

# God and the Novel in India

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## ABSTRACT

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The novel—especially the realist novel—has been generally understood as a secular, disenchanted form, but the history of the Indian novel complicates this view. A seminal trajectory of realist novels situated in India, by native and non-resident writers alike, presents a perception of God in the daily that is rooted in Indian religious traditions—in contradistinction to the *deus absconditus* European realist novel which has generally restricted itself to the secular sphere. Despite the conspicuous and consequential enchantment of the Indian novel, even postcolonial literary critics have followed in the critical tradition that takes secularism to be the precondition of the novel and dismisses instantiations of religion as mere anomaly, symptom, or overlay.

I contend that the powerful realism brought to India by the British novel was immediately injected with a strong dose of enchantment drawn from the popular religious and mythopoetic imagination. The novel invited God to come down to earth to become more real and more compatible with a self-consciously secularizing India unwilling to dispense with its spiritualism; reciprocally, God's presence in the naturalist novel engendered a radically new sense of both the genre and reality. Of all the existing art forms in India, it was only the realist novel—with its worldly orientation—that could give shape to the “profane illumination” in everyday life and provide a forum for the praxis of enchantment.

The Indian novel was part of a larger phenomenon in which the enchanted worldview became the grounds for independence from England whose disenchanted ethos was understood as the underpinning and justification for its imperialism. Not surprisingly, the place—namely,

Bengal—that birthed the novel also sparked India's anti-colonial struggle and its religious revival and reform movements. The novel in particular was seen as a privileged form for preserving a spiritualized cosmology, renovating it in some ways, and using it to enable Indian sovereignty. Straddling both the British and the Indian, the worldly and the spiritual, the novel offered a unique opportunity for cultivating a modern religious sensibility.

By analyzing the various literary techniques my novelists deploy to enchant a putatively disenchanted form in a (post)colonial context, I rediscover overlooked possibilities for the novel-writ-large. The trajectory I analyze teaches us that mimetic realism can offer a more congenial home to religious enchantment than the non-mimetic experimental modes, such as magical realism, usually considered more apt. My project charts the course of what I call the enchanted realist novel tradition via five seminal novels set in India and published between 1866 and 1980. In this arc, divinity is first made immanent in the phenomenal world, then it becomes internalized, only to meet with a bifurcated fate in the mid-twentieth century. The indigenous writers continue with realist first-order rendering of the divine in the daily, whereas the more international novelists formally distance themselves from the felt enchantment of the first order they struggle to represent. Another way to view that bifurcation: as the disenchanted, statist worldview comes to prevail in the national imaginary at Independence, the enchanted novel must henceforth either restrict itself to tiny local pockets of extant enchantment; or, if the novel still has ambitions to be a national allegory, it must register disenchantment as the nearly thoroughgoing *a priori* to what now can only be called a deliberate re-enchantment.

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*For my parents, who gave me an enchanted India*



## INTRODUCTION

*If religion is essentially of the inner life, it follows that it can be truly grasped only from within... There is but too much danger that the non-believer will talk of religion as a blind man might of colours, or one totally devoid of ear, of a beautiful musical composition.*

Wilhelm Schmidt, quoted by E. E. Evans-Pritchard

How, in a non-Western religious context, does God enter into a secular Western artistic form, and to what effect? Approaching this question requires entering into a religious attitude in which the divine presence courses through daily secular life. With its sharp divisions between worldly/otherworldly, science/faith, rational/irrational, the Enlightenment legacy has made it difficult for non-believers to grasp the inner life of believers, for whom those divisions do not necessarily obtain with the same force. However, in two simple ways, fiction can potentially overcome the estrangement between believers and non-believers: first, by translating alternate worldviews from the inside out; second, by operating through a suspension of disbelief homologous to faith itself. Yet, when it comes to religion, literary critics have tended to dismiss fiction's imaginative invitation, instead following in the secular-critical tradition that turns a blind eye to the believer's sensibility and reads religion as mere symptom of sociological and historical issues. This intellectual proclivity for transcendent rather than immanent critique has only widened the chasm between secular intellectuals and their increasingly religious surround.

If there is a single figure to whom the secular-critical approach to the novel can be attributed, it is Georg Lukács, whose foundational *Theory of the Novel* (1920) serves as the touchstone of my dissertation. "The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by

God,”<sup>1</sup> claimed Lukács, putting forth a notion of the novel that has since passed into common sense in both lay and academic circles. Lukács’ disenchantment of the novel went hand-in-hand with Max Weber’s “disenchantment of the world,” a sociological theory that observes rationalization, materialism, science, humanism and secularism displacing otherworldiness, organicity, and Divine immanence, turning the *anima mundi* into a mechanistic *deus absconditus* modern world.

What if Lukács had expanded his purview beyond a desacralized Europe to consider novels set in colonial and postcolonial realities where divinity courses through daily life, and provisionally enchanted worldviews persist? World Literature’s expansion of the literary horizon beyond Europe has invited me to reconsider whether the novel need be considered disenchanted by definition. If the novel—especially the realist novel—has been generally understood as a disenchanted form, then the history of the Indian novel complicates this view. A *seminal* trajectory of realist novels situated in India, by native and expatriate writers alike, presents a perception of God in the daily that is rooted in Indian religious traditions—in contradistinction to the *deus absconditus* European realist novel which has generally restricted itself to the secular sphere. Despite the conspicuous and consequential enchantment of the Indian novel, even postcolonial literary critics, such as the late Edward Said, have followed in the critical tradition that takes secularism to be the precondition of the novel and dismisses instantiations of religion as mere anomaly, symptom, or overlay.<sup>2</sup> By elucidating religious

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999 [1920]) 88.

<sup>2</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Pheng Cheah, *Spectral nationality: passages of freedom from Kant to postcolonial Literatures of liberation* (New York: Columbia

attitudes specific and basic to Indian modernity, I, like my novelists, hope to bridge the gap between faith and skepticism.

I contend that the powerful realism brought to India by the British novel was immediately injected with a strong dose of enchantment drawn from the popular religious and mythopoetic imagination. The novel invited God to come down to earth to become more real and more compatible with a self-consciously secularizing India unwilling to dispense with its spiritualism; reciprocally, God's presence in the naturalist novel engendered a radically new sense of both the genre and reality. Moreover, these novelistic instantiations of enchantment have played a role in the construction of Indian national-political identity at an especially important juncture—the century of decolonization, Independence, and postcoloniality. Of all the art forms, it was only the realist novel, with its worldly orientation, that could bring God down to earth, give shape to the “profane illumination” in everyday life, and provide a forum for the praxis of enchantment.

By analyzing the various literary techniques these novelists deploy to enchant an arguably disenchanted form in a (post)colonial context, I hope to rediscover overlooked possibilities for the novel-writ-large. The trajectory I analyze teaches us that mimetic realism can offer a more congenial home to religious enchantment than the non-mimetic experimental modes, such as magical realism, usually considered more apt.

The Indian novel was part of a larger phenomenon in which the enchanted worldview became the grounds for independence from England whose disenchanted ethos was understood

as the underpinning and justification for its imperialism. Not surprisingly, the place—namely, Bengal—that birthed the novel also sparked India’s anti-colonial struggle and its religious revival and reform movements. In particular, the Bengal Renaissance<sup>3</sup> made a concerted effort to preserve the Hindu cosmology, to renovate it in some ways, and to use it to enable Indian sovereignty. The novel was a privileged form in that project, particularly in the hands of first Bankimchandra Chatterjee<sup>4</sup>, then his literary heir Rabindranath Tagore.

The new and plastic form of the novel lent itself well to cosmological preservation. The combination of the secular realist form and a religiously-enchanted sensibility engendered a radically new sense of reality, appropriate to a self-consciously secularizing India unwilling to dispense with its spiritualism. Straddling both the British and the Indian, the worldly and the spiritual, the novel offered a unique opportunity for cultivating a modern religious sensibility.

Partha Chatterjee has argued that the spiritual sphere, especially religion and the novel (upon which he does not elaborate), was the first zone of sovereignty in the Indian nationalist struggle, preparing the ground for the direct political confrontation with the Raj that would ensue.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the crucial mark of difference in Indian nationalism became the enchanted

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<sup>3</sup> Bengal is often put in synecdochic relationship to the rest of India, with regard to incipient nationalism and literary efflorescence. It owes this honor to the fact that it was Bengal (Calcutta, specifically) that catalyzed both across India. Nationalist historians, such as Partha Chatterjee, who focus on Bengal see it as a nation unto itself (the Bengali nation), and as a metonym linked to the as-yet-nascent Indian nation. There is certainly an argument to be made against such metonymy, but I will be following in the prevailing tradition in my own work because it is so focused on the novel, which was born and originally cultivated in Bengal during the proto-nationalist era.

<sup>4</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee is most commonly referred to as merely “Bankim,” which is how I will refer to him throughout this thesis. His last name, Chatterjee, is the more common Anglicized appellation of his Bengali surname, Chattopadhyay.

<sup>5</sup> Partha Chatterjee 6.

worldview purveyed by the “inner sphere,”<sup>6</sup> as opposed to the disenchanting worldview of the West. Unlike in Europe, in 19th-century India the notion that this world was in intimate, daily communication with the divine still prevailed, even if new European currents of thought—including positivism, utilitarianism, and secularism—were threatening to encroach on this worldview. The novel in India negotiates precisely that tension.

I chart the course of what I call the enchanted realist novel tradition in India, via five seminal novels set in India and published between 1866 and 1980: Bankim’s *Kapalkundala* (1866), Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World* (Bengali original 1916; English translation 1919), E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924), R.K. Narayan’s *The Guide* (1958)—only fleetingly mentioned as a counterpoint to Rushdie, and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980). In this arc, divinity is first made immanent in the phenomenal world, only to meet with a bifurcated fate in the mid-twentieth century: the indigenous writers continue with realist first-order rendering of the divine in the daily, whereas the more international novelists formally distance themselves from the felt enchantment of the first order they struggle to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 48-50. I would, however like to register a possible distinction from my own and what I understand to be Chatterjee’s sense of the scope of spiritualism in the Bengal Renaissance. Because, it is realism that the novels of Bankim, for example, exemplify, and because the novel also contains much avowed spirituality, then it follows from these two observations that spirit must inform *the world*. This need not be entailed by the avowed spirituality in Bankim were he not a realist but rather, say, a stream of consciousness or non-mimetic novelist instead. Thus, while I am inspired by Partha Chatterjee’s taking important note of the role of the spiritual in nationalist resistance, I would like to extend his view of the inner sphere of spirituality to the outer sphere as well. Bankim’s scheme of religious enchantment extends to even the realm of political engagement with the British, and all else that is contained in reality. In fact, Bankim’s commitment to realism might ventilate the spirituality out into the world itself. Alternatively, it may be the case that spirituality in the world blows into the inner sphere because the ventilation there is open to it coming from the outside, since, as Bankim suggests, the spirit exists in the world itself. (In other words: the arena of religion exists because God exists, not the other way around). Of course, to be clear: when Partha Chatterjee uses the term “inner,” he is not referring primarily to the interiority of the individual as much as he is the cultural realm of domestic, religious, and cultural life that remained relatively autonomous from British directive. I am grateful to Akeel Bilgrami for pointing out my slight discrepancy with, or rather expansion of, Partha Chatterjee’s scheme of the inner versus outer sphere.

represent. Another way to view that bifurcation: as the disenchanted, statist worldview comes to prevail in the national imaginary at Independence, the enchanted novel must henceforth either restrict itself to tiny local pockets of extant enchantment; or, if the novel retains ambitions to be a national allegory, it must register disenchantment as the nearly thorough-going *a priori* to what now can only be called a deliberate re-enchantment.

### THE LITERARY-RELIGIOUS BACKDROP OF 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY INDIA

Though the form was imported from England, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century novel in India rose out of the autochthonous religious and mythopoetic imagination, a fact rarely acknowledged by both metropolitan and postcolonial critics who tend to see the novel as distinctly secular.<sup>7</sup> What happens if one reads the realist Indian novel against this secular-critical grain, duly registering the patent enchantment that distinguishes it from its European counterpart? What one finds is that religion and spirituality never got exiled from the novel there as it ostensibly did in Europe. Even in the Indian novels of canonized British writers Kipling and Forster, religion plays a significant part. It is utterly important to remember that when the novel came to India, it did not land in a cultural vacuum as some would have it seem. Rather, it jostled against the mystical poetic and Hindu Puranic traditions that dominated the cultural landscape at that time. Vernacular mystical poetry (by Sufis Kabir and Ghalib, by the mendicant Baul singers, and by the Krishna-adoring Vaishnavites), in concert with the orthodox Hindu epics and the secular enchanted Sanskrit poetry embedded within the Hindu tradition, constituted the Indian literary

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<sup>7</sup> Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*; Cheah, *Spectral nationality: passages of freedom from Kant to postcolonial Literatures of liberation*; Mukherjee, *Realism and reality: the Novel and Society in India*.

tradition, which, I argue, played a key role in the development of the novel in India.

Fundamentally, then, the religious tradition constitutes a seminal strain of the novelistic tradition in India, not just thematically, but also epistemologically. As such, the implications for the form are vast. When it comes to religious enchantment, the novel does not just impose itself on local material, as Franco Moretti and his global research cadre would have it; rather, the novel's very philosophical and cultural underpinnings are called into question. Generally, I hypothesize that the novel in India—unlike Europe—experienced a remarkably trans-generic, trans-epistemic continuity. If literature and religion were inextricably linked in the major indigenous genres of 19<sup>th</sup> century India, it makes sense that the novel, taking the baton from them, would also be allied with religion in ways that the form never was in Europe.

#### WORLD LITERATURE DISCOURSE:

Several literary critics (Roberto Schwarz, Franco Moretti, Priya Joshi, Meenakshi Mukherjee, etc.) have taken on the question of how the novel form is adapted by the disparate cultures that inherit it—cultures whose conditions differ significantly from those which engendered the novel in Europe. Generally, these critics see (post)colonial cultural adjustments as some sort of compromise of the European form; the discrepancy between local culture and foreign form somehow finally works itself out, but these “adjustments” never fundamentally alter the form (or how we conceptualize it) on a global scale. Instead, the novel form would continue to disseminate uni-directionally in its European cast. A prime example of this conception is Moretti's influential and controversial “one and unequal” Wallersteinian world

systems theory of the novel in his essay “Conjectures on World Literature.”<sup>8</sup> Moretti calls the peripheries’ adjustments to the novel “compromises” but never “innovations,” which are reserved for Europe. That the Third World might pose a fundamental epistemological and formal challenge to the novel has not been duly considered. Even Pheng Cheah considers the postcolonial novel a response to a “de-magicked” postcolonial world. Is it necessarily so? It seems to me that Moretti et al. have failed to consider the myriad ways “peripheral” novelists have brought about innovations and re-evaluations of the novel form via religion as epistemic catalyst.

## MAGICAL REALISM

If there is any critical school that has claimed a fundamental formal (post)colonial innovation of the novel, it is those who treat the Latin American writers (especially Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel Garcia-Marquez) that developed the once-radical form, magical realism. These theorists claim that the magical realist (or “*lo real maravilloso*”) form corresponds to the enchanted worldview and indigenous cosmologies of the local population that came to bear upon the imported colonial *weltanschauung*. That this formal innovation should hinge on the issue of enchantment, numinosity, and magic cannot be overlooked. Indebted as I am to the magical realists’ attentiveness to enchanted worldview in relation to formal expression, I wonder if magical realism is really THE best or only way to represent such a worldview. In fact, I suspect that magical realism is not the ideal form to convey a mystical worldview, for several reasons

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<sup>8</sup> Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London and New York: Verso, 2004) 148-162.



that I lay out in Chapter 4 when I offer a lengthy critique of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

Among these reasons: magical realism's meta-fictional tendency to privilege enchantment of form and epistemology over enchantment of content and ontology; subsequently, an undermining of the notion that enchantment exists in the world, not just in consciousness; a false (if unwitting) dichotomy forged between pre-modern autochthonous enchantment and colonial disenchantment and a problematic dovetailing between pre-modern autochthonous magic and postmodern experimental epistemology, both of which dyads empty out the possibility for a modern enchantment; a tendency toward hyperbole that exaggerates, almost to cartoonish effect, the enchanted attitude of natives; a foregoing of the authority of the real that operates in realism to bring God down to earth and make Him more solid, permanent, and believable, even to secular readers. To plumb other possibilities, I ask how the *realistic* form of the novel attempts to represent enchantment.

#### POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE ON RELIGION AND THE NOVEL

Postcolonial and subaltern studies have generally tended to gloss spiritualism in all its political implications;<sup>9</sup> these schools of scholarship have occupied themselves more with the public sphere of secular politics (as THE place where the postcolonial subject would avail him/herself of agency and identity), and to view religion as either an instrument of oppression (forcible conversion, castism, etc.) or as the sectarian undermining of the post-Independence democratic secular ideals that hold out the only promise for India. Rarely do such critics take

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<sup>9</sup> With the exception of Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments*, which I discuss above.

religion seriously on its own terms. Even when religion is approached more generously, it is still considered an epiphenomenon of more serious public sphere concerns.

To begin, Edward Said's secular criticism gives short shrift to religious and mystical epistememes, from the Irish W.B. Yeats to so-called Third World nativists<sup>10</sup>—a blind spot that has persisted in postcolonial studies and its more radically descended line, subaltern studies. By choosing to pay attention to the role of religion in identity formation, Gauri Viswanathan, in her book on conversion, *Outside the Fold*,<sup>11</sup> lays out an astute critique: "Subordinated to the legal and administrative will of the nation, religion in the modern secular state is less a marker of the subjectivity of belief systems than a category of identification." Citing Susan Harding, Viswanathan explains that cultural studies has inherited this way of approaching (or not approaching) religion:

to engage in discussions about belief, conviction, or religious identity in a secular age of postmodern skepticism is already fraught with infinite hazards, not least of which is the absence of an adequate vocabulary or language...[Rustom Bharucha] makes a sustained critique of one of the most radical and significant historiographical interventions in recent years—the school of subaltern studies scholars—to reveal the extent to which even the most innovative historical methods have failed to come up with ways of studying belief systems as an essential component of subaltern consciousness...subaltern historians have continued to polarize worldly and otherworldly consciousness as descriptive of the divide between secularism and religion. And if shifts in attitude to religious consciousness are beginning to emerge in the world of younger historians, Bharucha is right to express certain reservations that these newer formulations should not lead simply to 'an instrumentalist reading of religion as an adjunct to political activity,' but should enable a recognition of the 'experiential contexts of religion providing new possibilities of representing 'resistance' an 'transcendence.'<sup>12</sup>

Though Viswanathan sets her own task as a corrective against these tendencies in cultural and subaltern studies, she unfortunately does not quite execute it. While she admirably refuses to let

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Said, "Yeats and Decolonization," *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 220-239

<sup>11</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998)

<sup>12</sup> Viswanathan xiv.

the Right hijack religion, her terms of measurement still belong to the secular sphere—the Habermasian public sphere that has always circumscribed postcolonial studies.

Because “the diminished role of religion in modernity” has resulted in the increasing banishment of belief to individual interiority, Viswanathan wants to generate a vocabulary to deal with the worldliness of belief. However, her study is so concerned with the question of protecting minority rights to religion, that it noticeably slips into the critical tendency to subordinate belief to political claims. She treats religious conversion, the subject of her study, not in terms of genuine faith or a structure of attitude, but as a strategic identitarian move meant either to garner more goodies from the public sphere, or to resist oppression by the state or the various institutions of religion (caste, for example). Further, though a literary critic, she barely touches on literature as a crucial site for elaborating structures of belief. Her spotlight is trained instead on historical figures: famous religious converts whose agendas were explicitly political, from John Henry Newman to Pandita Ramabai to Annie Besant to B.R. Ambedkar. In terms of literature, though, she merely offers a passing treatment of the romance novel juxtaposed to the census report to evaluate their relative contributions to the discourse of conversion.

Meanwhile, Srinivas Aravamudan, whose *Guru English*<sup>13</sup> duly treats religion in Indian literature, offers readings that are uniformly biased by his secular lens. For example, his critique of Desani’s *All About H. Hatterr* reads the spiritualism right out of a novel patently dedicated to it. Aravamudan casts Hatterr’s spiritualism as *merely* parody, thereby invalidating the increasing sincerity of Hatterr’s spiritual quest and final Gangetic epiphany, not to mention Desani’s

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<sup>13</sup> Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian religion in a cosmopolitan language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006)

lifelong international training and practice of transcendental meditation and yoga. In contradistinction to both Aravamudan and Viswanathan, my dissertation takes religion, faith, and mysticism seriously on their own terms, as much as possible; while politics certainly enter my considerations in a consequential way, it is not necessarily my bottom line.

Although inadequate attention has been paid to the legacy of religion that has sustained the Indian novel in English, a couple of critics have recently nodded in that direction—a direction I plan to pursue less symptomologically than they do. In her consumption-oriented study of the indigenization of the English novel in India,<sup>14</sup> Priya Joshi *implicitly* identifies Indian religious mythopoetics as the primary element that determined the five phases of the Indian novel’s trajectory. However, for Joshi, the religious mythopoetics are symptoms of a more significant “indigenizing” impulse; thus, she gives short shrift to analyzing these mythopoetics on their own nuanced terms, i.e., as very particular instantiations of a continuous tradition of enchantment. Meanwhile, Srinivas Aravamudan in *Guru English* identifies a “transnational, transidiomatic” popular discourse of South Asian religion, language, and literature, dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, he approaches this discourse from a decidedly secular critical perspective, tending to presume against the very epistemes he discusses, and reading religion as symptomatic of larger, more significant transnational socio-cultural phenomena, *par excellence* the global-popular. In other words, both of these critics superficially register the spiritual theme, without actually analyzing it from within in a sustained way. Instead they pass over and subordinate the theme to what they see as the more important socio-political issues at stake.

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<sup>14</sup> Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel In India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)

While I too pay heed to the latter issues, I, unlike these dyed-in-the-wool secular critics, put spiritual epistemes at the center of my analysis. I attempt to understand enchantment from the inside, identifying continuities and divergences in its poetics, over the course of a century in one relatively circumscribed cultural space and genre. To recapitulate: mine is a sustained look at the episteme and poetics of enchantment: how it reads, is written, and evolved in an important strain of the Indian novelistic tradition.

#### THE DISCOURSE OF ENCHANTMENT

In the past decade or so, a vigorous discourse of enchantment has developed as part of what has often been called the “religious” or “post-secular” turn. The constantly-banded term “enchantment” patently resists definition (as do allied terms like magic, numinosity, mysticism, etc). Nevertheless, the nascent discourse on enchantment<sup>15</sup> seems to constellate around a handful of definitions: 1) wonder at the world; 2) a sacralized nature viewed not as brute matter, but shot through with value, spirit, or divinity<sup>16</sup>; 3) allied to that view of nature, an integrated view of the world in which man and the world were made for each other, respond to each other, and exist in meaningful and engaged relationship in which humans respond evaluatively to an enchantment that exists *in the world*<sup>17</sup>; 4) a general perception of magical, occult, supernatural, irrational, or numinous forces at play in the world; 5) the vitalism of substances and things, often

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<sup>15</sup> Among the prominent voices in this discourse: Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Akeel Bilgrami, Colin Jaeger, Alex Owen, Bill Brown, and Marina Warner, to name just a few.

<sup>16</sup> Mainly elaborated in Akeel Bilgrami’s two influential essays, “Occidentalism, The Very Idea: An Essay on The Enlightenment and Enchantment,” *Critical Inquiry* 32.3 (Spring 2006) and “The Political Possibilities in the Long Romantic Period,” *Studies in Romanticism* 49 (Winter 2010).

<sup>17</sup> See immediately prior footnote.

referred to as “the life of objects”; 6) the paradoxical magic to be found in modernity and science themselves, a view that inherits the Frankfurt School notion of the “Dialectic of Enlightenment.”

While some of these definitions conspire with my own, particularly Bilgrami’s philosophy of enchantment, my emphasis is more decidedly religious than the aforementioned definitions recently so popular in Metropolitan discourse. My own baseline definition for enchantment is: the continuity between world and otherworld, or the divine presence immanent in the everyday world. To grasp and convey this mode of enchantment, I focus specifically on an Indian sensibility for enchantment rooted in particular religious traditions of India. I am not concerned as much with the institutional aspects of orthodox Indian religions so much as I am with a particular religious disposition through which the believer directly apprehends experiences the divine, an apprehension alternatively called “mysticism” or “Gnosticism” in the West. The philosophical basis for my definition of enchantment is borrowed from Bilgrami’s tri-level understanding of natural-supernaturalism, which I elaborate below.

What interests me most is how religious enchantment engages with the national-political sphere in my chosen novels and their milieu. If the West’s modernity hinges on a radically diminished relationship to God, India’s has largely been framed in terms of religious enchantment, for better and for worse. Enchantment is sometimes the heterodox grounds for resistance to statism, while at other times its terms are manipulated and exploited by a disenchanted statism itself; sometimes it is localist, at other times transnationalist; sometimes it is politically radical; at other times, quiescent. To give just a few examples: in *Kim* (which I do not treat), the lama’s alternate pilgrimage serves as a quiet critique to the otherwise-endorsed Great Game; in *The Home and the World*, the debates around the nascent Independence

movement are cast in terms of two divergent Hinduisms, the one lending itself to fundamentalist-nationalism, the other to transcendentalist-anti-nationalism; in *A Passage to India*, the breakdown in Indo-British relations has to do with the characters' varied capacities to relate to a religiously-enchanted India; meanwhile, *Midnight's Children* frames the story of Indian independence in the tradition of the Hindu epics, even while critiquing the genuine enchantment felt by the superstitious Hindus *inside* the novel. Whatever the case, Indian enchantment never divorces itself from the secular realm of politics; and this makes sense, given that enchantment bridges worldly and otherworldly.

To grasp its radical significance, one must put Indian enchantment in the context of a commonly accepted Western account of modernity, in which Enlightenment arrives hand-in-hand with Deism<sup>18</sup>: God withdraws from the world, leaving it to operate according to mechanistic principles. In turn, this machine-like world abandoned by God is fraught with anomie, alienation, and fragmentation—a condition generally referred to as the “disenchantment of the world.” In the disenchanted world, rationality and rationalization, science and systems, humanism and secularism supposedly displace God, magic, enchantment, organicity, irrationality, and otherworldiness.

Yet, one wonders whether such a total shift ever really happened: perhaps the actual shift in the world was less total than the shift in *thinking* about the world, which has made it difficult to see the persistence of pre-modern modes in the modern, in the West no less than in the East.

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<sup>18</sup> Throughout the thesis, when I use the term “Deism,” I refer to its current, commonplace definition rather than its historically more capacious one. Even John Toland, author of *Pantheisticon* and radical dissenter against the Newtonian view of matter and the idea of a *deus absconditus*, described himself as a deist. He and others who believed in a world shot through with spirit, value, and God were often called deists. Though both Voltaire and Toland were labelled deists at the time, I am using the more restrictive contemporary sense of the term. In other words, I equate Deism with the notion of a *deus absconditus*.

This shift in thinking—Enlightenment’s most permanent and consequential rupture—artificially bifurcated worldly from otherworldly, disenchantment from enchantment, rationality from irrationality, secularism from spirituality, science from magic, subject from object, humans from nature, nature from supernature. This split-think, so fundamental to the disenchanted worldview and virtually impossible to supersede, has blinded us to a world that is not actually as split as we think. All over the world today, a huge number of people live “enchanted” lives in which those bifurcated realms converge; yet we lack the critical vocabulary to deal with this reality. Over the slow-burn course of a novel, realist writers like Bankim, Tagore, Narayan, and to some degree even Forster, undo our split-think by unassumingly immersing us in a modestly enchanted, integrated worldview rooted in a culture that did not undergo quite the same Enlightenment rupture that Europe did. My thesis, while focused on a specific, non-Western cultural sensibility and moment, intends more broadly to retrain our eyes to the continuities in all our midst. Thus, my thesis—neither Orientalist nor romantic-nostalgic—participates in one of the great intellectual challenges of the last decade the world over, anticipated in the preceding hundred years by figures as varied as Marx, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer, all of whom identified modernity’s own enchantments. By re-awakening us to the enchantments—modern, pre-modern, Eastern, Western, secular, spiritual, fundamentalist, heterodox, dystopic and utopic—all around us, this grand challenge refuses to let the Enlightenment perform what it announces, namely a “disenchantment of the world.”



## DISCOURSE ON DISENCHANTMENT: BILGRAMI, WEBER, LUKÁCS

My three key theorists of disenchantment are philosopher Akeel Bilgrami, sociologist Max Weber, and literary critic Georg Lukács, all of whose theories are generally compatible. Bilgrami begins his genealogy of disenchantment with England's scientific debates of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, whereas the Frankfurt school takes industrialization to be their rough starting point. Bilgrami points to the earlier conceptual sources of disenchantment, explaining how those very sources led to the unchecked rise of the industrialism thought to be the apotheosis of disenchantment, by the Romantics and the Frankfurt School alike. Further, Bilgrami's particular genealogy allows him to cut a broader swath both temporally and geographically, connecting across history and context figures as diverse as Blake and Gandhi.

### **Bilgrami**

#### THE CONCEPTUAL ROOTS OF DISENCHANTMENT

Bilgrami emphasizes that the question of enchantment has been political ever since the Newtonian establishment, set against the scientific heterodoxy, asserted its disenchanted conception of nature. The heterodoxy's idea that divinity animates the world from *within* and permeates all that is contained in it distinguished the enchanted worldview from the disenchanted worldview, which posited a *deus absconditus* who from the *outside* gave the initial push and then left alone an otherwise brute, material world.<sup>19</sup> As Bilgrami explains, both views—passionately fought over in the 17<sup>th</sup> century English scientific community—were equally

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<sup>19</sup> Akeel Bilgrami, "Occidentalism, The Very Idea: An Essay on The Enlightenment and Enchantment," *Critical Inquiry* 32.3 (Spring 2006) 396.

scientific/unscientific, but the disenchanted worldview prevailed over the enchanted worldview for purely political reasons.<sup>20</sup> The massive historical consequences of the Newtonian establishment's victory over the scientific heterodoxy can be felt all the way down to colonialism, the logical conclusion of a disenchanted worldview in which nature, like its primitive custodians, was rendered brute and thus available for merciless extraction (extraction that would not, as in primitive ritual, require any acts of atonement or sacrifice).<sup>21</sup> Significantly, the scientific dissenters have analogues in heterodox traditions as historically and culturally diverse as the English Diggers, the Levelers, the Romantics, the thousand-year-old bhakti tradition in India, and the anti-colonial movement as epitomized by Gandhianism. The enchanted worldview was the cornerstone of all of these philosophies.<sup>22</sup>

Not unlike the 17<sup>th</sup> century scientific heterodoxy, Bankim attempted to preserve the notion of an *anima mundi* immanent with the divine while simultaneously embracing modern, scientific principles, such as positivism. Neither he nor his European predecessors saw any contradiction in the coexistence of rational scientific principles and enchantment; rather, they saw such coexistence as essential for a healthy modernity. Thus can Bankim simultaneously subscribe to natural law and to a conception of an all-pervading Godhead as the ultimate cause.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 399.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 399, 402-403, and f. 20.

## AGENCY AND VALUE

Crucially, in Bilgrami's formulation, an enchanted world depends on our agency: while the world contains values, it requires our human agency to recognize and respond to them.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the enchanted world—and God, by extension—needs us just as much as we need it. And so, *living* enchantment means *engaging* in response to the enchanted world—an engagement that requires an assertion of agency. Although Bilgrami deliberately ensures that his argument fits even a secular orientation, it actually derives historically from a religious cosmology, and thus applies even more transparently to the religiously enchanted scheme.<sup>24</sup>

This issue of enchanted agency is so crucial to my dissertation that I want to take a moment to plumb Bilgrami's logic.<sup>25</sup> He explains that we do not experience the objects of our desires as merely *desired*: to do so would mean always taking a detached, third-person point of view on oneself to investigate one's interiority for indications that the object is indeed desired by one. Rather, we experience the objects of our desire as *desirabilities*: we see their value coming from THEM, not entirely from ourselves.<sup>26</sup> There is something a bit tautological about the first approach. After all, it seems odd to say "I want x because I have discovered within myself that I want x." Instead, one thinks, "I want x because x is in itself desirable, i.e, good, beautiful,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 398 and f. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 396. Here, Bilgrami acknowledges that among the scientific dissenters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many, such as John Toland, argued in explicitly pantheistic terms. The upshot is that the enchanted worldview, while translatable into secular terms (Bilgrami himself effecting that translation), was first conceived in openly pantheistic ones.

