and so achieve a kind of physical and social mobility.
As he tells Salim, “we’ve been clinging to the idea of defeat and forgetting that we are men like everybody else. We’ve been choosing the wrong side. I’m tired of being on the losing side . . . now I want to win and win and win” (161). However, as Kareisha relates to Salim in London, Indar’s over-reliance on the generosity of “the winning side” eventually leads him to ruin when the momentary craze for all things African dies out in America, and no one wants his intellectual vagrancy (249). Salim, via Yvette, has already experienced the possibility of ruin through a close association with Europeans, and so eventually his vagrant cosmopolitanism takes a slightly different expression.

Salim’s “vagrant cosmopolitanism” is structured around valorizing the binary opposition of white/black, colonizer/colonized, with the failure of the “weaker” half of the binary always serving to prop up the superiority of the white colonizer. To focus on the tension itself becomes the best, most secure outcome for Salim. Having arrived in London, Salim, with his characteristic “habit of looking,” immediately spots “an Arab lady with her slave” walking the street of Gloucester Road (241). Rather than confirming a lack of community, Salim is instead able to recognize immigrants like himself. As he notes, this “Europe I had come to—and knew from the outset I was coming to—was neither the old Europe nor the new. It was something shrunken and mean and forbidding . . . where hundreds of thousands of people like myself, from parts of the world like mine, had forced themselves in, to work and live” (238). Fulfilling his promise to marry Kareisha, Salim proceeds to get officially engaged to her on this short trip and moves to London for good after a quick trip back to Africa. In so doing, he is not
disavowing his community life. Instead, he simply moves that life to within the perceived security of the metrople. As Nixon notes of Naipaul, “he feels [most] at home in the idealized imperial England of his imaginings” (*London* 37). A similar argument can be made for Salim. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Naipaul himself admits to feeling that “to be a colonial was to know a kind of security; it was to inhabit a fixed world . . . But in the new world I felt the ground move below me” (*Literary* 170). In London former colonial subjects like Salim can finally be colonial subjects again, thus assuring themselves of their place “in the world.”

In the novel, the idea which most directly exemplifies Salim’s way of living within the tension and security of this binary are his descriptions of the water hyacinth. Styled very early in the novel as an invasive species, “the new thing in the river” introduced by the colonial powers, the water hyacinth image recurs every time Salim mentions the river (51). Unlike the aeroplane that moves so “quickly” you can forget the “past,” the water hyacinth floats on the turbulent waters, drawing its existence from those very waters. At the end of the novel, when Salim finally leaves the town for good on a steamer ship to take up residence in London, he once again refers to the “water hyacinths [that] pushed up in the narrow space between the steamer and the barge” (287). If there is any doubt as to Salim’s “looking laterally for empire” to solidify his own “vagrant cosmopolitanism,” the last line leaves the reader in no doubt: “The searchlight, while it was on, had shown thousands [of moths and flying insects], white in the
white light” (287). Through the white European lens of empire Salim “sees” his surroundings and continues to move through the world.
Chapter Three

Looking Laterally for a Worldly Reader: Narrative Cosmopolitanism in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*

Introduction

In 1997, when Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West edited *Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing 1947-1997*, they included in the anthology the then-unknown writer Kiran Desai’s piece “Strange Happenings in the Guava Orchard.” The piece became part of Desai’s first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, published the following year. At the age of twenty-six, Kiran Desai was known only, if she was known at all, as the daughter of the acclaimed novelist Anita Desai. Kiran Desai’s first published piece of fiction appeared in the June 23, 1997 edition of *The New Yorker*. Again, as the editor of the magazine’s special “Fiction Issue” on Indian writers, Rushdie included her piece, “The Sermon in the Guava Tree,” which too became part of her first novel. The Indian magazine *Outlook* described the response to Kiran Desai’s inclusion in the special issue as, “Rushdie’s attempt to be patronising or desperately trying to bolster his thesis about Indian writing in English” (*Outlook*). Rushdie’s “thesis” depended on having a mother and daughter in the same collection, allowing him, in his introduction, “Damme, This is the Oriental Scene for You!,” to hail the mother-daughter duo as “the first dynasty of modern Indian fiction” (*The New Yorker* xx). Desai’s debut onto Rushdie’s so-called “oriental scene” was meant to be read by
metropolitan readers as the beginnings of a new phase in Indian literature: it had “arrived” on the world stage, and the young Kiran Desai was to be seen as representative of that arrival. Her novel was consequently much anticipated, and despite the highly competitive nature of the world of Indian fiction in English, received reviews in such major newspapers and magazines as The New Yorker and The Atlantic Monthly. Indeed, Michiko Kakutani in The New York Times called the novel a “modest but enchanting debut” (Kakutani).

Eight years elapsed between this special, if eventually rather muted, debut and Desai’s much lauded second book, The Inheritance of Loss, for which, following in Rushdie’s footsteps, she won the Man Booker Prize in 2006. Desai had the added distinction of being the youngest person ever to win the prize. Set in the town of Kalimpong in North East India among the foothills of the Himalayas, the novel recounts the story of Sai, an orphaned young girl growing up with her retired grandfather in the shadow of the struggle for a Gorkha state that engulfed the region in the 1980s. A parallel story of her cook’s son, Biju, struggling to survive while an undocumented worker in New York City, runs alongside that of Sai’s. From the outset, the novel was at best a long shot for the prize. Grumbling in the press began when Desai made the short list while such stalwarts as Nadine Gordimer, Ian McEwan, and J. M. Coetzee were not selected. However, the short list was made up almost entirely of young novelists, including the Libyan writer Hisham Mattar for his first novel In the Country of Men, and Desai was placed second in the running for the prize by British bookmakers. The novel’s quiet emergence onto the scene is revealed by the fact that The Guardian
reviewed the novel only after it had made the long list for the Booker. The early reviews restricted themselves to simple plot summaries and announced her win grudgingly, “Well, who’d have thought it?” A real surprise then, even for the author who in her acceptance speech admitted that she “didn’t expect to win” (Crown). The only person who felt vindicated was Rushdie, who called her novel “terrific” and “a fulfillment of early promise” (Outlook).

In this chapter, I argue that The Inheritance of Loss hails a specifically “worldly reader”—akin to a prescient Rushdie who attentively read Desai’s work—to appreciate and participate in what I call the novel’s “narrative cosmopolitanism.” A “narrative cosmopolitanism” revels in the existence of a profusion of narratives, inviting “us”—knowing, clever, “worldly” readers—to detect and decode such multiple viewpoints rather than having to choose among them—or worse, to identify/empathize with any particular position. Choosing, and especially identifying politically, implies, according to the novel’s ideology, a partisanship unbecoming of cosmopolitan, worldly readers. Rebecca Walkowitz calls such worldliness “cosmopolitan style,” wherein literary style embraces its “trivial, idiosyncratic, apolitical and anachronistically literary” qualities as an intellectual and “political” project (Cosmopolitan 4). Thus, The Inheritance of Loss teaches its reader how to recognize the codes and conventions of a postcolonial cosmopolitan literature that valorizes reading as the principal form of engaging “the world,” and implies that it is only such self-congratulatory reading that will form a bulwark against the messy and violent praxis of postcolonial politics.
Beyond Salman Rushdie’s close association with the launching and promotion of Kiran Desai’s career, one also notices the ideological kinship between their novels. Hailed almost universally as the archetype of the literary genius, Rushdie is unquestionably the superstar of contemporary postcolonial English literature. His rise to prominence in the 1980s coincided with the rise of postcolonial studies as a disciplinary category, fortuitously making Rushdie nothing short of a brand name for postcolonial literature. He was the first writer of Indian origin to win the Booker Prize for *Midnight’s Children* in 1981, and the subsequent furor caused by the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 enshrined him as a “Western,” enlightened, and progressive writer from “the East.” Winning the “Booker of Bookers” in 1993 and “The Best of the Booker” prizes in 2008, *Midnight’s Children* was cemented as the ur-text of South Asian writing in English, and perhaps postcolonial writing in general. Rushdie continues to be a polarizing figure, however, especially in the sub-continent where *The Satanic Verses* was banned when first published. As recently as the 2012 Jaipur Literary Festival, a reading of sections from *The Satanic Verses* sparked major protests among Muslim groups in India and elsewhere and charges were brought in Indian courts against him for “incitement of racial hatred” (“Rushdie”). When the organizers of the festival came under governmental pressure to cancel his video-linked address, writers like Jeet Thayil (who lives and writes in Mumbai) and Hari Kunzru (from London) chose to read from the novel as a defiant show of
solidarity, and to stand up for what Kunzru in *The Guardian* defended as “the freedom of speech” (“Why I Quoted”). As a result, these writers made the culture sections of most newspapers across the world, sharing the stage, as it were, with Rushdie, and benefitting from his global appeal. In this, and practically every other instance of Rushdie’s invocation, literature, supposedly universal and cosmopolitan, is positioned in opposition to politics, framed as partisan and polarizing.

As the voice of South Asian writing, it was Rushdie, who in his introduction to the collected edition of *Mirrorwork*, made a rather partisan argument, and one that has come to be considered as defining Indian writing at the turn of the twenty-first century. Marketed as the first collection of Indian writing published in the West, *Mirrorwork* was to have a powerful influence, both negative and positive, on what “the West” considered good writing coming out of the sub-continent. Rushdie’s ostensible goal in *Mirrorwork*’s introduction was to re-draw the map of world letters, which “in the standard Mercator projection, is not kind to India . . . On the map of world literature, too, India has been undersized for too long. Fifty years after India’s independence, however, that age of obscurity is coming to an end. Indian writers have torn up the old map and are busily drawing their own” (*The New Yorker* 61). Rushdie, thus, quite explicitly, even defiantly, positioned himself as writing against older, colonial mappings of the world, championing a new global, more equitably accommodating, map. In Rushdie’s formulation, the end of the twentieth century became the moment when the former colonial and metropolitan centers of the globe—London and New
York for the English speaking world—would no longer hold sway over the way the world is imagined. New writers from “the margins,” he announced, would tear up “the old map” and “rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis.”

However, the irony of Rushdie’s position should not go without remark, for the literature meant to challenge and “re-write” the map of letters from the “margins,” upon inspection, turns out to be neither local nor historically specific, but rather cosmopolitan and apolitical. In fact, Rushdie’s “pretty catholic” literary tastes are not so much “catholic” as coincidental with the metropolitan literary marketplace where, he avows, “there tends to be a bias towards . . . cosmopolitan fiction” (ix, xii). Mirrowork’s introduction argues for literature as “a means of holding a conversation with the world,” (xiii) and any literary work, not just South Asian literature, and including literary criticism, which “does not deal with [the seemingly universal categories of] language, voice, psychological or social insight, imagination or talent” is rendered “parochial,” and concerns of “class, power and belief” are declared unimportant (xii). The formulation and defense of an apolitical cosmopolitanism is forcefully posited as the literary lens— “Literature has little or nothing to do with a writer’s home address” (xiii, emphasis in original). The disjunction of inhabiting, describing, and defending a map of the world without the architectonic structures of “class, power, and belief,” not to mention a home address, while simultaneously claiming to be “re-writing” older maps and creating new ones, is the defining characteristic of cosmopolitan writing in the lineage of Rushdie. As we shall see, this Rushdiean focus on highly specific historical events only to reduce, and therefore reject,
them as partisan is central to the functioning of narrative cosmopolitanism in *The Inheritance of Loss.*

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**Hailing a Worldly, Well-Read Reader**

Set in the late 1980s Kalimpong in North East India, *The Inheritance of Loss* revolves around the young orphaned girl Sai. While in one sense *The Inheritance of Loss* is a coming-of-age novel, the backdrop of the Gorkha struggle for an independent homeland complicates the narrative trajectory of the *bildung*. Less well known than the neighboring hill station of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, “barely managing to stay on the saddle between the Deolo and the Ringkingpong hills,” is a national and global backwater (35). It is here, far from what the novel calls “modernity”—“all over Kalimpong modernity began to fail,”—that Sai’s grandfather, Chief Justice Jemubhai, retires after a career as a judge in the British, and then Indian (after 1947), Civil Service. When Sai’s parents die in a road accident in Moscow, where her father (also an orphan brought up in a “Zorastrian charity for orphans”) was training to be an astronaut, the orphaned Sai is forced to leave her convent boarding school, where she has spent the last two years, and live with her only living relative, her grandfather (31). A significant amount of narrative space is devoted to re-telling the life of Judge Jemubhai and the events which brought him from a small village in Gujarat, to a period of study at
Cambridge University in England, and ultimately to a life in the prestigious Civil Service. Running parallel to Sai’s story is the story of Biju, the judge’s cook’s son. Biju illegally immigrates to the U.S. and works in the restaurant kitchens of New York City, trying to eke out a living, and, at the end of the novel, returns home destitute and shorn of all dignity. Structurally, the narrative chronology is continually interrupted as the novel jumps back and forth between and among these three narrative threads, often moving rapidly between multiple locales and time periods within the same chapter. Devoting a great deal of time to Sai’s grandfather and Biju, the novel gestures, often several times within the same page, to the idea that Sai’s story must be understood in relation to these other two stories.