<sup>25</sup> Bilgrami, "The Political Possibilities of the Long Romantic Period," 547-548.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 548.

valuable, etc.” The latter approach takes a first-person point of view on oneself: one intends, rather than predicts.

In other words, in the enchanted worldview, value comes not just from us, but from the world. Value is not merely our own fanciful mental projection but something that inheres in the world itself. With our evaluative agency, we are able to recognize the values of the things in the world. From that evaluative agency comes intention and a practical engagement with the world.

Bilgrami explains the difference between this sort of (enchanted) agency and the sort of agency involved in the detached, third person point of view of science and disenchantment:

when one studies a phenomenon, as science does, one is no doubt an agent, but one is nevertheless treating the world and nature from a detached point of view, not from the point of view of practical engagement. From such a detached point of view, we may observe meteorological events, chemical compounds such as H<sub>2</sub>O, caloric counts of a region’s populations. But we also perceive in those very places, threats, thirst-quenching value, and human need; and when we do we are not merely viewing them with detachment, we respond the normative demands that those evaluatively described features of the world make on our agency, on our practical engagement rather than detachment.<sup>27</sup>

## THE NATURE OF NATURE

If the world itself contains values, then certainly the nature that essentially comprises it does, too. As Bilgrami puts it, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century scientific heterodoxy’s enchanted worldview took matter to be “not brute and inert, but rather...shot through with an *inner* source of dynamism that was itself divine. God and nature were not separable...”<sup>28</sup> In Hinduism, this *anima mundi* would be considered the manifestation of “lila”: the play of the gods, the ever-shifting play of forms. Now, it is within this enchanted context that we should consider hierophany and *tirtha*: the presencing of the divine here on earth in myriad sites and forms,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 548.

<sup>28</sup> Bilgrami, “Occidentalism: the Very Idea,” 396.

which my authors attempt to represent. Indeed, pantheistic belief is predicated on an enchanted worldview of the sort I described: the ubiquitous manifestations of aspects of the divine in the immanent. Hinduism—not just polytheistic but also pantheistic—shares with the Romantic immersion into nature a conception of an enchanted world; Bankim, Tagore, and Forster all reflect this Hindu orientation.

Bilgrami astutely relates the detached point of view to a particular view of both nature *and* humanity in the colonies as brute and “stupid.” The conceptual connection among detached observation, disenchantment, and colonialism is crucial, and it bears out in my Forster discussion especially. Such a dehumanizing, if aestheticizing, perspective on colonial peoples resonates with the infantilizing view of colonial subjects on which many have commented. Bilgrami goes further to connect this infantilizing take on colonial subjects to the view of matter as inert and desacralized: both views were necessary to justify the uninhibited exploitation of colonial lands. One might say that in the disenchanted worldview that prevailed in the Newtonian orthodoxy, brute “stupid” matter went hand in hand with brute “stupid” colonial subjects—neither of which could possibly impose any normative constraints on the colonizers. Bilgrami explains:

It was this scientific rationality, seized upon by just these established religious and economic alliances, that was central to the colonizing mentality that later justified the rapacious conquest of distant lands... colonized lands, too, were viewed as brute nature to be conquered and controlled. This hypothesis is wholly plausible *as long as one was able to portray the inhabitants of the colonized lands in infantilized terms*, as a people who were as yet unprepared—by precisely a *mental lack* of such a notion of *scientific rationality*—to have the right attitudes towards nature and commerce and the statecraft that allows nature to be pursued for commercial gain. And such a historically infantilizing portrayal of the inhabitants was explicit in the writings of John Stuart Mill and even Marx.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 399-400, italics his.

It is not a big leap from an infantile view of the colonial inhabitants to an objectivizing one, such as that which Forster assigns to his British characters, and often his own narrator. In both views, colonized subjects are seen as deficient in proper humanity.

## NATURAL-SUPERNATURALISM

Most crucially, my thesis depends on Bilgrami's triple distinction between natural and supernatural that derives from his incisive reading of M.H. Abrams' landmark study of Romanticism. Bilgrami's disambiguation of the seemingly paradoxical term "natural supernaturalism"<sup>30</sup> provides the philosophical reference point for my definition of enchantment. *Throughout my thesis, when I say "enchantment," I am referring at various points to **any one of the three definitions** of the supernatural that emerge from Bilgrami's natural-supernatural scheme: 1) transcendental, sacral, or religious; 2) only imaginable but not perceptible; and 3) lying beyond the purview of natural science.*

In the first distinction between the natural and the supernatural, natural means all that is not religious or sacral. In the second distinction, the natural is immanent, perceptible, and phenomenal; whereas the supernatural is transcendental, imperceptible, and noumenal. The non-coincidence of these two distinctions is precisely what produces possibilities we call natural-supernatural, such as pantheism. Natural-supernatural phenomena would be considered natural by the one definition, yet supernatural by the other. Hence, the paradoxical term "natural supernaturalism." To take our example of pantheism, the revered spirit would be considered

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<sup>30</sup> Akeel Bilgrami, "The Political Possibilities in the Long Romantic Period," *Studies in Romanticism* 49 (Winter 2010): 537-538.

supernatural by the first definition (because sacral), yet natural by the second (because immanent).

To these two natural/supernatural distinctions in Abrams' book, Bilgrami adds a crucial third. In the third distinction, the natural means that which science studies, and therefore the supernatural must mean all that science cannot study. This third distinction, which Abrams himself does not explicitly point out, emerges from the 17<sup>th</sup> century ambition to leave nothing natural out of the purview of science; this notion is still with us today. Implicitly, Bilgrami argues, Abrams' book provides ample exemplification of "the idea, perhaps the most central idea in Romantic metaphysics, that not only the words on our pages and on our lips and not only the images on our canvases, but objects and things in the world, including in nature, are filled with properties of value and meaning"<sup>31</sup> This is an old idea, primarily explained in religious—including pagan—discourse, but "because this third distinction does not coincide with the first distinction, these properties of value and meaning that fall outside of the coverage of science, can inhere in what is immanent and perceptible without being elaborated in anything but secular terms."<sup>32</sup> So, secular enchantment becomes a particular possibility in the post-Newtonian age.

My use of enchantment will be open to all three definitions. What Bilgrami's triple disambiguation of natural-supernaturalism shows is that enchantment need not be religious in every instance. I have gone to such lengths to reproduce Bilgrami's logic so as to not have to justify every time I use enchantment to refer to a manner that is not strictly religious. Science (including sociology like the Comteanism that was so germane to Bankim) excludes much more

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 538.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 539.

than religion; therefore enchantment includes much more than religion. What lies beyond the scope of science and Comte et al. is part of the ethos of enchantment. Comte and the positivists had begun to think of nature as what science can study. Therefore nature took on a new meaning with the positivists, and for Bilgrami, even earlier with the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Newtonians. After that point, nature is not defined so much as the opposite of transcendence as what science studies. Therefore enchanted nature, though necessarily immanent, comes to be thought of as supernatural, in that science does not study it.

In other words, nature has a spiritual value beyond Comte and positivism, beyond the ordinary post-Newtonian understanding of nature. There are a number of novelists and philosophers who come before me (including Rousseau and D.H. Lawrence) who had a deep, almost religious feeling about nature as the site of spiritual innocence—a nature that was subsequently corrupted and co-opted by society, a society that includes science and positivism. For these thinkers, nature is enchanted and spiritualized—at times, even darkly so. (A Hindu pantheon need not be present to be nevertheless a religious conception.) Therefore, the nature/society dichotomy is not far from the enchantment/disenchantment dichotomy in a whole long history of thought in which my thesis participates. There is a familiar reading of Bankim's *Kapalkundala* that turns on the nature/society distinction. My chapter on Bankim (as well as my chapter on Tagore) shows the degree to which a different, but related distinction—that of enchantment/disenchantment—nests inside the nature/society distinction.



## Weber

Weber intuited many of the dimensions of disenchantment that Bilgrami so sharply teases out. Weber, too, identified a crucial tension between religion and rational-empirical knowledge, the latter increasingly cannibalizing the former in the modern era.<sup>33</sup> The key phrase Weber put into critical currency, borrowed from Friedrich Schiller, is the “disenchantment of the world,” by which he generally means rationalization: in other words, the displacement of magical thought by systematically coherent naturalistic ideas.<sup>34</sup> The disenchanted world is futile, meaningless, and fragmentary<sup>35</sup>; this notion corresponds to Bilgrami’s notion of the disenchanted world as emptied of value. Weber writes, “today only within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situations, in *pianissimo*, [is] something pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic *pneuma* which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together.”<sup>36</sup> Gone now is the broad organicity of community linked by spiritual values, gone is the immanent sense of meaning in the world. Lukács shares Weber’s understanding of these losses, but the former goes further to formulate the diminution of the sphere of value unto the point of sheer interiority of the individual.

Science—even his own science, sociology—can certainly not provide an answer to the question of meaning, Weber insists. Unfortunately, science is all that we have left, its having

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<sup>33</sup> Max Weber, *From Max Webber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) 350.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 51.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 357.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 155.

peremptorily dismissed all other modes as illusory.<sup>37</sup> This ideology of science uses the criterion of so-called rationality to render religion marginal for its so-called irrationality.<sup>38</sup> Bilgrami puts a more refined finish on this dynamic when he identifies thick scientific rationality disguising itself as thin, so as to call “irrational” anything that does not subscribe to its ideological assumptions in the thick sense of the term “scientific rationality.”

Art, which “takes over the function of a this-worldly salvation,” becomes “a cosmos of more and more consciously grasped independent values which exist in their own right.”<sup>39</sup> Lukács shares Weber’s conception of an increasingly autonomous art as an inadequate and nearly-blasphemous compensation for the loss of religious enchantment. Both theorists propose that moderns continue to long for salvation, meaning, and organic wholeness, even if it is nowhere to be found.

However, unlike Lukács, Weber lavishes quite a bit of attention on extant religion, from Protestantism to Hindu asceticism. Even in the realm of religion, he observes a gradual process of rationalization, whereby the priestly classes, closely associated with rational intellectualism, have stamped out all that is not book-religion, such as sorcerers and their magic.<sup>40</sup> This process, too, qualifies as disenchantment for Weber.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 143.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 351.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 342.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 351.

## Lukács

In Lukács' incomparably influential theory of the novel—apiece with the larger Enlightenment narrative and certainly in tandem with his colleague Max Weber's theory of modernity—the disenchanted modern world, having been abandoned by God, creates the novel as a valiant but inevitably inadequate aesthetic compensation for the permanent loss of spiritual meaning in an integrated civilization. Thus, disenchantment becomes the precondition and defining feature of the novel, a secular form that would confine itself exclusively to representing the reality of the disintegrated, godforsaken world. (Indeed, from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Wilhelm Meister*, *Pride and Prejudice* to *l'Education Sentimentale*, *Great Expectations* to *The Red and the Black*, *le Père Goriot* to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the Anglo-European novel becomes normatively secular. Enchantment, like God, gets exiled from the traditional realist novel, forever banished to the margins of the genre, in the experimental modes of magical realism, surrealism, and science fiction.)<sup>41</sup>

In his theory of ideal-types, Lukács paints a much broader, and a much less historically and analytically precise, picture than either Weber or Bilgrami. But he shares with them nearly all of their anxieties and formulations about the modern Western world's loss of enchantment: the attenuation of spiritual life, the loss of meaning and magic, the compensation of (an increasingly autonomous) art for lost religion, the reduction of the sphere of engagement to mere interiority, the distance/disjunction between world and God, the alienation of the modern individual from others and from his own soul, man's estrangement from nature, the constriction of human agency, the antagonism between soul and world.

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<sup>41</sup> This is my interpolation, not a paraphrase of Lukács.

Lukács posits as the foil to the modern world of the novel, the ancient Greek world of the epic. Rounded, homogenous, immanent with “ready-made, ever-present meaning,”<sup>42</sup> and perfectly corresponding to the cosmos, “The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars.”<sup>43</sup> Life, relations and social structures are as “full of substance as [man] is himself.”<sup>44</sup> Most significantly, the Greeks had not yet been abandoned by God. In fact, God, the transcendent, was immanent in the world. If interiority did not yet exist, it is because there was “not yet any exterior, any ‘otherness’ for the soul.” The venturing soul knows, as in Homer’s epics, that it will reach its aim, for the gods are there to guide him; “such a soul never stakes itself.”<sup>45</sup> There is no need for synthetic totalities because there is an organic one. Forms are given in the world, not made. Therefore, Homer’s epics reflect that given totality, rather than constructing one. Art has not yet become independent from life in the way that Weber describes.<sup>46</sup>

The modern world and the art form it engendered, the novel, are everything that the Homeric world and epic were not. The crucial rupture happened when God abandoned the world, thoroughly disenchanting it.<sup>47</sup> With that permanent loss of the transcendental locus,

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<sup>42</sup> Lukács 32.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 39. Weber laments this autonomy of modern art, but Lukács seems more ambivalent about it. He admires the Luciferian ambition of the novel to create its own unified world after having been rejected by God, and he also admires the novel for its attitude of “virile maturity” that recognizes the impossibility of precisely such a task.

<sup>47</sup> Lukács is not altogether clear about when exactly this abandonment happened. Generally speaking though, it seems to occur after Dante and around the time of Cervantes. So, though rough, Lukács’ chronology is not really at odds with Bilgrami’s pin-pointed chronology.

meaning and essence are no longer immanent in the world. Forced to look for it within himself, man tests his soul against the world without the guidance of the gods, knowing he will necessarily fail to meet his aims. No longer is he guided by a sense of destiny, or even of possibility.

Soul and the world are no longer in sync; indeed they are at odds: “We have found the only true substance within ourselves: that is why we have to place an unbridgeable chasm between cognition and action, between soul and created structure, between self and world.”<sup>48</sup> The homogeneous world has become irremediably heterogeneous: a gaping abyss lies not only between man and god, but also between man and the social substratum that refuses the *lebensraum* for his aspiring soul, between men and other men who become ever more distinct in their individuality as they courageously test their souls against the hostile world, and even between man and his own soul. His sphere of action has become severely constricted. To put it in Bilgrami’s terms, he sees “darkness in the world in those places where agents [would have] perceived values.”<sup>49</sup>

In the wake of the loss of a given totality of the world, man attempts to create his own synthetic totality: namely, the novel. We moderns continue to think in terms of totalities, but now totality of form, like meaning, must come entirely from us because the world no longer provides it. (Note how perfectly this notion fits with Bilgrami’s notion of a disenchanting world.) But that synthetic compensatory form itself is admirably “mature” and “virile”<sup>50</sup> precisely

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>49</sup> Bilgrami, “The Political Possibilities of the Long Romantic Period” 550.

<sup>50</sup> Lukács 88.

because of its independence and because of its acknowledgment of its own constraints. The fragmentation of the world is built into the form itself, such that totality can only be achieved either through a narrowing-down and volatilizing of its scope or the introduction of a sense of irony, the prevailing disposition of the novel.<sup>51</sup> This ironic disposition acknowledges the novel's inevitable failure to achieve what it aspires to, totality, just as the questing hero acknowledges that he will fail in his aims to find a home in a transcendently homeless world. That ambition to persist in the aspiration to totality and meaning, despite the awareness of their impossibility, is the admirable distinction of the novel.

The novel is “the adventure of interiority...the story of the soul that goes to find itself,”<sup>52</sup> only to discover a profound “separation between interiority and adventure.”<sup>53</sup> The novel's scope can only be interiority, because that is all that is left to the hero: “interiority is the product of the antagonistic duality of soul and world.”<sup>54</sup> Not only banished from his transcendental home, but also at odds with the empty conventional forms of social life, the hero becomes demonic in his attitude. The archetypal hero of the novel is either a criminal or a madman because his soul's aspiration is denied its actualization. In many ways, man takes after Lucifer: outcast by God, but hubristically attempting to create a meaningful world in a newly restricted sphere that denies God a place in it just as he was denied a place in God's cosmos (i.e., the secular novel that banishes God from its auspices). The “demonic” for Lukács carries the heavy implication of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 38-39.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 88.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 88.

irony: the novel hero's psychology is demonic because he knows that "meaning can never quite penetrate reality, but that, without meaning, reality would disintegrate into the nothingness of inessentiality."<sup>55</sup> This paradox simultaneously produces the limits and possibilities of the unique form that is the novel.

THE NOVEL IN INDIA IN RELATION TO THEORIES OF DISENCHANTMENT,  
ESPECIALLY LUKÁCS' *THEORY OF THE NOVEL*

My dissertation faithfully subscribes to the theories of disenchantment laid out by Bilgrami, Weber, and Lukács. Indeed, by way of contrast, they serve as the theoretical basis for my analysis of novels set in India. My argument is with neither their claims nor their terms, both of which structure my own interpretations and evaluations of the novels in India I discuss. I agree with them to the extent that after Enlightenment the West has become generally disenchanted in its worldview in all the ways they claim, and that, indeed, the novel in Europe corresponds to and responds to this disenchantment. (That said, I do feel that the secular bias buttressed by these theories has probably obscured our view to pockets of, and novelistic instantiations of, enchantment within Europe; but those are only pockets, and thus do not affect the general tendency of these theorists' claims).

Rather, I mobilize their theories to show that in *another* cultural context—namely the Indian colonial/postcolonial one—enchantment significantly persisted to varying degrees over the century I discuss. And yet the novel took root under precisely such conditions. Taking these two seemingly incommensurate facts together, I conclude that the novel *can* in fact be enchanted.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 88.

Therefore, I take issue only with the normativity of the *upshot* of Lukács' argument, that the novel is a *necessarily* disenchanted form—an upshot that may be valid for his own context, but not for mine. If anything, my contention is with the critical legacy that has indiscriminately applied his bold and brilliant theory to contexts that patently differ from the European one that produced the novel. One cannot blame Lukács for being ethnocentric; but one *can* blame contemporary critics for being ethnocentric in a period when the discourse of literary criticism has dilated enormously to include non-Western contexts. My dissertation is intended as a corrective to this regnant theoretical ethnocentricity and its Metropolitan bias toward secular criticism. It is also an attempt to relate the two contexts—Western and disenchanted, Indian and enchanted—to the event of colonialism that connected them, a colonialism to which the novel form served as a crucial arm. Edward Said, Gauri Viswanathan, Priya Joshi, Srinivas Aravamudan, and even Thoman Macaulay have, in their different ways, already elaborated the connection between the novel's privileged role in the imperial adventure in India especially. My main and unique point is that the exile of God that Lukács takes to be the precondition for the novel did not happen everywhere and in every case. Lukács might have considered the Indian, or even a supposedly high-imperialist novel like Forster's, alongside Tolstoy's novels which, he claims, come closest to redeeming a transcendental world for the novel. The European theories of disenchantment and its privileged artistic form offer me a pivot that allows me to draw some important conclusions about the relationship between East and West during the past century and a half.



In India, the *main*<sup>56</sup> trunk of the realist novel tradition grew up seminally incorporating God. The convergence of the beatified and the banal effected uniquely by the novel testifies to that dimension of religious enchantment I have highlighted: the communication between the worldly and the otherworldly. In fact, we might think of the religiously enchanted novel as a modern *tirtha* of sorts—a crossover point between this world and the other world. Thus the enchanted novel does not just represent Indian religious enchantment thematically, but also structurally performs the very enchantment that believers experience.

Yet, the variously secular commitments of all of my writers, not to mention the naturalist parameters and representational freight of the novel, pose a challenge to their striving to express the Indian sensibility for enchantment. Forster and Rushdie—outsiders to India less because of nationality and more because of their estrangement from Indian religious faith—cannot avoid a sort of second-order enchantment. Their exoticist wonder from the outside at a religious enchantment from the inside alternately lures them into and keeps them away from the direct experience of enchantment. Forster’s modernist mystification of Hindu, Indo-Muslim, and primeval mysticism produces an alienation-effect from the Indian numinosity that compels him; and Rushdie’s romantic-exilic, postmodern, hyperbolic magical realist frame takes distance from the very religious traditions and sensibilities that inspire it. Meanwhile, Bankim, Tagore, and Narayan, who write as engaged participants in Indian spiritual traditions and for whom the divine presence in daily life is taken a matter of fact, cannot escape the representational freight of the novel that inevitably distances them from the very immanence they mean to convey. Mystical

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<sup>56</sup> I emphasize that it was in the mainstream of the novel in India, rather than marginal experimental works as in Europe, where enchantment can be found. Further, Anglo-European enchanted works ought to be properly understood as “re-enchanted” since they are responding to a long-since thoroughly disenchanted world.

poetry, guru discourse, and Hindu epic reiterations—precursors to the novel in India—presume an organic community of faith in which the writer and reader share an already enchanted sensibility. However, the novel genre that inherits these religiously enchanted modes is estranged from their worlds of faith—not only estranged as a foreign genre that comes from outside the organic community of belief, but also estranging by its structure of aesthetic detachment (as opposed to lyric, mystic-pedagogic, or mythic *frissons* of beatitude). In straining against their chosen genre’s representational imperative, the insider-novelists who write from the enchanted subject position walk the tightrope between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Translating the experience of enchantment into the naturalist parameters of the realist novel, moving from the experiential to the representational, from the first to the third person point of view on the world, from enchanted immanence to aesthetic detachment, puts these insider-novelists at times in a detached, disenchanted position akin to that of the secular outsider-novelists.

In fact, neither modern believer, nor novel, nor secular critic can fully shake off the secular inheritance that is disenchantment. What becomes interesting and worthwhile is finding ways to translate the experience of enchantment and the spirit of immanence into the inherited idioms of disenchantment and transcendence—an endeavor shared by these novelists, myself as literary critic, and plenty of anthropologists and scholars of religion who struggle with a critical vocabulary and disciplinary orientation at odds with the worldviews they convey.

## ON MIMESIS AND ENCHANTMENT

My preceding comments presume that realist representation is necessarily disenchanting, Apollonian, and objectivist: representing faith means taking a detached view on it. Yet, although literary realism, and mimetic representation broadly speaking, have tended to be associated with disenchantment in the West, it has not always been so. Moreover, the religious backcloth of Hindu and Islamic-syncretic India has always understood mimesis to be enchanted. In any case, mimesis and (dis)enchantment implicate each other, with important consequences for culture and realist representation. Can God—or magical and numinous spirits—be represented in mimetic form? Does the copy contain any of the spiritual power of the original? If so, would the copy—i.e., the realistic representation—qualify as sacred, too? Is it even accurate to call mimetic form mere “copy”?

From Plato to Walter Benjamin to Erich Auerbach, many of the West’s greatest thinkers have cogitated on mimesis: imitation or representation of the real world in art or objects. For the most part, the West has conceived of mimesis as disenchanting: the copy lacks the spirit of that which it copies. Furthermore, when reality itself became disenchanting after Enlightenment, the copy became that much more so.

But to represent the West’s philosophy of mimesis as monolithically disenchanting would be a disservice to the varied tradition that it is. As Erich Auerbach so beautifully demonstrates in his monumental study *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*,<sup>57</sup> the European tradition of mimesis has either re-erected or flouted the Platonic injunction on the

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<sup>57</sup>Erich Auerbach. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991 [1953]).

serious realistic representation of everyday life, depending on whether the period is neo-classicist or anti-classicist.<sup>58</sup> While his stated interest lies in the emancipation of realism from the classical rule of distinct levels of style,<sup>59</sup> another theory about the relationship between truth and mimesis lies buried just below it.

In fact, Auerbach explains that his study emerged as an attempt to reconcile two statements on mimesis: Plato's disparagement of mimesis as a third-order derivative of the truth and Dante's assertion that he presented "true reality" in his *Divine Comedy*.<sup>60</sup> If, as both Plato and Dante understood it, truth is divine, then their difference lies in their understanding of the ability of the copy to speak divine truth. Significantly, Auerbach identifies the first break with the classical rule of distinct styles occurring with the story of Christ itself, "with its ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy."<sup>61</sup> So, we see how again how central God is to the issue of mimesis, and how long and profound is the legacy of the profane/sacred mixture in realism.

Indeed, what differentiates the two periods that flout the classical rule of distinct styles—the Christian middle ages and the 19<sup>th</sup> century modern and beyond—is their view of reality in relation to divinity.<sup>62</sup> The period of late antiquity through the Middle Ages conceived of reality in terms of the *figural*:

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 554.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 556.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 554.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 555.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 555.

In this conception, an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms, without prejudice to the power of the concrete reality here and now. The connection between occurrences is not regarded as primarily a chronological or causal development but as a oneness within the divine plan, of which all occurrences are parts and reflections.<sup>63</sup>

Auerbach's legitimizing of the figural view of reality indicates that he allows for an enchanted view of reality in mimetic representation. The notion of a dual register of world and otherworld in direct correspondence is not far removed from the Hindu and Sufi cosmological understanding. And for both the Indians and pre-Enlightenment medievals, mimetic representation did not mean a divorce from the otherworldly realm. As I see it, Dante's claim that his mimetic representation had presented true reality depends on two elements: 1) the ability, *contra* Plato, for the copy to present (not just represent) divine truth; and, directly related to that, 2) the close link between divine and human reality. So, even though Dante depicts the Devil and other supernatural figures, such figures were part of a still-rounded cosmos that included the earthly and human realms. The ability to perceive and present otherworldly elements in a truth-claiming mimetic form was still perfectly feasible.

In his *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács supports the view of Dante's world as still enchanted, even if not to the same degree as the Homeric one, and even if Dante's attenuated enchantment would soon be completely lost: "The immanence of the meaning of life is present and existent in Dante's world, *but only in the beyond*: it is the perfect immanence of the transcendent."<sup>64</sup> The medieval church gave a second lease on life for enchantment, for it established a "paradoxical link between the soul lost in irredeemable sin and its impossible yet certain redemption became an almost platonic ray of heavenly light in the midst of earthly reality: the leap became a ladder

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 355.

<sup>64</sup> Lukács 59, italics mine.

of earthly and heavenly hierarchies.”<sup>65</sup> Such a hierarchical scheme is precisely what *The Divine Comedy* presents, with all its rings and bulges. But this hierarchical scheme was a point in the general trend toward autonomy of parts from the whole. Lukács explains:

[Of the medieval writers,] Dante is the only great example in which we see the architectural clearly conquering the organic, and therefore he represents a historico-philosophical transition from the pure epic to the novel. In Dante there is still the perfect immanent distancelessness and completeness of the true epic, but his figures are already individuals, consciously and energetically placing themselves in opposition to a reality that is becoming closed to them, individuals who, through this opposition, become real personalities. The constituent principle of Dante’s totality is a highly systematic one, abolishing the epic independence of the organic part-unities and transforming them into hierarchically ordered, autonomous parts.<sup>66</sup>

Systematized synthetic architecture and individuals’ gaining of personality through their thwarted quest to find meaning in a God-forsaken world would be the elements that would fully flourish in in the emergent novel.

If, for Auerbach, the medieval world’s realism is characterized by *figura*, essentially an allegorical relationship between the worldly plane of everyday life and the transcendental plane of divinity, then that allegorical relationship is precisely what, for Ian Watt, disqualifies Bunyan from being a proper realist like his disenchanting contemporary Defoe. Watt, unlike Auerbach, follows in the Lukácsian tradition of strictly classifying realism as necessarily disenchanting—restricted to a here and now divorced from God. For Watt, only the latter of the two periods that Auerbach claims made a break with the classical prohibition on seriously representing “low” subjects’ daily lives, would qualify as realism: the modern. Yet, Auerbach’s historical take on mimesis is not altogether at odds with Watt’s, since Watt identifies the rupture between the otherworldly and worldly planes occurring after the medieval period, around the time of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 68.

Enlightenment (the seventeenth century, specifically). In fact, it was precisely this rupture that marked the beginning of an epoch entirely distinct from the Christian medieval period that preceded it. Indeed, Watt, too, identifies the apogee of this realism in the French 19<sup>th</sup> century “*réalisme*,” which, as Auerbach mentions, took a contrarian position vis-à-vis idealism.<sup>67</sup>

However, Watt’s emphasis is different from Auerbach’s: “the novel’s realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it.”<sup>68</sup> Hence Watt’s lavish attention to realistic method, which for him means a photo-objectivism that was the representational corollary to the new epistemological mode of empiricism. Rejecting *both* the classical the Middle Ages’ scholastic realists’ universals (including *figura*), the modern realists focused entirely on “the particular, concrete objects of sense-perception.”<sup>69</sup> The writer took the reporter’s approach to his task. The reporter-novelist, restricts himself to “man’s worldly doings without placing them in a religious framework.”<sup>70</sup> This is why Bunyan is, according to Watt, not a realist:

There is a great difference, however, between Bunyan and Defoe, a difference which suggests why it is Defoe, rather than Bunyan, who is often considered to be our first novelist...we have [in Bunyan] many elements of the novel: simple language, realistic descriptions of persons and places, and a serious presentation of the moral problems of ordinary individuals. But the significance of the characters and their actions largely depends upon a transcendental scheme of things: to say that the persons are allegorical is to say that their earthly reality is not the main object of the writer, but rather that he hopes to make us see through them a larger and unseen reality beyond time and place.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000 [1957]) 10.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 80.

Through his counter-example of Bunyan, Watt makes it exceedingly clear that secularism and realism are the related fundamentals of the novel form. (For Lukács, too, these two elements are crucially related, and crucial to the novel.) Watt discusses at length the increasing secularization that found its reflection in the new genre of the novel: “it is certain that the novel’s usual means—formal realism—tends to exclude whatever is not vouched for by the senses: the jury does not normally allow divine intervention as an explanation of human actions. It is therefore likely that a measure of secularization was an indispensable condition for the rise of the new genre.”<sup>72</sup> Immediately after this quotation, Watt quotes Lukács’ famous sentence: “The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God.”

I have lavished this much attention on Watt (by way of Lukács) because it is his take on the novel and its realism that has become a commonplace in the West. While there have been important Western voices like Auerbach’s making a claim for the eligibility of enchantment (continuity between this world and otherworld) in realism, such voices<sup>73</sup> have been drowned out by the chorus that insists, to the contrary, that mimesis means the representation of observable, verifiable, concrete reality. In this prevailing view, mimesis cannot be enchanted, for mimesis cannot represent the numinous, let alone the Divine spirit. Mimesis, broadly speaking, has become nearly a synonym for disenchantment, bring us back full-circle to Plato’s original insistence that the copy is false because it is too far removed (thrice-removed) from the original, God’s idea.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 84.

<sup>73</sup> including Benjamin’s, which I will discuss below in connection to mimetically enchanted language.



But the West's general disenchanting of mimesis does not necessary extend to the rest of the world. Mimesis, the conjuring of likeness, has had a powerful, privileged, and unique role in the Hindu tradition of words and images. Religious scholar Diana Eck writes, "For the Indian religious artist the task of image-making was giving shape to those things we cannot readily see."<sup>74</sup> I believe that the writer of the enchanted realist novel in India is charged with this complex mimetic task no less than the consecrated sculptor or painter in the Hindu tradition.

As Eck reminds us, mimesis—in the form of icons, or so-called "fetishes"—has been at the heart of the West's misunderstanding and disparagement of the East.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, I do believe the West continues, albeit less nefariously, to misunderstand the way mimesis works in India, in the literary no less than the plastic arenas.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the West's general disenchanting of mimesis versus the Hindu enchanting of it accounts for some of the most significant muddles in cross-cultural understanding, from the missionaries of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the postcolonial Metropolitan critics of today. From the Abbé Dubois to (arguably) E.M. Forster, Western visitors to India have historically been bewildered and disgusted by Hindu "idol-worship."<sup>76</sup> The Hindu worship of icons struck these Europeans as crass because they saw these icons as mere objects—disenchanted, brute material. However, for the Hindu worshippers, these icons are not mere objects, but likenesses through which the Divine spirit is approached, invoked, and dismissed during the ritual of the puja. The statue is, for that time, not just a likeness of God, but God

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<sup>74</sup> Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2007 [1981]) 38.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 17-18, 31, and 35.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 17-18, 35.

itself. Of course, even when Western visitors were able to understand that these objects were not brute *in the eyes of* the worshippers, the former still subscribed to the fetishism taboo: the notion of spirit “improperly” attributed to an object, one of the deepest taboos that separates the West from the rest. This taboo also bespeaks the Western insistence on the disenchantment of mimesis: to enchant the likeness with the spirit of the likened is to commit a grave mistake.

Such recalcitrant disenchantment of mimesis, moreover, plagues even today’s critical discourse on India, from art history to literary history.<sup>77</sup> By identifying mimetic narrative and art as an imported disenchanted Western mode making a sharp break with the supernatural “non-mimetic” Indian past, these critics not only ignore the longstanding mimetic tradition in Hindu India, but also its enchantment and its relevance to both natural and supernatural realms. In Chapter 1, I more fully take up this theme as well as the related Hindu theory of mimetically enchanted language, which I parallel with Benjamin’s and contrast with Barthes.’ In both Benjamin’s and the Hindus’ theories, language in an enchanted world is directly, mimetically related to nature and the cosmos; there is no slippage between signifier and signified. Word directly reflects, and sometimes has the power to affect, the world.<sup>78</sup>

The bottom line is this: emerging from a religio-literary tradition in which mimesis was always taken to be enchanted, the earliest Indian vernacular realist novels would have been, and should be, read in such a way that their realism need not be presumed to be disenchanted, as it tends to be in the West. The convergence of the likeness and the thing itself moves mimesis into the realm of enchantment, rather than disenchantment. The likeness is charged with the spirit of

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<sup>77</sup> See footnote 209.

<sup>78</sup> For the space of space, I cannot elaborate further here.

the original (here, God), and so the slippage between the symbol and its referent is virtually non-existent. Note how different this notion of mimesis is from the standard Western academic one, in which mimesis is generally taken to be an index of disenchantment, in that the brute copy can never capture the animus of the thing it copies. In the Hindu context, however, it is helpful to think of mimesis in terms of embodiment, more than copy; manifestation rather than imitation.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

**Chapter 1** treats *Kapalkundala* (1866), an early novel by Bankim, the Indian pioneer of the genre who brokered the transition from the supernaturalism of the Hindu *Puranic* tradition to the naturalism of the realist novel tradition. Accepting the modern ineluctability of naturalism as the normative parameter of the novel, he refuses to let that naturalism get hijacked by the disenchanted ideologies associated with it in Europe. I argue that by multifariously evincing God as ever more immanent in the phenomenal world, Bankim stresses the continuity between other world and this world. Supernature permeates nature, just as supernatural content punctures naturalist narrative frame: for example, the nearly-celestial eponymous heroine of *Kapalkundala* communicates with her personal deity through signs in her natural surround, a supernatural interpretive scheme that at times dissolves the supra-ordinating naturalist frame meant to contain it. I situate my discussion of Bankim within the historical context of the Bengal Renaissance, in theological relation to the Hindu view of the God-man-nature nexus, and in philosophical relation to Hindu theories of enchanted mimesis and language. All of these discussions enable us to understand the cultural backcloth of Bankim's world, which filtered through his writing, wittingly and unwittingly. I suggest that Bankim through this early novel helped to usher in a

modern religious sensibility by enchanting the real, rather than emphasizing the supernatural aspects of divinity, as had been the case in the Puranic tradition.

Rabindranath Tagore takes further his literary forebear's imperative to portray the Divine immanent in the here-and-now. Tagore's 1919 novel *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*, 1916), the subject of **Chapter 2**, further interiorizes God as the first-person narration passes among the three protagonists, each with his/her own powerful relationship to a palpable divinity. Whereas Bankim had directly presented God in ontological if not empirical terms, Tagore does so more obliquely. He presents God as a subjective phenomenon, as will Forster in a more problematic way. However, unlike Forster, Tagore does not posit a skeptical narrator "outside" these subjectivities of faith, for there is no "outside" to faith in a culture where God is the very sky above. Tagore's polemical novel exploits the subjectivities of his three narrators to privilege one mode of faith (monistic, heterodox, transcendentalist) over another (polytheistic, sectarian, instrumental) in the nationalist era; but faithless secularism is not an option. Formally, the prose of *The Home and the World* stretches toward song, thus recalling the "chant" at the heart of enchantment. Rather than distantly representing enchanted epiphanies, such prose immerses us in them while also offering a poetic critique of the objectivism of standard naturalist prose. Together, Bankim, and Tagore expand the notion of prosaic reality to include the holy, thereby refusing a disenchanting materialism and cultivating a modern enchanted sensibility deemed essential for a decolonizing India.

In **Chapter 3**, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), hard-won moments of enchanted narrative are at best evanescent. And that is not just because of the pendular exoticist swing from immersion back to distance, nor even simply because of Forster's outsider's relation

to India's deepest spiritual life, but because Indian enchantment itself was, to Forster's view, evanescent—already nearly choked off by the general disenchantment that, through colonialism's impact on urbanization, statist nationalism, and communalism, had already begun its encroachment. Like the Marabar Caves or the Hindu princely state that is the site for the novel's climactic epiphany of enchantment, such sites and moments were circumscribed exceptions to the disenchanted modern India Forster presciently decried. Written during the last days of the Raj, Forster's novel mystifies Indian mysticism, registering the breakdown of Anglo-Indian culture due to incompatible spiritual worldviews. *A Passage to India*, taking its chapter titles from the physical structures of Indian religious life, is indeed a meditation on form and spirit, thus recalling the cultural ideologies about mimetic enchantment. Forster grapples with the first-order praxis of Indian religious life from which his narrator takes varying degrees of critical distance through techniques of epistemological instability and formalism that find postmodern echo in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980), the primary subject of **Chapter 4**.

Rushdie's romantic-exilic, hyperbolic magical realist mode estranges us from the very religious traditions and sensibilities that inspire its epic frame. As postcolonial India defaults on its secular promise, the protagonist's waning magical powers in that realm become replaced by hyper-sensory perception of India on-the-ground. As Saleem comes closer to the "real" India, the epic meta-textual frame increasingly reveals itself as self-consciously *Puranic*, as if to suggest that Hindu epic had dictated the course of New India all along, despite the original secular hubris of the narrator and his fellow Independence-era citizens.

I end briefly by evaluatively contrasting Rushdie's magical realism with R.K. Narayan's straight-forward realism in *The Guide* (1958), a comic novel that presents a trickster turned

accidental saint who exploits others' desire for both secular and religious enchantment, suggesting not only that the two registers may comfortably cohabit everyday India and the novel, but also that the religious subsumes the secular. In the end, the joke is on the rogue when his devotees force him to undergo a rain-inducing fast that in turn inspires his genuine spiritual convergence. That the villagers' tenacious *darśan*—their (mis)taking him for a saint and holding him to it—can ultimately render the cynic a saint suggests that subjective enchantment has the force to effect objective enchantment. Narayan doubles back to Bankim and Tagore's realist enchantment, albeit with a touch of light irony and an extremely circumscribed sub-national scope—indicative of post-Independence India's reduced ambitions for, yet persistence of, indigenous religiosity. By ending with a magical realist counter-example and its more successful realist foil, I demonstrate that mimetic realism unexpectedly proves more able than anti-mimetic modes to convey enchantment.

## CAVEATS

Finally, before I proceed to the body of my dissertation, I would like to make some caveats about my dissertation's approach and its limitations. The first pertains to scope, the second to method.

### **Scope**

For two crucial reasons I have chosen India as my geo-cultural scope: 1) until the late stage of decolonization, India typifies the key elements of the enchanted worldview. From the Orientalists who immersed themselves into Indian religiosity or the subaltern historiographers who struggle to grapple with it, no critic can deny the force of religiosity in India—a force that

persists even to this day, despite having been drastically diminished by the influences of colonialism and the disenchanting ideologies associated with it. 2) The novel has had a privileged role not only in modern India, but also in the colonial relationship between England and India.

In terms of temporal scope, I chose 1866 to 1980 because it represents the entire trajectory from enchantment to disenchantment in India. It makes sense to begin the story of the novel in India with Bankim, given that he was its universally-acknowledged pioneer, and because he self-consciously grappled with the ideologies and parameters of the borrowed form in relation to the Hinduism in which he took such an interest. It makes sense to end with Rushdie because he begets a host of his own literary “Children,” a generation of younger writers who, unflatteringly, have been accused of being infected with the disease of Rushdie-itis. Not just Rushdie’s spawn, but even young writers whose mode deliberately differs from his, continue to write under the anxiety of Rushdie’s influence. After Independence, writers who attempt to enchant the novel are really re-enchanting the novel; for, with Rushdie and Independence, a widespread enchantment was lost (even it was maintained in the second of the two Indias I map out: the provincial India that is the realm of Narayan’s fiction). This brings me to the third temporal reason for ending with *Midnight’s Children*. Because it was written around the time of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency—the nadir of disenchanting politics, the sour fruit born of the originally inspired but decidedly Westphalian (democratic, secular) vision of India’s first premier, Jawaharlal Nehru, throws into sharpest relief the narrative attempt to (re)enchant against a profoundly disenchanting backdrop of reality. Since Emergency—cause for Rushdie’s acute lament for India’s profound loss of civil rights and syncretism—India has not recovered from its crisis of disenchantment. With neo-liberalism on the rise, the India that followed in the wake of

*Midnight's Children* sustained, perhaps even deepened, the disenchanting legacy. Finally, as a magical realist text, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* offers a counter-example to enchanted realism, allowing for an evaluative comparison between the two modes. I think this evaluative comparison is particularly valuable because magical realism is so often thought of as not just enchanted, but as *the* paradigmatic and exclusive narrative genre of enchantment. I disagree with both commonsensical claims, as I thoroughly elaborate in my final chapter. My hope is that by the end of the thesis, the reader will feel that a more understated sort of realism that does not forego realism's authorizing and fictive potentials more effectively presents the divine spirit coursing through the world.

Finally, I should make the predictable caveat about not providing coverage. Clearly, when one is dealing with phenomena as broad as Hinduism, philosophies of enchantment and mimesis, the novel, colonialism, and India, one cannot possibly achieve coverage—nor was that my ambition. In the spirit of the key figure I engage with, Lukács, I take an ideal-type and general historico-philosophical approach to my analysis. I have selected the novels I have as case-studies because, to me, they epitomize something important about enchantment in their particular historical epoch. Each of these novels should be seen as an important node in the history of the enchanted novel in India; and my goal has been to engage deeply with each one, rather than to provide the sort of surveys of realism in India that already exist. My orientation has been rather philosophical: through a deep analysis of each of my novels, I try to show how profoundly the enchanted worldview bore its mark on the novel. This philosophical orientation diverges from the more common “travelling genres” approach that describes the adaptation of Metropolitan genres to peripheral cultures. These critics tend to focus merely on language,



tone/voice, and local cultural references as constituting a content adaptation, but they take for granted that the essential philosophical underpinnings of the form remain unaltered by the receiving culture. This, too, I would argue is one of the many ethnocentric assumptions that underwrite novel theory.

Finally, a note on the religious scope of my study: my discussion of Indian religiosity has focused almost exclusively on the Hindu and related syncretic traditions. In part, this emphasis has to do with the practical limits to coverage: I could not possibly cover all the important religions of India (Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, and all their syncretic combinations), in their philosophies and instantiations of enchantment. Even within Hinduism, as my dissertation shows, there obtains an enormous variety. It makes an obvious sort of sense to focus on Hinduism, for it is and always has been the religion of the vast majority of Indians. That said, to privilege a tradition on the basis of sheer demographics is to subscribe to the hegemonic principle that troublingly has given rise to Hindu fundamentalism and the democratic disenfranchisement of minorities, the very ethe that the advocates of enchantment justifiably criticized. Of this problem I am uncomfortably aware. Yet, I can do no more than offer an outright apology and promise to rectify this shortcoming in the book version of this dissertation—by at least considering one text by an Islamic writer and exploring Indo-Islamic enchantment more deeply than my Forster chapter has led me to do. To take on more than that would distend this already lengthy work.

My apology for my Hindu emphasis mainly rests on grounds of sheer unfamiliarity with the other traditions. As a born and bred American, I relate to Hinduism as a rather foreign religion, although I grew up around it in my Indian immigrant parents' home. That osmotic

absorption of the religion was enough to give me the confidence, if not the competence, to pursue an auto-didactic study of it, as germane to my thesis. Beyond Hinduism, I am regrettably unfamiliar with the praxes, doctrines, and histories of the religions of India—a lacuna that can certainly be redressed, but not in the short course of the writing of a dissertation. However, my initial foray into religion prompted by this thesis has gradually become something of a commitment, one that I will pursue over my long career. When, in my dissertation research, I began to explore theories of mimesis in the Hindu, Indo-Islamic, and Sufi traditions, I began to perceive the richness of the historical and theological links among these traditions. But, as such a perception arrived rather too late for the dissertation, I had not the time to educate myself fully enough to pursue that lead.

The importance of extending my argument to other religions of India seems all the more pressing given the general Hindu orientation of scholarship on India. Unfortunately, my dissertation reproduces the Muslim lacuna one finds in most scholarship on India, a lacuna duly registered and regretted within such studies. This scholarly gap turns less on bias, and more on a lack of sufficient competence with the Muslim texts and contexts by scholars who come from a Hindu background in the main, a competence that can no doubt be gained assiduously.

## **Method**

### TRANSLATION

Beyond my philosophical and ideal-type approach to my literary analysis, another dimension of my method needs to be addressed: the problem of translation. As a non-native reader of Indian texts who, further, does not have any of the vernacular languages, I am doubly estranged. I would like to say a word about how I have handled my linguistic estrangement.

Two of the novels I treat were originally written in Bengali: Bankim's *Kapalkundala*, and Tagore's *The Home and the World*. I could not possibly write the story of enchanting the real in the Indian novel while leaving out the two first and most significant writers who attempted to do so. Bankim and Tagore are the giants of Indian literature and were the cutting edge of literary experiment during the Bengal Renaissance and its immediate aftermath. It simply would not do to neglect their novels simply because I cannot read them in the original. In fact, even in their own day, their novels had wide readerships outside Bengal, and even India. Their novels were translated into other Indian vernaculars, often from English itself. So, reading Bankim and Tagore in a language other than Bengali is a long-standing tradition; I am neither the first nor the last to do it. Thus, their novels can be considered World Literature, for even in their own day they had an exceptionally pan-regional and international audience.

While Tagore's novel was translated into English by his own nephew three years after its Bengali publication, and though Tagore is believed to have authorized that translation and even to have provided some translations of some passages himself, the well-known problems of translation persist in this case. Indeed, the translation problem here takes on further dimensions of complexity, for in some significant ways *Ghare Baire* and *The Home and the World* do not quite correspond, in details as significant as the plot's ending. I can and do only speculate as to why Tagore made or authorized these changes in the English translation.

Despite the limitations of translations, I consider translations, particularly translations of literature that circulates in a World Literature sphere, to be legitimate texts in their own right. Such a view is widely held in the field of literary studies, which so often depend on translations, particularly as the scope of World Literature expands to include the entire planet. If we were to forsake comparative work beyond the realm of our own nation-state or those of the few languages we know, critical discourse would be, as it once was, woefully impoverished. I believe that a translated text is not merely a debased version of the original. Rather, it is the product of imaginative and literarily sensitive endeavor, in turn worthy of the imaginative and literarily sensitive endeavor of the critic. Certainly not the same as the original text, the translation has merit on reconstituted grounds. Those reconstituted grounds have become very interesting as the embrace of World Literature becomes ever wider. I am a proponent of David Damrosch's parabolic schematic of World literature: a World Literature text has a double life, one at its point of origin, and one in its international ambit. The critical interest comes in trying to elaborate the shape of that parabola, never forgetting or devaluing either of its two nodes.

In this spirit: although I have made every effort to modulate my Bankim and Tagore arguments in relation to the few Bengali readers who have read them, my interpretation has no choice but to rely, in the main, on the translations I use. For a non-native reader, the alternatives—relying on the translator's or on one's own friends' and colleagues' interpretations of the original—are equally derivative. I feel it would be a disrespect to the worthy endeavor of translation to presume against the translator's interpretation of the original language, by deferring in every case to one's own contacts' interpretations (themselves often inconsistent with one another). Finally, when reading a work of literature in translation, one needs to maintain a

certain degree of exegetical consistency, which also obliges the critic generally to trust the translator's choices.

My version of *Kapalkundala*, translated by Radha Chakravarty comes from *The Bankimchandra Omnibus*. It is the one of the most widely available translations in international circulation, a fact that I can attest to, having been unable to procure any other legitimate translation of *Kapalkundala* even in the major Calcutta bookshops, let alone American libraries and bookshops. Likewise, Surendranath Tagore's translation of his uncle's novel is the prevailing translation in international circulation. These two translations, then, serve as the international nodes of the parabolic life of these Bengali novels in the arena of World Literature, my vaunted discipline.

#### DECONSTRUCTION/THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

Paradoxically, I approach my texts at times in a spirit of immanent critique, and at other times, transcendent critique. When it comes to worldview, I try as far as I am able to give myself over to one that is so different from my own; but when it comes to my close readings of primary texts, I employ a hermeneutics of suspicion. My goal in the first case, is to avoid the mistake of presuming against the religiosity of those I write about, as so many critics do. It is natural that literary scholars, including myself, should tend in the direction of transcendent critique, for criticism means reading *against* the grain to discover hidden meanings. Indeed, the freight of transcendent critique is as hard for the critic of enchantment to shake off as the disenchanting freight of the novel is for the novelist of enchantment. Still, to the best of my ability I try to perform my analysis from *within* the perspective of enchantment. What this involves, above all,

is an attitude of respect, engagement, and humanist empathy for an alternate orientation to the world, and a degree of awareness of the assumptions underlying one's own. At least to that extent, I feel I have succeeded in my immanent critique.

At the same time, I have vigorously maintained the critical practice of reading against the grain when it comes to my textual exegesis. While I would not necessarily call myself a great champion of postmodernism, my approach could well be called deconstructive. In the wake of deconstruction, it seems almost impossible to do literary criticism any other way. The deconstructive approach, in the tradition of De Man and Derrida, tries to find the hidden layers and meanings in texts; this approach reveals underlying elements that betray the openly available level of meaning. An author/text may have certain avowed propositions, yet the imagery, ethe, inheritances, premonitions, and tendencies one actually finds in the text may point to something else. Thus, for example, I have found religious enchantment in Bankim's novel that betrays the secular avowals of his early treatises; by the same token, I have discovered a disenchanted ethos in Rushdie's novel that betrays his avowed religious ambitions for it. To find such contradictions and ambivalences in the multiple layers of a text is not to accuse the writer of being a hypocrite. Writing is never an entirely self-conscious endeavor: an author's intentions may or may not line up with the multivalent and autonomous work he produces. A text cannot be reduced to mere authorial intention; culture speaks through texts in more voices than just the author's, as Barthes' "Death of the Author" so vociferously asserts. At the same time, my stance is not so postmodern as to completely kill off the author as Barthes would have it. In every case, I attend to the author's explicit ethe and intentions; but these do not tell the whole story.



## CHAPTER 1

### *Bringing God down to earth*

#### **Enchanting the real in the early Indian novel: Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Kapalkundala***

To my view, it was only the realist novel that could bring God down to a (modern) earth, give shape to the immanence of the holy in everyday life, and provide a forum for the praxis of enchantment, all while conceding some necessary ground to the by-then-ineluctable ideologies of Enlightenment. That is why I believe Bankim (1838-1894), India's first major novelist, chose this brand-new genre.<sup>79</sup> In doing so, he sought to show that religiosity was not only compatible with, but essential for a modernity that would not go the disenchanted way of the West. Ultimately, Bankim's strenuous effort at enchanting the novel when it first took root in Indian soil laid the philosophical groundwork for the subsequent great visionaries of Indian sovereignty, from Tagore to Gandhi.

What does it mean to write a religiously-enchanted novel, given that the novel itself was born of circumstances and normative conditions of disenchantment in Europe? How does

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<sup>79</sup> Sunil Gangopadhyay, "The Making of the Indian Novel," *Bankimchandra Chatterjee: Essays in Perspective*, ed. Bhabatosh Chatterjee (New Delhi and Calcutta: Sahitya Akademi, 1994) 390-394. Gangopadhyay explains: although prose literature existed in certain parts of India prior to the Indian novel (such as Assam, where it was used to chronicle the royal court), it was by and far trumped by poetry. Fiction written in prose was a rarity before Bankim, and when it appeared, it was usually in the form of short stories considered prose poems. There are two exceptions Gangopadhyay notes: Kempunarayana's Kannada novel *Mudramanjusha* (1823) adapting a Sanskrit play; and the anonymous Marathi novel *Yumuna Paryatan* (1857). However, both of these were isolated cases, neither of which were quite the stuff of fiction, and neither of which launched a substantial novelistic enterprise, as in the case of Bankim. Bankim was really the first fiction writer in India to wield and wend the novel form in an Indian vernacular. Several men of his generation, inspired by and well-read in (translated) Bankim, soon followed suit in their own vernaculars (e.g.: Harinarayan Apte in Marathi, Fakirmohan Senapati in Oriya).



Bankim do it? Unlike Renaissance Europe seeking its roots in a defunct, unthreatening Greco-Roman tradition, the Bengal Renaissance—like so many colonial renaissance sites—had to deal with the thorniness of borrowing from the hegemonic colonizing culture at its heyday, i.e., the very culture it was by and large resisting.

As I see it, Bankim's goal for the enchanted novel was to invite those nearly ineluctable parts of the Enlightenment legacy that would be suitable to India, while filtering out its disenchanted elements, via three mediations, *all of which hinge on the basic definition of enchantment as continuity between this world and the other world*: 1) the subtle negotiation of supernaturalism and naturalism (with an increasing emphasis on the latter) via a Bakhtinian juggling of multiple registers,<sup>80</sup> and a sustained Hindu-based ethos of mimesis underpinning both; 2) elaborating a Romantic-style pastoral spiritualism compatible with both new, foreign-imported secular modes and older animistic, pantheistic, and even more orthodox Hindu ones; 3) translating humanism in terms of dharma, the Hindu scheme by which each person interprets his or her proper relationship to concentric rings of belonging (individual, family, community, nature, God), and in living these relationships well, renders the holy in mundane life. Dharma allows for Bankim's humanist imperative—all the more urgent in the nascent decolonizing era when new relationships between self and community needed to form, and karmic passivity had to give way to dharmic agency. As well, dharma offers a unique role for the novel, possibly the only forum in which to provide case studies in the praxis of immanent enchantment.

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<sup>80</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002 [1981]).

In this chapter, I will elaborate these dynamics through a reading of Bankim's *Kapalkundala* (1866). In short, Bankim strove to preserve, via containment, the Hindu cosmology of natural-supernatural continuity, even while privileging naturalism, a modernity-compatible mode that could retain numinosity by his making the holy ever more immanent in the worldly.<sup>81</sup> For this "profaning of the sacred," the novel genre was essential.

## BANKIM AND HIS TIMES

Like his religious reformist predecessor, Ram Mohun Roy, Bankim did not accept Hinduism on the basis of scriptural authority or brahminical orthodoxy. Rather, everything in the religious tradition was up for re-evaluation and renovation. In particular, religion was forced to stand the test of rationalism and, vis-à-vis the novel, realism—the two fundamental parameters of the early novel. Bankim is credited not only with vernacularizing the literary language of Bengal, a movement that sparked similar vernacularizations of other regional literatures, but also writing narratives that for the first time represented real life as it is lived, i.e., realism.<sup>82</sup> And yet, his novels smack of the fabulous, with reference even to the religious epics that precede them. Consider this conversation between Mulk Raj Anand and Rabindranath Tagore, two of the most

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<sup>81</sup> This impulse finds analogues in the European Romantics, as M.H. Abrams discusses in his study *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1973 [1971]), whose title is taken from a section of Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987 [1834]).

<sup>82</sup> Alok Ray, "The Novelist on the Novel," *Bankimchandra Chatterjee: Essays in Perspective*, ed. Bhabatosh Chatterjee (New Delhi and Calcutta: Sahitya Akademi, 1994) 490-497. Ray writes, "...none can dispute the fact that his novels are all about real life." Bhudeb Chaudhuri, "Romance and Reality," *Bankimchandra Chatterjee: Essays in Perspective*, ed. Bhabatosh Chatterjee (New Delhi and Calcutta: Sahitya Akademi, 1994) 416-424. The passage reads: "It is particularly the novel, as Bankim also affirmed, which is most concerned with mundane existence in all its intricacy and aims at describing life truthfully, or realistically."

important successors of Bankim's path-breaking experiments in the novel. Here, they are discussing his much beloved<sup>83</sup> and most radical novel of revolution, *Anandamath* (1882), but they might as well be talking about his early novel, *Kapalkundala*, which will serve as my object of analysis in this chapter:

M.R.A.: 'Fable'—that is the right definition! It is not a novel in the English tradition! Most modern British novels are realistic! Reproducing characters of the mundane life, with their surface emotions! All naturalistic—from Fielding, Smollet, Richardson—from 18<sup>th</sup> Century downwards!

Tagore: Bankim Chandra's *sanyasis* are fabulous men, rather like characters in the *Mahabharata*—where God Krishna appears as a character among Princes, Princesses, sages, heroes, noblemen, evil courtiers, soldiers! So this novel is a legend of the struggle for freedom against John Company's extortionate rule of the 18<sup>th</sup> century...

M.R.A.: It is a recital then and not a novel!

Tagore: (After mature reflection) You are right! English novel is three dimensional. This novel of Bankim Chatterji is two dimensional—like our epic recitals.<sup>84</sup>

...

M.R.A.: ...I see how we unconsciously inherit our sense of values.<sup>85</sup>

...

Tagore: It has resonance as asked for in our old poetics—*Dhvani*! That makes *Anandamath* even more like an Indian fable of the *Mahabharata*.

M.R.A.: Maybe all Indian novels, even those not so well written romances, modeled on English novels, will tend to be part of a new *Mahabharata*.

Tagore: Inevitably!

M.R.A.: I find our collective subconscious comes through me as I write...

Tagore: You know how W.B. Yeats had urged Irish writers to go back to Gaelic legends and myths and accent! I share his ideas of inheriting the past—if it is made relevant for the present! Bankim Chandra is our master in this respect.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> This revolutionary novel spawned, even, India's national anthem, "Bande Mataram," meaning "Hail motherland."

<sup>84</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, "Mulk Raj Anand's Conversation with Rabindranath Tagore," *Anandamath*, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, trans. and adapt. from Bengali Basanta Koomar Roy (Delhi, Mumbai, and Hyderabad: Orient Paperbacks, 2006 [1882]) 12.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

There are a couple of remarkable and, for us, relevant issues broached in this exchange. First, it highlights the issue of renovating indigenous cultural patrimony, in this case an explicitly religious-literary one (the *Mahabharata* epic). This type of revival-and-reform endeavor, constitutive of nation-formation, is the trademark of postcolonial cultural renaissances, including the Irish, as Tagore aptly notes here. It is significant that such a literary revival should, in the Indian and Irish and so many more cases, be associated with enchantment—autochthonous myth, fable, epic, poetics and spiritualism.<sup>87</sup> This widespread phenomenon suggests that the very philosophy of enchantment is ideologically anti-colonial. And indeed that is what radical thinkers, from Blake to Gandhi to Bilgrami, have claimed.

Second, the conversation between Anand and Tagore illuminates the fabular quality of Bankim's novels, an assessment that runs against the grain of Bankim's contemporaries who noted them for precisely the opposite quality: their realism. How can a novelist be noted—by sound critics in both corners—for his realism on one hand and his epic fabulism on another? This chapter is an attempt to come to terms with these contradictory claims about Bankim's debatable realism, and to reach a philosophical conclusion about what this means for enchantment, and vice-versa. I believe that at the heart of this paradox lies an insight about the nature of mimesis and holy immanence in the Hindu tradition—an insight that will change the

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>87</sup> The German romantic revival, so significant to Lukács' thinking, was no different in terms of both nation-building and enchantment. In fact, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Kapalkundala*, *The Bankimchandra Omnibus: Volume I* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005 [1866]) echoes, in many ways, German romantic novellas. It is significant for my larger argument that these radical-enchantment movements across the world and modern history tended to be aware of and inspired by one another.

way we understand the entire realist novel tradition in India, an insight that depends on the continuity between the natural and the supernatural in Hindu cosmology. As I will show over the course of this chapter, this philosophy of enchanted mimesis underpins Bankim's sly slide into naturalism while maintaining reference to supernaturalism.

Anand and Tagore subtly conflate the fabulous with religion just as, by implication, they collapse naturalism with secularism. This chapter will probe these assumptions and complicate them by suggesting that Bankim is finally more naturalist than supernaturalist, but his conception of the real, instead of precluding the supernatural, makes it ever-more immanent so that finally secularism cannot hijack naturalism. My final conclusion, that naturalism/realism need not be thought of as mutually exclusive with enchantment, lays the groundwork for the novelistic tradition in India that follows in Bankim's wake.

While Bankim's naturalism is undeniable—no many-armed goddesses coming on the scene here!—his romance-like novels are peppered with *quasi*-supernatural elements reminiscent of his British exemplar Wilkie Collins and, even more significantly, reminiscent of the *Puranic* literature. However, if one studies them closely, virtually all of these moments would pass a rigorous test of naturalism.<sup>88</sup> The invisible hand of God makes itself immanent in the worldly world, not through any literal (physical) intervention, as in the earlier epics, but in the psychological projections and interpretive schemes (dreams, omens) of his devout characters, the animism of nature, the moral qualities of humans, and a strictly enforced dharmic scheme in which transgressions of one's divinely-ordained worldly duties meet with dire consequences.

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<sup>88</sup> Ray 492.

Bankim declared unambiguously, “the subject of [the novel] is man;”<sup>89</sup> on the other hand, he asks rhetorically, “What is wrong if a novel deals with the supernatural?”<sup>90</sup> According to critic Alok Ray, Bankim reconciles these statements by explaining the specific conditions under which the novelist may present the supernatural:

the novelist’s purpose is to delineate the inner workings of the mind, not to explain the attributes of matter, the supernatural interpretation of matter does not blur the portrait of the mind; rather it gives on many occasions clarity to the portrait... There is nothing wrong with the use of the supernatural in the ‘exposition of the mind,’ but one can object to the use of the supernatural when it violates the laws of nature.<sup>91</sup>

As we shall see, Bankim uses this ontology/epistemology distinction to keep his naturalist frame “clean” while he attributes all the supernatural content to the characters’ point of view. But I suspect that by importing supernatural elements, he is doing more than simply offering an “exposition of the mind”; he is also creating a bridge with the earlier supernatural literary tradition.

Moreover, Bankim’s naturalism is what I shall call an “enchanted naturalism,” unlike anything we find in the social naturalist novels of Europe at the time and of India much later. In his claim that the novelist’s purpose is “not to explain the attributes of matter,” he refuses a crass materialism that would be the keynote of the disenchanting worldview. Despite his admiration for John Stuart Mill and his scorn for the gross error in Hindu philosophy for not making observation and experiment its first principles,<sup>92</sup> Bankim was ambivalent about the extent of

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 491.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 492.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 492.