However, the “other” story that does not get much narrative space, but which nonetheless forms the catalyst for many of the events in the story, is the political struggle taking place in Kalimpong. Beginning with the events of February 1986, when “Sai was seventeen, and her romance with Gyan the mathematics tutor was not even a year old,” the next two thirds of the novel (around 200 pages), fill the reader in on the events which lead back to the present of 1986 (9). The years 1985-1986 marked the peak of the local Nepali population’s demand for their own state, Gorkhaland, with marches, strikes, political murders, daily curfews, and often the shutting down of movement and trade between the hills and the plains. Placing the narrative in this volatile time period might have signaled an engagement with that history. However, rather than place the events of the political struggle in an explicitly political-historical
context, Desai chooses instead, through a series of intertextual references, to conjure up a specifically postcolonial cosmopolitan literary genealogy as a lens through which to understand not just Sai’s story, but also the political events of the novel. As in Rushdie’s novels, *The Inheritance of Loss* invites, even challenges, the reader to uncover and identify the myriad references. And the ability to do so confirms the reader’s worldly cosmopolitanism, thus setting up a circular affirming logic whereby the recognition of the text’s worldliness confirms the reader’s—and vice versa.

Hailing such a worldly, cosmopolitan reader would automatically indicate, the text suggests, how we should read and interpret the events of the novel. The word itself—cosmopolitan—only comes up twice in the text and, just as in Rushdie, it is reserved for the metropolitan spaces of London and New York. The owner of a French restaurant in Manhattan, where Biju works for a short while as a dishwasher, uses the word to describe his wife when she speaks of archeological sites in Chile and Peru: “Baz was proud of her cosmopolitan style” (149). One other time it is used to describe a “new England . . . [a] completely cosmopolitan society” in a discussion by one of Sai’s informal tutors, Lola, about V.S. Naipaul’s novel, *A Bend in the River* (52). This second use echoes Naipaul’s own use of the word in his novel to describe an immigrant-filled, and thus rather un-English, London. This latter intertextual reference, in particular, signals Desai’s awareness of the literary critical currency of the term “cosmopolitanism” in literary theory. Additionally, the invocation of Naipaul and *A Bend in the River* should alert readers of the specifically literary kinship being established.
One of the curious features of the novel is the repeated staging of its knowledge of postcolonial theory. One might even say the text self-consciously draws attention to this knowing-ness. For instance, Noni, one of Sai’s tutors, almost casually picks “up a sad account of police brutality during the Naxalite movement by Mahasweta Devi, translated by Spivak” (239). Noni, we are told, had “recently read [Spivak’s interview] with interest in the Indian Express”—an English-language daily newspaper, in which Spivak had been made to look “cutting edge by a sari and combat boots wardrobe” (239). The offhand, last name only invocation of the noted literary critic Gayatri Spivak suggests she was a familiar name among the English-speaking elite of 1980s Bengal. The conjunction of Spivak and Mahasweta Devi, too, should be noted. It was Spivak’s translation and deconstructionist preface to Mahasweta’s works that launched the latter into the U.S. academy. Furthermore, it is not the original Bengali text that catches Noni’s attention. Rather, it is the “cutting edge” Spivak’s English translation, and dense literary critical framing, that makes the radical Naxalite movement and its equally radical author palatable. Thus, the novel’s cosmopolitanism is itself imbricated in and made legible through academic discussions in the West.

The novel’s—and by extension the novelist’s—exhibition of its familiarity with debates in academic cultural studies is neither accidental nor ornamental. The novel not only participates in such discussions, but is also constituted through on-going academic debates about postcolonial discourse. As Pankaj Mishra, writing in the New York Times astutely noted,
Desai seems far from writers like Zadie Smith and Hari Kunzru, whose fiction takes a generally optimistic view of what Salman Rushdie has called ‘hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs.’ In fact, Desai’s novel seems to argue that such multiculturalism, confined to the Western metropolis and academe, doesn’t begin to address the causes of extremism and violence in the modern world. Nor, it suggests, can economic globalization become a route to prosperity for the downtrodden. ‘Profit,’ Desai observes at one point, ‘could only be harvested in the gap between nations, working one against the other.’ (“Wounded”)

For Mishra, Desai, unlike multiculturalists in the western academy, is not convinced that globalization’s production of “unexpected combinations” will be the answer to “extremism and violence.” Nor does she appear to believe that radicalism will erase fundamental disparities. Instead Desai, unlike Rushdie, finds only loss in “hybridity, impurity, intermingling” and in “unexpected combinations.” Whether one finds “joy” or “loss,” it is important to note that Desai’s novel is deeply imbricated in these ideas, and participates in on-going academic debates through references to a select canon of literary texts, scattered throughout. That is to say, while The Inheritance of Loss may see “loss” instead of “celebration,” in “the combination of human beings, cultures, ideas” the fact
remains that it still takes the concept of multiplicity as its starting and ending point.

The intertextuality of Desai’s novel has also been noted by critics. In her essay, “Cultivating Community: Counterscaping in Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss,” for example, Jill Didur carefully traces the novel’s heightened awareness of British colonial writing, especially on Kalimpong. Didur’s analysis allows us to see how, despite differences with Rushdie’s work, Desai’s novel must be understood to be distinctly “postcolonial.” She investigates British colonial imaginings of the hill station, such as Kalimpong, as a place of “retreat” and “purity” to ask how Desai counters, or in her term, “counterscapes,” such narratives, and concludes that Desai is distinctly “counter-colonial” in her outlook (DeLoughrey 43). Didur takes her cues from the novel’s many references to colonial narratives that Sai and other characters are reading. These repeated references to British colonial writing draw attention to the novel’s own location within a larger literary landscape and produce the text as a knowing participant in the canon of postcolonial theory and literature. This literary self-consciousness becomes, for Didur, the hallmark of a purposeful writing back which “unsettles the innocence associated with [hill stations’] cultural and material maintenance, and restores an awareness of the cultural transformation that normalized their political culture in the post-colonial era” (DeLoughrey 46).

*The Inheritance of Loss,* thus, shows itself to be a self-consciously postcolonial text, and specifically one that structures itself around the principle that “oriental texts,” in Rushdie’s phrasing, employ a multiplicity of narratives to
disrupt the “pure” and “old” colonial maps of the colonies. Furthermore, it hails—and even expects—the reader to possess quite specialized, even academic, literary knowledge to decode its references to literature and literary theory. Whether the novel’s awareness amounts to an “unsettling,” of the British colonial literary tradition, as Didur claims, needs a closer look.

Literary Tropes Produce Characters, Not Political Histories

Apart from more indirect and embedded references to a specific genealogy of postcolonial literature and theory, the novel also more directly instructs its reader on how it should be read. It does so by spending a considerable amount of time on the “reading practices” of the many characters. On the most basic level, the exemplary scenes of reading provide both the characters and the worldly reader of the novel with metaphors to understand the lives of the characters. In the opening section of the novel, we find Sai reading a National Geographic article about a giant squid roaming in the “dark of the ocean” (3). Also permeating this opening scene are the vapors of smoke from her cook’s fire and the growing mist, creating a haze where objects rapidly disappear: “Up through the chimney and out, the smoke mingled with the mist that was gathering speed, sweeping in thinker and thicker, obscuring things in part—half a hill, then the other half” (2). Sai then walks past a mirror in the house where the “grey has permeated inside”
and in a mirror she catches “a glimpse of herself being smothered” (2, 3). From the perspective of the reader, the “grey” of this opening section becomes a metaphor for the wide range of global influences that will work their way slowly into the “haze” of characters’ lives and their town of Kalimpong. Highlighting the importance of this metaphor of “haze,” and the novel’s discomfort with such “unexpected combinations,” Didur, in her analysis of the novel, calls this opening scene a “threatening landscape” (DeLoughrey 49). While the “grey” scene sets the tone for the novel as a whole, reading the National Geographic is offered as a counterpoint to such a tone for the magazine allows Sai to grapple with the fatalism suggested by this opening. In the image of a squid, Sai sees a metaphor for her own life in Kalimpong, where she struggles to understand her place in the world. Consequently, at the end of this first section, the third person narrator philosophizes on Sai’s situation and explains:

[The squid’s] was a solitude so profound they might never encounter another of their tribe. The melancholy of this situation washed over Sai.

Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss? Romantically she decided that love must surely reside in the gap between desire and fulfillment, in the lack, not the contentment. (3)

Here, in this short exegesis of the life of the squid, Sai is able to “see” herself as corollary to the squid and, thus, encounter “another one of [her] tribe” through reading, even if she cannot find such a person in Kalimpong. Such “romantic connection” to the squid forms a many-layered rejection of the world of Kalimpong right in the very first scene. Not only is reading the primary
mechanism through which Sai begins to understand her place in the “world,” but this “world” happens to be that of a fish at the bottom of the ocean, while Sai lives near one of the highest peaks in the world, Kanchenjunga. The difference in “worlds” could not be starker.

It is precisely this “difference” that animates the “romance” of reading. Sixteen years old and homeschooled by her neighbors Lola and Noni, Sai spends most of her days reading. Noni, a spinster for whom “life had passed her by,” one day asks Sai, “‘Don’t you want to meet people your own age?’” (77). In response, Sai can only confess of her desire to “travel,” a desire entirely constructed and animated through reading:

Of one thing, though, she was sure: ‘I want to travel,’ she confessed. Books were making her restless. She was beginning to read, faster, more, until she was inside the narrative and the narrative inside her, the pages going by fast, her heart in her chest—she couldn’t stop. In this way she had read To Kill a Mocking Bird, Cider with Rosie, and Life with Father from the Gymkhana Club library. And pictures of the chocolaty Amazon, of stark Patagonia in the National Geographics, a transparent butterfly snail in the sea, even of an old Japanese house slumbering in the snow. . . .—She found they affected her so much she could often hardly read the accompanying words—the feeling they created was so exquisite, the desire so painful. She remembered her parents, her father’s hope of space travel. She studied
photographs taken via satellite of a storm blowing a red cloud off the sun’s surface, felt a terrible desire for the father she did not know, and imagined that she, too, must surely have within her the same urge from something beyond ordinary. (77, ellipsis in original)

This is the clearest testimony to the constitutive role of reading novels in Sai’s life. Like her deceased astronaut father, Sai seeks out the thrill of exploration, the “urge of something beyond ordinary,” and finds it in reading anything she can get her hands on. But what she reads, of course, is a telling selection of western (or westernized) texts: from stories about growing up in England, to life on Wall Street, to tales of race relations in the American South or the carefully curated “world” in the pages of National Geographic. The only prerequisite seems to be that the readings take her away from her own life. Indeed, Sai remakes herself through her reading and viewing of photographs, to the point where “she was inside the narrative and the narrative was inside her,” giving her life an almost fantastical quality. Such “narrative cosmopolitanism”—constructed and sustained through glimpses of worlds faraway—is not only defined by “faster [and] more” travel, but also the “exquisite” and “painful” disjuncture from her surroundings. Reading, therefore, does not just provide her life with metaphors, “a tribe,” and a way to “see” the world, but it is the very raison d’être of her life.

For the worldly reader of The Inheritance of Loss these insights into Sai’s reading practices arrive through the third-person narrator, whose preferred style is free-indirect discourse. Just as with the squid, in the above description of Sai’s
reading, the narrator speaks on her behalf. In response to Noni’s question, Sai simply says “I want to travel,” and after the frenetic descriptions of reading, “Noni and Sai picked up the physics book again,” without any further comment (77). The interim “focalization” of the narrative on behalf of Sai points to the novel’s modus operandi. As narratologists have pointed out, “the ideology of the narrator-focalizer is usually taken as authoritative, and all other ideologies in the text are evaluated from this ‘higher’ position.” (Rimmon-Kennan 83). We see repeatedly that Sai herself, in direct speech, never articulates her life in such specific terms of loss, desire, and fulfillment. Instead it is the narrator who, here and elsewhere, expresses one of several moments of realization/understanding for all the characters who, after experiencing an event or reading a book, only articulate their responses and understanding via the free-indirect discourse of narrator-focalizer. The elevation of reflection to the “higher position” of the narrator functions to provide the reader with an interpretative lens for the complexities in the novel¹. In short, if the worldly reader, like Sai, is involved in a process of reading an “exquisite” tale of life in one of the remote regions of the world, then the narrator functions as the tour guide, teaching the reader how to interpret the “insider view” of the society about which she is reading. The worldly reader thus assumes the framed and reflective position of the narrator-focalizer, gaining knowledge of (a silent) Sai and her life in Kalimpong, which, ironically,

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¹ In one way, such “elevation” becomes the mechanism for, what Timothy Brennan characterizes as, “cosmopolitan commentators on the Third World, who offer an inside view of formerly submerged peoples for target publics in Europe and North America in novels that comply with metropolitan literary tastes” (Nation and Narration 63).
is structured through reading colonial and neo-colonial narratives of adventure and life in Europe and the Americas.

Along with mannered referentiality and staged reading practices, the narrator relies on a specific genre of writing through which to understand life in Kalimpong—the Anglo-Indian novel. As a self-consciously postcolonial novel claiming an “inside view” of a Third World society, the text oddly enough establishes a lineage with its (colonial) literary predecessors, what Bertold Schoene, in his analysis of the novel, calls “the good Anglo-Indian read” (137).

Indeed, the very first event which unfolds after the narrative returns to the present of March 1986, a month after we meet Sai, and after much of the novel has been spent recounting the events leading up to the present, centers around this literary genealogy. Lola, Noni, Sai, Father Booty [a Swiss national who has lived in India for decades] and Uncle Potty [a drunkard Anglo-Indian]—all Sai’s neighbors—visit Darjeeling for the expressed purpose of exchanging “their library books before the [political] trouble on the hillside got any worse” (210). Apart from the fact that they implicitly posit reading against politics (about which I will have more to say later in the chapter), here again we have the narrator-focalizer reflecting on the kinds of books available to this motley crew:

Of course they had *The Far Pavilions* and *The Raj Quartet*—but Lola, Noni, Sai, and Father Booty were unanimous in the opinion that they didn’t like English writers writing about India; it turned the stomach; delirium and fever somehow went with temples and snakes and perverse
romance, spilled blood, and miscarriage; it didn’t correspond to the truth (217).

However, despite the narrator’s claim that the tropes of such novels “turned the stomach,” *The Inheritance of Loss* employs many of the same. Early in the novel, for example, we find the cook, Panna Lal, praying to snakes with all the quaint superstition of a country bumpkin—“I went to the temple and they told me that I must ask forgiveness of the snakes [for defecating near their abode in the garden]. So I made a clay cobra…and did *puja*” (14). Such representations, of course, have been made familiar as much through *National Geographic* as by the hugely popular genre of Anglo-Indian fiction, of which the best known example is E.M. Forster’s classic, *A Passage to India*. Indeed, as we will see later in this chapter, the novel continually plays with the tropes of a “perverse romance” with Sai and her mathematics tutor Gyan, “the spilled blood” of the Gorkha uprising, and the final “delirium” of the judge who loses his mind when his beloved dog goes missing during the “trouble.” Yet, with characteristic self-consciousness, the narrator-focalizer once again shows the novel as aware of the irony of having characters dislike tropes from Anglo-Indian novels, yet finding their lives embodying precisely such tropes:

There were endless accounts of travel in India and over and over, in book after book, there was the scene of late arrival at a *dak* bungalow, the cook cooking in a black kitchen, and Sai realized that her own delivery to
Kalimpong in such a manner was merely part of the monotony, not the original. The repetition had willed her, anticipated her, cursed her, and certain moves made long ago had produced all of them: Sai, judge, Mutt [the judge’s dog], cook, and even the mashed potato car. (217-218, emphasis added).

At work, then, is hardly what Rushdie calls the business of “tearing up the old map of the world and letters.” Instead, the narrator, and the characters, find themselves—willingly and unwillingly—trapped in the old. In effect, then, the novel inevitably replicates the tropes of an “English writer writing about India,” and is itself a version of the “good Anglo-Indian read” revised for the contemporary era. More to the point, the novel seems to argue that literary tropes, in this case Anglo-Indian novels, and not socio-political history, produced the characters, thereby confining the “reality” of the novel to a highly specific literary or narrative existence.

Far from tearing up the old maps, as Rushdie had contended, the old maps in the novel help Sai, in fact, to understand her place in the world. Their importance is directly brought to our attention when we find Sai looking at old copies of The National Geographic magazine. Already in 1986, these magazines were outdated because the judge “as a young man [presumably in the 1940’s and 50’s], visualizing a different kind of life,” had taken the magazines “to a shop to have bound in leather with the years in gold lettering” (8). Sai’s visualization of the world is also aided via “a free National Geographic Inflatable Globe” which
“arrived along with a certificate congratulating them for being adventure-loving members pushing the frontiers of human knowledge and daring for almost a full century” (20). Here, again, as in the case of Anglo-Indian novels, the “old maps,” exemplifying a very particular, western, anthropological world-view, animate the characters’ own understanding of themselves. This way of being in the world is all the more significant as, at that very moment, new maps were, indeed, in the process of being created. In the context of Kalimpong, such maps were being fashioned through the challenge of the Gorkhaland struggles. However, in Rushdie’s formulation political maps are, by definition, partisan; thus the older maps and novels—supposedly apolitical—will have to act as a compass of the characters’ existence. Indeed, as the narrator has already shown us is true of Sai, “adventure-loving members” must definitively resort to narrative to experience “painful” and “exquisite” excitement, and avoid entering the messiness of “real, political life.”

* Words Make Simple Explanations

*The Inheritance of Loss* self-consciously employs a number of key, “universal” words to describe, and in effect, explain away highly localized political contexts. The repeated use of these words helps to “universalize” the significance of events, and thereby evacuates them of historically specific
meaning. One such word, employed strategically throughout the novel is “hate.” The word not only comes to encapsulate and contain an overabundance of meaning, but its recurrent use connects the vastly different experience of disparate groups and characters across the world. A second such word is “civilization.” Both words play a key role in subverting the particularity of political context in favor of a hazy universal.

Chapter twenty-eight begins with the sentence, “The judge was thinking of his hate” (181, emphasis in original). This epigrammatic sentence receives its own section, marked off by a hyphen. This cryptic sentence draws attention to itself by its placement on the page and its brevity seems to imply that it requires no context. “Hate” is employed as the marker of a seemingly universally recognizable emotion. Indeed, the word “hate” surfaces every time a specific, often political, position needs to be explained. But instead of an explanation, the narrative repeatedly offers us “hate”—as if to say, that the word was sufficient commentary to understand what was unfolding in Kalimpong. When the march of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) turns violent killing “thirteen local boys”—the “spilled blood” of the “trouble” (another such universal word) can only be understood in anodyne terms: “This was how history moved, the slow build, the quick burn, and in an incoherence, the leaping both backward and forward, swallowing the young into old hate” (303). If the movement of history is “incoherent,” then no particular chain of events needs to be recounted, nor any cause-effect be sought. The only element which needs to be recognized is “hate.”
Hate, in fact, amounts to an entire philosophy of being in the novel, used not just to explain history, but also the logic of all political motivation. Even the Indian struggle for Independence is described in this manner. The people who fought for it “belonged to this emotion more than to themselves, experienced anger with enough muscle in it for entire nations coupled in hate” (190). Gyan’s own nascent Gorkha identity is explained not by experiences of discrimination or by a desire for political representation but by his dislike of Sai’s love of Christmas—“She was defining his hatred, he thought. Through her, he caught sight of it—oh—and then he couldn’t resist sharpening it, if only for clarity’s sake” (191). Hate becomes an explanatory term for all dissensions, large and small: it is used to describe the personal spats between people; to explain murder; to clarify history; and to understand political struggle. In every instance, it is the third person narrator who focalizes the situation with free indirect discourse and with recourse to the singular and recognizable word, “hate.”

Similarly, the notion of “civilization,” stands in for, and signals to the worldly reader, a universal axis of empathy and affiliation in the novel. As with the use of the term, “hate,” the invocation of the word “civilization” seemingly makes unnecessary the detailing of specific social and historical events, and appears at strategic moments to point to a tragic “loss.” Noni and her sister Lola, well-read, bourgeois, retirees, feel the impact of the Gorkha uprising when squatters take part of their land to set up a home—“the sisters woke one morning to find that, under the cover of night, a hut had come up like a mushroom” (263). When they rush out proclaiming “This is our land!” the only response they
receive is, “It is not your land. It is free land. . . . It is unoccupied land” (264). In desperation, Lola goes to see Pradhan, a fictionalized version of one of the real leaders of the Gorkha movement, C.K. Pradhan. In practically the only instance in the novel, Pradhan is spared the ideological interpretations of his actions by the narrator-focalizer. Indeed, this is one of the few sections of the text which is almost entirely set in dialogue and scene description. The narrator’s motivations to spare Pradhan from what we can safely assume to be disapproval might simply have been self-preservation. The novel, despite winning the Man Booker Prize, caused protest marches in Kalimpong, and is much disliked in an atmosphere where the Gorkha political struggle continues to this day. However, the other reason might simply be that “empathizing” through an exegesis of his actions is deemed unnecessary in a novel concerned with escaping politics, and indeed overlooking any form of political reality. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Lola’s request to take back her land is turned down in a simple and matter of fact manner. To further discredit a political argument for the action, Pradhan is shown to be a sexist (268). While Lola is hit hard by this rejection and takes a long time to recover from this visit, her sister Noni is more able to reflect on their existence as “narrative cosmopolitans” in Kalimpong:

Oh, [Lola and Noni] had been wrong. The real place had evaded [the sisters]. The two of them had been fools feeling they were doing something exciting just by occupying this picturesque cottage, by seducing themselves with those old travel books in the library, searching for a certain angled light with which to romance themselves, to locate what had
been conjured only as a tale to tell before the Royal Geographic Society, when the author returned to give a talk accompanied by sherry and a scrolled certificate of honor spritzed with gold for an exploration of the far Himalayan kingdoms—but far from what? Exotic to whom? It was the center for the sisters, but they had never treated it as such. Parallel lives were being led by those—Budhoo, Kesang—for whom there was no such *doubleness or self-consciousness*, while Lola and Noni indulged themselves in the pretense of it being a daily fight to keep up civilization in this place of towering, flickering green. They maintained their camping supplies, their flashlights, mosquito netting, raincoats, hot water bottles, brandy, radio, first-aid kit, Swiss army knife, book on poisonous snakes. These objects were talismans imbued with the task of transforming reality into something otherwise, supplies manufactured by a world that equated them with courage. But, really, they were equivalent to cowardice. (272, emphasis added)

Here again, the narrator-focalizer provides an extended reflection for one of the characters, marking the self-consciousness of living in a world created purely out of Anglo-Indian fiction. At this crisis point, Noni cannot help but realize the difference between her imagined Kalimpong of the Royal Geographic Society and the real one, where an entire region has risen up to claim its right to self-govern. It is telling that again the notion of “civilization” arises in this context. Noni and Lola are, to their minds, “fighting to keep up civilization” marked by the
“talismans” culled from fictional accounts which “transform their reality.”

However, immediately after this moment where she considers the problems with such un-specific, local living, she immediately returns to a valorization of her own self-conscious problems: “Maybe everyone felt this way at some point when one recognized that there was a depth to one’s life and emotions beyond one’s own significance” (272). Here, not only does Noni offer the worldly reader a way to emphasize with her struggle, but rejects once again her servants who do not possess this “doubleness.” Such a “recognition” of a larger significance is another instantiation of a “universal” understanding culled at the expense of specific historical knowledge.