<sup>92</sup> Bhabatosh Chatterjee, “Introduction,” *Bankimchandra Chatterjee: Essays in Perspective*, ed. Bhabatosh Chatterjee (New Delhi and Calcutta: Sahitya Akademi, 1994) xvii-lxxxv. Chatterjee’s philosophical depiction of Bankim here is based on the latter’s essay, “The Study of Hindu Philosophy”, *Mookherjee’s Magazine*, May 1873.

empiricism's jurisdiction, particularly in the arena of the novel. This ambivalence came down to a recalcitrant refusal of atheism. From one side of his mouth, he valorizes the philosophy that takes natural law and observation as its first principles; from the other side of his mouth, he makes Godhead the first principle. Bhabatosh Chatterjee describes the contradictory ethe of this rationalist believer:

...[around 1875] he wrote an article entitled 'Mill, Darwin and Hindu philosophy' in which his chief tools of analysis are reason, natural law, and verifiable evidence; but the conclusion shows a completely different frame of mind. He discards the sharp-edged tools and places himself at the foot of the altar on which is installed a deity who is all-pervasive, incomprehensible and unknowable, the final cause of all phenomena. (He quotes Herbert Spencer's statement in a footnote: *The consciousness of an Inscrutable Power manifested to us through all phenomena has been ever clearer.*)<sup>93</sup>

Again, Bankim finds in the Samkhya and Nyaya Vedic schools the only redemption of the otherwise erroneous Hindu philosophical tradition: "...Law is recognized as supreme in the more advanced systems. No divine interposition, no especial providence, no miracle, not even the initial creative Act is recognized here."<sup>94</sup> And yet, according to many critics "the law of causation is often superseded by miracles" in Bankim's novels.<sup>95</sup> What follows is my attempt to parse out in detail Bankim's fraught relationship to naturalism and supernaturalism, in specific literary terms, and in terms of the religious and literary tradition he inherits. What I will propose by the end of this chapter is that Bankim struck a compromise between the two epistemologies, by rendering the supernatural ever-more immanent in the phenomenal world, by privileging a monistic God over pantheistic gods, and by presenting an *anima mundi*. All of this I shall place under the rubric of my neologism, "enchanted naturalism."

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<sup>93</sup> Bhabatosh Chatterjee xxvii.

<sup>94</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee quoted in *ibid.* xxvii.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* xxvii.

## ON HINDUISM AND THE BENGAL RENAISSANCE

If Bankim seems a clutch of philosophical contradictions, he was not alone. The Bengal Renaissance's ferment of ideas, debates, and artistic experiments emerged from the dizzying encounter between European intellectual currents rushing full-stream into an incompatible, long-standing Hindu tradition in Bengal. All the major thinkers of the time—and there were many—struggled to come to terms with their traditional and their colonial inheritance. This struggle played out most strikingly in the related realms of literature and religion. In India, the moment that founded the tradition of the enchanted novel, and the novel in general, was the Bengal Renaissance galvanized by Bankimchandra Chatterjee. As with so many Third World cultural renaissances, literary efflorescence converged with a paroxysm of values: the creation of a vernacular literary language and body of work, the shoring up of the spiritual sphere, and anti-colonial agitation mutually imbricated one another.

Religion was at the center of the debates on how Bengal could strengthen itself, moving toward greater autonomy and authenticity.<sup>96</sup> Beginning to lose ground on one end of the spectrum were the long-standing high brahminical orthodoxy and the populist, highly sensual, polytheistic Vaishnavist sect. In the middle was Ram Mohun Roy and his reformist Brahmo movement attempting to “cleanse” Hinduism of its orthodox authoritarian oppression (caste, sati, prohibition on widow remarriage) and its “irrationality” (the polytheism and superstition of folk Hinduism) by finding in the Vedic Upanishads an autochthonous basis for Unitarian monism.

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<sup>96</sup> Amiya P. Sen, *Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay: An Intellectual Biography* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008) 20-21.



Even further down the spectrum of radical, rationalist dissent were the atheistic and incendiary acolytes of Henry Derozio, a Hindu College professor. The Derozians, also known as the Young Bengal Movement, avidly imbibed contemporary currents in European thought and rejected anything that smacked of traditionalism and irrationalism in Bengali cultural life.<sup>97</sup>

The polymath Bankim—novelist, essayist, linguist, anthropologist, philosopher of science, theologian, and principal figure of the Bengal Renaissance—situated himself more or less in line with the Brahmos’ universal humanist religion, but with qualified and rather intellectual sympathies for Vaishnavist *bhakti*, the life-affirming relish of a personal, humanized God *with* qualities (*sāguna*).<sup>98</sup> Vis-à-vis *bhakti*, Bankim would gradually attempt to apotheosize the nation, installing it in lieu of pantheistic deities, thus humanizing and politicizing *bhakti*: his idea was that devotion to nation, to one’s fellow man, was equivalent to devotion to one’s personal god.<sup>99</sup> Bankim’s religious thinking shifted a number of times over the course of his lifetime, but always remained his central focus. In terms of the general trend of his thinking, his initial commitments to rationalism—which took inspiration from the Brahmos, from European Enlightenment thinkers, and from the agnostic Samkhya and Nyaya philosophical schools—became increasingly tempered by a respect for the lively indigenous traditions of the *Puranas*, the *Vedas*, and *bhakti*.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 78 and 86-87.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 86-87.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 81 and 91.

He increasingly came to feel that rationalism and Comtean positivism were somewhat inadequate because they generally omitted matters of God and religion;<sup>101</sup> likewise, he qualified his approval for Mill's utilitarianism because he believed it tended too much toward individualism and crass materialism.<sup>102</sup> So we see how indigenous enchantment, for Bankim, mitigates a thoroughly disenchanting ideological inheritance. The trouble is that these two normatively opposed ethes are not easy to reconcile, and he did not, in fact, have an easy time reconciling them, as we will see in his novels. Just as he felt the need to qualify and supplement European rationalism with God, he came to feel that Samkhya and Nyaya, the ancient Vedic equivalent to rationalism, needed to be supplemented by *bhakti*. Though he admired the skepticism of Hindu theological schools that had the courage to doubt the very existence of God, he found them too abstract and negative.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, *bhakti*, devotion to a personal God replete with qualities, was more concrete, affirmative, and accessible. The indigenous and populist traditions were important to him not only because they made a place for God, but also because they could be a source of strength in cultural autonomy. He felt that his renovation of Hinduism would be moot if it could not somehow stay connected to the widely-beloved folk traditions. What distinguishes Bankim to this day, though, was his tendency toward an indispensable rationalism in a culture where God was the very sky above. As his intellectual biographer notes, "The tendency to measure religious thought and practice against notions of

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 76.

reason and utility never deserted Bankim even at a time when he began to grow somewhat skeptical of these.”<sup>104</sup>

It is surprising indeed that critics rarely study in depth the intricate relationship between his religious thought and his novelistic enterprise, instead merely acknowledging *en passant* the one in a study of the other. This is even more surprising given that Bankim was explicit about the fact that his endeavor aimed to relate the new technology of the novel to his overarching religious project.<sup>105</sup> Thus, his novels must be taken together with his writings on religion and philosophy, chief among which are his *Letters on Hinduism* (1882-1887) and his philosophical-theological books *Krishna Charitra* (1886), in which Lord Krishna is rendered an ideal man rather than a deity, and the unfinished *Dharmatattva* (1888), which relates the praxis of Hindu dharma to the concepts of agency and humanism. Amiya Sen and others claim that Bankim’s religious treatises, which became his primary focus in the years before his death, were the fruit of seeds sown much earlier.<sup>106</sup> I believe some of those seeds, and the complexities and contradictions inhering in them, can be discovered in his novels—even his earliest ones, such as *Kapalkundala* (1866) and *The Poison Tree* (1873). If rationalism never lies outside Bankim’s peripheral vision, the same can be said for religion. Even in Bankim’s many sociological and scientific essays, Comte, Mill, Seeley, Renan, Buckle, and Darwin are considered always with an eye toward the Hinduism Bankim sought to renovate.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 76; Das Gupta, “A Religion of Man,” *Bankimchandra Chatterjee: Essays in Perspective*, ed. Bhabatosh Chatterjee (New Delhi and Calcutta: Sahitya Akademi, 1994) 196.

<sup>105</sup> Sen 19.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 25-26; Chatterjee xxv.

The *central* tension of both Bankim's religious concerns and his novels turns on his simultaneous fascination with European ideologies of disenchantment—utilitarianism, empiricism, positivism, secularism—and his commitment to the indigenous traditions and philosophies of Hindu enchantment. The Bengal Renaissance cleared out a construction zone with rich if conflicting materials out of which to build the edifice of the modern Bengali sensibility. Chief among these materials was, of course, the truly *novel* novel form, which allowed Bankim to indigenize those elements of the Enlightenment tradition he accepted, and to vet out those he did not. To reiterate, in my view the criterion that determines this selection process is compatibility with religious enchantment. Not surprisingly, then, his novels are generally marked by psychological realism with mythic touches.

It is hard to overestimate the *gravitas* of Bankim and the Bengal Renaissance religious reformists' efforts to update Hinduism. And yet, this moment was not unique: it had many precedents in a long history of accommodation and revision in a religious tradition remarkable for its flexibility and multivalence. From the early days of the *Rg Veda* through the liturgical *Vedas*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Vedanta*, the *Puranas*, and all the many permutations of orthodox Hinduism, the religion has radically refashioned itself time and time again, coalescing seemingly contradictory strains in an effort to bring into the fold antithetical outsiders and marginal yet threatening practices. The Bengal Renaissance was no different.<sup>108</sup> We might see Bankim's

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<sup>108</sup> Rammohun Roy was "the first modern Indian to have used the term 'Hinduism' to collectively describe a wide range of religious beliefs and practices associated with the Hindus. Evidently, Rammohun was trying to forge together a pan-Indian community of Hindus, united in thought and deed as against local communities often separated by religious sectarianism." Sen 20-21. Bankim, whose impulse seems similarly assimilative, also refers to "Hinduism" as if it were (or should be), a unified praxis. For that reason, when I use the term "Hindu," it is not to suggest that I am not aware of the myriad, often-contradictory strains and histories within this modern designation, but to correspond to the term and usage relevant to the milieu and texts I treat here.

*heteroglossic* novelistic endeavor as continuous with this religious revisionist tradition of containing critique. Indeed, Vedic literary history indicates that the sorcery, animism, and instrumentalist ‘charms’ of the *Rg Veda*’s primitive Aryans were subsequently repackaged and “dignified” into the brahminical sacrificial prayers and the more heavily metaphorized supernatural deities of the liturgical *Vedas*.<sup>109</sup> Likewise, as that subsequently orthodox sacrificial tradition began to come under fire from skeptics and philosophers outside the brahminical fold,<sup>110</sup> it internalized the outsider critique, going so far as to include in the Vedic tradition even the Samkhya school that challenged the very existence of God, not to mention the ritual practices of sacrifice.<sup>111</sup>

Taken as a whole, the *Vedas* span everything from black magic spells to sacrificial science and rigorous Vedantic philosophical meditation on the nature of being. The God/gods that populate the *Vedas*, India’s—and indeed the world’s—first literature, are equally sundry: the early Aryans’ pantheistic gods (e.g., *Surya* the sun god, *Vayu* the wind god, *Indra*, etc.) representing elements of nature are then gradually superceded, but not displaced, by the orthodox supernatural trinity of *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, and *Brahma*, depicted in mythopoetic and heavily metaphorized, hyperbolic anthropomorphic form;<sup>112</sup> and finally, God is cast in monistic terms as the abstract creative principle immanent in all life—*Brahman-cum-Atman* (or, Godhead-cum-

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<sup>109</sup> Maurice Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature, Volume I: Introduction, Veda, Epics, Purānas, and Tantras* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2003 [1981]) 68, 142-3, 156, 114-116 and 182 especially.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 210.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 220. N.B.: Bankim was very drawn to *samkhya*, though not without reservation.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 68.

soul).<sup>113</sup> In this chapter, I want specifically to contend that Bankim incorporates a European-inspired privileging of naturalism (problematically read: rationalism) into the religiously-enchanted worldview in much the same spirit that the *Vedas* assimilated monism as an internal critique. As with monism in the *Vedas*, Bankim's naturalism does not so much displace as it does critically augment and absorb earlier modes of religiosity. The final effect of this containment strategy is to establish continuities rather than breaks with the past, to preserve and renovate rather than militate against the enchanted worldview.

### **BANKIM'S 'NATURAL SUPERNATURALISM'**

Particularly in his early novel *Kapalkundala*, we can detect Bankim's strenuous effort to contain earlier modes, like animism, pantheism, and tantrism,<sup>114</sup> within a newer, somewhat

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 234.

<sup>114</sup> This containment includes even earlier modes to which he was hostile, such as tantrism. I am not suggesting that he endorsed each and every one of the Hindu sects and modes he represents in his novel, but that he represents the range within his naturalist, rationalist supra-ordinating frame, so as ultimately to allow certain Hindu praxes to prevail over others (not unlike the *Vedas'* *modus operandi* of incorporation and subordination of threatening sects). One mode that unarguably is meant to be vanquished within his novel is tantrism. He was such an enemy of tantrism that his encounter with a harassing kapalik in Hijli, the template for the seaside scene in *Kapalkundala*, inspired him to write the novella. He denounced tantrism not only in this novel, but in his polemical writings. As part of a famous, lengthy, and fiery journalistic exchange with the British evangelist critic of Hinduism W. Hastie in 1882, Bankim makes an emphatic clarification in a letter addressed to another *Statesman* reader who has entered into the fray, K.M. Banerjea: "What the influence of Tantrikism has been on the people of Bengal, of Assam, and of Orissa, I do not propose to discuss here. I do not say that the influence has been beneficial. I can assure Dr. Banerjea that he cannot be more emphatic in the condemnation of Tantrikism than I am, and that I have in no respect departed from the view I put forth and illustrated in *Kapala Kundala* in regard to the morality of that form of Hinduism. True Hinduism and Tantrikism are as much opposed to each other as light and darkness, and I say with as much sincerity as he does, that let it never be assumed that Tantrikism is the general religion of the Hindus; no one, I believe, has ever thought of making an assumption. Let Tantrikism perish—but let it not perish unstudied. The study of the darkest errors of humanity yields lessons as valuable as that of Truth itself. And what is history, if it is not the history of human errors?" (Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Bankim Rachanavali, Collection of English Works, Volume 3* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1998 [1969]) 224.) Indeed, his novel attempts, through an imaginative forum, precisely that sort of study of human error: rather than ignoring a sect whose practices he disapproves, he invites it into his text, only to forcefully denounce it.

antithetical epistemological inheritance from the ‘outside’, that of the European Enlightenment. In fact, I suspect that he chose the novel form precisely for its capacity to juggle multiple valences:<sup>115</sup> whereas the *Vedas* accomplish this in an expository mode, Bankim’s novel juggles *narrative* registers and finally passes a critical judgment on different modes of religiosity. In this pioneering novel—probably the most significant novel of its day—jostle the “primitive” practice of tantric human sacrifice, animism of nature in both primitive and modern modes, superstition, orthodox brahminical ritual observance, secular Islam, a novel (in both senses of the word) elucidation of modern dharma, rationalist exhortation, and a generally naturalist yet enchanted narrative frame. Bankim’s effort to establish continuities between newer and older modes can be identified most strikingly in his natural-supernatural continuum.

*Kapalkundala*, only his second novel in Bengali,<sup>116</sup> is significantly his most romance-like—significant because this novel singularly creates a bridge between the epic tradition he inherits and the more social-realist novels that will follow. We might consider that bridge a crossover point, or *tirtha*,<sup>117</sup> between the other world and this world. If, as I will suggest over the course of this dissertation, the novel writ large in India functions like a *tirtha*, then *Kapalakundala* would be the *ur-tirtha*, for it is the one that stands not just at the border between

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<sup>115</sup> Bakhtin 11-12.

<sup>116</sup> The first, *Durgeshnandini* (1865), was a watershed event in launching the vernacularizing movement. Bankim’s only prior novel was *Rajmohun’s Wife* (1864), written in English and generally considered a failure, in large part for its linguistic awkwardness and unfitness to subject. After he switched to Bengali, he deliberately stuck with it throughout his career. The regional novel tradition that began with Bankim (*Durgeshnandini* and *Kapalkundala*, especially) set in motion a nation-wide trend in various other major language-groups. Indeed, it was with the regional novel that the novel genre first flourished in India. See Joshi, *In Another Country*, 31.

<sup>117</sup> Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983 [1982]) 34.

the supernatural realm and the natural world, but also at the temporal cusp of an era more inclined toward supernaturalism and one more oriented toward naturalism.

The onus of making the literary transition from the one orientation to the other fell almost single-handedly to Bankim.<sup>118</sup> Bankim arrives in the wake of the Sanskrit high literary tradition which was embedded in the larger Hindu tradition, though it contained both secular and sacred literature: the Vedic literature, Sanskrit secular poetics and aesthetics, Buddhist and Jainist literature, and Kavya literature.<sup>119</sup> Through his fiction, the pioneering Bankim sought to vernacularize high literature, to bring it down to earth. It would be hard to overestimate the gravity of Bankim's deliberately-undertaken task in this watershed shift in consciousness. One might call this moment India's "secular turn," but the term secular is not just inadequate but misleading. This is because the very effort of not just Bankim, but also subsequent novelists like Tagore and political visionaries like Gandhi, was to retain and revise the religious cosmology that would keep the fallout of a fully disenchanting—read: exclusively secular—worldview at bay. Although Bankim was committed to the endeavor of preserving the secular elements within Hinduism, that endeavor was not mutually exclusive with his endeavor to preserve religious elements within it that he felt should be cleared out of the dross of some of the less savory ones. Indeed, to make such a sharp secular/sacred distinction is to impose our own Enlightenment

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<sup>118</sup> See footnote 79 for a sense of Bankim's pioneering role and moment in Indian letters. Ray 490: Bankim himself identifies *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* (The Spoilt Son of Rich Parents) as the first novel in Bengali, based on its realism. But, as Gangopadhyay 393 notes, Bankim was the first and only novelist to take on the new genre in a sustained endeavor, without many resources of vernacular language or fictional practice as yet in place.

<sup>119</sup> Though a bit more oblique to Bankim's purview, Persian literature and quasi-secular histories existed in Bengal as well, but these also were permeated by the supernatural.



split-think, for in the Hindu tradition, both secular and sacred elements sat alongside each other harmoniously; and both were enchanted.<sup>120</sup>

Here, I would like to rehearse quickly the tri-partite distinction of “natural-supernaturalism,” as Bilgrami formulates it.<sup>121</sup> Both the secular and the sacred elements of the Hindu tradition ought to be thought of as enchanted, or even “supernatural,” in terms of Bilgrami’s third distinction: that which science does not study. If the Hindu sacred includes both natural and supernatural divinity (the pantheistic and the polytheistic), then the latter qualifies as “supernatural” by all three definitions, whereas the former by the first and the third. In any case, all the Indian traditional versions of the sacred and the secular are somehow enchanted. Science cannot study the properties of the world described by the (debatably) secular<sup>122</sup> classical Sanskrit poet Kalidasa any more than it can the immanence of Vishnu in the

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<sup>120</sup> See Introduction. As well, Bankim himself points out admiringly that the poetry of the pantheistic primitive Indians that can be found in the Vedas mixed secular and sacred topics. But all of this poetry was marked by a “strong religious instinct” (*Bankim Rachanavali*, 157). Bankim is always eager to relate earlier stages of Hinduism (pantheism) with later ones (Puranic polytheism). In his anthropological research on Hindu festivals and rituals, he avers that the latter originated as a response to nature: crops, nature’s fertility, astrology. Elements of nature were named by their different aspects and worshipped as deities, deities that become nominal vestiges when they become co-opted by the later Puranic deities whose iconography gives clues to their original representation of nature (*Bankim Rachanavali*, 92-93). Such observations and inclinations in Bankim lead me to conclude that his desire was not to make a sharp break between the sacred and the secular, or between the past and the present, but to establish continuities between them. He goes so far as to suggest that the primitive Hindus’ poetry and worship and the most sophisticated schools of Hindu philosophy are both, in very different ways, responses to the “mighty energies of nature” (*Bankim Rachanavali* 145).

<sup>121</sup> See Introduction.

<sup>122</sup> Whether Kalidasa (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.), a major influence on Bankim, is a secular poet or not is debatable. Although he was a court poet, his poetry and plays were based on Hindu philosophy and the Puranas. Moreover, he as a fierce devotee of the Goddess (debatably either Kali or Saraswati). In fact, there is a legend that on the brink of suicide he prayed to his goddess who then bestowed on him the wit that won him his peerless stature as the greatest Sanskrit poet. Even his most famous poem, “Meghaduta” (“Cloud-messenger), whose subject is ostensibly secular, is thoroughly enchanted. In the poem, an exiled king convinces a passing cloud to take a message to his wife thousands on Mount Kailasa. He convinces the cloud by describing all the beautiful sights the cloud will see en route. This apostrophizing and personifying of nature, not unlike that of the European Romantic poets as Bankim himself points out (*Bankim Rachanavali*, 155), indicates the degree of intimacy between man and nature, the very hallmark of enchantment. “Meghaduta” bred a whole genre of messenger poems in which the speaker addresses

salagrama stone or in an icon. Indeed, this was precisely why Bankim moved away from the Comteanism that initially compelled him: it could not possibly countenance the dimension of value in the world. Bankim was explicit in naming these dimensions as religious, but even the secularism of the Sanskrit tradition that he sought to preserve was enchanted in the terms that develop after Europe's Scientific Revolution.

Despite the thorough-going enchantment of the world Bankim sought to preserve, this crucial juncture in the Indian worldview—its shift from a supernatural to a natural orientation—had no precedent. But as radical as Bankim's task was in effecting this transition, he pursued it with an eye toward establishing continuities rather than harsh breaks with tradition. In contradistinction to the *deus absconditus* cosmology of deistic post-Enlightenment Christianity, the Hindu tradition envisaged a highly permeable membrane between the supernatural and natural realms. Here, humans and gods occupy the same realm(s), as in the ancient Greek cosmology which Lukács posits as his reference point for enchantment.<sup>123</sup> In all three of the major Vedic phases, the supernatural world is humanized, and, reciprocally, the worldly world is immanent with the divine: in early Hinduism, the natural elements were personified and invoked instrumentally in relation to devotees; in later orthodox Hinduism, the deities were given exaggerated anthropomorphic form, and were often storied as avatars come down to earth to intervene in human affairs, and sometimes seen as spontaneously self-manifesting in nature as *svayambhu* forms (*lingam*-shaped stones for Siva, and *salagrama* stones for Vishnu); in the

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some element of nature to convey his message to his beloved. That a supposedly secular poet borrowed freely from religious mythology, much like the modern Bengali poets like Michael Mudhusadhan Datta whose "Meghana Badh" adapts material from *The Ramayana*, is proof that the hard-and-fast secular/sacred split did not exist in the Indian literary tradition.

<sup>123</sup> Lukács 29 especially and 31.

Vedanta, the transcendental Brahman was held to be manifest in the souls of all living things (the entire natural world, including of course, humans).<sup>124</sup>

Bankim is, thus, only underscoring the continuities between natural-supernatural that were already there.<sup>125</sup> What is significant is that he does it in new and very literary ways, for a new, post-“rationalist” era. What this requires is a shifting of the emphasis to the world of the here-and-now immanent with the holy, rather than focusing—as in the Puranic tradition—on the gods’ goings on in the Empyrean (albeit an Empyrean that has considerable traffic with the human world). One will not find in Bankim’s novels any mention of a pantheistic deity coming down to intervene in human matters<sup>126</sup> as they do in the religious epics, but one will find characters who still understand god(s) as acting in such ways. Bankim’s effort, I believe, is to make the supernatural ever more immanent, and, in doing so, to shift the readers’ orientation of faith. Faced, as mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Indians were, with the choice between an antiquated supernaturalism and a deistic or atheistic modern rationalism,<sup>127</sup> people might have chosen the latter. For all his attraction to the latter, Bankim was well aware of the disenchanting dangers of such a worldview; hence his foregone commitment to religion. To his anglophilic contemporaries, he poses a challenge:

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<sup>124</sup> Winternitz 233.

<sup>125</sup> See footnote 120.

<sup>126</sup> Bankim’s aversion to direct supernatural intervention in the world can be seen in his admiration for the advanced Hindu philosophical systems, such as the Sankhya and the Nyaya schools, where “Law [of causation] is recognized as supreme...No divine interposition, no especial providence, no miracle, not even the initial creative Act is recognized here.” (*Bankim Rachanavali* 148).

<sup>127</sup> Sen 10, 20 and 22.

But the spiritual nature of man abhors a vacuum. Between our various *isms* [Deism, Theism, Brahmoism, Comteanism], the Hindu code of personal and social ethics has been well-nigh wholly repealed, and its precepts are universally seen and felt to be more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Where is our new code of morality?...Where is the man amongst us who in personal purity, in meekness, in self-forgetfulness, in genuine non-political patriotic feeling, in tenderness for the least sentient thing, in lifelong and systematic devotion to knowledge and virtue for their own sake, can stand a moment's comparison with the better order of minds nurtured in the cradle of Hinduism? Let the tree be judged by its fruit.<sup>128</sup>

In his presentation of the “better order of minds nurtured in the cradle of Hinduism,” Bankim delineates many of the key tenets of enchantment and recognizes that they are consequentially lacking in the European schools of thought that were beginning to sweep educated Bengal. I believe that it was to stave off this disenchanting outcome that Bankim sought a middle path: an “enchanted naturalism” that would be the best of both worlds. This chapter looks at scenarios in which Bankim pushes enchantment to the limits of naturalism. In both cases, we will see how Bankim, *pace* Bakhtin, takes advantage of the novel in its supra-ordinating and “relativizing power to take up and display the discourse of others,”<sup>129</sup> and in doing so, to preserve multiple modes of religiosity, and finally to make a critical comment on their relative appropriateness to the modern epoch. A defining characteristic of Bankim’s novels is that the prose often strains toward—without quite tipping into—supernaturalism, thus effecting a bridge between the new naturalist genre and the often supernaturally-inflected religious tradition that precedes it.

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<sup>128</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee, “Confessions of a Young Bengal,” *Bankim Rachanavali* 141. In this essay as well as his essay “Vedic Literature” (*Bankim Rachanavali* 149-169), Bankim laments the estrangement of the educated Bengalis from their religious roots. He beseeches his contemporaries not to abandon the best parts of Hinduism. Notably, his preservationist impulse is matched equally with his editing impulse. As strong an advocate for Hinduism as he is, he sees it as his epoch’s duty “to separate the gold from the dross” that over time had accumulated in the religion.

<sup>129</sup> Jonathan Arac, “Imperial Eclecticism in *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Man*: Literature in a Postcolonial Empire,” *boundary 2* Fall 2010; 37: 156.

As Priya Joshi reminds us, Bankim’s middle class Bengali readership would have been steeped in the Hindu epics and subsequently drawn to the foreign analogue that most resonated with them, namely the sensationalist, anti-realist pulp fiction of Reynolds and Corelli.<sup>130</sup> According to Joshi, the Indian readers’ taste for supernaturalism ran so deep that they abjured the canonical British fiction—the Great Books—in which they were forcibly inculcated, as per Macaulay’s 1835 *Minute on Indian Education*.<sup>131</sup> With Macaulay’s infamous claim that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia”<sup>132</sup> came his prescription of one such shelf for the moral education of the irrational heathens. But Macaulay’s attempt to use British canonical literature to create a “class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”<sup>133</sup> failed at the level of literary preferences. Joshi’s empirical study shows us that the middle-class Indians trained in the classics of British high realism nevertheless rejected it in their autonomous consumption,<sup>134</sup> preferring instead low-brow British melodramatic fiction, Puranic

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<sup>130</sup> Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel In India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 89. Here, I adhere to Joshi’s designations of realism and anti-realism, though I will soon debunk them in my discussion of mimetic enchantment.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

<sup>132</sup> Thomas Macaulay, “Minute on Indian Education,” *Selected Writings: Thomas Babington Macaulay*, ed. John Clive and Thomas Pinney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) 241.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* 243.

<sup>134</sup> Joshi claims that realist novels “had such trouble putting down roots in Indian soil where the different and often contesting discursive fields of orality and manuscript exerted their own volatile influence and claims upon the consumers of print” (Joshi 39). From a less material-cultural standpoint, the epistemology of realism had to compete with premodern epistemes that tended to find analogues in melodrama instead (*Ibid.* 88).

literature translated into vernaculars,<sup>135</sup> and finally, as we shall see, new Indian novels that had not altogether abandoned supernaturalism. What's more, the subversive, unofficial reading preferences of the Indian middle-class determined nascent novelistic production in India, according to Joshi.<sup>136</sup> Bankim writes within his readers' "shared narrative universe" forged by the epics and British pulp fiction, taking his readers one step further in the continuum from premodern to modern forms.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 88-89. Joshi recognizes a "symbolic and structural affinity" between this British melodramatic pulp fiction and Hindu epics: "excruciatingly complex plottedness, ...community, ...didacticism, ...[and] coincidence [which] underscored and affirmed the existence of a divine hand involved in human affairs."

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. 136-137. Bankim's intentionality in building a bridge between the supernatural religious literature and the new naturalist form of the novel is difficult to ascertain. His commitments to both Hinduism and secularism shift in emphasis from one essay to the next. Generally speaking, it seems that he was attracted to a Hinduism shorn of its "excesses," such as tantrism, primitive fetishism (which he distinguishes from the worship of consecrated Hindu icons). Although he never inveighs against supernaturalism, and he certainly respects the Puranic tradition, as a worthy part of the Hindu tradition, his admiration for the hard logic of the advanced schools of Hindu philosophy and European philosophy and science, his zeal for secular Sanskrit poetics, his and his generation's desire to recover for modern literature the "secular literature in Sanskrit" of the post-Maurya age, his insistence that the Vedas included secular topics, a rather intellectual appreciation for the normally sensuous Vaishnavism, and his insistence that Hindu worship need not involve icons might lead one to think he would have been less than zealous about the supernatural elements of Hinduism. That said, he has an enormous admiration for the poetic imagination of the Hindus, who gradually personified nature into ever more sophisticated deities, he publicly defended *darśan* and icon-worship, and he was fiercely devoted to his household deity, personal God: all of these dimensions suggest his sympathy for the supernaturalism in Hinduism. His insistence on the commingling of secular sacred topics in the early Vedas, his anthropological tracing of Hindu iconography, ritual, and festivals to non-religious responses to nature, his constant connection making between earlier and later stages of Hinduism, and his epigraphs form both secular and sacred literatures within the Hindu tradition, cut both ways. In other words, his commitments were ambiguous, and at times inconsistent. There are as many critics arguing for his secular impulses as there are those who argue for his religious ones. I am arguing both. As I already elaborated in both my Introduction and earlier in Chapter 1, I am open to all three definitions of supernaturalism, à la Bilgrami: the transcendent, the religious, and that which science does not study. There is no question that all that Bankim cherished falls at least under the third definition. Even his aesthetic theory would qualify, for it discusses beauty and spirit in ways that science cannot countenance; and he was mightily aware of that inadequacy of science. My own sense is that for him, as for fellow writers of his period (e.g., Michael Madhusudan Datta) and even his poetic forefathers (e.g., his much-admired Kalidasa) in the classical period (around the time of Christ) who have been described as "secular" writers, supernaturalism was such a strong element in the cultural backcloth given the dominance of the Hindu Puranic tradition, that those elements both wittingly and unwittingly trickled into the writing. I identify religious inheritances and premonitions in even his early novels that adumbrate his deliberate and well-known neo-Puranic turn in the 1880s. Critics usually consider his early novels as distinct from the expository writing and later novels written after his religious turn. I, however, notice premonitions of this later turn, as early as 1866 in *Kapalkundala*.