* *

A Perverse Romance

Despite the many sub-plots of the novel, the central focus of *The Inheritance of Loss* remains on Sai. Her coming-of-age narrative, however, is restricted to the years 1985-1986, and her yearlong romance with Gyan, her mathematics tutor. The romance plot structures her growing understanding and recognition of her place in the world, and culminates in a final falling out with Gyan where, for the only time, the spell of narrative is broken. For the most part their romance is cast as an adolescent whisperings of sweet nothings to each other, instead of studying. However, once “the troubles”—the Gorkhaland
agitations—come, Gyan can no longer remain in the self-enclosed world of their romance. Moved by the growing movement, the Nepali Gyan becomes very conflicted about his love for the Anglicized Sai. As his political consciousness grows, Gyan, one of the university’s best students, begins to see his job as Sai’s tutor to be demeaning, where once he had felt relieved just to have a job, even one that paid him a pittance.

Early in the novel, Cho Oyo, the home of Sai and her grandfather, is robbed by Gorkha fighters looking for the judge’s hunting guns. As the novel proceeds, it emerges that it was Gyan who, during one of his lovers’ tiffs with Sai, inadvertently precipitated the robbery. One night, angry with Sai, an inebriated Gyan lets slip to his friends in the movement that the judge has guns lying around the house. With a curfew now in place in Kalimpong, Gyan has ceased his visits to Cho Oyo, and Sai, “bereft of her former skill at solitude . . . read Wuthering Heights twice over, each time the potency of the writing imparting a wild animal feeling to her gut.” (274). The narrator rehearses several motifs to explain Sai’s behavior in this moment of waiting. For one, we see her obsessively reading a famously failed romance in Wuthering Heights, one that dwells on the disparity of class and social status. Given Sai’s tendency to enter “inside the narrative and [let] the narrative inside her,” this moment is a not-so-subtle signal to savvy readers that they can expect this romance to take a similar trajectory to Brontë’s novel—one in which the distinctions of class between Gyan and Sai will become consequential. With that reminder, the narrator then immediately returns to the earlier image of the giant squid, which serves to dismiss the significance of social
relations and to once again pronounce the fatalistic eventuality of loss: “everyone had to accept imperfection and loss in life. The giant squid, the last dodo” (276).

However, in a play on the name Gyan, which means “knowledge” in Sanskrit, “Sai started out on the undignified mission of searching for Gyan” (276). Noni and Lola had their idea of civilization challenged by people reclaiming public land. Similarly, the test of Sai’s “knowledge” of the world comes when she visits Gyan’s home in a shantytown. Full of “tin roofs [which] promised tetanus,” Gyan’s home “was a small, slime-clicked cube” (278, 279). In shock at this scene, Sai, via the narrator, must face up to the harsh reality of the life of people in Kalimpong, even when they appear to be smart and well-spoken:

The house didn’t match Gyan’s talk, his English, his looks, his clothes, or his schooling. It didn’t match his future. Every single thing his family had was going into him and it took ten of them to live like this to produce a boy, combed, educated, their best bet in the big world. Sisters’ marriages, younger brother’s studies, grandmother’s teeth—all on hold, silenced, until he left, strove, sent something back. Sai felt shame, then, for him. How he must have hoped his silence would be construed as dignity. Of course he had kept her far away. (280)

For the first time Sai, but also the narrator/novel, admits to a world that is not created through a web of literary sources. In the absence of familiar reference points, nothing makes sense to Sai. In Gyan’s case, there is an obvious back and forth of love and labor between him and his family—“Every single thing his family had was going into him and it took ten of them to live like this to produce
[Gyan],” and he, in turn, must send “something back.” Gyan’s life is imbricated in the life of his family, as he in turn constitutes them. Snapped out of her “romantic” feeling for Gyan, Sai instead feels “shame” on his behalf, seeing him “reduced” to tutoring her. But such empathy is only momentary, as it had been for Noni.

In the very sentence, Sai “felt distaste, then, for herself. How had she been linked to this enterprise, without her knowledge or consent? She stood staring at the chickens, unsure of what to do” (280). Gyan’s poverty can ultimately only be understood, not as a condition of its own, but as unacceptably impinging on her own “world.” Unable to cope with what she “sees,” and unwilling to understand/admit her complicity in the exploitation of Gyan’s labor, Sai focuses, instead, on the chickens outside Gyan’s door. In an overreaction to her own supposed contamination by Gyan’s poverty, Sai feels that “The birds had never revealed themselves to her so clearly; a grotesque bunch, rape and violence being enacted, hens being hammered and pecked as they screamed and flapped, attempting escape from the rapist rooster” (280). In her outrage, she displaces the immensity of her realization of Gyan’s status onto a “rapist rooster,” and can only express her shock to Gyan as anger: “Dirty hypocrite. Pretending one thing, living another. Nothing but lies through and through” (281). Her own blindness to Gyan’s poverty is thus converted into an accusation of deception, and possibly one of rape.

While the eruption of the specter of sexual violence is never fully explained, Sai is able to recover herself and attribute the misunderstanding
between herself and Gyan as a problem of “hate” and “civilization.” Desperate to recuperate some form of dignity, Sai enters into an argument with Gyan about the Gorkha struggle, to which she correctly blames for his long absence:

“Civilization is important,” she said.

“That [cheese and chocolate cigars] is not civilization, you fool. Schools and hospitals. That is.”

*You fool*—how dare he!

“But you have to set a standard. Or else everything will be brought down to the same low level as you and your family.”

She was shocked at herself as she spoke, but in this moment she was willing to believe anything that lay on the other side of Gyan.

“I see, Swiss luxury sets a standard, chocolates and watches set the standard . . . Yes, soothe your guilty conscience, stupid little girl, and hope someone doesn’t burn down your house for the simple reason that you are a *fool.* (281)

Sai’s deeply classist opinions come to the fore here for the first and only time in the novel. Civilization, in this instance, is cast as a narrowly bourgeois concept reserved for the English-speaking elite of Kalimpong. Despite his education, it is clear that as far as Sai is concerned, Gyan will always occupy “a low level” and can never access “civilization.” Sai ensures that he knows his place, remaining defiant even as a political struggle is under way to take back from the bourgeoisie precisely what was stolen from the working classes—land and self-governance.
Instead of acknowledging that the very basis of the Gorkha movement lies in their material disenfranchisement, Sai restricts her understanding of this traumatic event as a consequence of hate—“‘You hate me,’ said Sai, as if she’d read his thoughts” (285). In short, because the scene is focused on Sai, in the very moment where she might see outside of her customary “reading practices” and “see” a different, political Gyan/Knowledge, she (and, therefore, the reader) retreats from such a possibility into the personalized explanation of “hate.” We are left with the simplistic categories of a romance plot: love/hate. The specific historical context of Gyan’s rejection is recast as the inexplicable chemistry of human interaction.

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A Narrative Supreme

As I have been arguing, The Inheritance of Loss is a highly self-conscious novel which hails a worldly reader. Over the course of this chapter, I have elaborated on how this reader is taught to read Sai, and gain direct access to her inner thoughts, even though she never articulates such thoughts in direct speech (save the one argument with Gyan). In the final section of the novel, Sai has had a “terrifying” brush with “reality” and the text ends with Sai becoming a worldly reader herself. The ending also leaves the worldly reader with one final testimony of the supremacy of a narrative cosmopolitanism—thereby reaffirming the
“correctness” of the reader’s taught reading practice. This moment occurs when Sai “reads” Biju.

It is in this light—that of Sai becoming a worldly reader herself—that we must understand the intersecting narrative of Biju. Seemingly on a different narrative path from Sai’s story, Biju’s wandering and exploitation in the kitchens of New York City bring Sai, and consequently the reader, to the final realization of loss in the novel. Having heard of the political upheaval in Kalimpong, Biju decides to give up on his American dream of getting a green card, and returns to his father, Sai’s cook, carrying with him cheap American t-shirts and other gifts. On his return, he is robbed of everything, including his own clothes by the Gorkha guards who control access in and out of Kalimpong. Forced to steal a nightgown off of a laundry line, Biju returns to his father destitute and maimed (having suffered an injury to his foot in New York). Sai mistakes or “misreads” Biju’s presence for a “bent-over woman dragging one leg onerously. She must be on her way elsewhere” (356). Yet it is the reunion of father and son that leads Sai to an understanding of “truth”:

[The cook] walked through the drenched weeds to the gate. At the gate, peeping through the black lace wrought iron, between the mossy canonballs, was the figure in a nightgown. “Pitaji [Father]?” said the figure, all ruffles and colors. Kanchenjunga appeared above the parting clouds, as it did only very early in the morning during this season.
“Biju?” whispered the cook—

“Biju!” yelled, demented—

Sai looked out and saw two figures leaping at each other as the gate swung open.

The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent.

All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it. (357)

In these final lines of the novel, the focus shifts from Biju and his father to the peaks of Kanchenjunga in rapid succession, producing for the observer Sai an almost out-of-body experience. Nature, here, unlike the historicized characterization seen in Didur’s argument, is transcendental and serves the purpose of highlighting Sai’s encounter with the sublime—the ambiguously termed, “truth”—employed for the first time in the novel. What that truth is, is never specified; the “luminous light” makes us “feel” as though we know what it is. What is clear is that Sai, unlike Biju, does not need to travel to New York to gain access to the truth. It emanates from the mighty peaks that surround her. It is especially important to note the use of the pronoun “you” in the very last line, the only time this kind of address occurs in the novel. This usage fuses Sai and the worldly reader together, offering the reader the same modes of sublime recognition of “truth” as Sai.

Bruce Robbins, in his article “The Sweatshop Sublime” remarks on a similar process of looking away and substitution when encountering “the
sublime” knowledge—and resultant horror—of a postcolonial, globalized labor force which produces the materials of daily life in “the West.” Such a moment of “insight,” of coming face-to-face with the “truth” of a brutal, exploitative process, Robbins argues, is “accompanied by a surge of power.” (85):

In thought, at least, you are launched on a one-click leap from the tender, drowsy privacy of early morning at home—the shirt not yet on your back, the first cup of tea just finished—to the outer reaches of a world economic system of notoriously inconceivable magnitude and interdependence, a system that brings goods from the ends of the earth (as Baudelaire puts it, with an accuracy that you suddenly recognize) to satisfy your slightest desire. Yet at the same time this insight is also strangely powerless. Your sudden, heady access to the global scale is not access to a commensurate power of action on the global scale. You have a cup of tea or coffee. You get dressed. Just as suddenly, just as shockingly, you are returned to yourself in all your everyday smallness. (85)

In Robbins’ example, contemplating the global, exploitation of labor—labor which produces “our” way of life (captured precisely by the benign image of “your morning cup of tea”)—is a momentarily transformative, but ultimately ineffective, experience. For instead of taking action, we are “returned . . . to all your everyday smallness” (Robbins 85). Similarly, for Sai and the worldly reader—the “you” of the direct address—contemplating Biju, “the figure in the nightgown,” not to mention several other characters, including Gyan, who labor in unending patterns of “loss,” “lack of civilization,” and “hate,” produces a brief
moment of the possibility of recognition. Sai sees “two figures leaping at each other.” But what such an image might mean is left unspecified. Instead of dwelling on it, Sai looks up to the luminous peaks of Kachenjunga.

*The Inheritance of Loss*, thus, unlike Robbins’ example, does not dwell on the specific abjections of the labor process; instead the narrative force is to sublimate it repeatedly into seemingly universal, apolitical formulations. There is, consequently, no need to “shockingly” return “to yourself” in the novel after a brief and jarring detour into the “inconceivable magnitude” of an unequal world. The novel ends, instead, on the vague comfort of having the ability to simply “reach out and pluck [the truth].” The focus, then, is primarily on “our” ability to “read”—and read selectively. We are invited not so much to focus on the “leaping figures” and their meaning, as to look away. The unspecified truth, after all, is there for us to pluck out of a majestic landscape, up and away from the human drama unfolding before our eyes.

In the moments leading up this incident, the narrator-focalizer reiterates the power of narrative when Sai has a breakdown when reflecting on her argument with Gyan:

‘What is this all about?’ asked Sai, but her mouth couldn’t address her ear in the tumult; her heart lying in pieces, didn’t seem able to address her mind; her mind couldn’t talk to her heart. ‘Shame on myself. . .’ she said. . . Who was she . . .she with her self-importance, her demand for
happiness, yelling at fate, at the deaf heavens, screaming for her joy to be brought forth . . . ?

How dare. . . . How dare you not. . . ?

Why shouldn’t I have . . . ? . . . How dare. . . . I deserve. . . . Her small greedy soul. . . . Her tantrums and fits. . . . Her mean tears. . . . Her crying, enough for all the sadness in the world, was only for herself. Life wasn’t single in its purpose . . . or even in its direction. . . . The simplicity of what she’d been taught wouldn’t hold. Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it.

(355, ellipses in original)

Crucially again, while we can assume that the free-indirect discourse represents Sai’s inner thoughts, in practice, we only see characters who remain trapped in their own “narratives,” unable to do anything except mourn the loss of their singular and fictional worlds. As Robbins has it, being self-conscious of this supremacy of narrative is the most important aspect of such bourgeois being, and “the only scandal is unconsciousness of the division of labor, not failure to change the division of labor” (88). “The truth,” at the end of the novel is what Jacques Rancière would call the idea that “everything is ‘narrative,’ with alternations between ‘grand’ narratives and ‘minor’ narratives” (38). Fundamentally, this truth is reserved solely for the worldly reader of the novel who is consuming, like Sai, just another type of abjection and who mourns the loss of a hierarchical and prelapsarian civilization where there is no need to travel or suffer through the
indignities of our cosmopolitan and globalized identities and exploitative
complicities. Rather than a genuine attempt at “looking laterally” that is, beyond
the parameters of one’s prescribed vision, to see the world of politics and struggle
generated by the exploitation all around us and do something about it, the novel
invites the reader to return to “the mind’s eye.” In the safe world of reading and
narrative, the individual self can travel unfettered and, more importantly, without
having to examine the suffering of those around oneself. And through the version
of “reading” to which we have been schooled in this novel, we can look beyond
politics and towards an unchanging landscape (in this case the magnificent
Kanchenjunga) to find the world transformed into a luminous and sublime object.
The repudiation of the messily political, and the looking up and away to the
sublime, delivers to us, the readers, the pabulum of an a-historic and easily
available truth: “all you needed to do was reach out and pluck it.”
Chapter Four
Looking Laterally for Each Other: The Praxis of Daily Living in Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People

Introduction

Set in the aftermath of an ecocidal poisonous gas attack that disproportionately harmed the slum-dwelling populations of the fictional city of Khaufpur (City of Terror), Indra Sinha’s 2007 novel Animal’s People is a thinly veiled depiction of life in Bhopal twenty years after the Union Carbide Gas Disaster of December 2, 1984. On that night, the Union Carbide chemical factory released several thousand gallons of the gas methyl isocyanate (MIC) into the Bhopal atmosphere, causing one of the worst industrial disasters in the world. While official numbers vary, it is generally accepted that at least half a million people were poisoned, and at least fifteen thousand died immediately, and several hundred thousand more were permanently disabled (“Union Carbide’s Disaster”). To this day, the toxic site of the factory remains as it was since that night, with poisons still in the ground and in the water, recreating the disaster for successive generations of slum dwellers who live in the vicinity of the factory.

In Animal’s People, Jaanvar (“animal” in Hindi), the novel’s protagonist and first person narrator, is one of these poisoned slum dwellers. Consequently, throughout the novel, we see him consider the difficulty and yet the absolute necessity of forming bonds of solidarity across a range of differences such as

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1 For a brief overview of the disaster and its coverage in news media see Mukherjee 134-144.
class, gender, religion, and nationality in order to take a stand against such environmental degradation. Unlike the characters discussed in previous chapters, Jaanvar’s impetus to form these bonds is not idealistic in its cosmopolitan longing, but necessarily materialist in the characters’ need for literal survival in the face of environmental disaster, not to mention the denial of justice to the poorest of citizens by national-political-juridical systems. It is worth noting that this is the only novel of the dissertation which considers cosmopolitanism, as it were, “from below” i.e., from the perspective of the underclass, rather than being “about” them. In considering Animal’s People as an instance of a new kind of cosmopolitanism—that is, a “cosmopolitanism from below”—I deviate from a number of critics who ascribe a facile cosmopolitanism to Sinha and, by extension, the novel, based solely on Sinha’s residence outside India. The literary critic Pablo Mukherjee, for example, in his much-quoted analysis, declares that Sinha is “a cosmopolitan author (who grew up and lives in England and France) writing in English” (Mukherjee 135). However, despite Sinha living and working outside India, the novel is very much centered in India, and on a group of characters who never leave the confines of their slum, the Nutcracker. The only thing “cosmopolitan” about their lives is the poisonous gas released by an American “Kampani” (Company) which has crippled, killed, and poisoned several hundred thousand people in Khaufpur. Sinha, in fact, sees himself not as a world-travelled fashionably cosmopolite author but rather first and foremost as an activist charged with “trying to tell this story [of Bhopal] to the world, and ask[ing] good-hearted people, who believe in justice and fair play, to help” (“We
will carry the torch”). In several interviews and articles since the publication of the novel, and in the process of reflecting on it, Sinha has repeatedly pointed out that he began writing the novel with the worry that “I had no right to write about the poor” (“Bhopal”). Consequently, in order to write about the poor of Bhopal, he invented the fictional city of Khaufpur so as not to trade directly in the misery of people who continue to suffer. The novel’s cosmopolitanism resides, thus, not in the fact of the novelist’s mobility in the world but in the ideological position of the novel.

The novel was short listed for the Booker Prize in 2008 and won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2008. Most reviewers, however, consistently avoided any discussion of Sinha’s publically stated activism, choosing instead to critique the novel’s style. The novelist Kamila Shamsie, who reviewed it for The Guardian, complained that the novel meanders and has “too many characters” and “little narrative tension,” while Ligaya Mishan in the New York Times accused Sinha of “awkwardly stuffing his story with improbable high jinks” (“Behind,” “Poisoned”). Sinha himself noted how improbable his own life—not his fiction—had become; he was spied on, for example, by Dow Chemical (the company that Union Carbide morphed into via a corporate merger) for being an activist: “If this sounds like the fantasy of a desperate Hollywood screenwriter, imagine pitching the story of Bhopal to a studio producer. Nobody would believe it” (“We will carry the torch”). If the western press took issue with the formal features of the novel, the Indian press denounced Animal’s People for using “the truth” for personal monetary gain. Geeta Doctor in India Today wrote, “Like the ambulance

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2 See “Bhopal: a novel quest for justice” for Sinha’s reasons for not calling the city Bhopal.
chasers and headline hunters, there’s now a sub-genre of disaster seekers diving for another version of the Titanic” (“The Animal Kingdom”).

The academic world, by contrast, has received the novel quite favorably. It has become a staple of environmental humanities courses and has been analyzed through a variety of literary critical lenses—ecocriticism, trauma theory, posthumanism, and apocalyptic fiction, among others. Two of the more influential and much cited readings of the novel have been put forward by Pablo Mukherjee in his chapter on the novel in Postcolonial Environments and in Rob Nixon’s essay, “Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque.” It would not be an exaggeration to say that in academic circles the novel has succeeded in bringing the Bhopal Gas Disaster back into the spotlight.

What is unique about Animal’s People, certainly in the context of this dissertation, is that both the author and protagonist are driven by a strong sense of injustice and a notion that the “poor have been abandoned, their memory obliterated…[and] they can expect to be jailed, tortured, gang-raped or murdered” (“Abandoned”). Both Sinha and Jaanvar are determined to do something about this material reality, the recognition of which leaves Sinha with only one question, “How can I not join them [in their fight for justice]?” (“Why I’m going on hunger strike”).

The first step in joining the fight, for the novelist as well as for his protagonist, is the difficult task of getting people to actually see, recognize and acknowledge “them”—the suffering poor of Bhopal and Khaufpur. Angered by several journalists’ facile attempts to speak for the abject, Jaanvar begins the novel by stating explicitly that, “You’ll talk of rights, law, justice. Those words..."
sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don’t mean the same” (3). Jaanvar is so outraged by the casual use of such consequential terms that he equates it to the original disaster: “On that night it was poison, now it’s words that are choking us” (3). Focusing on Jaanvar’s attempt “from below” both to see and be seen, I argue that Jaanvar finally discovers a daily praxis of making himself vulnerable to the people around him. This “negative practice” of stripping away the layers of misrecognition between one another, coupled with a firm utopian “faith” in equality, is the important first step towards justice for everyone. In this final chapter of the dissertation, I look to Sinha’s novel as an example of prioritizing the task of “looking laterally” beyond our narrow and selfish selves and “seeing each other.” The novel thus displays a “cosmopolitanism of the dispossessed” constructed through collective social action, designed to directly impact, and make better, the material lives of people forced to suffer environmental injustices.

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Looking Laterally

The distinctive quality of Jaanvar’s particular form of looking laterally is that it is always also a looking upward. Thus far in the dissertation we have encountered novels whose manner of looking were always a version of looking downward—from the aeroplane for Naipaul’s Salim, through the “higher
position” of the third-person narrator in Desai, or toward the beyond and below of the aristocratic Hindu home in Tagore. In this novel, Jaanvar’s disabled physicality—his mangled spine—necessitates a vantage point close to the ground. Jaanvar literally walks on all fours because the poisonous gas released by the Kampani caused “smelting in my spine” and condemned the nineteen-year-old narrator to be always at the eye level of “someone’s crotch” (15). Jaanvar is therefore the very definition of that which has been consigned to “the bottom” of society. He begins from the point of being both literally close to the ground, but also, in a metaphorical sense, “grounded” in the afterlife of the tragedy. It is this “grounding” in both senses of the word that gives Jaanvar a unique perspective and allows him to see through the behavior of “foreign” people using him and his suffering to prove their own humanity (5). The novel’s animating conceit is that the “story was recorded in Hindi on a series of tapes by a nineteen-year-old boy… [and] Apart from [a foreign journalist] translating [the tapes] to English, nothing has been changed.” This we learn in an “Editor’s note” which also tells us that “difficult expressions which turned out to be French are rendered in correct spelling” (“Editor’s note”). The conceit—of Jaanvar speaking directly into a tape recorder—posits the novel as an unmediated communication between speaker and listener. Speaking on tape directly to the journalist who gave him the tape recorder, Jaanvar says, “You were like all the others, come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there’s so much pain in the world. Like vultures are you jarnaliss [journalists]” (5). Given that an American Kampani has caused his suffering, the irony that the foreigners who produced the
problem further prey on their victims to make themselves feel better is not lost on Jaanvar. It is this knowledge, as well as the experience of daily exploitation, that disgusts Jaanvar and about which he speaks up and out.

Focusing on the brutal and exploitative mechanisms of class, gender, religion, and nationality Jaanvar adamantly refuses to sublimate such distinctions into mere “differences” to be overcome through an idealistic longing for community. Quite simply, the most basic necessity for survival—food—allows him to see through the uses of differences and understand how precisely they keep him near starvation. Jaanvar also stubbornly refuses to be trapped in the posture of always “looking up,” whether literally or metaphorically, to the people who exploit him and his story for their own profit. Instead, Jaanvar is continually in the process of developing his own version of looking out toward and interacting with the world. This is a difficult process that forces him to reckon with the hierarchical structures of society, but which also makes him see the possibility of a future premised on human equality.

Jaanvar is continually verbally abused and treated like an “animal” by all around him. And it is the brutal treatment of others, more than his fused spine, that “reduces” him to the status of “animal.” This process of “reduction” allows for a close scrutiny of a centrally important term of the novel: the very definition of “the human.” Jaanvar’s (and by extension the novel’s) fundamental preoccupation is with what Leerom Medovoi, in “The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory,” calls an “ecocritical Marxism.”

Medovoi asks, “what does it mean to become subject to a macro-procedure of
knowledge/power whose operation comes to undergrid some accumulation regime?” (133). Medovoi’s argument interrogates the concept of “environment” and argues that the idea took shape as a way to reduce the multiple social and biological valences of nature to an unlimited source of capitalist profit. Though not phrased in quite such a blend of Marxist and Foucauldian terms, Jaanvar too asks the question—“what does it mean to be human?”—especially in circumstances where all social relations appear to be constructed through and for “accumulation regimes” of one sort or another. Rejected by humanity because of his “deformity,” Jannvar, in turn, rejects the category human and sets out to investigate its deficiencies. And ultimately its possibilities. Throughout the novel, Jaanvar offers us a searing critique of the category “human,” which he suggests is much too often constituted not through acts of communal generosity, but through the everyday violence of exclusion that result from what Medovoi calls “macro-procedure of knowledge/power.” He rejects all offers to be included within such a debilitating category.