## ***KAPALKUNDALA***

Bankim’s striving toward the supernatural is never more pronounced than in his most romance-like and possibly his most beloved novel, *Kapalkundala*.<sup>138</sup> This mesmerizing tale set in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century features a forest nymph, the titular heroine of the novel, who encounters Nabakumar, an urban castaway imperiled by her adoptive father, a menacing kapalik intent on sacrificing him to his patron deity Kali. Kapalkundala rescues Nabakumar from this threat, and he does the same for her—provisionally—by marrying her and taking her with him to the city of Saptagram, Bengal. En route, the pair is momentarily separated, and he encounters a ravishing woman who, unbeknownst to him in her new persona as the libertine Muslim courtesan Lutfunnissa, turns out to be his banished, caste-fallen first wife, Padmavati, who sets her sights on reclaiming him. The novel then shuttles between Lutfunnissa’s secular storyline—mainly flashbacks depicting all her intrigue in attempting to capture via seduction the most powerful female position in the Mughal empire—and Kapalkundala’s unsuccessful transition into orthodox Hindu urban society.

Except where it dovetails with the enchanted storyline of Kapalkundala, I will not be treating Lutfunnissa’s secular storyline here, as it is the subordinated plotline of the novel<sup>139</sup> and,

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<sup>138</sup> Gangopadhyay 394. Gangopadhyay claims that *Kapalkundala* set a new standard and taste for Bengali readers, and a successful style and language for Bankim. Whereas Bankim had struggled to find the right pitch in his second novel, *Durgeshnandini* (not to mention his first novel, an English-language failure), it was all too imitative of Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. With *Kapalkundala*, however, Bankim found his tongue and his originality: “He was no longer ‘transplanting the English novel into Indian literature,’ he had given birth to the truly Indian novel.”

<sup>139</sup> There is a much longer story to be told about the symbolizing of the Indian nation in the form of the woman. More specifically, woman-as-nation has been cast in terms of the juxtaposed feminine archetypes of the Muslim courtesan (as metonym even for the Urdu language) and the Hindu virgin (as metonym for Sanskrit). These symbolic feminine foils have problematically underwritten much of the rhetoric of the Hindu nation (Hindutva). I will tell this story in the longer book version of this dissertation, using Kapalkundala and Lutfunnissa as two alternatives, and finally failed, metonyms for the new Indian nation.

because thoroughly secular, not germane to my major concern. However, I would like to note two things here: 1) Bankim uses the secular narrative, grounded in some historical fact, to confer a certain reality-effect on his other, more enchanted storyline; and 2) he presumptuously equates Islam with secularism in a move that reflects his dismissal of Indian Islam (very unlike, say, E.M. Forster's treatment of its religious ethe), a prejudice that stirred much controversy in Bankim's contemporaneous critical reception.<sup>140</sup>

The story continues apace until the secular and the enchanted storylines converge, with Lutfunnissa plotting Kapalkundala's death with the kapalik, now enraged at his adoptive daughter for stealing away his human sacrifice in the forms of both herself and Nabakumar. Meanwhile, Nabakumar has become suspicious of Kapalkundala's infidelity, given her general disregard for social custom and her tendency to wander in the forest alone, an erotically inflected and socially prohibited practice in mainstream middle-class Bengali society at the time. The kapalik manages to convince him that the cross-dressed Brahmin-impersonator (Lutfunnissa) whom Kapalkundala meets in the forest for information on her death-plot is really her lover. The kapalik thus enlists the jealous husband in the murder of Kapalkundala once Lutfunnissa refuses to participate in it, opting merely to banish her rival by enlightening her about the death-plot and financially incentivizing her to leave her husband. The bewildered Kapalkundala, who has been looking to signs in her dreams and in her visions of her mother-Goddess Kali, finally decides to sacrifice her life to her jealous patron deity. With little investment and pleasure in human society, she hardly bats an eye in deciding to offer herself to death. The novel ends in a cremation site where the kapalik is preparing to murder a compliant Kapalkundala with

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<sup>140</sup> See Sen 107-109, for a discussion of Bankim's debatable anti-Muslim sentiments.



Nabakumar as his accomplice. It is at this point that the misunderstanding is cleared up, and Nabakumar realizes Kapalkundala was never unfaithful, but was rather meeting with her covetous co-wife. But this is not a moment of redemption. Finally, a river crashes into the precipice on which she is standing, presumably drowning her. Nabakumar jumps in after her to save her, but he too disappears. Thus ends the novella.

The eponymous heroine exemplifies a hyperbolic version of the enchanted attitude, while her form itself embodies the permeable threshold between the natural and the supernatural realms. A mesmerizing forest nymph, she is so intimate with nature that she stands almost as a metonym for it;<sup>141</sup> yet she is also described in mythopoetic terms evocative of the depictions of goddesses in the religious epics. Moreover, she has compelling dreams and visions of these goddesses, with whom she has an uncannily intimate relationship. Her benevolent personal deity, Goddess Bhavani, as well as the more terrifying face of the mother-Goddess, Goddess Bhairavi, leave her in nature and in her dreams the putative “signs” of their divine intervention. Kapalkundala takes these omens to heart, allowing such supernatural traces in the natural world to guide her through her awkward and finally fateful social life.

Kapalkundala, with her obscure origins, seems to emerge out of nowhere, much like the Hindu goddesses who grace the earth in their short-lived human guises, or the various strata of quasi-celestial beings, like the *apsaras*, beautiful female angels who move between earthly and celestial realms, making mischief with mortal and immortal male hearts alike. When our heroine makes her breathtaking initial appearance in the novel, she seems to emerge from the ether, a

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<sup>141</sup> Apurba Kumar Ray, “History and the Romantic Imagination,” *Bankimchandra Chatterjee: Essays in Perspective*, ed. Bhabatosh Chatterjee (New Delhi and Calcutta: Sahitya Akademi, 1994) 513.

liminal figure for a liminal hour: “At once, [Nabakumar] beheld an extraordinary apparition. At the edge of the wave-resonant ocean, on the sandy shore, in the blurred glow of twilight, stood and exquisite female figure!”<sup>142</sup> The description goes on:

Outlined against her heavy tresses—her thick, unbraided locks, coiled like snakes, cascading down to her ankles—her body glowed like a jewel, a picture framed by its backdrop. Though partially concealed by the profusion of her hair, her countenance glowed like moonlight glimpsed through a gap in the clouds. Her large eyes were calm, tender and intense, yet bright as the gentle moonbeams that played upon the ocean’s<sup>143</sup> breast. Her shoulders were completely obscured from view by her cascading hair, but the unblemished beauty of her arms was partially visible. Her body was free of ornament. The magic of her beauty was indescribable. The enchanting effect of her complexion, resembling the gleam of the crescent moon, offset by the tangled webs of her dark hair, had to be viewed against the backdrop of that wave-resonant seashore, *in the twilight glow*, for its true impact to be felt. Suddenly encountering *this divine figure* in the midst of such a wilderness, Nabakumar stood transfixed.<sup>144</sup>

Here is Bankim’s own English translation of those lines from his famous sea-side scene:

Turning his back to the sea, he saw a magnificent vision. There stood on the sandy beach of the deep-sounding sea, dimly seen in the twilight, the figure of a woman such as he had never seen before. Her cloud-like tresses confined by no hand, flowed down below her knee in long serpentine curls. Her face was partly hidden, but it shone like the moon through a break in the clouds. There was a mild and subdued light in her large eyes. Her expression was grave: but her face beamed on him like the moon now newly risen over the surface of the deep.<sup>145</sup>

How different is this description, really, from the many we find in the invocational mantras to the various goddesses of the Hindu pantheon? Compare the description of Kapalkundala to that of Goddess Kamala,<sup>146</sup> one of the ten aspects or deity-manifestations of Devi, the Mother-Goddess worshipped by Kapalkundala herself:

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<sup>142</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee 15.

<sup>143</sup> From now on, when I gloss lines that involve the word “ocean” I will replace it with “sea,” which more directly corresponds to the Bengali word Bankim used: “*sagar*” or “*samudra*.” Thanks to Partha Chatterjee for pointing out that distinction between original and translation.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 15-16, italics mine.

<sup>145</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Bankim Rachanavali*, 121.

<sup>146</sup> Kamala is usually thought of as a version of Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. This might seem like an odd choice for a comparison to a forest nymph so removed from society. However, Lakshmi, as Bankim himself points out, was originally associated with the fertility of nature (i.e., wealth, in terms of natural bounty) in the early

She has a beautiful golden complexion...Her complexion is like the brightness of lightning. Her breasts are firm and heavy and are decorated with garlands of pearls. She is resplendent like the rising sun and wears a bright moon disc on her brow...She is bent down due to the weight of her large breasts, and in her hands she holds two lotuses and two bunches of rice shoots. She has three lotuslike eyes.<sup>147</sup>

This comparison indicates that Bankim borrows heavily from the Hindu tradition, not just in this description, in the many chapter epigraphs from the *Puranas* and medieval Sanskrit poetry, and in his naming of Kapalakundala (borrowed from *Malatimadhav*, a classical Sanskrit verse drama),<sup>148</sup> but also in his very designation of his heroine as “this divine figure.”

While some may see Bankim’s description of Kapalkundala as borrowing not so much from the religious iconography of the *Puranas* as from the *kavya* tradition of secular Sanskrit poetry, it must be said that the feminine descriptions in the latter were strikingly similar to the sacred ones, again suggesting proximity rather than the distance between the secular and sacred literatures within the Sanskrit tradition. For example, when discussing modern Bengali poets who write in the classical Sanskrit tradition, Bankim disparages them for unimaginatively recycling the standard tropes of classical Sanskrit poets such as his much-admired Kalidasa: “No lovely woman in the pages of these writers has any other form of loveliness than a moon face,

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days of Hinduism. Hence her continued ritual association with the harvest. As Bankim observes, the original deities were merely names given to elements of nature whose fearsome power the early Aryans worshipped. Those names became deities, and then much later, those deities were absorbed into the Puranic tradition. When the Puranic tradition displaced these obsolete pantheist gods, and replaced them with supernatural ones, the latter still retained in his/her iconography elements of the original nature associated with the obsolete deity. In fact, it is precisely that iconography that often provides Bankim the anthropological clue to the origin of Hindu ritual (Bankim, *Bankim Rachanavali*, 92-93). Bankim actually uses Lakshmi as an example of this assimilation and transfiguration (Ibid. 92). Kapalkundala certainly evinces a strong sense of the fertility of nature, given how uncorrupted her relationship to the land is. And she herself is a throw-back to the primitive Indians, in her intense relationship to nature, her uncivilized life.

<sup>147</sup> Dhyana mantra of Mahalakshmi, *Sarada Tilaka Tantram* 424, quoted in David Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahāvidyās* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997) 223.

<sup>148</sup> Sen 53.

lotus eyes, hair that is a cloud.”<sup>149</sup> And yet, in his own description of Kapalkundala, he recycles exactly those tropes—themselves clearly borrowed from the Puranic tradition! (Note especially the Sanskrit poets’ invocation of the rampant lotus motif from the *Puranas*). Such an unwitting borrowing, or an inevitable trickle-down of a religious-literary tradition, is a perfect example of the the underlying elements from the traditional backcloth that find their way into Bankim’s writing, betraying the deliberate stances he takes. It is also a testament to the strength of the religio-literary inheritance that left nothing untouched, not even putatively “secular” writing.

In fact, it is crucial to take into account that the “secular” in the Hindu tradition, and even in Bankim’s epoch, did not carry with it the same disenchanting implications as it does in the West and in today’s India. As Bankim observes, the Hindu tradition since its Vedic inception has always been comprised of both secular and sacred elements. The passionately religious early Aryans did not discriminate between secular and sacred topics; everything that was relevant to their practical and spiritual lives entered into their cultural compendium, the Vedas, subsequently taken to be uniformly religious.<sup>150</sup> In the classical period, putatively secular court poets would feel free to draw on religious themes and Hindu myths. For example, Kalidasa’s *Kumara Sambhava*, tells the story of Uma and Shiva as embodiments of *prakriti* and *purusha* (Nature and Soul),<sup>151</sup> the duality which constitutes the fundamental philosophy that runs through all Hinduism, even its secular literature.<sup>152</sup> Bankim insists that this duality, or necessary mutuality,

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<sup>149</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Bankim Rachanavali* 108.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. 154 and 233.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 215.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. 213.

of nature and soul manifests in every single element, epoch, and school of Hinduism<sup>153</sup>: from the primitive Aryan worship of nature as divine force,<sup>154</sup> to the Puranic deity-dyads of Krishna/Radha and Shiva/Shakti as embodiments of *prakriti* and *purusha*,<sup>155</sup> to all the philosophical schools of Hinduism,<sup>156</sup> to the ritual of *darśan*<sup>157</sup> and the theory of aesthetics that turn on the rendering of the ideal in the real.<sup>158</sup> If “enchantment,” as I and others use the term, can be boiled down to a single concept, it is the mutuality of nature and soul. That this philosophy should stand at the center of Hinduism, emanating out to its every spoke, including secular ones, is telling. What it tells is that, for Bankim, Hinduism’s normative enchantment included both the secular and the sacred.

To return to my comparison of the descriptions of Kapalkundala and Kamala: Bankim’s notorious middle-class prudishness<sup>159</sup> and his naturalist commitments require him to eliminate

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. 158-159, 256.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. 246.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 254-255.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 215.

<sup>159</sup> Bankim, “enchanted by beauty” (quoted in Ray 496), as he is, renders his female protagonists in highly sensuous detail and often in somewhat transgressive roles, and he is rightly credited with inaugurating mutual premarital romantic love between men and women. However, these impulses are checked by a conservative counter-impulse that tends to punish ultimately his libertine heroines, and to delete overt sexual marks from his feminine depictions. See Sen 17; Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the formation of nationalist discourse in India* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1995]) 100-101, on the consequential de-eroticization of Radha in Bankim’s version of the Krishna myth; and Partha Chatterjee 131, on the simultaneous mythologizing and de-sexualizing of the feminine during the (proto-)nationalist era, more generally. Chatterjee explains: “...the specific ideological form in which we know the ‘Indian woman’ construct in the modern literature and arts of India today is wholly and undeniably a product of the development of a dominant middle-class culture coeval with the era of nationalism. It served to emphasize with all the force of mythological inspiration what had in any case become a dominant characteristic of femininity in the new construct of ‘woman’ standing as a sign

only the most erotic references (the lavish attention on the breasts) and the most fantastical physical features (the three eyes); but the description remains an uncanny reverberation of the *dhyana mantra* to Kamala, typical of the many Hindu mantras that would have been a familiar feature not only in the written tradition, but in the daily ritual of *puja* (worship and honor of the deity). Such strong echoes suggest a seepage from the inherited religious, even supernatural, tradition into Bankim's novel.

Further, by occluding Kapalkundala's origins and affiliating her so closely with nature, Bankim seems to suggest that she belongs to the womb of nature rather than to the social order—a suggestion borne out by the sad ending of the novel when she gives up her husband and social life altogether, preferring to resign herself to death-by-water. She would not be the first such quasi-mortal enchantress in the Indian literary tradition to have her wifely faith tested, only to then return to the natural element from which she emerged. In Valmiki's original *Ramayana*, the goddess-incarnate Sita, forced to stand trial by fire and continually suspected for adultery, is said to be so thoroughly disheartened by the social world, particularly her own husband, that she chooses to sink back into the soil from which she was born. Indeed, Sita vanishes into the natural elements—fire, forest, and earth<sup>160</sup>—repeatedly, as a result of her husband Rama's

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for 'nation,' namely, the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on. This spirituality did not, as we have seen, impede the chances of the woman moving out of the physical confines of the home; on the contrary, it facilitated it, making it possible for her to go into the world under conditions that would not threaten her femininity. In fact, the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home." This analysis certainly applies well to Bankim, a chief craftsman of this symbolic construct of the Indian woman during the nationalist era.

<sup>160</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009) 224.

continuing and unwarranted distrust. This feminine-divine abdication of the human world for the natural one, catalyzed by a husband's ethical betrayal, describes Kapalkundala just as well as Sita. Although Sita, unlike Kapalkundala, is usually held up as an exemplar of Hindu wifedom, the suppressed, original version of the *Ramayana* depicts an incarnated goddess with a defiant attitude<sup>161</sup> and a willingness to abandon her wifely role for one more welcoming in nature. Kapalkundala is most uncannily similar to this original Sita when the former's own punishing husband's jealous suspicions make her lose her will to live in the social universe at all. Her perennially slight grasp on the worldly world is released completely when she finally drowns herself in sacrifice to her Mother-goddess.

But Bankim the naturalist is careful never to make explicit supernaturalist claims or intratextual references; he works only via subtle allusion to a common cultural backcloth.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid. 228.

<sup>162</sup> Ashis Nandy, "A Report on the Present State of Health of the Gods," *Bonfire of Creeds: The Essential Ashis Nandy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004) 131-138. Nandy explains that, despite the various efforts to sanitize and monotheize Hinduism from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward, Indians continue to live with gods—a shared cultural patrimony—regardless of sect, or even belief/non-belief. The gods and goddesses exist in culture as much as in faith. See 131, an assertion which also happens to be an eloquent iteration of my general take on enchantment in India: "During these fifteen hundred years, a crucial identifier of Hinduism—as a religion, a culture and a way of life—has been the particular style of interaction humans have had with gods and goddesses. Deities in everyday Hinduism, from the heavily Brahminic to the aggressively non-Brahminic, are not entities outside everyday life, nor do they preside over life from the outside; they constitute a significant part of it. Their presence is telescoped not only into one's transcendental self but, to use Alan Roland's tripartite division, also into one's familial and individualized selves and even into one's most flippant, comic, naughty moments. Gods are beyond and above humans but they are, paradoxically, not outside the human fraternity. You can adore or love them, you can disown or attack them, you can make them butts of wit and sarcasm." See also 134: "For even within persons, communities, cults, sects, and religions that deny gods and goddesses, there persist relationships more typical of religions with a surfeit of gods and goddesses. Gods and goddesses may survive as potentialities even in the most austere monotheistic, anti-idolatrous faiths. They are not permitted into the main hall, but they are there, just outside the door, constantly threatening to enter the main hall uninvited...just outside the doors of consciousness." This Hindu habitus would take into its reach even Indian Muslims, of course. Then, see 138: "When gods and goddesses invade our personal life or enter it as our guests, when we give them our personal allegiance, they may or may not have much to do, apparently, with the generic faiths we profess...The Indic civilization has been there slightly longer than the Hindutva-peddlers and the Indologists have been, and it may well survive its well-wishers. The more continuous traditions of this civilization may reassert themselves in our public life. A majority of people in South Asia know how to handle the gods and goddesses, their own and that of others. The gods and goddesses, on the other hand, not

While Kapalkundala is indisputably a mortal character existing under the exigencies of natural law, it makes sense to place this enchantress whose feet hardly touch the ground in the intertextual context of her literary precursors in the Hindu tradition—*apsaras* and *avatars* who would have held tremendous sway in the readers’ imagination, if not quite so much in Bankim’s own.<sup>163</sup> Indeed, Bankim’s most compelling characters are those most supernaturally-oriented, for example the miracle-working spiritual leader of the Santans in *Anandamath* and the omen-fated Kundanandini in *The Poison Tree*. (In Satyajit Ray’s film “Charulata,” based on Tagore’s novella “The Broken Nest,” the eponymous heroine who has come to writing, waxes romantic and aspirational about “Bankim Babu’s” most mesmerizing heroines: at the top of her list, Kapalkundala, of course.)

Part of the reason these supernatural characters are so compelling is that the narrator lavishes on them a more in-depth psychological treatment than he does the more worldly, conventional characters. The narrator penetrates their consciousness, not just because Bankim himself seems also quite taken with these other-world-hovering figures, but more significantly because the dreams, visions, and interpretive schemes of these characters are the only permissible way he can admit the supernatural into the novel. In other words he must lavishly and sympathetically represent these characters’ supernaturalism without letting it bleed into his naturalist frame, and his solution is to present the former as epistemology rather than ontology.

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only live with each other, they also invite us to live with their plural world.” If I have quoted Nandy so amply here, it is because his lucid elaboration of “living with gods” takes the issue of enchantment beyond faith and into praxis, a praxis that has been a hallmark of Indian culture.

<sup>163</sup> Sen 89. N.B.: Even if Bankim himself was suspicious of avatars he still defers to the tradition, presumably to court his readers. The preceding footnote would be relevant in explaining this move of his.



And yet, perhaps despite himself, his own prose often gets infected with the very supernaturalism it represents. Whenever a character like Kapalkundala comes on the scene, Bankim's prose inevitably strains towards supernatural description. Here, we do not find the distanced meta-perspective—the extreme, hyper-objectivizing third-person narration of disenchanted naturalism—but rather a roving-eye narration that seems to overlap and merge with the enchanted perspective of the perceiving character. Let us look at an early passage that describes the shipwrecked Nabakumar's second encounter with the sylvan enchantress, his soon-to-be wife:

She walked away, leaving no footprints. With invisible footsteps she moved, like a white cloud wafted on the slow spring breeze.<sup>164</sup> Turning, he froze at the sight that met his eyes. It was the same goddess of the wilderness, she of the dense, ankle-length tresses. As before, she was silent and utterly still. From where had this vision suddenly appeared?...He was anxious to turn back, but could not determine the direction in which the maiden had vanished. "Who has cast this magic spell?" he began to wonder... Suddenly, with the speed of an arrow, the maiden darted past the young man.<sup>165</sup>

Virtually flying, this unsocialized, spell-binding "goddess of the wilderness," with her ankle-length tresses, is as extreme as a human can be. In this sustained hyperbolic description, Bankim continues to be intoxicated by his own rich metaphors, hovering at the border between naturalism and supernaturalism. With the double emphasis on her movement—her invisible footsteps, her leaving no footprints—the naturalism of Bankim's description here is as strained as it gets. Further, this rare, quasi-supernatural detail literalizes my suggestion that Kapalkundala is so ethereal, so hyper-enchanted that her feet hardly touch the ground. Again, Bankim remains—with the exception of the reference to invisible footsteps, which is anyway

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<sup>164</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Kapalkundala* 16.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.* 18-19.

more metaphorical than literal<sup>166</sup>—technically naturalist in his narration, slyly attempting to impute all the wonder and magic to Nabakumar’s reaction. And yet, this roving-eye description turns out to be narrated mostly from the narrator’s, not Nabakumar’s, point of view. The narrator seems equally bewitched by Kapalkundala, his language so impregnated with her magic that, in this case (as in so many featuring Kapalkundala), the supernatural content dwarfs the naturalist framing. And so the supra-ordinating meta-critical frame that would ostensibly

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<sup>166</sup> Thanks to Partha Chatterjee and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay for helping me with the Bengali version of this phrase. My interpretation could be disputed, in light of the difference between the Bengali original and the English translation. In the former, “she left no footprints” and “invisible footsteps,” are rendered thus: “*alakshya padakhshep*” and “*alakshya padabikhshep*.” Literally, *alakshya* means “without conscious intention,” and *padakhshep* means “to take a step.” Taken together, the phrase literally means, “to take a step somewhat unmindfully.” While the Bengali rendering tends less toward the supernatural than the English translation does, even the original, not to mention the exaggerated translation, suggests movement so extraordinarily ethereal that it strikingly resembles a vaporous cloud more than it does the firm plodding of ordinary mortals. Partha Chatterjee has suggested an alternate interpretation to my own. His does not see even a trace of the supernatural in the description. But I take the striking original description itself, the translator’s decision to emphasize their nearly-supernatural quality, and the surrounding passages as evidence of the text’s straining against naturalism in order to present Kapalkundala initially as an ambiguous figure—ambiguous in her status as a mortal. About his own description of his heroine in the famous seaside scene, Bankim comments: “The young woman thus described in language rather more lofty than distinct, turns out to be a Kapal Kundala, a girl who had been saved...” (*Bankim Rachanavali* 121). Indeed, the language is lofty—as lofty as that of Kalidasa or the Puranic poetry. Bankim himself seems to be acknowledging the exceptional, hyperbolic nature of his description. At this point in the text, and even a bit later, Kapalkundala has not yet been explicitly ascertained to be mortal. The dazed Nabakumar genuinely wonders, “Is she a goddess, a human being, or merely an illusion conjured up by the kapalik?” (*Kapalkundala* 17). The Bengali original is nearly verbatim. “*Eki devi—manusi—na kapaliker mayamatra!*” literally translates to: “Is she a goddess or a woman or just a mirage/a spectral creation by the Kapalik?” Bankim goes on, “Frozen, immobile, he turned this question over and over in his mind, uncomprehending” (*Kapalkundala* 17). That Nabakumar should be so genuinely puzzled over her status as a being invites us to read the “footprints” lines liberally. Indeed, two out of the three possibilities Nabakumar contemplates exist in the explicitly supernatural register: whether she is a divinity or the effect of magic, she would have a supernatural status. To my view, it is patent that Bankim here is trying to stretch naturalism as far as it can go. She is repeatedly described as “goddess of the wilderness,” which may indeed be meant purely as metaphor, but nonetheless is imagery that partakes of divinity. It is precisely such imagery that I identify as an underlying impulse to supernaturalism that betrays Bankim’s overt naturalist commitments. I do not, in my exegesis, use the word “ghost” or “eerie,” though many other Bankim critics have used precisely these words to describe the quasi-supernatural tendencies in his prose; sometimes they even unambiguously identify him as supernaturalist. In any case, ghosts are not the key for me. Ghosts, goddesses, visions conjured by magic: they are ALL part of enchantment (which can mean alternatively numinosity, religion, magic). Even if she is just an enchantingly beautiful woman, her beauty exceeds normal limits, inviting such an exaggerated and heavily metaphorized prose as to certainly fall under the third definition of the supernatural in Bilgrami’s triple-tier natural-supernaturalism distinction: that which science cannot possibly study. There is, in any case, no debate that Kapalkundala has a striking ethereality to her, in the narrator’s no less than Nabakumar’s perspective on her.

otherwise mitigate the enchantment, dissolves for a powerful moment, sub-ordinating itself to its supernaturally suggestive content. And yet, as I will soon discuss, mimesis runs through it all, connecting the two registers, as is meet for a worldview in which the natural is continuous with the supernatural—a worldview that does not correspond to the Enlightenment’s split-think.

When it comes to Bankim’s association of Kapalkundala with the supernatural realm—her ethereality of being, intimacy with personal deities, and “reading” of omens and signs expressing themselves to her in her natural surround—there is something even more at stake than description, allusion, and narrative tone. And that is the philosophical dimension of her enchantment. The benevolent side of the coin to the menacing tantric kapalic who has “adopted” her with an eye toward ultimately using her for his sexual rites of passage and then making of her a human sacrifice (*bali*) to Kali, Kapalkundala belongs to an older sacrificial order in which the equilibrium between ourselves and God must be maintained at all costs. Sacrifice is predicated on enchantment: the principle that God needs us too, that our actions can incite wrath, convey love, or grant satisfaction to God. Afterall, sacrifice would be irrelevant to a deistic God who would be detached, impervious, immune to, and utterly independent of the human world. Not so with Kapalkundala’s personal deities who, she believes, are directly involved in her life, who often behave as pettily as humans (e.g., Goddess Bhairavi’s jealousy of Kapalkundala), and who require things of her (ultimately her self-sacrifice). Before she leaves the forest to enter society with her newly acquired husband, Kapalkundala places a belpata leaf at the foot of her “Ma’s” altar, looking for some indication of her fate in the social world. Goddess Bhavani’s foreboding omen is borne out in subsequent dreams and visions of the less benevolent face of her patron goddess, visions that finally speed Kapalkundala on to her death. In the final scene, she sees in

the sky an apparition of her jealous goddess-mother Bhairavi who nefariously leads her to the cremation site. Orphaned jungle girl that she is, misfit to the social world, Kapalkundala has only her two-faced mother-goddess to serve as her guiding light, for better and worse (we shall explore both consequences). And the girl treats this goddess as intimately as one would a mother—a mother with compassionate, protective, cruel, punishing, and petty faces.

Yet, this kind of intimacy is not reserved for jungle girls, savage tantrics, and other unsocialized humans. Rather, this kind of personal connection between devotee and deity is more common than not in India, the strongest evidence of which would be the Shakta tradition (Kali worship) and the Vaishnavist tradition (Krishna worship) so popular in Bengal.<sup>167</sup> While the former (as illustrated *in extremis* by Kapalkundala and her tantric adoptive father) tends toward appeasement of a fearsome deity, the latter puts at the heart of its ethos familial and tender intimacy with the deity. Both tantrism and Vaishnavism—as different as they are, and as different as Bankim’s attitudes toward them were—often envisage an erotic relationship between devotee and deity, where, with the proper *bhava* (mood) and ritual observation, the one merges into the other.<sup>168</sup> Whatever the particular mode or object of devotion, *bhakti* (devotion) presumes that God needs us as much as we need God. *Bhakti* is thus predicated on a sense of human-divine reciprocity, permeation, and interdependence that stands at the heart of an enchanted worldview in which our daily life in this world is eminently connected to the other world.

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<sup>167</sup> The latter is also extremely popular across India.

<sup>168</sup> Nandy 137. See also Kinsley, throughout. Kinsley describes the tantric adept’s capacity to obtain, through rigorous practice, the very qualities and powers of his/her patron goddess; in successful convergence, he may actually become indistinguishable from her.

The phrase Bankim uses to describe Kapalkundala, “goddess of the wilderness,” is apt, for it speaks to her two most striking dimensions: her affinity with the supernatural world *and* with the natural world. Indeed, the one affinity implies the other, at the twain of which lies naturalism: with a nod to positivism, Kapalkundala cannot detect the presence of the deity without its making itself manifest in the natural world around her (e.g., the belpata leaf as a sign of Goddess Bhavani’s will). By implication, the more invested one is in the supernatural, the more avidly one must attend to the natural. The notion of the divine making itself perceptible in the world of the here-and-now—indeed that the divine simply *cannot* be grasped in the absence of its concrete, worldly manifestations—underpins the prevailing praxis of Hinduism, namely *darśan*, a concept I more fully elaborate in my treatment of enchanted mimesis.

That Kapalkundala communicates with Goddess Bhavani through the ominous belpata leaf suggests that our heroine’s world is a world shot through with divinity,<sup>169</sup> just like the ancient Greek world described in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. This conception of the spiritualized world was also at the core of European Romantic philosophy, according to M.H. Abrams’ path-breaking study *Natural Supernaturalism*. While the Greek and Hindu worlds were enchanted all along, Europe had lost its sense of enchantment, and the Romantics strove to restore it. For the Romantics who deliberately undertook to re-enchant the natural world as an *anima mundi*, secular enchantment went hand-in-hand with a revolutionary politics.

Indeed, Akeel Bilgrami reminds us that the question of enchantment was political ever since the Newtonian establishment, set against the scientific heterodoxy, asserted its disenchanting conception of nature. The heterodoxy’s idea that divinity animates the world from

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*within* and permeates all that is contained in it distinguished the enchanted worldview from the disenchanted worldview, which posited a deistic God who from the *outside* gave the initial push and then left alone an otherwise brute, material world.<sup>170</sup> As Bilgrami explains, both views—passionately fought over in the 17<sup>th</sup> century English scientific community—are equally scientific/unscientific, but the disenchanted worldview prevailed over the enchanted worldview for purely political reasons.<sup>171</sup> The massive historical consequences of the Newtonian establishment’s victory over the scientific heterodoxy can be felt all the way down to colonialism, the logical conclusion of a disenchanted worldview in which nature, like its primitive custodians, was rendered brute and thus available for merciless extraction (extraction that would not, as in primitive ritual, require any gestures of atonement or sacrifice).<sup>172</sup> Significantly, the scientific dissenters have analogues in heterodox traditions as historically and culturally diverse as the English Diggers, the Levelers, the Romantics, the thousand-year-old bhakti tradition in India, and the anti-colonial movement as epitomized by Gandhianism. The enchanted worldview was the cornerstone of all of these philosophies.<sup>173</sup> Not unlike the 17<sup>th</sup> century scientific heterodoxy, Bankim attempted to preserve the notion of an *anima mundi* immanent with the divine while simultaneously embracing modern, scientific principles, such as positivism. Neither he nor his European predecessors saw any contradiction in the coexistence of rational scientific principles and enchantment; rather, they saw such coexistence as essential

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<sup>170</sup> Akeel Bilgrami, “Occidentalism, The Very Idea: An Essay on The Enlightenment and Enchantment,” *Critical Inquiry* 32:3 (Spring 2006) 396.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* 399.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.* 399, 402-403 and f. 20.

for a healthy modernity. Thus can Bankim simultaneously subscribe to natural law and to a conception of an all-pervading Godhead as the ultimate cause.