But Jaanvar’s attitude should not be seen simply as a rejection of the “human.” For every attempt to exclude him from the category of human, Jaanvar possesses a corollary desire to be “seen” as an equal despite his debilities. He oscillates between contradictory desires to remain unique and stand apart or be included in a meaningful collective. Spurred on by what Fredric Jameson calls “a Utopian impulse” which, as he puts it, “sees its work as the conception and projection of a radically new form of some properly socialist legality,” Jaanvar spends the entirety of his narrative grappling with the idea that a “very real
political” collective, one that would have to be in “a radically new form,” holds the solution to his exclusion and abjection (298). Such dual energies within Jaanvar—the simultaneous rejection of “humanity” and a desire to be part of a collective—animate his everyday life, and spur him on to keep “looking laterally” in critical and utopian ways.

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Between human and animal

The novel’s plot revolves around the possibility that Jaanvar will undergo a medical “procedure” in America that will allow him to walk upright on two legs, instead of on all fours. Three weeks before he ends the series of voice recordings, Jaanvar receives confirmation from America that “money has been found, my operation is booked” (365). It is the arrival of a “fat package” containing “many forms, plus a letter with good news for me” that forces Jaanvar to make a life-changing decision and confront his most hidden desire— “my yearning to walk upright” (365, 23). As it turns out, his decision to undergo the “procedure” is not only far from straightforward; it becomes the impetus for narrating his story:

Long I sat with this paper under the old tamarind tree that was Ma’s parlour. Thought and thought I’ve, asked aloud for advice, my voices had none to offer, but began their crazy hissing, khekhe
fishguts noises. It’s then I’ve remembered the tape mashin in the wall, I will tell this story, I thought, and that way I’ll find out what the end should be. I’ll know what to do. (365)

Jaanvar, thus, pauses to engage with a different kind of technology—the tape machines—and the medium of storytelling, to try and figure out if he should subject himself to advanced medical technology in the west that may transform his life. Although plagued by voices in his head for most of his life, in this most important moment they seem to have nothing to offer him. Instead, Jaanvar decides to use his “own” voice, not the ones in his head, to speak up and speak out about the various aspects of this question of his humanity. Thus, analysis of the category of “human” through the telling of Jaanvar’s life story, although only revealed at the end, is the generative cause for the existence of the novel, and reveals storytelling as distinctive and significant in its own right. The novel, therefore in its generative, even redemptive possibilities, stands in contrast to the “vultures”—his term for journalists—who simply “consume” stories.

In its function as an investigative self-examining personal record, the text lays out Jaanvar’s problem as fundamentally a choice between walking upright and becoming “human” or remaining “a quatre pattes animal” (208). At the end of the novel, Jaanvar makes the decision to remain as he is:

I reckon that if I have this operation, I will be upright, true, but to walk I will need the help of sticks. I might have a wheel chair, but how far will that get me in the gullis of Khaufpur?…If I’m an
upright human, I would be one of millions, and not even a healthy one at that. Stay four-foot, I’m the one and only Animal. (366)

In his decision to remain on all fours, we see Jaanvar’s convoluted logic, driven both by practicality (it will allow him more ease in the crowded streets) and a desire to be unique, singular. His signature jingle captures this duality: “I am *Animal* fierce and free/in all the world is none like me” (366).

Rob Nixon, in his influential essay on *Animal’s People*, analyzes Jaanvar’s approach and final decision through a consideration of “the picaresque”—what he calls “Sinha’s singlehanded invention of the environmental picaresque” (“Neoliberalism” 444). As an environmental picaro, Jaanvar “joins a long line of picaros: canny, scheming social outliers governed by unruly appetites, scatalogically obsessed, who, drawn from polite society’s vast impoverished margins, survive by parasitism and their wits” (“Neoliberalism” 451). What I have been calling Jaanvar’s dual energies—critique and utopian impulse—Nixon, in his article, posits as characteristic of picaresque literature. For Nixon, “through Animal’s immersed voice, Sinha is able to return to questions that have powered the picaresque from its beginnings. What does it mean to be reduced to living in subhuman, bestial conditions? What chasms divide, what ties bind, the wealthy and the destitute, the human and the animal?” (“Neoliberalism” 462). Reading Jaanvar’s liminal position between human and animal through the lens of the picaresque, Nixon concludes that in “Animal’s day-to-day meanderings, the impulse for survival trumps the dream of collective justice” (462). Jaanvar, in Nixon’s reading, cannot prioritize “collective justice” over the very real and
tangible need to survive. As a result, the salutary effect of the picaro’s societal critique is felt most directly by the reader of the picaresque novel, and not the picaro-narrator.

My reading of the novel differs from Nixon’s, and even Jaanvar’s own stated logic for staying four-footed. My contention is that Jaanvar, at the end, dislodges himself from survivalism, and instead chooses to act on a notion of collective justice. I take Jaanvar at his word when he says that he genuinely does not know if he should “correct” his posture, walk upright and become “human.” It is important to allow for this unpredictability—the not-knowing of the final outcome of Jaanvar’s physical deformity. For it is this not-knowing that propels us to look for reasons apart from his posture of picaresque bravado, his defiance in the face of brutality, to discover why Jaanvar chooses to forgo his “medical procedure” to become “human.” Why might that decision to remain physically as he is and therefore “not-human,” be more important to Jaanvar? Uncoupling Jaanvar from a mode of survivalism, and from being always first and foremost a “picaro,” opens up space for a deeper philosophical engagement with the novel and holds out the potential of taking Jaanvar as more than just a useful vessel to critique “humanity.” Instead, by refusing to embrace the easy fix of medically altering his posture, Jaanvar reveals the possibility of actually “seeing” the human victims of the underclass as they are. And it is this ability to look laterally that initiates what Nixon calls “the dream of collective [human] justice.”

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Jaanvar’s desire to enter the category of “human” seems to follow from two competing reasons—one political and the other individual. The first, individualistic reason is his love for Nisha. (This is also the reason that eventually helps precipitate the text’s climax of Jaanvar burning down the Kampani factory, thus ironically recreating the original accident that released poisonous gases.) Nisha—college student, daughter of the famed “Aawaaz-e-Khaufpur, the voice of Khaupfur,” singer pandit Somraj Tryambak Punekar, and acolyte/future wife of activist and political leader in the fight for justice for the victims of the Khaupfur gas disaster, Zafar—becomes the locus of all of Jaanvar’s desires to become human (33). Heteronormative romance continues to be in this novel, as in the other novels considered in the dissertation, a powerful avenue for characters to understand themselves as “looking laterally” beyond their own individual selves; “love” is posited as the way to seek connection to something “beyond” themselves. However, as we have seen in previous chapters, romance can often be a form of narcissism, the very opposite of “looking laterally.” And so it proves for Jaanvar too.

As a beggar foraging for food in “the alleys behind the eating houses in the old city,” Jaanvar is indeed Nixon’s picaro—a hardened survivor who, early in life, “learned to look out for myself” (17, 16). Mercilessly teased by passersbys on the street, repeatedly “pushed” and “kneed…in the face,” he had “got a few beatings” and had experienced such hunger that he would “break off lumps of [his
foot’s] dry skin and chew it” (16, 15, 17, 13). Reduced to near cannibalism, Jaanvar is for all practical purposes a stray animal, scrounging for food on the streets of Khaufpur. Indeed, his best friend and companion in life is a dog he names Banjara—Jara for short—“Banjara, gypsy, free spirit, because she belongs nowhere, and everywhere is her kingdom” is Jaanvar’s way of dignifying a “yellow dog, of no fixed abode and no traceable parents, just like me” (18). “Abject cosmopolitans,” Jara and Jaanvar, in Peter Nyers’ useful phrasing, form an inseparable pair on the streets of Khaufpur, receiving “hand-outs” from the city’s restaurants in return for leaving their clientele alone—“nothing puts a person off their food more than a starving Animal watching every mouthful” (19). Yet for all of their closeness and teamwork to get “up to our tricks outside a café,” Jaanvar is tormented by the lack of human female companionship in his life (18). This lack is made worse by people suggesting that he is having sex with Jara. This suggestion so disturbs him that “in my street years I hated to see dogs fucking” (16). Indeed, despite his great affection for Jara, the teasing he endures is often too much for Jaanvar to bear. In Jaanvar’s telling of the story, the brutal treatment meted out to him comes to explain his quick temper and aggressive behavior:

…they’d yell, ‘Hey Fourlegs, you get glued up like this, you and your girlfriend? You and Jara? Never have I been able to cope with teasing. I’d lose my temper, fataak! I know how to fight. Early in life I learned to look out for myself, to put myself first, before all

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other and every other thing. Who else was going to stick up for me? It’s a bad idea to attack an opponent who can kick shit out of you, I got a few beatings, but if they know you’ll fight back, people mostly leave you alone. Plus I used to bite. Maybe there were afraid of getting rabies. (17)

Though “glued,” metaphorically to Jara, and therefore also to the category of animal, Jaanvar nonetheless abhors any suggestion that there is any sexual contact between them or that the nature of the contact defines him as an animal. Yet Jaanvar is simultaneously aware that he is safer and better able to survive if he embodies the role of an animal. When he acted as an animal (“I used to bite”), people distanced themselves from him: “Maybe there were afraid of getting rabies.” Caught between these two painful realities—of rejecting others’ definition of him as an animal and yet behaving as one in order to survive—he imagines that the solution to this dilemma may well be Nisha.

The first human to ever accept him for who he is and how he is, Nisha has a profound impact on Jaanvar:

I think it was that from the first she took me exactly as I was.

When she called me Jaanvar, Animal, it was a name, nothing more.

She never seemed to notice that I was crippled, nor pretend I wasn’t. She was the only person I know who treated me as completely normal. (22)

In her ability to “see” him for who he is-- “exactly as I was”—an entity trapped between animal and human, Nisha allows Jaanvar to imagine a more complex
engagement with the animal/human divide. Her attitude towards him, noticing neither his deformity, nor pretending it does not exist, becomes his new understanding of “normal.”

After being introduced to Zafar, Jaanvar gains employment in the activist movement as a kind of spy. Thinking of himself as a Khaufpuri James Bond—“Namispond! Jamispond!”—Jaanvar keeps his eyes and nose close to the ground for any information that might be useful to the movement (26). For his spying, he receives a monthly salary of “four hundred rupees,” a princely sum for a beggar who previously had survived on food handouts (27). But more than a stable income, validation of what Zafar calls his “especially abled” body, or a free lunch every day at pandit Somraj’s house, Jaanvar gains something much more precious to him—love (23). As Jaanvar confides to the voices in his head, “Quietly does love happen. You’re not even thinking about romance, then she smiles and you notice for the first time that she’s not all that plain, her face really is quite sweet” (46). The voices in his head would have him believe that he is simply a “dirty little fucker” with cruder thoughts of “pussy, pussy, pussy,” but Jaanvar is determined to fight off those voices and argue that—“Love is different and more difficult. It has nothing to do with sex. This is what I tried to make my voices understand” (45, 44, 46). In so doing, for not the only time in the text, Jaanvar aspires, or “looks upward,” toward a more “wholesome” connection with Nisha. Yet every time he attempts a lofty consideration of love, he cannot help but fall back into much cruder thoughts. If she sits next to him or has any physical contact with him, he has an erection and is at great pains to hide it from view (124).
Tortured by his own virginity, he is often unable to resist masturbation, and eventually takes to climbing the frangipani tree outside Nisha’s window, ostensibly to guard her honor and “to be certain that brother Zafar isn’t taking advantage” of her, but in fact to catch a glimpse of Nisha undressing, “She stoops to remove her underwear,” and “oh fuck that pattering in the leaves, it isn’t rain” (115, 117).

In recounting his life story on tape then, Jaanvar is acutely aware of how, despite his best efforts, he is unable to escape the materiality of his own body whose deformity and urges he identifies with animality. His sexual urges may well be explained by the fact that he is still, after all, a teenager coming to terms with his sexuality; however, significantly, even at this stage Jaanvar conflates sexuality with animality and love with humanness. Previously, we saw Jaanvar viewing his animality as offering a kind of protection; now we see his sexuality undercutting his desire to be human. To be sexual, Jaanvar seems to believe, is to be nothing but an animal. Speaking directly to his imagined audience, “Eyes,” he says, “Eyes, did I just now say ‘Forget sex?’ What fucking hypocrisy! Sex was the one thing I could never forget, my second impossible wish. My first wish was to stand upright, but why did I want to do that if not because it led to the second? talks of love, the little prick/but anywhere would plunge his dick” (75-76). Such internalized self-loathing is one of Jaanvar’s distinctive qualities, and one he is desperate to eradicate. He repeatedly tries to convince himself that what stands in the way of winning Nisah’s love is his inability to walk on two feet. To win
Nisha’s love, he reasons, he must be able to walk upright and thereby enter the category “human”:

Over and over I’d tell myself, if only I could stand up straight, it might be a different matter … This made me feel better, but changed nothing. What hope was there that my back would ever unbend? I complained to Nisha that everyone else would one day get married, but no girl would ever look at me. (47)

This utopian fantasy— one that in his mind would resolve all his difficulties—to walk upright and seek Nisha’s hand in marriage is very powerful in Jaanvar. For one, this fantasy exists in the face of utter hopelessness that he could ever walk upright. Second, it is premised on his assumption that what keeps Nisha from loving him is his mangled body and not her genuine love for Zafar. Thus, when Nisha finally and categorically rejects him, Jaanvar loses all hope and control of his body and, as he only discovers later, burns down the Kampani factory in a fit of blind despair. And this unthinking, desperate act releases poisonous gases once again into Khaufpur.

Zafar precipitates Nisha’s rejection when, on a hunger strike to protest a secret deal between the government and the Kampani, and close to dying, he tells Jaanvar that “if anything happens, look after [Nisha]. Make sure she’s okay” (300). In this moment, Jaanvar confesses to Zafar that, imagining him as a rival in love, he has been poisoning him for many months. Much to Jaanvar’s surprise, Zafar, “too tired to be angry,” notes, “at least it proves one thing, that you’ll look after Nisha. I can trust you to keep her honour safe” (303). When word arrives
that Zafar is dead, Jaanvar, now with a heavy heart, goes to Nisha both to keep his promise to Zafar and finally achieve his most cherished desire—to be with her:

“Marry me Nisha, I’ll never leave you. Babies, we’ll have. I’ll get educated, I’ll find a job’.” An appalled Nisha rejects his offer, ‘Stop it Animal, stop! I’ve told you before I will never marry you!’” (332). In keeping with his characteristic manner of internalized self-loathing, Jaanvar attributes Nisha’s rejection to his position: “‘Because I am an animal, that’s the real reason isn’t it, that you can never marry me? . . . If I were human maybe I could be your lover. No chance of that now! . . . I’ll always be nothing but a fucking animal!’ She looks at me with crazy eyes. ‘If you are an animal then fuck off and be one!’” (332-333). In this moment, Jaanvar is able to vocalize his worst fears—that he will never be able to enter the collective category of human—and the strain of articulating this fear makes him blind to any possibility other than the confirmation of those fears.

Whatever the reasons for Nisha’s rejection of him, Jaanvar definitively understands himself as being “nothing but a fucking animal” which, in his logic, bars him from Nisha’s love. This sense of exclusion dooms him, in his mind, to always only being an animal, never human (116, 333).

Thus, at the end of the novel, when Jaanvar is finally offered a seemingly miraculous surgical procedure that will “cure” him, that is, it will allow him to stand up and become “human,” he pauses to take stock of his desires and motives. Throughout the narrative, Jaanvar, as Nixon suggests, does little to explore his own motives for desiring to be “human” other than his love for Nisha. Through the process of re-examining his life, however, as he speaks into the tape recorder,
he becomes slowly aware of the powerful, non-romantic solidarities he has
developed along the way and about which he had remained largely oblivious.
These relationships stand in powerful distinction to his investment in the romantic
as a way to be human.

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**Daily Living**

Partly following the literary conventions of a love triangle (because Nisha
is not entirely ejected from the eventual male-male relationship between himself
and Zafar), in the end Jaanvar’s love of Nisha simply acts as a vehicle for a closer
relationship with Zafar (who, in fact, does not die). Politicization runs parallel to
Jaanvar’s “humananizing” romantic interests and libidinal desires. This second,
less spectacular, more subtle development occurs through his interactions with
Zafar and the justice movement for the victims of Khaufpur. It is through his
proximity to this movement that Jaanvar begins to learn the lessons of solidarity,
and its ability, often quite literally, to save lives, including his own. Early on in
his narrative, during his first meeting with Zafar, Jaanvar had defiantly
proclaimed, “‘My name is Animal’, I say. ‘I’m not a fucking human being, I’ve
no wish to be one.’ This pronouncement was also, as he tells us, “the start of that
long argument between Zafar and me about what was an animal and what it meant
to be human” (23-24). These disagreements with Zafar finally help Jaanvar to
open himself up to other ways of participating in the category of “human” which, he realizes, goes beyond a longing for romantic love/sex. As he recounts his relationship to Zafar, Jaanvar is surprised by his own already existing political solidarity with “his”/“Animal’s” people—a realization which eventually strongly influences his decision to stay the way he is physically and continue to fight for justice for everyone.

In “Zafar’s gang,” Jaanvar encounters an entirely different utopian desire—justice for everyone—than the solitary and private ones to which he has confessed (27). “Saint Zafar” as Jaanvar sometimes calls him, is, in fact, “a scholar who left his studies to take up the cause of the poor,” and the leader of, in Jaanvar’s words, “just a bunch of fucking do-gooders” (27) is at the center of several important political events in the novel. Zafar gains notoriety when he convinces a judge in the case against the Kampani to force the defendants to appear in court, and if they fail to appear, “then in accordance with the due provisions of the law, let all the Kampani’s assets in India be attached” (53).

Since Zafar has petitioned the court “many times over the years” and has failed as many times, this latest attempt is met with “giggling.” But on this particular day the judge issues a decision for “a list of the Kampani’s assets in India be drawn up and entered to the court” (53). Having seen “thirteen judges” in almost as many years, none of whom ruled against the powerful corporate-government collusion in the cover-up of the environmental crime, Zafar here achieves a great victory for the people of Khaupfur as well as vindicates his faith in the judicial system (52). Buoyed by the unexpected victory, Zafar makes a speech in which proclaims,
‘However long it takes we will never give up. Whatever we had they have already taken, now we are left with nothing. Having nothing means we have nothing to lose. So you see, armed with the power of nothing we are invincible, we are bound to win.’ (54)

Zafar’s speech triggers “a roundabout of [joyful] madness,” with crowds of people chanting hopefully, “‘we have to start winning one day. Why not today?’ ‘Why not today? Why not today?’ Nisha and [Jaanvar] start chanting…To people in the street…to all the citizens of Khaufpur, we’re calling out, ‘Hey, hey, why not today?’” (55). Several critics have hailed this triumphant scene on the steps of the court as possibly the political statement of the novel⁵. In his articulation of “the power of nothing,” then, Zafar becomes the locus of a parallel utopian impulse in the novel, holding the hopes and desire of Khaufpur’s poor—“they worshipped him”—and their desperate need for justice (22). Zafar’s utopian impulse is different from Jaanvar’s; though he too is in love with Nisha, he is still able to distinguish between heterosexual romance, and the collective need for societal justice. He, in fact, is able to hold on to both possibilities simultaneously.

Jaanvar, despite his momentary joining in on the chanting, remains suspicious of Zafar, especially as the embodiment of the city’s utopian desires. Jaanvar, instead, distances himself from the political: “Couldn’t be bothered with the political shit, I hated all that talk of ‘poison victims’, I don’t want to be pitied, I refuse to be some fucking bhonsdi-ka vicitim” (27). Yet, despite his

unwillingness to identify with the political project of justice and therefore with the victims of Khaufpur, Jaanvar begins to learn something unexpected from Zafar’s gang. In his day-to-day interactions with the justice movement he learns not the “power of nothing,” but the power of solidarity and commitment to the people around him.

One such important moment of learning comes when he is assigned the task of taking care of Ma Franci or Mère Ambrosine, a French nun who ran the orphanage where Jaanvar lived till he was nine and who is now the last remaining French nun in Khaufpur. It was Ma Franci who had taken special care of Jaanvar when he took ill at age six and when his spine began to twist. An “old and more crotchety than ever” woman, Ma Franci’s struggles in India also revolve around the question of her humanity (40). If, for Jaanvar, to be human is defined by love or by one’s ability to walk upright, then for the old nun, it is a shared language:

None of the remaining sisters spoke français, there was no one left whose speech Ma Franci could understand, or who had any idea what she was saying. The Indian sisters did take the trouble to learn a few things such as o, water, dézhoné, meal, and twalet, toilet, komoñ sava, how’s it going, etc, but this only made the old woman crazier. If they knew what proper language was, why did they keep on with their beastly gibbering? (38)

Indeed, throughout his narrative Jaanavar reports Ma Franci’s constant complaints to him that nobody makes an “effort to speak like a human being” to her—“I know many languages. These people are just drweling. Why do they do it? Why
won’t they treat me like a human being?” (40). After “forty years” in India, Ma Franci is alone and continually feels as though people treat her like an imbecile. As Jaanvar tells Nisha, that in the gas disaster, “all sort of people lost all kinds of things, lives for sure, families, friends, health, jobs, in some cases their wits (37). But for Ma Franci it was the loss of language—“her knowledge of Hindi”—that would prove to be the most devastating: “She had gone to sleep knowing it as well as any Kaufpuri, but was woken up in the middle of the night by a wind full of poison and prophesying angels” (37).

Ma Franci’s story, much to Jaanvar’s surprise, moves Nisha to tears: “‘That poor woman, is she still here in Khaufpur?’” she asks (38). When he confirms that she is at the convent living a miserable existence, Nisha immediately entrusts Jaanvar with her care, “‘From now on looking after Ma Franci is part of your job. Zafar will confirm it’” (38). Thus, Ma Franci moves into Jaanvar’s hovel in the abandoned Kampani factory, the “About-To-Fall-Tower-By-Factory-Corner, Nutcracker,” and he picks up a smattering of French from a “jarnalis français” (another one of the many “vulture journalists”), and begins the process of learning “responsibility” (103, 144).

While Ma Franci is the most obvious example of Jaanvar’s slow unlearning of the habit of “put[ing] myself first, before all other and every other thing,” his own recounting of his life-story is full of other such examples. Upon joining the movement, Jaanvar becomes a trusted money courier, his “especially abled” body giving him an advantage to pass unnoticed—“I was amazed that Zafar, knowing that I’d been a scam artist, would put so much money in my hand.
‘You trust me? I could run away.’ ‘It’s you who must learn to trust,’ said he” (39).

A vital agent in Zafar’s attempt to get help for the poorest people in Khaufpur, Jaanvar often teams up with Farouq, also a recent convert to Zafar’s gang—“Two years ago Farouq’s father fell seriously ill, he could not get proper treatment, it was Zafar who fixed it, since that time Farouq worships Zafar” (88). In a jovial pairing filled with acerbic and bawdy teasing of each other, Farouq and Jaanvar, two hardened “criminals,” are often employed to fend off loan sharks who exploit the sick, who are in desperate need of money for medication (89). In addition to his assigned duties, Jaanvar also begins to take a personal interest in several people who reside in his neighborhood of the Nutcraker, particularly the little orphaned girl Aliya and her grandparents, Huriya and Hanif.

Yet throughout, Jaanvar retains his defiant streak and tries his absolute best to reject any emerging sense of solidarities, which extends even to being willfully blind to his and Ma’s shared struggles. When she asks him why people will not treat her like a human being, he simply says, “Je ne sais pas, Ma, je suis un animal,” as if he has never considered the problem of not being treated like a human being (40). He does something similar with Elli Barber, the American doctor. When her free medical clinic is boycotted on the suspicion that she is a Kampani proxy, Barber says to him, “‘Animal, I don’t know what such suffering is like, but it doesn’t mean we’ve nothing in common. There’s simple humanity? Isn’t there?’” Animal characteristically devalues the moment by rejecting any suggestion of commonality (185-186). Despite his need to feel a connection to her, Jaanvar is too aware of his repeated humiliation as “an animal” —“Cheap
lying bastard, I’m. ‘No good asking me,’ I tell her. ‘I long ago gave up trying to be human.’” (186). Indeed, Jaanvar, in his daily interaction with people, focuses his energies on distancing himself from hints of “sameness”—whether of suffering or experiences of indignities. Thus, he resists, at every turn, anyone’s, including Farouq’s, claiming him as part of an afflicted human collective:

‘Don’t whine,’ says [Farouq]. ‘This is Khaufpur. In this city if a man is lame he’s called Langda. If he’s cross-eyed he’s Look-London-Talk-Tokyo. These are just fucking words, call him Raju or Razaq, doesn’t change what he is.’