At the outset of *Kapalkundala*, we find a consequential staging of the encounter between two forms of nature-enchantment: the animistic, as embodied by our sylvan heroine; and the Romantic-secular, as embodied by her future husband, the urbanite, orthodox Nabakumar. If she represents primitive woman, he represents modern, secular man. (Although he is nominally Hindu, secularism often turns out to be an issue of degree in a culture that barely has an “outside” to religious praxis.)<sup>174</sup> In typical Bankim spirit, concurrent modes of enchantment—some reaching back into Hindu praxis, others inspired by European philosophical currents—are brought together, and, by the end of the novel, sifted out according to his preference. Let us close read this famous Adam-Eve episode—an episode that inaugurates not only a modern concept of romantic love between the sexes,<sup>175</sup> but also the naturalist order of representation,<sup>176</sup> and finally, a marriage between paganism and secular romanticism that could potentially pave the way for Bankim’s renovation of Hindu enchantment. By the end of this chapter, we will see how these two latter modes fare.

Cast ashore and abandoned by his fellow pilgrims, Nabakumar finds himself stranded in a part-terrifying, part-beatified wilderness. After a horrific night spent aimlessly and fearfully

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<sup>174</sup> See footnote 162.

<sup>175</sup> Sen 16. Sen tells us that Bankim, influenced by his European writing, was the first Indian writer to introduce the concept of pre-marital love.

<sup>176</sup> I am grateful to Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay for a discussion (July 2007) of this scene. He calls this moment the inauguration of the mimetic order of representation in the India, but I would instead call it the inauguration of the naturalist order, as mimesis had already existed in the form of supernaturalism, a seeming paradox I am about to dissect.

walking the unpeopled island, only to discover and become hostage to a kapalik menacingly presiding over his human sacrifices to Goddess Kali, Nabakumar manages to escape to the enchanting ocean shore, his real object of desire in undertaking the disastrous voyage. It is at this point that a new mythology potentially begins—a new myth for the new secular enchantment.

In an earlier exchange between Nabakumar and a fellow pilgrim aboard the floundering boat, we are made aware of the distinction between this young man and his comrades. Whereas the latter have embarked on the pilgrimage seeking a traditional site of hierophany,<sup>177</sup> Nabakumar has come only to see the ocean. In other words, from the beginning, Nabakumar, a fundamentally secular man despite his orthodox Hindu background, would seem to be seeking a distinctly secular enchantment. One landscape replaces another: secular enchantment (read sublime, subjectively perceived) replaces mythic landscape based on the older cosmology.

Thus does this novel make a break with the familiar, older, distinctly religious mythology—the mythology of the Hindu pantheon. In the traditional cosmology, a landscape would be important only insofar as it is sacred, marked by the trace of divine immanence.<sup>178</sup> Whether the site of birth, battle, or visitation of the various gods (especially half-human, half-divine avatars such as Krishna and Rama), such *tirthas*—crossover points between this world and the other world—are considered enchanted because God has been there. A *tirtha* would be absolutely resistant to photo-realistic description, for there is much more than meets the eye in such a holy place. It takes enchanted eyes—faith, really—to sense the numinosity of a place that

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<sup>177</sup> Mircea Eliade's term for "the 'showing forth' of the gods"; here, read: *tirtha*. Eck, *Benares: City of Light*, 34-35.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.



would appear perhaps ordinary to disenchanted eyes. Not only would a naturalistic representation seem out of place, it might even constitute an affront, a sacrilege. Far from a brute materiality that could be taken in retinally and described “objectively,” such a landscape graced by God is sustained instead by symbolically-rich legends of distinctly supernatural figures.

For all that, though, the would-be enchantment of such sacred sites and their accompanying narratives would have lost some of their punch by now, having hardened into tradition and ritual to a large degree.<sup>179</sup> Bankim seems to suggest this when, right at the outset, he presents a cantankerous old pilgrim who, when questioned by Nabakumar, vituperates that he has embarked on this difficult pilgrimage in order to accrue karmic life insurance: “With three-quarters of my lifespan over already...when should I build my store of virtue for the life to come, if not at this stage?”<sup>180</sup> This language of accounting and accumulation alerts us to a cynical and utilitarian religiosity that has nothing to do with genuine wonder at hierophany, but rather a self-interested going through the motions according to scriptural prescriptions—all too compatible with the disenchanted, acquisitive attitude of commerce. No enchantment here! Bankim’s critique of this hardened attitude takes the form of Nabakumar’s counter-assertion that the scriptures do *not* actually require that one go on a pilgrimage to prepare for the afterlife; one can prepare just as well at “home.” More than a cheeky riposte, Nabakumar’s contrary interpretation of the scriptures not only shows the religious texts’ polysemousness, but more importantly, highlights the inanity of unconsidered ritual observation. Finally, read metaphorically,

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<sup>179</sup> Bhabatosh Chatterjee xxxix.

<sup>180</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee 4.

Nabakumar’s corrective suggests that a going-through-the motions religiosity is a misguided approach to the holy—a belief shared by such diverse figures as Bankim, Tagore, and Rammohun Roy. We could read “home” in Nabakumar’s usage as referring not just to the domestic sphere, but to the interiority of the self: if God is everywhere—in the sea, the trees, the sky—then God is also within everyone, a notion held dearly by the Levelers of England and Gandhianists alike. With this belief, the fetishization of a particular patch of land designated holy would seem arbitrary, even narrow.

The old pilgrim’s small-mindedness is thrown into further relief by Nabakumar’s own Romantic-mystical impulse: in lieu of the karma-accretion coveted by the old curmudgeon, the pilgrimage offers Nabakumar a chance to see the ocean, an object of intimate connection and longing for our quasi-secular-Romantic.

‘As I’ve said before, I had a great desire to see the ocean,’ replied the young man. ‘That is why I came here.’

‘Ah! What a vision!’ he mused, in a softer voice. ‘Never to be forgotten in all eternity!’ In Sanskrit, he quoted:

*Behold the remote blue shore, densely encircled by tal and tamal!  
And there, like a long, dark stain, stretch the salt waters of the deep.*

The old man paid no attention to the poetry.<sup>181</sup>

I make the qualification “quasi” with reference to the secularism of Nabakumar’s romantic impulse because there is no reason to think of this impulse as Anglophilic or even at odds with a religious impulse. As I laid out at length in my introduction, there is good reason to think of European romantic notions of nature as, themselves, religious. Certainly these lines quoted from Kalidasa, while not explicitly religious, belong to a Sanskrit secular poetic tradition that was debatably secular in the first place, definitely enchanted, and harmoniously cohabitating with the

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

sacred Hindu tradition. Further, Nabukumar's earlier riposte displays a familiarity, even a competence, with the Hindu tradition, which, in turn, might suggest that one need not disavow Hinduism in order to espouse a more secularly-compatible Romantic sensibility. Rather, Nabakumar's longing for communion with nature suggests a sensibility for an *anima mundi*, where God is made immanent in the world through nature, a notion no less compatible with Hinduism than with European romanticism. Not for nothing, then, does he quote in Sanskrit, the language of the Hindu tradition, when he waxes poetic about the sea. Thus, the new enchantment—while referring to the Shelleys and Wordsworths beloved in Bengal,<sup>182</sup> cracking open a new sliver of space for *secular* Romanticism, and finally bearing consequences for a change in representation that I will soon discuss—is actually coextensive with the pantheistic Hindu worldview that it would at first glance seem to displace. Moreover—and I think this is why the verbal sparring with the old pilgrim is so crucial as a precedent for the introduction of the sublime—secular romanticism, rather than the latter's moribund ritual accompaniment, turns out to be far more compatible with the “original” Hindu hierophanic enchantment.

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<sup>182</sup> N.B.: Many of the chapter epigraphs in *Kapalkundala* are taken from the British Romantics. In fact, Bankim was very well versed in British Romantic and Victorian literature. Jonathan Arac has observed that the overall character of *Kapalkundala* bears a striking resemblance to German romantic novellas, such as those translated by Thomas Carlyle in *German Romance*. This observation, considered together with Bankim's familiarity with British Romantic and Victorian writers, begs the question of influence. Although Bankim did not read German (only English and French), might Bankim have encountered Carlyle's translation? While this possibility is quite likely, I have not found evidence in any of the English-language literature on Bankim that he had read this particular book of Carlyle's (though he had certainly read Carlyle generally). Unfortunately, the rich and large Bengali secondary literature on Bankim is not available to me, so I cannot be certain about the extent of his European reading. I would be very curious to learn from a Bengali critic whether Bankim had read even Carlyle's “Sartor Resartus,” where he coins the term “natural supernaturalism” that M.H. Abrams and more recently Akeel Bilgrami thoroughly develop. If Bankim had encountered this text, then that would provide even more fodder for my argument about his own natural-supernaturalism. As well, it would indicate a definitely *conscious* attempt to establish natural supernaturalism in his novella. Along with these points of intercultural, intertextual connection, Lawrence and Coleridge would be interesting live points of comparison, particularly given their nearly religious feeling about (enchanted) nature, which I discuss in my introduction.

In the Romantic enchantment that turns out to be the more rightful heir to Hindu pantheism, nature replaces deities, and hierophany gives way to the sublime as the expression of divine immanence. Here is Nabakumar facing the sea:

His heart leapt with joy at the sight of this vast, blue expanse of water. He reclined on the sandy shore. Before him stretched the ocean, foaming, blue, limitless. On both sides, as far as the eye could see, was a line of froth, flung onshore by the breaking waves, like a garland of bunched white blossoms deposited on the golden sand, a hair-ornament to adorn the earth's green tresses. Foaming waves broke the blue surface of the water in a thousand places. Only a storm violent enough to displace thousands of stars, swirling them against the azure backdrop of the sky, could match the sight of the waves churning in the ocean. At this moment, one segment of the blue water shone like molten gold in the gentle rays of the setting sun. Faraway, a European merchant vessel breasted the waves, white sails outspread, winging its way like some gigantic bird. Nabakumar had no idea how long he remained on the seashore, gazing at the beauty of the ocean.<sup>183</sup>

The narrative voice focalizes Nabakumar's sense of awe in the face of the ocean-sublime, a sense of awe undiminished by familiarity. This scene conveys enchantment in the two (usually contradictory) senses: it bespeaks a certain degree of estrangement allowing for wonder, unfamiliarity producing shock and awe, as with a baby responding to an all-new world; on the other hand, it bespeaks immersion, the trance-like surrender to the overwhelming "beauty of the ocean." "Limitless," "vast," "a thousand places," "thousands of stars," "as far as the eye could see," "only a storm violent enough," "swirling," "churning": this is language *in extremis*, befitting the sublime, which normatively pushes language beyond itself. So total is this oceanic sublime that it subsumes the ultimate icon of disenchantment—a European merchant vessel betokening two disenchanted realms, imperialism and commerce—and transmogrifies it mimetically into a giant bird harmonious with the grandeur of the seascape. Moreover, this is no mere ventriloquizing of Shelley or Wordsworth: Bankim writes the sublime in the language of his own tradition, casting the ocean in metaphors evocative of Sanskrit poetry and even sacred

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<sup>183</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee 15.

mantras: e.g., the oceanic hair-ornament could well remind us of the figure of Ganga pouring out of Lord Shiva's top-knot. For all its sublimity, the scene also parlays a sense of mutuality with the human world—not just in terms of Nabakumar's Dionysian dissolution into the image, or Bankim's subtle anthropomorphism conferring life-force to nature, but also the imminent appearance of a nymph completely enmeshed with her environment: Kapalakundala herself.

This updated Romantic enchantment of nature, for all its allusions borrowed from Hindu rhetoric, makes a break with the old representational order. This site is enchanted not for its having been visited by a deity, but on its own terms. Here we have not the old mythic language which would defy "objective" representation, but naturalist-mimetic language. Landscape can be represented as it appears. That said, it is imbued with a sort of magic that transcends mere photo-objectivity—magic which is conveyed mainly by rich metaphor. Metaphor, like religious symbolism, reaches toward what is elusive, connecting something ontologically real to that which must be imagined.

If, in the description of Nabakumar's beloved sea, metaphor elevates the literal into the numinous, then see how this is even more the case when it comes to the description of Kapalkundala I have quoted, where she is rendered utterly coextensive with the setting: "the enchanting effect of her complexion, resembling the gleam of the crescent moon...had to be viewed against the backdrop of that wave-resonant seashore, in the twilight glow, for its true impact to be felt."<sup>184</sup> The figure of Kapalakundala is hardly distinguishable from the natural surround that is, in fact, part of her. As we have discussed, she appears out of nowhere on this seashore that is her perfect habitat, as though she has emerged from the womb of nature itself.

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid. 15-16.

Not only is her physicality likened to natural elements—snakes, jewel, moonlight, moonbeams, and moon again—but the description itself shuttles back and forth between Kapalakundala and the sea so constantly that they almost merge into one and the same entity. If the “backdrop of that wave-resonant seashore” is necessary to feel the enchanting effect of her beauty, then, reciprocally, her eyes, like the moon itself, “[play] upon the ocean’s breast” as tide responds to moon.

In the Bengali original, the two times Bankim refers to the sea’s “breast” he uses the word *hriday* which means merely “heart” in the ungendered sense.<sup>185</sup> Even so, the overall depiction of woman symbiotic with the moon, traditionally thought of as female, suggests Bankim’s subtle feminine anthropomorphizing of nature. My claim does not depend on the word “breast,” but rather on Bankim’s general tendency to associate nature with femininity, not just in *Kapalkundala*, but also in his famous Bengali comparative essay, “Shakuntala, Miranda, and Desdemona.” That essay explores the phenomenon of women reared in nature, a Rousseau-esque preoccupation of his that was an obvious motive for writing *Kapalkundala*. In fact, he explicitly stated his animating question of the novel after his own encounter with a kapalik in the seaside jungle of Hijli: “If a woman from infancy to the age of sixteen is brought up by a Kapalika in the jungle on the seashore, if she gets to know nothing of society...if such a woman is brought into society by someone who marries her, then how will she change in contact with human society?”<sup>186</sup> The nexus of woman-nature-enchantment, as opposed to man-civilization-

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<sup>185</sup> I am grateful to Partha Chatterjee for pointing out this semantic distinction between the Bengali original and my English translation.

<sup>186</sup> Bankim quoted in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, “Kapalkundala’s Destiny,” *Bankimchandra: Essays in Perspective* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994) 303.

disenchantment, is a commonplace in the enchanted ethos the world over—a tendency identified by thinkers as far removed from each other as Carolyn Merchant<sup>187</sup> and M.K. Gandhi.<sup>188</sup> For both Merchant and Gandhi, such feminization of nature has not been simply incidental but essential to the enchanted worldview, but their conclusions are different. For Merchant, the feminization of nature in Europe eventually led to the idea of raping it, as in mining and other disenchanted practices that went into full swing after the 17<sup>th</sup> century Scientific Revolution.<sup>189</sup> Whereas Gandhi believes that the feminization of nature demands a sacralized, respectful, protective approach to it. Both thinkers, though, rightly identify the feminine inflection of enchantment.

Bankim participates in this long history of associating women with nature and enchantment. Such symbiosis of woman and nature, such mutual enhancement and integration, is later borne out by the sad fact that Kapalakundala, ripped from her natural habitat, cannot successfully integrate into her life in society. In the final chapter, “In the Land of Spirits,” she abandons her unwelcome role as wife, content to rejoin her beloved natural habitat again: “I was once a wanderer in the wilds. To the wilds, as a wanderer I shall return again.”<sup>190</sup> Increasingly, she has returned to her natural habitat, rejecting the station of wife. Without any compunction toward her mistakenly jealous, contrite, pleading husband, she insists on sacrificing herself to nature, finally drowning in a river, apt for one who seemed to have emerged from the sea. Her

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<sup>187</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) xvi and 188-190, especially.

<sup>188</sup> Thanks to Akeel Bilgrami for mentioning this observation to me.

<sup>189</sup> Merchant’s genealogical point of origin, and the focus of her study, is the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as it is for Bilgrami.

<sup>190</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Kapalkundala*, 88.

watery womb-tomb finally proves her true consort. (But I am getting ahead of myself; I will later treat more fully Kapalakundala's fate.)

For now, let us return to Bankim's subtle anthropomorphism of nature and correspondent nature-affiliating of the human. Uncannily, such human-nature fluidity evokes the animism of early Hinduism, still practiced in tribal communities in India, and even orthodox Hinduism's approach to *svayambhu* deities—self-manifesting deities found in nature, especially rocks (*linga* for Shiva, *salagrama* stone for Vishnu) and water (Ganga River, *naga* pools). When animist worshippers don clothing on a rock or tree in clothing, thus anthropomorphizing nature, they are seen by the West as fetishists “inappropriately” attributing spirit to mere objects. But to view animist Hinduism this way is to impose a disenchanting worldview on it, as disenchantment turns on a hard and fast division between things and beings, nature and humans, the visible and the numinous.

As Bilgrami puts it, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century scientific heterodoxy's enchanted worldview took matter to be “not brute and inert, but rather...shot through with an *inner* source of dynamism that was itself divine. God and nature were not separable...”<sup>191</sup> In Hinduism, this *anima mundi* would be considered the manifestation of “*lila*”: the play of the gods, the ever-shifting play of forms. Now, it is within this enchanted context that we should consider hierophany and *tirtha*: the presencing of the divine here on earth in myriad sites and forms. Indeed, pantheistic belief is predicated on an enchanted worldview of the sort I described: the ubiquitous manifestations of myriad aspects of the divine in the immanent. Its explicit anthropomorphism notwithstanding, Hindu pantheism shares with the Romantic immersion into nature a conception of an enchanted

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<sup>191</sup> Bilgrami 396.



world; and Bankim seems to be combining both traditions by establishing a union between enchanted Nabakumar beholding the sublime sea, and an enchanted Kapalkundala who will soon become his companion and savior.

What is Bankim trying to accomplish in bringing together the quasi-secular Romantic Nabakumar and the pantheistic Kapalkundala? It seems to me that Bankim is, in this scene of union, creating a new myth of origin, bringing together old and new modes of enchantment. Like Adam and Eve, these two characters come together in this Edenic sublime to establish a new mythology, linked to, but distinct from, the older (Puranic) Hindu mythology. (Nabakumar's name means, literally, "new man.") No longer does enchanted narrative mean religious legends featuring the supernatural figures of the familiar Hindu pantheon, but a new representational order: the naturalist order.<sup>192</sup> Bankim breaks with the earlier narrative mode in establishing the naturalist order of the novel: landscapes can be described as they are, and the characters of the novel are more or less regular humans. For all its sublimity, the seaside landscape can be described as visually perceived, an impossibility in the supernatural mode of religious legend. It is significant that the narrative does not go on to tell the story of the pilgrimage that would have taken place, which could only have been cast in terms of religious legend—pilgrimage sites being so holy that they resist naturalist description as mere landscapes. Instead, Nabakumar's story takes a 180-degree turn from this older order, and this pioneering novel moves the literary tradition into the phenomenal world. But—and this is no negligible detail—in doing so, Bankim is careful not to abandon religious enchantment altogether. Rather, he aims to renovate it in

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<sup>192</sup> Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, discussion, July 2007. Again, Mukhopadhyay would call this the "mimetic order" while I would insist on calling it merely "naturalist."

ways that might make it compatible with the new secularizing order.<sup>193</sup> That is where Kapalkundala intervenes.

It is common knowledge that European Romanticism transvalued the “primitive” ethos that had been denigrated by Enlightenment, seeking in its responsiveness to the normative demands of a nature a relationship of reciprocity, the salvation for a Europe already well along the road to industrial, imperialist hell. The Bengal Renaissance sought to do much the same in its home context, with prospects, modes, and concerns linked to, yet distinct from its European analogue. Poised at the precipice of either a similar desacralized disaster or a rejuvenation of the *zeitgeist* of a soon-to-be-independent India, the nation (and Bengal in particular) in this era looked to folkways to preserve and renovate its spiritual traditions.<sup>194</sup> Bankim, in fact, often donned the cap of a zealous amateur anthropologist, most notably in his classification of Hindu festivals and myths by their probable origins, which appears in his 1869 essay “On the Origin of Hindu Festivals,” a sort of Indian equivalent to Frazer’s *Golden Bough*.

Whether Bankim or Tagore (or later, Gandhi), urban middle- and upper-class spokespeople were to be found romanticizing peasant or primitive life for its continuing intimacy with nature. The idea of living in a close reciprocal relationship with the elements of nature, not yet alienated from their daily and spiritual existence, appealed intensely to such figures, who saw in such an attitude nothing less than the preservation of an ethos that would be the saving grace for an India which owed its very colonial exploitation to the disenchanting ethos of imperialism—

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<sup>193</sup> Sen 88: “[Bankim’s] reluctance to admit the religious and the secular as two separate domains...with the Hindus, religion...pervaded every aspect of their lives.”

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. 76-77.

an ethos that treated the land and people of the Third World as a brute materiality to be instrumentalized.<sup>195</sup> It is precisely this desacralized view of nature—as something to serve instrumentalities—that the Romantics of both East and West, were trying desperately to fight against in the modern era.

Bankim himself often explicitly establishes a connection between European Romanticism and Hindu pantheism. In his polemical writing, Bankim analogizes the nature-worship of the Rg Veda to that of the English poets:

If you call to mind some instances in which English poets, with whom we are all familiar, personify and apostrophize aspects of physical nature, or some lower animal, you will find that the difference between them and these Suktas is really not so great. Take, for instance, Byron's great Apostrophe to the Ocean, or Shelley's Ode to the Skylark, or some of Collins's Odes. The difference that exists is due to the genius of the Western and the Oriental languages. The latter lend themselves more easily than the cold languages of cold climes to overflow of sentiment and extravagance of expression. If you remember this, you will find no difficulty in agreeing with me that these productions have as much right to be called Suktas as the opening hymn to the Fire in the Rig-Veda Samhita, and many others that follow.<sup>196</sup>

As such an instance, Bankim cites in full Byron's address to the Setting Sun in *Manfred*, adding as a postscript, "If this address to the Sun were translated into the Vedic Sanskrit, and Vedic forms of expression, it would, to many, present the appearance of a Vedic hymn."<sup>197</sup> Indeed, reading Byron's lines in the Hindu light Bankim casts on them, makes us see even certain novels in the European tradition as particularly enchanted. Bankim extends his cross-cultural, trans-historical parallel when he likens the mental visions of the Vedic rishis (seers) to that of inspired English lyric poets.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Bilgrami, "Occidentalism," 399-400.

<sup>196</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Bankim Rachanavali*, 155.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. 156.

Mapped onto the Bilgrami/Abrams' triple-tier natural-supernatural rubric, Bankim's aesthetic-religious theory would valorize all three versions of the "supernatural" definitions. Immanent yet sacral and uncountenanced by science, both Hindu pantheistic poetry and English romantic poetry would qualify as enchanted, meaning beautiful *AND* religious—indeed religious because beautiful, and beautiful because religious. Let me explain in Bankim's own words which, themselves, draw from Seeley. While clarifying that the early Hindus' so-called "polytheism" was really pantheism—no different from the nature-worship of classic paganism—Bankim argues for its inclusion as religion:

The deities of the Vedic pantheon are not gods, but merely the powers and forces of nature conceived as such. Now what is the value of such a religion? Is it entitled to retain its place in the religion of the nation, or should it not be discarded as false worship? For there is no question that Hinduism must be prepared to discard whatever is not true worship. "The words Religion and Worship," says Professor Seeley, "are commonly and conveniently appropriated to the feelings with which we regard God. But those feelings—love, awe, admiration, which together make up worship...are excited by various objects" Among these various objects are the mighty forces and great powers of nature...the Grand and Beautiful in nature...If Nature is God, the worship of Nature is worship of God also."<sup>199</sup>

By this logic Bankim demonstrates that pantheism, whether that of the early putatively "polytheistic" Hindus or the "natural-supernaturalist" Romantics, ought to qualify as religion. It is only a short step from Bankim-via-Seeley's logic above to arrive at a definition of art as the religion of beauty, since "it is not exclusively but only *par excellence* that religion is directed toward God."<sup>200</sup> Indeed, Bankim subscribed to the religion of beauty, to be further elaborated and more explicitly linked to God in Tagore's philosophy of Creative Unity. The closely aligned religion of beauty and religion of nature are, of course, the hallmarks of European Romanticism.

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid. 264.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

Both treat of things that lie outside the purview of science, and thus may fall more reasonably under the rubric of religion.

This is the sort of religion of nature (even in its dark aspect), to which a Lawrence or even a Rousseau was devoted. Within the familiar reading of *Kapalkundala*<sup>201</sup> that turns on the nature/society distinction, lies embedded another crucial distinction, that of enchantment/disenchantment—particularly given Hinduism’s abiding central doctrine of the duality of nature and soul. If nature, for Locke, Lawrence, and Bankim, is what society corrupts away from, then it is because a crassly materialist and scientific society threatens the enchantment of nature by trying to divorce nature from soul. Bankim, writing about the Sankhya school of Hindu philosophy, disparages the latter on the same grounds that the radical dissenters objected to Newtonianism and its fallout: namely, the divorce between matter and Soul. He writes:

In spite of its incomparable logic, and its profound analysis, the Sankhya is a cold and dreary philosophy, a gloomy pessimism, taking an attitude of intense hostility to nature. ...Knowledge is of value in its eyes only as furnishing the means of the dissociation of the Soul from Nature. This doctrine strikes at the root of all true religion. It is (in) the union of Soul with Nature—in the harmony of man with all that is outside himself—that lies true religion. For here alone lie the sources of the Beautiful, and Truth, and Goodness.<sup>202</sup>

Here again, we see how the natural, the beautiful, and the divine are extricably linked. Bankim sees the “lofty instinct of Hinduism” that inspired the Puranic legends as a protest against precisely this “barren doctrine.”<sup>203</sup> For its hostility to nature, its extreme intellectualism, and

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<sup>201</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, “Kapalkundala’s Destiny,” *Bankimchandra Chatterjee: Essays in Perspective* (New Delhi and Calcutta: Sahitya Akademi, 1994) 304.

<sup>202</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Bankim Rachanavali*, 246.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

above all, its divorce between nature and soul, Bankim must finally dismiss Sankhya from among those elements of Hinduism he would preserve for a modern Hinduism.

It is well-known that Bankim was an avid reader of Locke; it is also well-known that Bankim's novelistic experiment in *Kapalkundala* as well as his essay "Shakuntala, Miranda, and Desdemona" were motivated by his interest in the archetype of the noble savage.<sup>204</sup> Though Bankim never specifically cites *Émile*, many critics have likened *Kapalkundala* to it. The Rousseau of India, Bankim's legacy was the "critique of civilization through the eyes of the savage."<sup>205</sup>

In short, Bankim's aesthetic theory as well as his religious theory met most obviously at the enchanted twain of romanticism/pantheism. By analogizing the early Hindus with the British Romantics, by casting his narrative in an idiom that borrows from both, by marrying *Kapalkundala* and *Nabakumar*, Bankim achieves two purposes: he shows that Hinduism contains important elements that are compatible with modernity; and he affiliates those with a particular strain within the West that shared India's goal of resisting disenchantment. Indeed, he felt the imperative to preserve Hinduism precisely for its capacity to renew the world's fast disappearing enchanted ethos. Hinduism would bring to the bounty of the world a long, uninterrupted, vigorously lived tradition of enchantment whose earliest elements had already adumbrated such modern reactions to disenchantment as Romanticism. Europe's general fall into disenchantment, the Romanticism's re-enchanting imperative as a response, provided the very justification for Bankim's preservationist impulse. In an exhortation addressed to those modern

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<sup>204</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Kapalkundala's Destiny," *Bankimchandra Chatterjee: Essays in Perspective* 304.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

Indians who would jettison all of Hinduism because they consider it antiquated and worthless,

Bankim writes:

If [the modern Hindu] is not led away by prejudices fostered by his European education—prejudices which habit has made in him stronger than those imbibed with his mother’s milk, he will see in these legends...much that is beautiful, much that is really instructive, much that is calculated to save him yet from the effects of that deadliest of moral poisons—the intense materialism of modern Europe. They serve to embellish, to beautify, to explain and to illustrate the belief of his forefathers...That should perish which is fit to perish, but do not in your anger sweep away with it that which deserves to live. Search through all the vaunted literatures of Europe—rich as she is in literary treasures, and find me something which is equal to the Hindu legends of Dhruva, of Prahlad, of Savitri the wife of of Satyaban, of Harishchandra; and moderate your contempt for the wisdom of ages, and study with becoming reverence the outcome of centuries of patient thought.<sup>206</sup>

It should be clear, then, that Bankim’s novelistic experiment could not have meant to effect a sharp break with the Hindu past, but instead to filter out the gold from the dross of Hinduism. Of that gold, an enormous nugget was Hindu nature-worship. In Nabakumar’s sublime epiphany, Bankim “updates” this practice embedded within Hinduism’s history and ethos reaching back all the way to the early days of the *Rg Veda*. Nabakumar’s inspired vision of the seashore meets almost too literally Eck’s translation of *tirtha* as a “fording point to the other shore,” where the “other shore” refers, ambiguously enough, to the spiritual cosmos. Indeed, this awe-inspiring shore invites the formerly landlocked Nabakumar to a genuine convergence experience (evocative of the Transcendentalists or the Lake Poets, for example). It seems altogether appropriate that this liminal scene, poised halfway between the worldly and the otherworldly worlds, should be the context into which the “primitive” enchantress Kapalkundala, herself closer to the natural than the human world, enters the story, and asks of the worldly Nabakumar, “Traveler, have you lost your way?” This by-now-iconic line suggests that secular urban man had, by the colonial era, “lost his way,” and only a return to nature and enchantment

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid. 253-4.

(as embodied by the figure of Kapalakundala) could get him back on the proper path. It remains to be seen, of course, how successful this effort will be.

Just as the secular Nabakumar's Romantic call finds its response in Kapalkundala's animism, the new society would have to find its redemption in its earliest (proto-)Hindu antecedents, rather than its more recent, dessicated—I dare say, even disenchanting—orthodox ritual praxis. This selective animistic revival, finding its homology in the modern sublime, served Bankim instrumentally (after all, he was a positivist, in the Comtean sense): he was encouraged to valorize those elements of the past that would be compatible with a modernity already in swing. For him, this meant an enchanted naturalism of ethos that would correspond to a naturalism of representation that he took for granted as a precondition for not just the novel, but all literature.<sup>207</sup> Gradually, almost imperceptibly, this naturalism comes to displace supernaturalism, as immanence gains ground over transcendence, bringing the other world ever closer to this world.

#### ON ENCHANTED MIMESIS:

While colonial historiography and even postcolonial literary history tend to emphasize the break between supernaturalism and naturalism (thus reproducing Enlightenment split-think), I would like to suggest continuity, containment, and gradualism. The formal choice of the novel, for all its apparent novelty and innovation, actually serves Bankim's containment strategy, thanks to the supra-ordinating function of the novel form: he can contain supernaturalism within

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<sup>207</sup> Alok Ray 492.



his naturalist frame. Moreover, I want to argue that the realist novel's mimetic mode is the unexpected link between the Hindu literary past and the semi-secular present to which Bankim was hoping to fit India. The naturalism of Bankim's supra-ordinating frame would be seen as continuous with the supernaturalism of the earlier Puranic epics, for both modes subscribed to the enchanted mimetic Hindu philosophy of language, in which word directly reflects worlds. The following discussion about enchanted mimesis and enchanted language extend beyond just Bankim's milieu; it is meant to elaborate the general philosophico-theological backcloth of India in general, particularly at the time that the novel took root there. So different is the Hindu notion of mimesis from our own commonsensical disenchanting one, that we cannot step into the mentality of the early readers of the Indian novel without thoroughly understanding this alternate worldview; we must abandon our own assumptions about mimesis to understand what underlay the praxis of both writing and reading in the Indian context at the time in order to properly "read" Bankim's novel.