Not very bright, is our Farouq…First he does not realise that everything’s just fucking words, second this edge he misses, that when I say I’m an animal it’s not just what I look like but what I feel.’ (87)

In this “edge” lies the crux of Jaanvar’s problem with a politicized collectivity—the very real pain he feels because of his internalized ostracism from the category marked by the “fucking word” “human.” Thus, even though no one will speak to Ma in “la langue humaine,” Jaanvar cannot accept that she suffers in a way humanly similar to him, and though he knows that every disabled person in Khaufpur goes by the name of his or her infirmity, he cannot accept the similarities to his own situation (142). Instead, he wants to believe that the conflicting thoughts that he has about his body are uniquely his own. The first time he is able to see a way out of this back and forth routine of practicing daily solidarity but refusing human solidarity is by finally “seeing” Anjali.
In *Animal’s People* Anjali is the epitome of ignored humanity. A prostitute working the Nutcracker neighborhood, she is almost completely absent from Jaanvar’s narrative, till her sudden, very important appearance toward the end of the novel. Fed up with Jaanvar’s constant references to his animality, and recognizing the connections that Jaanvar, to his own detriment, sees between his sexuality and animality, Farouq decides to help him lose his virginity. He buys the services of Anjali for Jaanvar. The shock of being able to have sex with a woman is the first and defining instance that helps Jaanvar finally be able to “look laterally” and actually “see” the person right next to him.

During the festival of Holi, Farouq attempts “making a friend happy” and takes Jaanvar to the brothel. Jaanvar exclaims in anticipation,—“Tonight, this very night, I am to get my heart’s desire, I will get laid” (235). However, a highly intoxicated Jaanvar loses consciousness only to wake up the next day “naked.” He notices that his “kakadus [shorts] are gone” and “my lund-of-lunds [penis], lying thick and floppy between me and the girl, is fully covered with bright powder-blue dots.” In shock, he wonders, “What the hell has been going on?” (238). As his head clears, Jaanvar realizes that he is lying next to Anjali, “the friendly girl who used to tease me in my street days” and he discovers by questioning her that “we didn’t do anything,” but instead “fell asleep” (238, 240). Even in the morning he appears incapable of accessing his much desired utopian dream of human, sexual connection: “Let it be enough that at this moment, when at last I could
have my desire, enjoy that pleasure of which I’ve so long dreamed, you know what, my big boastful, out-of-control lund won’t wake up. Deep asleep, it’s, or else cringing in fear” (242). In short, his usually out of control libido does not oblige him in this instance.

Jaanvar is shocked out of his obsessive sexual/romantic illusion; instead, he actually has a conversation with Anjali. She tells him her life story of how she was kidnapped from her village, sold from brothel to brothel, and forced into a life of prostitution (242). Having rejected all previous opportunities to empathize and connect with other women—Ma Franci or Elli Barber—through shared human suffering, Jaanvar, for the first time, is actually able to “see” how another human being’s body can be abused. And it is this abjection of the body—an abjection he experiences daily—that finally allows Jaanvar to feel a sense of connection with another person. He understands intuitively that sex for her is so “automatic it’s as namasté. Undress, close your eyes, after that, what can I say, time passes” (242). Lying, quite literally, laterally to her on the bed—“The cot’s narrow, our bodies are touching”—Jaanvar is very quickly disabused of the illusory potential of sex, something, as we have seen, he was previously prone to idealize and confuse with genuine human connection (242).

Of course, this is a fleeting moment of illumination for Jaanvar. Almost immediately, having failed in sex, he tries his hand at another romantic trope and attempts to persuade Anjali, much as he did with Nisha, to run away with him—“Come, we’ll go together” (242). Yet, unlike Nisha, Anjali is trapped by her material circumstances. As, of course, is Jaanvar. “‘Dreaming, you’re,’ she says
with a bitter sigh. “Madam paid money for me. Think she’ll let me go just like that?” (242). Reminding him of their shared imprisonment—he in his body, she in her environment—Anjali offers Jaanvar another, simpler option: a sense of connection: “ ‘We were both in the shit’” she reminds him. More importantly, she tells him that “ ‘you were always laughing. So I laughed too.’” (242). Here, for the first time, in realizing that Anjali is treated as only an abject body to be used for profit, and like him still laughs in the course of daily life, Jaanvar “sees” another person’s suffering and understands it as a mirror image of his own.

However, as he usually does, Jaanvar refuses a simple “take away” of joyous connection. Instead, he drops all understanding of this experience and, immediately following this moment of revelation, “began preparing to leave” (244). Never mentioning Anjali again until the last page of the narrative, he walks out with her calling him “a hard-hearted bastard” for refusing to give her some money (244).

On the very last page of the novel, Jaanvar, displaying a newfound understanding gained through telling his story, returns with a genuinely selfless gesture to Anjali:

Of the cash I earned from Zafar and Co, which was four hundred rupees a month, each day I spent only four. In a tin inside the scorpion wall is more than ten thousand rupees. Eyes, it was for my operation, but now that cash, plus a little persuasion from Farouq’s friends, will go to buy Anjali free and she will come to live with me. (365-366)
Jaanvar takes it upon himself to change Anjali’s material reality directly—she will be free and come to live with him, in much the same way as Ma Franci had done. Crucially, Anjali will live with him in a distinctly un-romantic manner. Jaanvar ends the novel with a focus on material reality and with a gesture of unselfish caring. Perhaps of greater importance, he ends his recording with a recognition of collective identity, a gesture of solidarity: “Eyes, I’m done. Khuda hafez. Go well. Remember me. All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis [apocalypse]. Tomorrow there will be more of us” (366).

Mukherjee reads Jaanvar’s statement as a threat to the reader. He writes that “his final promise of the future force of such a gathering is a warning to those who wish to continue to deny personhood to other humans and non-humans around them” (162). Far from being a “warning” I read this final gesture of selfless generosity towards Anjali, as well as the signing off from speaking into the tape recorder, as evidence of Jaanvar’s disavowal of his former performative self. If in the past his pyrotechnic language had spectacularly described, even fetishized (much like the vulture journalists he so abhorred) his own abject material reality, he now accepts that he is poor, plain and simple. Just like Anjali. And just like countless others—“we . . . the poor people.” Jaanvar’s freeing of Anjali is not just a final recognition of the solidarity he has already encountered in Zafar’s political justice movement: it is a gesture to a beginning of a new kind of praxis, one that requires acts rather than words. The end of the tape—the cessation of Jaanvar’s speaking voice—is therefore not the culmination of an argument but the beginning of action.
Conclusion

Jaanvar thus ends the tapes with two important, interconnected realizations. The first is that despite beginning to speak out of a desire to solve a personal dilemma, he ends up telling the story of a collectivity of people. “When I first started to speak,” he tells us, “when I heard Aliya’s voice calling, it was like she and others who are no more came back to be with me” (365). It is their remembered presence—“they’ve been here through every minute of this telling”—that enables his speech and makes his narration as much about his own life as about those others, past and present (365). We, too, as readers, begin to understand that despite Jaanvar’s continuous use of the first person singular pronoun and his treasured individualist desires, Jaanvar has come to believe that he can be—perhaps has always been—part of a collective social identity. It is also worth noting that it is only through the telling—“I will tell this story, I thought, and that way I’ll find out what the end should be. I’ll know what to do.” (365)—that such a realization can be achieved. These last lines of the tape testify to the capacities of storytelling to “make present” the lives of people who are not immediately present in one’s life. The utopian potential of stories to “connect” people and help them “see each other” gestures to Jameson’s “projection of a radically new form.” It is only proper, then, that Jaanvar would end the tape at this moment, to disrupt the old form to await the “radically new.”

This brings us to the second related conclusion. “Seeing each other” in this novel is premised on being able to see similarities in material realities, not false
equivalencies based on some idealistic narrative frame of “humanity.” At the end of the novel, Jaanvar effectively renders the question of “humanity” moot. In effect, he is not interested, say in Mukherjee’s formulation, to expand notions of “personhood” to the “human and non-human” and thus make an intellectual argument (162). Instead, material action becomes paramount. Here, unlike in every other discussion of cosmopolitanism and nationalism in this dissertation, we have a distinct awareness that people find it nearly impossible to see connections even to people who share very similar material realties, let alone to those who are “different.” The only undeniable and universally recognizable term is “poor”—“All things pass, but the poor remain” (366).

Thus, rather than shun what Nixon calls the “dream of collective justice,” Jaanvar simply does not care to “poisonously” name his daily praxis of helping those around him. Always retaining a dual perspective of negative critique and utopian faith, Zafar, too, at the end of the novel joins Jaanvar’s focus on material reality. Remarking on the “stink bombing” of Kampani executives who are visiting Khaufpur, Zafar says, “poetic justice, rhyming or not is not the same as real justice, but being the only kind available to the Khaufpuris was at least better than nothing” (361).

This is just the start…
In this dissertation, my critique of postcolonial cosmopolitanism as evacuating the possibilities of social and political action is animated by the pressing need in the present and the foreseeable future to respond to the array of environmental harm that faces the planet. The response to such planetary disaster will have to be global. In my concluding chapter, I turned therefore to questions of environmental justice and argued for a planetary cosmopolitanism. I posit planetary cosmopolitanism also in opposition to the kinds of postcolonial cosmopolitanism in Naipaul’s and Desai’s novels. Since those are the hegemonic forms of cosmopolitanism, and because, as I have argued, they look away or look down upon political engagement, I needed to spend the largest part of the dissertation engaged in a negative critique of postcolonial cosmopolitan literature as it stands today.

While my critique focuses principally on two figures—Desai and Naipaul—the argument I have made could be expanded and placed in conversation with a number of other literary texts, with a similar outcome or conclusion. My contention remains that the genealogy of cosmopolitanism in postcolonial literature, as I have traced it here, is more broadly applicable. For example, my first chapter could pair Tagore’s novel with Satyajit Ray’s 1985 film adaptation of Ghare Baire to demonstrate how Ray replaces a discussion of a middle and “natural” path forward in Tagore with a simple nationalism-cosmopolitanism dichotomy, thus demonstrating the lasting negative connotations
and seemingly inherent connections between postcolonial politics and violent nationalism. My second chapter could pair *A Bend in the River* with the poetry of Dom Moraes. Having won the Hawthornden Prize in 1957, Moraes’ writing, like Naipaul’s, also predates the rise of postcolonial literary theory, and displays the prized perspicacity of a vagrant cosmopolitan who is most at home in the frameworks of the British empire, now lost. Kamila Shamsie’s 2004 novel *Kartography* displays a similar knowingness of postcolonial theory as does Desai’s novel in chapter three, and similarly fetishizes what I have called a narrative cosmopolitanism. As in Desai’s novel, narrative cosmopolitanism in Shamsie is displayed as the prerogative of the upper-classes, this time in Pakistan. Finally in chapter four, Hubert Sauper’s 2007 film *Darwin’s Nightmare* also performs, like Sinha’s novel, the difficult task of rejecting an idealized, benign notion of globalization; instead the film exposes the underbelly of a globalized world by vividly charting the very material and violent connections between the global arms trade and famine in Tanzania, between the thoughtless introduction of a fish in lake Victoria and the destruction of livelihood and life on its shores, while arguing throughout for the vital role of artists and storytellers in the task of seeking environmental justice.

If Rob Nixon in his essay “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism” characterized the relationship between a cosmopolitan postcolonial literature and environmental justice as “one of reciprocal indifference or mistrust,” this dissertation is an example of how, from Tagore at the beginning of the twentieth century to Sinha a hundred years later, there has been, and still is, the possibility
of uncovering and highlighting a just, political, and environmentally inflected “true” and “planetary” cosmopolitanism (*Postcolonial Studies* 234).
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