Significantly, Bankim, who had always taken an anthropological interest in folk religion and myth, made a deliberate neo-Puranic turn in the late 1880s, explicitly indicating his desire to establish a continuity with the roots of Hindu folk religion. This turn toward popular Hinduism was a reaction against Ram Mohun's sterile Brahmo rejection of Vaishnavism and Puranic culture.<sup>208</sup> I want to emphasize the continuity of mimesis as a narrative mode spanning both the (Puranic) religious pre-history and the history of the realist novel in India, in order to militate against the prevailing assumption that mimesis applies exclusively to realism (read: naturalism), while non- or anti-mimesis applies to so-called 'myth' (read: supernaturalism)—myth being

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<sup>208</sup> Sen 91.

itself a problematic descriptor for the religious epics and scriptures. This cultural ideology about mimesis—the traditional Western ideology of realism that authorizes naturalism (and its epistemological corrolary, empiricism) as the exclusive realm of mimesis—has led to what I see as a gross error in reading and contextualizing the realist Indian novel, starting with Bankim.<sup>209</sup>

Bankim’s commitment to positivism and empiricism was ambivalent at best. While he was seduced by these modern Western ideologies, he refused their disenchanting upshot. Hence his contradictory narrative impulses—a generally naturalist narration straining toward otherworldly dimensions, as evidenced in his frequently supernaturally-prone narration, elements, and subcutaneous references. What is important, though, is that *both* impulses emanate from the same cultural backcloth with its considerable stake in enchanted mimesis. Cultural renaissances are always about both breaks and continuities, and the Bengal Renaissance was no exception; I want to emphasize a continuity here because we so often tend to over-emphasize the breaks, particularly in colonial history.<sup>210</sup> Take, for example, Partha Chatterjee who describes the “post-Bankim phase” of late nineteenth-century literary prose as “distinct not

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<sup>209</sup> Mukherjee; and Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004) 20-21. These postcolonial literary and art critics take a rather narrow and ultimately traditional Western approach in their understanding of realism as it pertains to the novel and printed images in India, respectively. Both critics implicitly subscribe to the standard designation of the real as the natural, and the anti-real as the supernatural. Although at least Pinney’s sympathies lie with the Indian predilection for the supernatural, he presumes against that very sensibility by refusing to see it as merely another class of the real. Further, Pinney and Mukherjee assimilate these categories to culture in a similarly conventional way: Indians are incorrigibly drawn to supernaturalism (read: un-real, in this classification), and Europeans to naturalism (read: real). At no point does either critic probe the assumptions that underlie his or her thinking. Pinney goes so far as explore the “hybrid” category of magical realism, a genre that still hinges on—even if provisionally to blur—the sharp distinctions between real and anti-real, natural and supernatural, non-Western and Western. As I argue later in this dissertation, however radical and hybrid magical realism is, it does less to dismantle and enlarge our understanding of the real than do more (*apparently*) conventional realist Indian texts, such as those by Bankim, Tagore, and even Narayan.

<sup>210</sup> Partha Chatterjee 52.

so much as a ‘development’ of earlier narrative forms but fundamentally by virtue of its adoption of a wholly different, that is, modern European, discursive framework.”<sup>211</sup> I categorically disagree. Bankim, in my view, seems much more to establish continuities—however unwittingly—with the religious past, than to sharply break from it,<sup>212</sup> and his mimetic mode should *not* be seen as a break from this past.

Mimesis, the conjuring of likeness, has had a powerful, privileged, and unique role in the Hindu tradition of words and images; further, mimesis in this enchanted context would extend to the (continuous) natural and supernatural realms alike. As religious scholar Diana Eck reminds us, mimesis—in the form of icons, or so-called “fetishes”—has been at the heart of the West’s misunderstanding and disparagement of the East.<sup>213</sup> Furthermore, I do believe the West continues, albeit less nefariously, to misunderstand the way mimesis works in India, in the literary no less than the plastic arenas. So it is worth spending some time right at the get-go to

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Scholars like Chatterjee often emphasize Bankim’s secular commitments, in particular his desire to recover for modern literature the secular literature in Sanskrit. Presumably, their secular tendency is a justifiable reaction against the Hindu nationalist appropriation of Bankim (although, it must be admitted, that Bankim had his own Hindu chauvinisms, including his dismissal of Indo-Islam, and his lack of deep engagement with world religions outside of India). I would not argue with the Chatterjee school’s notion. In fact, as I have explicitly claimed, one of Bankim’s major achievements was making a sliver for secularism in modern Bengal. But I believe that Chatterjee’s school makes more of the secular-sacred split within the Hindu tradition than there was. Further, I insist that Bankim’s secularism need not be thought of as either disenchanting, or as at odds with or divorced from the religious tradition. As I have emphasized a number of times, the secular and the sacred comfortably cohabited within the Hindu tradition from its earliest Vedic days. The two sub-traditions, borrowed from each other freely. Hinduism incorporated many secular strains, from the Rg Veda’s secular poetry, to the classical Sanskrit poetics, to primitive cults, to the nearly atheistic schools of Nyaya and Sankhya philosophy. Further, if Bankim were trying to make a clean break from the Indian tradition, why would he even have invoked a Sanskrit poetics embedded in the Hindu tradition? At the very least, *kavya* was written in Sanskrit, not the vernacular, thus clearly emerging from the religious tradition (since Sanskrit was the religious language of the Hindus, originally). Why not just abandon those references and start fresh, or use exclusively European secular poetic models?

<sup>213</sup> Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2007 [1981]) 17-18, 31, and 35.

re-*Orient* the notion in its context and tradition, for that shall serve as the foundation of our understanding of mimesis vis-à-vis the tradition of the enchanted realist novel in India, the subject of this dissertation. Eck writes, “For the Indian religious artist the task of image-making was giving shape to those things we cannot readily see.”<sup>214</sup> I would argue that the writer of the enchanted realist novel in India, from Bankim to Norbu, is charged with this complex mimetic task no less than the consecrated sculptor or painter in the Hindu tradition.

The putatively supernatural figures that populate the Hindu pantheon are rendered by consecrated sculptors as “*prakṛti* and *pratimā* [to] suggest the ‘likeness’ of the image to the deity it presents.”<sup>215</sup> (Note that Eck chooses the verb “presents” over “represents,” the former suggesting enchantment, the latter disenchantment.) But these icons are also called *mūrti*, which translates to form, embodiment, or manifestation: “thus, the *mūrti* is more than a likeness; it is the deity itself taken form.”<sup>216</sup> The convergence of the likeness and the thing itself moves mimesis into the realm of enchantment, rather than disenchantment. The likeness is charged with the spirit of the original (here, God), and so the slippage between the symbol and its referent is virtually non-existent. Note how different this notion of mimesis is from the standard Western academic one, in which mimesis is generally taken to be an index of disenchantment, in that the brute copy can never capture the animus of the thing it copies. In the Hindu context, however, it is helpful to think of mimesis in terms of embodiment, more than copy; manifestation rather than imitation.

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the West's disenchanting of mimesis versus the Hindu enchanting of it accounts for some of the most significant muddles in cross-cultural understanding, from the missionaries of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the postcolonial Metropolitan critics of today. From the Abbé Dubois to E.M. Forster, Western visitors to India have historically been bewildered and disgusted by Hindu "idol-worship."<sup>217</sup> For these Europeans, the Hindu worship of icons struck the former as crass because they saw these icons as mere objects—disenchanted, brute material. However, for the Hindu worshippers, these icons are not mere objects, but likenesses through which the Divine spirit is approached, invoked, and dismissed during the ritual of the puja. For the duration of the worship, Brahman (the infinite, transcendent Godhead) comes down to earth and takes a finite form for the sake of the worshippers; this form, or likeness, is then charged with divinity during that consecrated time.<sup>218</sup> The statue is, for that time, not just a likeness of the god, but the god itself. Of course, even when Western visitors were able to understand that these objects were not brute *in the eyes of* the worshippers, the former still subscribed to the fetishism taboo: the notion of spirit "improperly" attributed to an object, one of the deepest taboos that separates the West from the rest. This taboo also bespeaks the Western insistence on the disenchantment of mimesis: to enchant the likeness with the spirit of the likened is to commit a grave mistake.

Such recalcitrant disenchantment of mimesis, moreover, plagues even today's critical discourse on India, from art history to literary history.<sup>219</sup> By identifying mimetic narrative and art

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.17-18, 35.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid. 45, 49-50.

<sup>219</sup> See footnote 209.

as an imported disenchanted Western mode making a sharp break with the supernatural “anti-mimetic” Indian past, these critics not only ignore the longstanding mimetic tradition in Hindu India, but also its enchantment, and its relevance to both natural and supernatural realms.

Here, I want to pause to elaborate an understanding of the general principle of mimesis underlying both Hindu religious texts and the later novels. This enchanted mimetic theory of language would have underpinned even the Puranic epics in all their supernaturalism, for those pantheistic gods, like Bankim’s monistic, immanent one, would have been taken to be real as well. Describing the supernatural images of the Hindu deities, Diana Eck writes, “[*mūrti*] suggests the congealing of form and limit from that larger reality which has no form or limit. However, the *mūrti* is a body-taking, a manifestation, and is not different from the reality itself”.<sup>220</sup> The *sāguna* (with qualities) and *nirguna* (without qualities) are merely different approaches to the Divine, both equally referential to its reality.<sup>221</sup> Here we do not find a hard-and-fast separation between the visible and the invisible, as we do in Enlightenment split-think.

What is striking is the devotees’ libidinal investment in giving God form and visibility. It was no different for Bankim, whose orientation toward Vaishnavism was always more intellectual than libidinal; in keeping with that inclination, his version of visibility just takes on a linguistic and more naturalist rendering. (It is worth remembering that Bankim, while not the most sensualist of bhaktas, was more drawn to it than he ultimately was to the Hindu schools of philosophy he otherwise admired; he openly denounced the latter simply for their ascetic

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<sup>220</sup> Eck, *Darśan* 38.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid. 45. Eck explains that in the early theistic traditions of Hinduism, there are five forms of the Lord: “the Supreme form (*para*), the emanations or powers of the Supreme (*vyūha*), the immanence of the Supreme in the heart of the individual and in the heart of the universe (*antaryāmin*), the incarnations of the Supreme (*vibhava*), and finally, the presence of the Supreme Lord in a properly consecrated image (*arcā*).”

intellectual tendencies.<sup>222</sup>) This impulse toward giving God visible form bespeaks the natural-supernatural continuity I have been discussing in this chapter: it reveals a sense of god as readily accessible, perceptible, proximal. For Hindus, particularly Vaishnavas,

The image is a divine “descent” of the Supreme Lord who entrusts himself to human caretaking. In the image-incarnation, one sees evidence of the theological notion expressed by Pillai Lokacarya that people not only depend upon God, but God is willingly dependent upon people, upon their nurturance and caretaking. The worship of the child Krsna, who elicits the most spontaneous and tender of human parental emotions, is another instance of the divine-human mutuality which is the essence of bhakti. Bhakti comes from a Sanskrit verb which means “to share,” and bhakti is a relational love, shared by both God and the devotee.<sup>223</sup>

At the core of the Vaishnavas’ philosophy is the belief that the Lord is characterized by “his gracious Accessibility (*saulabhya*)...the divine image facilitates and enhances the closer relationship of the worshipper and God and makes possible the deepest outpourings of emotion in worship.”<sup>224</sup> Thus, the Hindu mimetic image is enchanted in two senses: 1) it both refers to and *is* the reality to which it refers; 2) its *raison d’être* hinges on the human-divine intimacy and reciprocity (much like Kapalkundala’s relationship to her personal deities).

Sometimes the divinely-charged images are natural: *sui generis* elements of nature-as-god, such as *salagrama* stones (Lord Vishnu himself) or the many outcroppings of stone called *linga* (Lord Siva himself) that can be found in the holy city of Benares;<sup>225</sup> other times, the divine images are supernatural, “[stretching] the human imagination toward the divine by juxtaposing earthly realities in an unearthly way.”<sup>226</sup> We need not belabor the distinction between natural

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<sup>222</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Bankim Rachanavali*, 145.

<sup>223</sup> Eck 48.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid. 46.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid. 34-35; and Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* 290.

<sup>226</sup> Eck, *Darśan*, 38.

and supernatural image-incarnations of the Divine—the distinction is a bit of a red herring in a cosmology that takes in the full sweep of natural and supernatural. The point is that, whether natural or supernatural, divine images in Hindu India are all mimetic and hyper-enchanted: they simultaneously liken and presence a God taken to be real. Paradoxical though it may sound, this is a particular form of verisimilitude, albeit not empirically-based. To suggest that eight-armed gods are not represented in realist modes is to suggest that these gods and goddesses are not real to the devotees. To presume against belief in this way has consequences for our hermeneutics of the image, and of the word-image of god(s) in India. It is here that I diverge from Metropolitan and postcolonial critics alike,<sup>227</sup> who assimilate mimesis exclusively to “realism,” by which they mean something closer to photo-objectivity, and thus disenchantment; they do not appreciate that the principle of mimesis held true even for the depiction of supernatural deities taken for real, let alone the more natural dimensions of enchantment (immanent enchantment).

Ironically, the West has been no less invested in mimesis (particularly when it comes to so-called realist forms, such as the novel); the only difference—a purely ideological one—is that its mimesis is disenchanting. Paradoxically, this ideology obscures the West’s own (secular) magic of mimesis, which finds its most spectacular success in the realist novel with its breathtaking capacity to “suspend the disbelief” of even the most skeptical reader. The novel, even in a post-secular milieu, encourages an extraordinary belief and immersion into alternate, imagined worlds, at least for the non-negligible duration of the reading of a novel. Indeed the “-ism” of realism exists precisely because the represented material is understood to be un-real in the objective sense, and thus requires tactics and tricks to achieve verisimilitude. So we can

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<sup>227</sup> Again, see especially footnote 209 on postcolonial critics Meenakshi Mukherjee and Christopher Pinney.



speculate that the West, blind to its own magic of mimesis,<sup>228</sup> in objecting to “idolatry” did not object to the principle of mimesis *per se*, but to its enchantment and its extremity.<sup>229</sup> This revulsion against hyper-mimesis is the scorn for taking the copy to be tantamount to the original, for taking the symbol to be the symbolized, for the inability to abstract. And yet, as Eck discusses, Hindu *darśan* is all about connecting the palpable symbol, *mūrti*, to the abstract symbolized, *Brahman*. Were there no understanding of an abstract transcendental (Brahman), there would be no need to invoke and dismiss it during the puja ritual. Again, the continuity between the supernatural/transcendent/invisible and the natural/immanent/visible that underpins Hindu enchantment is something the post-Enlightenment West, in its split-think, has had a difficult time taking into account.

Although I have thus far been discussing mimesis primarily in the plastic realm, the same claims can be extended to the literary realm. At stake in both is the debatable (dis)enchantment implicit in the theory of representation. If, in the West’s disenchanted theory of mimesis, the “copy” is considered devoid of the spirit of the original, an inherently incomplete “capture” of the original, then *representation* itself is normatively disenchanted. On the other hand, if in the Hindus’ enchanted theory of mimesis, the likeness captures the very spirit of the original, then representation becomes normatively enchanted—indeed, we might call it presentation, rather than representation. The consequences for two different theories of language and their implications for realist representation are far-reaching.

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<sup>228</sup> This insight is from Michael Taussig, in a July, 2009 conversation.

<sup>229</sup> Eck, *Darśan*, 18-21 (21, especially). In the longer book project, I will provide a more nuanced account of mimesis in the West, from Plato and Aristotle, through Auerbach. For now, please see Introduction.

Indeed, the enchantment of plastic images in Hindu India finds its even more significant analogue in language. In the lengthy elaboration below, which I chose for its clarity and eloquence, David Kinsley speaks specifically of the philosophy of sound/word in tantrism, a particular praxis of Hinduism that Bankim vehemently abhorred for its cruel, barbaric, morbid, and inhumane ritual “left hand sacred” practices. However, the philosophy of sound/language in tantrism is one of the aspects the esoteric cult shares with the wider Hinduism,<sup>230</sup> as evidenced by the general Hindu take on the Gayatri mantra which I explain below. So, I think we can safely say that this particular “right hand sacred” aspect would not have been one that Bankim objected to, even in tantrism. Therefore, when I gloss Kinsley’s passages, I, with some justification, extrapolate them to Hinduism-at-large.

We are so used to thinking of a deity in physical, anthropomorphic form, and so unused to thinking of one as a sound, that it is unnatural for us to look to the *bija* mantra as the essential manifestation of the goddess. In tantric philosophy and *sādhana* [exercise], however, the mantra has priority over the physical image of the goddess. It is not surprising, therefore, to find commentaries or analyses that elaborate the entire cosmos in terms of a given mantra. It is simply assumed that the mantra, which is the goddess herself, contains all of reality, the mantra is the cosmos in its essential form. ...in tantric thought, the cosmos represents a refraction of the essential being of the goddess, which is the mantra itself...the mantra is already complete, the emerging cosmos a natural and necessary effect, or emanation, of the mantra.<sup>231</sup>

This passage reveals the tight connection between sound, word, divinity, and cosmic reality.

Already, we have a sense that the Hindus subscribe to a theory of language very different from the modern semiotic theory of language. I would like to call the Hindus’ an enchanted mimetic theory of language. In contradistinction to Saussure’s famous theory of the arbitrariness of the sign, Sanskrit is believed to contain within its very sounds inherent meaning and holiness. Here is Kinsley again:

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<sup>230</sup> Bankim himself acknowledges that certain aspects of esoteric cults are shared by Hinduism generally, whereas others are not.

<sup>231</sup> Kinsley 135.

There is a long-standing tradition in Hinduism that sound is the essence of reality. The idea of *śabda brahman* is ancient: ultimate reality in its most essential form is expressed in sound. Philosophical schools of great sophistication, such as the Sphota school, are based on theories of sound and vibration as the essential and basic constituents of reality. Related to this emphasis on the priority of sound as basic to the nature of ultimate reality is the equally ancient emphasis in Hinduism on the potency of mantras, or sacred utterances. Reciting mantras, particularly Vedic mantras, is an essential part of most Hindu rituals. Indeed, many rituals are believed to be impotent unless qualified priests pronounce the mantras correctly...Mantras were usually taken from sacred texts, and their power was believed to be almost unlimited.<sup>232</sup>

Let us examine two examples of the power of mantra which will in turn illuminate the enchantment of mimetic language in the Hindu tradition—the very tradition whose immediate heir is, consequentially, Bankim. These examples will, I hope, draw our attention to the “chant” at the heart of “enchantment,” an etymology that lays bare the tight connection between language and enchantment.

The term “mahavidyas” generally refers to the ten major goddesses revered in Hinduism, particularly but not only in the tantric tradition. (Chief among these goddesses is Kali, worshipped by our heroine and her kapalik father). After all, Bengal has always been the great site for Kali-worship, including even that of the putatively “secular” poet Kalidasa. But the term “mahavidyas” extends beyond mere goddess-deity. This broader meaning gives us further insight into the relationship between divinity and language. Technically, “mahavidyas” translates to “ten great mantras;” and in turn, “vidya” or “mantra” (feminine and masculine designations for the same thing) refers to knowledge.<sup>233</sup> So, the sacred utterances ARE the goddesses, just as they ARE the knowledge bestowed by the goddesses. This perfect identity between language, divinity, and knowledge constitutes a closed circle of meaning that characterizes what Lukács calls “integrated civilizations,” taking as his own example, the early

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid. 59.

ancient Greeks.<sup>234</sup> The turning point in Lukács' philosophico-historical narrative of literary form was when God abandoned the world, leaving that closed circle torn asunder and requiring a secular substitute in the compensatory aesthetic unity offered by the novel. But that turning point had not yet come for the Hindus—God had neither abandoned the world of Bankim, nor the novelistic world of Bankim .

Kinsley explains, “the goddess—who is the mantra—appears or exists only when the mantra is invoked. She remains in latent form until a particular adept invokes her through the mantra that is her animating essence. It is in this sense, perhaps, that the emphasis upon the adept and the goddess as utterly converged might be understood in the tantric context. The one cannot and does not exist without the other”.<sup>235</sup> In this example, enchantment in all the registers I have been discussing—the divine-human co-dependence, the worldly presencing of the divine, the magical powers of mimetic language—come together. In the specific case of the mahavidyas, who are known for their destructive, malevolent powers, and are particularly revered by Bengalis, devotees (such as Kapalkundala and her *shakti*-hungry tantric guardian, vis-à-vis Kali) would take great pains to pronounce the mantras correctly, for imprecision is believed to inspire the wrath of the terrible goddess who would then release calamitous forces of destruction on the errant devotee.

My second example is even more rife with cosmological implications and applicability to Hinduism-at-large. The Gayatri mantra, the so-called “mother of the Vedas,” is considered the primordial speech, the original aural presencing of divinity in its most elemental, monistic form:

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<sup>234</sup> Lukács 29-33.

<sup>235</sup> Kinsley 59.

Brahman. Like its first word *Om*, the Gayatri mantra is loaded with sacred charge. Not only is the Gayatri mantra taken to be the core of the Hindu lexicon, it serves as the basis for an entire philosophy of language. By invoking the Gayatri mantra, which putatively contains within it all seven orders of the entire universe, one presences God in the world. In Kinsley's words, "the mantra is the cosmos in its essential form...*paramātmān*, the supreme or transcendent self or soul."<sup>236</sup> Each of the *hrīm* [a subset of the Gayatri] mantra's syllables are

interpreted as basic phases or constituents of the cosmic creative process. Different letters of the alphabet are said to proceed from each of the four components of the mantra, along with certain deities and certain aspects of the physical creation. The creation proceeds from the mantra on three levels: sound, deities, and the physical creation...The letters of the alphabet are said to have a threefold character—solar, lunar, and fiery...<sup>237</sup>

We see here that, even at the level of the alphabet, language is replete with enchantment and mimetic reference to the natural and supernatural cosmos. It is widely held that this gnomic mantra spawns the entire Vedas; still others claim that the mantra is the basis for literature itself—all literature. Given the centrality of this mantra to the Hindu written tradition, it is imperative to note that sound and word here directly, powerfully, and necessarily (i.e., NOT arbitrarily) correspond to their referents; and behind it all is the Divine breath of creation. The Hindu conception of the primordial Gayatri mantra insists that sound and meaning are inextricably linked; thus the word relates directly to the world.

To recite the mantra is to be in harmony with the cosmos—utterly enchanted. And the harmony effected by the *sādhana* of recitation actually presences the divine spirit which can then serve to enlighten the mind and soul of the devotee. Such is the charge associated with these

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid. 135.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

sacred utterances that the utmost rigours and protocols surround them: if so much as a syllable is mispronounced, the cosmic order gets thrown out of whack, with disastrous consequences for not just the reciter, but the entire world. Sound, nature, cosmos, creation, deities, and the devotee's body and consciousness aligned through language to presence God: this is almost a literal instantiation of the dharmic principle of universal alignment. It is also an affirmation of the natural-supernatural continuity I have been discussing; indeed, we see here that mimetically enchanted language, for the Hindus, is premised on this very continuum from one's own body to Brahman. It does not make sense to think of mimetic language as pertaining only to one discrete dimension of reality (namely, the phenomenal world) when the Hindus think of reality as continuous between the visible and invisible dimensions of the cosmos.

Compare this notion of language with that put forth by the likes of Saussure and Barthes, and extended by Derrida. In this desacralized view, language can never faithfully represent its object because: a) there has been a fundamental divorce between words and world; and b) the world is not taken to be revealed by the Divine Word (*logos*), but to be arbitrarily constructed by a contingent man-made language characterized by the disconnect between sign and referent. Barthes, in his 1968 essay "Death of the Author," homes in on the connection between religiosity and realism. In fact, it is precisely to this religiosity backing up the mimetic principle in (realist) language and literature that Barthes so vociferously objects. Set against this, modernist writing "carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning...refusing to assign a 'secret', and ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity...since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God..."<sup>238</sup> How different this

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<sup>238</sup> Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," *In Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 147.

anti-theological, disenchanted theory of language is from the Hindu mimetic theory of language! Once again, even from a mimesis-hostile point of view, we see how mimesis and religious enchantment go together. Benjamin takes Barthes' deapothosis of literature further when he situates the divorce between word and world not in modernism, but in the Fall itself; however, whereas Barthes jubilates over the desacralization of language, Benjamin elegiacally looks back to a time in the Judeo-Christian West when mimetic language was enchanted.

Benjamin's essay "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man" calls our attention to the mystical origins of language whose vestiges can be felt even in modern language, all of which is man's vain attempt to recover God's original word, once available to men, containing all of existence and perfect knowledge. For Benjamin, the degree of slippage between sign and referent is directly related to the degree of disenchantment. He means disenchantment in the Lukácsian sense: the rupture in the closed circle of meaning. Before the fall, there was as yet no gap between Word and the world. After the Fall, the language of man becomes merely a language of means, mere signs that proliferate in the plurality of languages. The "expressly mediate word" stands in lieu of the "expressly immediate, the creative word of God," and "that is really the Fall of language-mind."<sup>239</sup> In other words, that is the loss of *logos*.

According to Benjamin, before God abandoned the world, humans were still intimately connected to God, and the creative language-mind of God had a direct corollary in the name-giving language-mind of men, which responded perfectly to the mute language of things (i.e., the inner essence a thing in nature communicates to an "other" it requires—specifically, name-

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<sup>239</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986 [1978]) 327.

giving man).<sup>240</sup> Thus, in the enchanted world before the Fall, God and man and nature were bound up in the same transparent linguistic universe, where all three constituents of the enchanted realm required one another through language. Mimesis was perfect: there was no slippage between signifier and signified in the enchanted realm of complete reciprocity and continuity among the transcendent, the phenomenal, and the human.

Note how similar Benjamin's notion is to the Hindus', where word meets world in absolute correspondence, just as man in his capacity for consciousness and language participates in the transparent *logos* of God and mediates between the language of things (nature) and the mind of God. Since it was only during Bankim's era—primarily through Bankim himself—that high literary language expanded beyond Sanskrit<sup>241</sup> to include the vernaculars, we can assume that he and his readers would have inherited the religious philosophy in which sound-thought-word-God form a nexus. I find Benjamin's elegy very important for us, for he reminds us that even in the West, there was once an enchanted theory of mimesis, and the very shift in philosophy of language was brought about by a change in the cosmological relationship between men and God. And it is precisely that temporal, rather than culturally essentialist, argument that I am trying to make. The Bengal Renaissance thinkers, looking to Europe's example, were acutely aware of how India might go if not pulled back from the brink of disenchantment.

If I have belabored this discussion of enchanted mimesis, it is because I want to emphasize five key points apropos of Bankim specifically and the realist novel tradition in India

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid. 325-326.

<sup>241</sup> N.B.: Whether Sanskrit, Bengali, or Persian (in which educated Hindu Bengalis like Ram Mohun Roy were often conversant), the languages of this middle-class milieu were all marked by a non-arbitrary, divinely-sanctioned correspondence between language and world. This multi-linguistically shared ethos only lends strength to my claim about enchanted mimetic language in India.



generally. First, I hope I have challenged the mimesis-disenchantment assumption, so as to show that Bankim's naturalism should be considered enchanted, and to show that the mimetic-realist tradition in India can generally be thought of as enchanted. One might even go so far as to say that a thoroughly enchanted worldview actually *demand*s a mimetic theory of language spanning both natural and supernatural dimensions—a non-binaristic mimetic principle that would thus obviate the need for the anti-mimetic strategies of magical realism to be pursued a century later to represent enchantment.<sup>242</sup> Second, I wanted to suggest continuity over break vis-à-vis the relationship between supernaturalism and naturalism in the Hindu literary tradition, starting with Bankim's novels. Third, I wanted to rescue the supernatural from non-reality, an association that presumes against the worldview of the faithful. The ideology of a realism that delimits naturalism as its exclusive domain is merely the upshot of a *deus absconditus* worldview: if humans can no longer communicate with, perceive, or access the invisibly numinous, then they have no choice but to restrict their artistic renderings to that which they can perceive: the phenomenal world (empirically viewed, in the West). Fourth, I hope to have intimated that the West has always had its own magic of mimesis—not just pre-Fall, but even today, particularly vis-à-vis the mimetic magic of fiction. It is perhaps the West's desire to cover over this embarrassment that compelled it to project such distaste for the hyper-enchantment of “fetishists” in so-called primitive cultures. Fifth, I have identified the issue of enchantment/disenchantment vis-à-vis mimesis as the core of the cultural tension and misunderstanding between the West and “the (‘fetishistic’) rest.”

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<sup>242</sup> I will be discussing this at length in the final chapter: I take magical realism to be, ironically, an index of disenchantment.

Bankim stood at the precipice of yet another potential Fall—when already the atheist Young Bengal movement inspired by disenchanted European ideologies railed against native religiosity in much the spirit of the colonizers, threatening the lived, daily, taken-for-granted numinosity of the Hindu world. Through language—a sustained ethos of enchanted mimesis, shifted to a more naturalist and humanist agenda—Bankim meant to uphold the worldly-otherworldly cosmology even while adjusting India to a modern colonial world in which empiricist imperatives had become ineluctable and humanist agitation for action and justice had become urgent.

But where Bankim would not concede any ground was disenchantment: he would not abide the exile of God from the lived world of Indians. His refusal, however, did not take the form of nativism. Rather, he pursued the tried and true tactic of ‘using the master’s tools to disassemble the master’s house.’ With all his might, he kept the beast of disenchantment at bay, as aware of the power of appeasement as any of the “superstitious” characters from whom he will finally distance himself in *Kapalkundala*. His apotropaic magic was the enlisting of naturalism and humanism—“rationalism” as he called it—toward enchanted ends. He effected this by making the Divine ever more immanent, ever more perceptible in the phenomenal world. His naturalist commitments necessarily went hand-in-hand with his valorization of nature. According to his intellectual biographer, Bankim “relates the Hindu’s preoccupation with metaphysical abstractions and an after-life with the failure to master the world of nature”; thus, he prefers the more “affirmative and this-worldly” aspects of his religion.<sup>243</sup> In naturalist

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<sup>243</sup> Sen 77. Sen makes the point that Bankim’s forerunner in this regard, Rammohun, drew on both Anglo-Protestantism and the Hindu Tantra tradition, to shore up his “this-worldly” privileging. This kind of yoking of the

language, he renders an *anima mundi*, including: a natural sublime through which numinosity courses; and the enchanted perceptions, dreams, omens, and worldview of his most animistic character, an ethereal mortal female just as enchanting as the immortal equivalents to whom she is akin, almost like Helen to Athena.

Even more fascinatingly, Bankim turns his novel into a *tirtha* of a sort, stretching his naturalist language to its outer limit, gesturing toward “the other shore” both in content and in mode—namely, by ever-so-imperceptibly alluding to tropes and figures of the Hindu tradition, and by extending the mimetically enchanted narrative mode from the long-standing Hindu narrative tradition and philosophy of language. Bhabatosh Chatterjee, the critic who introduces the omnibus of essays commissioned by the Sahitya Akademi (the National Academy of Literature), claims:

[Bankimchandra] too nursed an unquiet dream that the power of the *word* could perhaps change the existent order. Was it a mere fantasy, or does it have any authoritative sanction? Bankimchandra was a firm rationalist, but he also had a deep religious sensibility. In almost all religions, including tribal religions, the final source of *logos* is God. Word and God are often interchangeable...In Hindu religion and theological writings, *Om*...is not a mere word but God Himself. What is called *śruti* is revelation, God’s utterance (heard and remembered by sages); on this assumption, *word* is the external aspect of the thought of God. The sacred words of mantras...can transmit spirituality and extraordinary power...Here voice, word, and thought are synonymous.<sup>244</sup>

This passage suggests that Bankim’s writing, and his consciousness of his writerly vocation, could be considered apiece with the religious literature and sacred philosophy of language that he inherited. Further, Chatterjee goes on to claim that the writings of Tagore and Bankim achieve the sense of “transport,” “exaltation,” “ecstasy,” and “inspiration” akin to the scriptures.<sup>245</sup>

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two different cultural traditions was very typical of Rammohun, Bankim, and religious reformists of the Bengal Renaissance in general.

<sup>244</sup> Bhabatosh Chatterjee lxxxii.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

Though this is debatable, the very manner in which this critic discusses Bankim's writing signals the religious literary milieu in which his writing would have been produced and received. In short, one may safely speculate that the realism of his fictions had a double force, which gave it an advantage over both the indigenous tradition and the European: on the one hand, its unprecedented emphasis on the phenomenal world of mere mortals, and on the other, its inheritance of an enchanted mimetic theory of language in which words carried an inordinate, sacred capacity—such that his realism had a *gravitas* far beyond that of his European counterparts. Perhaps it is this bifid aspect of Bankim's fiction that accounts for the paradoxical critical claims about it with which I opened up this chapter: some holding it up for its worldiness, others for its otherworldiness. With his East-West inheritance, Bankim can make of realism something far beyond Europe's ken: he demonstrates that mimesis need not exclusively mean a quasi-photo-objective naturalism that performs a disenchanting, alienated rendering of the world.

In a later more social realist novel, *The Poison Tree* (1873), he takes this imperative for a very particular kind of realism—the rendering of a reality immanent with God—even further and more successfully by bringing God still closer to mundane life in a few different ways. One of these ways is that he renders his plot in such a way that an invisible God responds to the fervent prayer of the heroine who asks for dharmic affirmation of her conduct by granting her wish. When the plot corroborates the presence and responsiveness of a monistic God, immanent enchantment prevails.

BANKIM'S FAILURE<sup>246</sup>

Before that success seven years later in *The Poison Tree*, Bankim has a partial failure in *Kapalkundala*. That failure, in my view, occurs toward the end of the novel when he suddenly turns on his hyper-enchanted heroine. Up until this point, he has been cultivating our sympathies toward her and celebrating her nature-loving, quasi-celestial qualities. Suddenly, though, he comes down very hard on her. Significantly, this is also when his narration becomes most markedly naturalist, meta-critical to the point of disenchanting representation. For all her picturesque enchantment, Kapalakundala's passivity and blind devotion to her personal deities finally do not pass muster with Bankim. After all, our Comtean Bankim wants to modernize the religion and make it stand up to the by-now-ineluctable demands of rationalism and even justice. Ultimately, Bankim's ideal version of enchantment is a "Religion of Man,"<sup>247</sup> and Kapalkundala is insufficiently connected to her fellow man. Even if certain elements of Kapalkundala are attractive enough to carry into the future—her intimacy with nature, for example—the novel needs to kill her off because she is over-connected to the other world, and under-connected to this world. Her attachment to the 'irrational and barbarous' elements of an antiquated tantrism (such as those that demand unjust sacrifices, including her own life), finally render her not the

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<sup>246</sup> It is almost a truism to say that novels' endings fail. But how and why a pioneering novel specifically fails is of tremendous interest and import when establishing a literary genealogy in a particular culture.

<sup>247</sup> Das Gupta 190-198 especially. According to Das Gupta, Bankim was trying to develop, first through his novels and then through his more explicitly didactic works, a humanist religion—a religion of praxis focusing on *mānava-dharma* (the religion of man). This *mānava-dharma* was a synthesis of Comte's Religion of Humanity and the religion of the *Gīta*. Bankim's emphasis is on the immanence of the divine in human life; he claims, "God is spread throughout the world; work for the world is work for him" (Bankim quoted in Das Gupta 192). Essentially, Bankim locates religion in culture, created by man. For him, the ideal man is the man who has the nature of God, who uses his human capacities to realize divine nature. I will be treating this "religion of man" much more fully in the next chapter.

NEW woman promised by the Genesis scene at the opening of the novel, but the obsolete woman.

So enchanted and enchanting is this wild woman that her feet hardly touch the ground—a detail that Bankim renders in entirely attractive terms at the beginning of his story, and in quite judgmental terms toward the end. Like one of the goddesses she worships, she seems to hover over the social world in all its pleasures and responsibilities. (It is significant that her personal deities are Kali and Bhairavi, the two fiercest of the *mahavidyas*—thus does he stack the decks against both her and, by extension, his didactic object, the Bengali readership so beholden to these particular *mahavidyas*.) Without any ties to her fellow humans, her only recourse is to her personal relationship with her deities and to her own enchanted interpretive code, with its heavy reliance on dreams and visions, such as the final one wherein Goddess Bhairavi takes form in the sky and leads her to her destination and destruction.

Kapalkundala is enchanted even to the degree that she is more attached to her patron deity than she is to her own husband or other humans:

She had developed in her heart a special devotion to Kali. She was strongly convinced that Bhairavi was the ruler of the created world, as well as its liberator. Now, the same Bhairavi, ruler of the universe, arbiter of human joys and sorrows, liberator of the soul, had appeared in a dream to decree that Kapalkundala should surrender her life. Why should Kapalkundala not obey that decree? You and I don't wish to die...love is the primary strand in the ties that bind us to life. Kapalkundala did not have such ties—she had no ties at all. So, there was no holding her back.<sup>248</sup>

Note the clear distinction here between her and “us,” us being the narrator and readers. Bankim marks Kapalkundala off from us very deliberately here. *We* are attached to our worldly needs and bonds, but Kapalakundala is not. She has outdone herself in enchantment, losing her grip on the world, and thus not successfully maintaining one foot in each world, as proper enchantment

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<sup>248</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee 90-91.

would have it. The narrator can *represent* her mindset, but he makes a point to distinguish his from hers. *She* “was strongly convinced of” Goddess Bhairavi’s omnipotence; by contrastive implication, *he* and *we* are not. *She* interprets the world in light of this belief; *we* should not.

While certain critics like Priya Joshi have rightly likened Bankim’s didactic narratorial role to that of the Hindu epic narrator,<sup>249</sup> we should note a paradox in this: in taking such critical distance on his *über*-enchanted character, Bankim steps into the disenchanted mode that such representation inevitably is; moreover, he makes us conscious of this. No longer does the narrator risk his point of view being conflated with Kapalkundala’s, as it might have been at earlier points when he initially presented these very dreams and omens. It is at this point that we *consciously* register that the text has had two registers all along: the secular register and the enchanted register. Actually, the entire plot has been organized along these parallel tracks: the secular narrative centering on the savvy, conniving, glamorous, Muslim arch-courtesan Lutfunnissa in her secular jockeying for temporal and sexual power; and the sacralized narrative centering on the hopelessly guileless yogini Kapalkundala. And up until this point, Bankim’s and our sympathies have been aligned with Kapalkundala. Suddenly, at this very late stage, he changes his tune and shifts into the other register to take a deeply critical view on her—even at the risk of disenchanting his own enchanted narrative.

Just a bit earlier, Bankim similarly establishes clear narratorial distance from Kapalkundala as he describes her decision-making process based on her dream-interpretation.

The narrator inveighs:

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<sup>249</sup> Joshi 159.

It is doubtful if a wise person would have arrived at such a decision; but the decisions of wise men are not our concern. Not being particularly wise, Kapalakundala did not arrive at a wise decision. Hers was the decision of a young woman...who enjoyed nocturnal wanderings because she had been reared by a hermit, a woman *held captive by her devotion* to the Goddess Bhavani. It was the decision of an insect about to plunge into the flames of a burning fire....A person without any ties proceeds with unchecked speed. When the waterfall descends from the mountain-crest, who can restrain its flow?...When a young elephant is in heat, who can calm it down?<sup>250</sup>

Nowhere does Bankim come so close to clear pronouncement on the dangers of blind faith and hyper-enchantment in the worldly world. The continued metaphorization of Kapalkundala to her beloved nature only serves to underscore her proximity to the natural and ethereal realms rather than the social one. Increasingly, she has returned to her natural habitat, rejecting the station of wife: “I was once a wanderer in the wilds. To the wilds, as a wanderer I shall return again.”<sup>251</sup> While Bankim would approve her harmony with nature, he would disapprove her irreverence for her dharmic duty as a wife and as a self- and other-valuing, agentive member of society. Finally, her blind faith in the mother-goddess and her passive sense of destiny exceed even her love for nature (a problematic privileging, in Bankim’s view): she chooses suicide over a return to the wilderness.

By censuring Kapalkundala so stringently, Bankim makes it clear that he believes one’s agency should be oriented toward the social world, not exclusively toward the otherworld. Bankim’s portrayal of Kapalkundala is peppered with the language of passivity: a woman held “captive” by her devotion to Goddess Kali, a woman who can see no other way than to quiescently “obey” the “decree” of Goddess Bhairavi. Her notion of destiny is fatalistic, in the spirit of karma wherein the destiny of one’s current lifetime is determined by the deeds of

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<sup>250</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee 80 and 91, italics mine.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid. 88.



preceding lifetimes: it is unalterable in the here-and-now, so the proper attitude is to resign oneself to it, rather than to fight it. It is easy to imagine what a hard time religious reformers hoping to prepare India for nationalist agitation might have had in encountering this widespread belief in karma, an ethos that sanctifies resignation. Significantly, if not surprisingly, Bankim's radical notion of destiny—and destiny does appear a driving force in his novels—has more to do with dharma than with karma: destiny, for him, depends on character, action, and natural law.

Here is Bankim expounding upon destiny in the preface to the first edition of *Kapalkundala*:

I do not say that providence or the supernatural forces control our actions. That is not what I mean by destiny. Even the atheists may believe in destiny. The sequence of events in life is the inevitable result of the physical laws or the laws of nature and is rooted in human nature. Destiny, therefore, is nothing but the outcome of psychological and physical conditions. Since, however, such laws are beyond human knowledge, they acquire the name of destiny. Some readers may not like the end of this novel and may say, 'The novel has no happy ending, the author could have ended it differently.' The answer is that an author has to trace the course of destiny. Who can alter it or go against it? The seeds were sown in the expository parts of the novel; these would yield fruits accordingly. Anything contrary to that goes against the truth.<sup>252</sup>

This crucial distinction between his and his central character's take on destiny lies at the heart of his late-stage divorce from her. He vociferously militates against the kind of fatalistic, other-world-oriented, agency-relinquishing attitude exemplified by his naïve protagonist and experienced by Hindus far and wide. His attempt to supplant karmic emphasis with dharmic emphasis drives his later novels, all of which are deliberate emplotments of environment-specific, causal actions taken in *this* lifetime.

For all his criticism of Kapalkundala's surrender of agency, we find, if we look closely, that Kapalkundala exercises plenty of agency. But it is the wrong *kind* of agency for Bankim.

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<sup>252</sup> Bankim quoted in Alok Ray 496.

Although Kapalkundala is guided by her faith in the Goddess, finally she owns all of her decisions. Note the agentive attitude asserted in her final words to a desperate Nabakumar:

I shall answer your question. The person you saw tonight is Padmavati. I have not been unfaithful. I tell you this by way of information. But I shall not return home again. I have come here to surrender this body at Goddess Bhavani's feet; I shall fulfill my resolve. You must go home. I go to my death. Don't even grieve for me.<sup>253</sup>

That there has been a devastating misunderstanding is obvious to her; yet this reckoning does not change her course, which has nothing to do with the secular narrative. Just as she is alienated from the secular register of the story, so too is she alienated from her husband, and even from her own body (“*this* body”). However, she is anything but alienated from her will. Everything is immaterial to her except the otherworldly realm, and *her capacity to act* in accord with it. Read in the secular register of the story, she has been led to the cremation ground by the connivings of Nabakumar, the kapalik, and Lutfunnissa; read in the enchanted register—i.e., Kapalkundala's register—she has been led there by the Goddess Bhairavi. Moreover, she has surrendered (itself, paradoxically, an act of agency) to Bhairavi's guidance. The right to surrender to divine wish, the right to act in harmony with the otherworld: this is her prerogative, one which she has exercised from the beginning of the story, even at the expense of social custom. Indeed, the only reason she agrees to enter into wedlock, an entirely new concept to her, is because the priest informs her that is her sacred duty. But beyond fulfilling her religious obligation in this basic and perfunctory way, her spirit remains connected to the spirits of the otherworld.

How might we understand human agency in relation to divine will? Intuitively, it would seem that the one is at odds with the other. But, this is only so in a disenchanting conception of

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<sup>253</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee 95.

the universe—in a universe where God is either absent or banished to a distant locus. Let me explain. In an enchanted universe, divine will responds to human need even as human agency responds to divine will and need. Crucially, in Bilgrami’s formulation, an enchanted world depends on our agency: while the world contains values, it requires our human agency to recognize and respond to them.<sup>254</sup> In other words, the enchanted world—and God, by extension—needs us just as much as we need it. And so, *living* enchantment means *engaging* in response to the enchanted world—an engagement that requires an assertion of agency. Although Bilgrami deliberately ensures that his argument fits even a secular orientation, it actually derives historically from a religious cosmology, and thus applies even more transparently to the religiously enchanted scheme.<sup>255</sup> Kapalkundala’s choices—actively flouting custom—have been entirely and exclusively in line with the otherworld while she has neglected this world. In fact, she has never become enough a part of this world to put herself in the position of ethical praxis or *tirtha*. Hers is an engaged response to certain aspects of the cosmos—her nature and her gods—but not to the human element of it. In a way, she has already “crossed over to the other shore.” She does not have one foot this world and the other in the other world, but rather both feet in the otherworld. This is the problem for Bankim.

Strange as it is to say, Kapalkundala is a sort of wholesome version of Conrad’s Kurtz: like the charismatic figure, she has “kicked herself loose of the earth,”<sup>256</sup> of social and ethical

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<sup>254</sup> Bilgrami 398; footnote 21.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid. 396. Here, Bilgrami acknowledges that among the scientific dissenters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many, such as John Toland, argued in explicitly pantheistic terms. The upshot is that the enchanted worldview, while translatable into secular terms (Bilgrami himself effecting that translation), was first conceived in openly pantheistic ones.

<sup>256</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Selections from The Congo Diary* (New York: Modern Library, 1999 [1899]) 82.

obligation. In fact, if we take Kapalkundala's perspective, there is virtually no pathos in her death. And indeed, she seems unperturbed by it, even as she stands unshaken in the cremation ground resolutely insisting on her death. After all, she belongs more naturally to the other-worldly realm, whereas the domestic-social world is a prison for her. Significantly, she confesses that she would never have chosen to marry if she knew it would mean slavery. Let us recall an exchange with her sister-in-law, the paradigmatic *grihini* (householder), to whose incomprehension Kapalkundala unabashedly professes that wifehood could never make her happy; rather, "it would make [her] happy to wander in those forests by the seashore."<sup>257</sup> As Bankim makes explicit, one thus detached from the usual social bonds would not really be giving up much in giving herself over to the preferred other world—particularly given the other world's continuities with nature. There is very little loss in death for her—in fact, the loss is more Nabakumar's than her own. Even we, the readers, do not feel as saddened by her death as we would with a more worldly character. In fact, to have sympathy with Kapalkundala—a provisional sympathy Bankim seems to want us to have—is to wish her freedom from her jealous husband, social strictures, covetous rivals, and an uncomprehending social milieu. Thus, the tragic dimension of her death is attenuated.

So, what would seem a tragedy in a secular narrative seems meet in an enchanted narrative. In this sense as well, Bankim does not quite pull off his didactic moment, for her ostensible punishment does not seem quite such a punishment. His cautionary tale about hyper-enchancement is not so cautionary precisely because of the hyper-enchancement of both the heroine and the predominant register of the story up to this moment. At the end of the novel, Bankim is

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<sup>257</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee 45.

unable to reconcile his two registers: the one (Kapalkundala's) is too enchanted, the other (Lutfunnissa's) too disenchanting, so we are left with a void. However insufficiently attached to her fellow humans Kapalkundala is, and however little value she places on her own life, she has more value for the lives of others than do her fellow characters. Beyond being the most virtuous of the four major characters in the novel, Kapalkundala is the only one who is not—at some point or another—downright murderous. It is no wonder she elicits our sympathy even at the end—a sympathy that has been cultivated all along (and we know how hard it is to refuse sympathy even to reproachable protagonists, particularly if we abide Lukács' claim that the heroes of novels are either madmen or criminals!<sup>258</sup>). Imagine how much more than we contemporaries the original readership, particularly the female readership which comprised his major constituency, would have related to a deeply religious woman evocative of the very *apsaras* who populate the mythopoetic imagination. So, Bankim is not quite successful in estranging his readers from his enchanting and enchanted heroine.

I suspect that even Bankim was ambivalent about Kapalkundala finally; and this residual ambivalence is also part of the failure of his ending. While he passes harsh judgment on her, he, like ourselves, cannot help but admire her for her bravery and compassion in her last moment. Because her disarmingly guileless personality is, unlike Kurtz's, characterized by an abstract, diffuse compassion without object, we naturally incline towards her. Here, Bankim depicts her tender and calm tone towards her treacherous husband:

Nabakumar's hand was trembling, Kapalkundala discovered; but she herself was fearless and steady... 'Are you afraid?' she asked him... Only a woman's voice can capture the tone in which she asked the question. Only a woman who melts in compassion can speak in such a tone. Who would have expected

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<sup>258</sup> Lukács 60-61.

such a tone of voice from Kapalkundala here, at the cremation ground, when her own death was imminent?<sup>259</sup>

That she can muster such aplomb in the face of death has something to do with her detachment, of course, but we are left to wonder whether emotional and social detachment is such a bad thing in a world populated by such menacing, exploitative, self-serving people as the kapalik, Lutfunnissa, and Nabakumar. Indeed, who could blame her for not wanting to live in such a world? That her detachment is not cold, but compassionate—almost like the benevolent goddesses of the pantheon who are not invested in social relationships to the same degree as the humans on whom they nonetheless bestow kindness—merely exaggerates her enchantment. So, despite Bankim’s admonishments, Kapalkundala remains the moral hero of the novel. If Bankim was trying to elaborate a humanistic dharmic scheme, this novel, with its multifarious villains and its ethereal protagonist, does not accomplish that goal. It is only in his later novels, such as *The Poison Tree*, that he is able to offer viable models for the ideal praxis of humanist dharma.

In terms of narration, since the initial rendering of Kapalkundala’s consequential dream, where the narrator takes a roving-eye point of view indistinct from Kapalkundala’s own, the narrator’s language has gotten progressively more detached from the (mis)perceptions of Kapalkundala’s it describes. When describing her final vision, the narrator’s language is more markedly detached than it has ever been: “In this state, even insubstantial things seem to take on a material shape. Such was Kapalkundala’s condition at this time...she *seemed* to hear a voice call out, from above...Etched in the clouds that had formed in the sky, *she saw what looked like*

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<sup>259</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee 94.

the outline of a figure...Bhairavi *seemed* to beckon to Kapalkundala.”<sup>260</sup> Note all the qualified language—“seemed,” “what looked like”—in addition to his almost clinical diagnosis of Kapalkundala’s “condition.” Here we see Bankim as we have never seen him before: detached unto the point of disenchantment, which I would define narratively as an ostensibly “objective,” explicitly third person view on the world (the narrative equivalent of the scientific perspective). Ironically, Bankim’s pronouncement on Kapalkundala, that “even insubstantial things seem to take on a material shape,” would run against his own ethos of the transcendent rendered immanent in the world. In more specifically literary terms, if this pronouncement were to be applied to Bankim himself in his many novelistic episodes of quasi-apparitional appearances, his novels’ trademark—their eeriness and numinosity—would become suspect. But this is still only part of his failure.

There is yet more going on in the “wise narrator[’s]” clear judgment on the excessively enchanted Kapalakundala’s “unwise” decision to sacrifice herself to her patron goddess. His disdain for Kapalkundala nearly echoes the notorious European (cf. Abbé Dubois) scorn for Hindu animism and superstition; thus does he problematically, if unwittingly, align himself with the disenchanted foreign take on India, rather than the indigenous one he has thus far sympathized with and advocated for. Moreover, he seems to assume in these related passages, a rift between the reader’s sensibility and Kapalakundala’s—hence his need to explain her decision. But does such explanation produce rather than reflect our distance from her? And what is the point of drawing the distinction between her and us, anyway?

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid. 91-92.

My intuition is that Bankim, after having valorized Kapalkundala's enchantment for most of the story, here at this late juncture, consciously—if *unsuccessfully*—attempts to humanize the narrative. I would not go so far as to say that he “secularizes” the narrative here, for he never denies a monistic immanent divinity (which will become even more explicit and prominent in *The Poison Tree*), but rather he rejects a superstitious and overly other-worldly approach to divinity. He effects this critique at two levels. By pointing out the distinction between a rational-secular perspective on the world and the *über*-enchanted perspective, and by deliberately assimilating his readers to the former category, he marshals them away from their “superstitious” tendencies. Further, by establishing a meta-critical distance on Kapalkundala thus, Bankim cracks open a sliver for skepticism on faith. He is asking us to question our own blind beliefs—a questioning essential to the rationalist “religion of man” he was at the time elaborating in his more explicitly theological writings. Informed by his utilitarian reading, Bankim believed that religion should never undermine humanity, but rather serve it, particularly because it—unlike God—is itself a human construction.<sup>261</sup> As such, he saw his own agentive role as a writer who might enable a more practicable, modern, and “rational” Hinduism.

At the same time, his novel benefits from, and indeed requires, the very character he finally kills off, for Kapalkundala's supernaturally-oriented mindset would have been mirrored by even his urban middle-class readers. In fact, Bankim's belabored distinction between her and us makes us wonder if it is more a wish than a diagnosis. Afterall, Kapalkundala's patron

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<sup>261</sup> Das Gupta 194.



goddesses are members of the very pantheon in which the readers would have believed.<sup>262</sup> Not for nothing is Kapalkundala the eponymous heroine of the novel. She would have resonated for her readers as both the subject and object of the sort of devotion they would have practiced. Part-devotee, part-*apsara* in a religion where the one can, through extreme *sādhana*, virtually become the other, Kapalkundala would have appealed immensely to a middle-class Bengali audience. Their own enchanted mode would have included personal relationships with the very same patron deities she worships, and they would have shared her belief in such divine incarnations appearing on earth from time to time. As “other” as Bankim attempts to make her in both his valorizing and criticizing moments, she would presumably not have seemed so alien to an ordinary Hindu reader.

Moreover, Bankim, I believe, trades on his heroine’s currency, crafting a heroine whose innocuous tantrism is but a more extreme version of the orthodox readers’ own devotional attitude. That he should, in the eleventh hour after cultivating such sympathy for her, attempt to divorce Kapalkundala from his readership makes his ending a failure. He associates her too strongly with her menacing ‘father’, yoking her innocuous tantrism to the kapalik’s malevolent one:

In matters of the heart, Kapalkundala was the child of a tantric. Just as a tantric does not hesitate to kill others in the hope of earning Goddess Kali’s blessings, so was Kapalkundala ready to sacrifice her own life to fulfill the same desire. Not that Kapalkundala had shared the kapalik’s single-minded pursuit of shakti, the divine gift of spiritual power. All the same, exposed day and night to the sight, sound, and practice of shakti-worship, she had developed in her heart a special devotion to Kali. 90

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<sup>262</sup> Eck, *Darśan* 17: “...this is a culture in which the mythic imagination has been very generative. The images and myths of the Hindu imagination constitute a basic cultural vocabulary and a common idiom of discourse.” See also my long footnote 162, re: Ashis Nandy on Indians’ living with gods and goddesses.

His caveat notwithstanding, such a yoking is violent, for Kapalkundala's entirely benign type of tantrism (*Devi-bhakti*) was still practiced then and now; whereas the kapalik's *bali* (human sacrifice), on which so much of the story turns and which serves as a rather ineffective straw-man of an antiquated religiosity, would not have been practiced since the early days of Vedic Hinduism, if even then.<sup>263</sup> It is this distinction that accounts for the fact that the narrator hardly need explain Kapalkundala's ritual practices (which include standard *pūja* only) and attitude (a sense of personal relationship with the mother-goddess), whereas he must go to great lengths to explicate the ritual practices of the kapalik, almost as if to a foreign audience. Presumably, a reader would identify Kapalkundala's devotion more with their own than with her kapalik father's. This orthodox identification with Kapalkundala's devotion is demonstrated when the ordinary orthodox temple priest prays to the mother-goddess, and, like the nymph, looks to the petals of the belpata leaf as an indication of the goddess' blessing or curse on the girl setting out into the world. So, another failure of Bankim's ending is that he throws the baby out with the bathwater: the beloved Kapalkundala and her innocuous, familiar form of tantrism get unduly sullied by their association with the evil kapalik and his outmoded, barbarous practices (human sacrifice and exploiting a young virgin for sexual rites).<sup>264</sup>

It is telling that Bankim would try at the end—even at the risk of disenchanting prose—to divorce the readers from Kapalkundala, and to affiliate her with a nefarious straw-man, the very

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<sup>263</sup> Winternitz 162.

<sup>264</sup> Kinsley 54. Kinsley explains that these practices constitute a particular path in Tantrism: the left-handed (*Vāmācāra*) path. It is an uncommon path, reserved for particularly skilled adepts, and it is characterized by “the *panca tattva* or *panca makāra* ritual—the ritual of the “five forbidden things.” The adept partakes of meat, fish, wine, *mudrā* (a possibly hallucinogenic grain), and illicit sex. The kapalik would be following the left-handed path, and Kapalkundala would be his intended *shakti*, or object of sexual intercourse.

man intent on exploiting and killing her. Bankim's rendering of both her and the tantric's die-hard orientation toward the other world at the expense of this world, distorts the notion of tantra, which has been known and practiced as a very rugged, this-worldly sect, according to Kinsley.<sup>265</sup> Indeed, there is an often self-serving, instrumentalizing aspect to tantric prayer: adepts often pray for boons from the Mother-Goddess that are eminently worldly, even mundane, usually having to do with gaining power over another person. But not Kapalkundala, who could not care less. It is Kapalkundala's relinquishing of human relationships—even more than her reliance on “hints and signals” and dreams and visions—that finally perturb Bankim so. Her lack of desire for all things human and social disqualifies her as the New Woman that she, as a *tabula rasa*, might have become to her New Man. At the end, we see that she cannot fulfill that New Woman promise because she is far too enchanted. She is incapable of forming human bonds, and of sufficiently valuing human life, even her own; it is in this sense, and in this sense only, that her relatively innocuous version of tantrism shares common moral ground with the kapalik's threatening tantrism. Kapalkundala's lack of a desire to exercise social agency, which Bankim sees as the result of blind, irrational, primitive devotion, is calamitous in his view.

Much in the mode of the Hindu epic narrators,<sup>266</sup> Bankim, therefore, seems to be instructing us, admonishing us, shepherding us, by making moral comment on his character. By engaging our sympathies for Kapalkundala until such a late point in the narrative, Bankim courts his readers' supernaturalist predilections, only to pull a bait-and-switch at the end. The wily Bankim attempts to impute the supernatural content to the mental projections of a (notably

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid. throughout.

<sup>266</sup> Joshi 159.

female)<sup>267</sup> pantheistic character, spicing up his narrative and providing a link to the autochthonous religious past, even while finally passing rationalist judgment on it, and never letting her supernaturalism bleed into his naturalism of reality-rendering. So, he tries to have it both ways—natural-supernatural—but he does not quite manage.

I deem the final bait-and-switch a failure on a few levels. First, Bankim's harsh final judgment on Kapalkundala, articulated in a rather disenchanting prose, undermines all the work he has done up to that point in allowing the narrator's enchanted perspective to dovetail with Kapalkundala's. Second, the plot finally bears out Kapalkundala's omens and interpretations. Just as the initial belpata leaf, a putative sign from the mother-goddess, rightly indicated that an ill fate would be in store for Kapalkundala, the latter's subsequent dream in fact foreshadows the conspiracy between the murderous kapalik and the more ambivalent Lutfunnissa, which leads to Kapalkundala's suicidal ideation and quasi-accidental drowning (N.B.: nature seems to conspire with this nature-lover's will). While it is possible that she *might* have kept her destruction at bay had she asserted her agency, the fact is that the plot corroborates point-for-point with the various hints and signals that Kapalkundala has indeed properly interpreted. If Bankim means to teach us to disregard dreams and visions, then his emplotment betrays that lesson.

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<sup>267</sup> In the longer book version of this dissertation, I will be elaborating more fully on the woman question, particularly Bankim's (and 19<sup>th</sup> century India's) casting of womanhood in terms of nationhood, as well as in terms of religious sect (the trope of the Hindu virgin versus the Muslim courtesan). What is important to note here is that Bankim, writing in the proto-nationalist era, sets up these two feminine archetypes, only to have both fail. Neither woman can stand in for the nation at this critical juncture, so he must provide an alternate feminine paradigm whose instantiation will be found in his subsequent novel, *The Poison Tree*, *The Bankimchandra Omnibus: Volume I* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005 [1873]). Notably, the latter novel is contemporary, whereas *Kapalkundala* is set in an anterior epoch. A second point to note here is Bankim's troubling gender-division of labor: the woman associated with supernatural content and himself (the male narrator) associated with naturalist frame. This division of labor runs the risk of limiting the (here, rather doomed) enchanted ethos to women, a trope that we find again and again in Bengali literature, even in Tagore. In Chapter 4, I will be further treating the woman-nation-enchancement nexus, and will show that Tagore is much more nuanced and heterodox than Bankim in his understanding of it.

In the end, the ostensible problem turns out not to be, as Bankim claims explicitly, her dream-interpretation but actually her relinquishing, in both dream and life, of the desire to remain alive. The relinquishing of that desire constitutes both the fundamental problem and the inexplicable element in the ending of the story. We cannot fathom why she, while still quite fearful of being destroyed, would, when given the choice of life or death in her dream, choose to have the Brahmin-impersonator (Lutfunnissa) drown her; and yet, in conscious waking life, she hopes that Goddess Bhavani will save her (79). None of this makes sense—not even according to the enchanted logic associated with Kapalkundala. Likewise, we cannot understand how her resigned desire to return to her beloved wilderness suddenly shifts into a desire to sacrifice her own life:

“Why should I not surrender this body at the Goddess Jagadiswari’s feet” Kapalkundala asked herself. “Of what use are the five senses to me?” She asked herself these questions, but was *unable to arrive at any definite answers*. Even in the absence of all other worldly ties, the senses bind one to life.<sup>268</sup>

Indeed, sensory ties would be particularly strong for a nature-loving woman like Kapalkundala, whose only definition of happiness is “to wander in those forests by the seashore” (45). So why not quietly return to that forest by the seashore when her senses are still binding her to life? Why these enigmas? Bankim leaves her rationale inadequately explained, and it is unclear whether this lacuna should be attributed to irrationality of protagonist or ineptitude of author. Perhaps it is more willful than that: given the level of detail with which Bankim has depicted Kapalkundala’s psyche and decision-making up to this point (her dream-interpretation constitutes an entire chapter), these conspicuous absences in such a key moment make us wonder if he is not trying to forcibly effect a break in our empathy for Kapalkundala. And this does not

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<sup>268</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Kapalkundala*, 91.

inspire trust in the narrator. So we have yet another level of failure in the didactic ending of the novel.

The ultimate failure of the ending is that Bankim the didact leaves us with no viable ethical model. In fact, considered in tandem, *The Poison Tree* can be seen as filling the void cleared out by *Kapalkundala*, a novel patently preoccupied with religion yet refusing to offer us an ideal model. In the earlier novel, we are left caught between a Scylla and Charybdis: between the destructive, antiquated cult of tantrism (the menacing kapalik and the suicidal Kapalkundala) and an equally destructive, modern secularism (Nabakumar's irreligion, and Lutfunnissa's temporal power-jockeying). It is notable that an antiquated tantric, an orthodox urban Hindu, and a secular Muslim courtesan could conspire together, driven by their various, convergent covetous desires. Such a convergence renders a certain (im)moral equivalence.

Nabakumar's religiosity, for all its modern and revisionist promise at the beginning of the novel, turns out to be superficial: at least orthodox at the beginning, he abandons morality altogether when he sets his intoxicated mind to destroying the wife he imagines to be perfidious.<sup>269</sup> When Kapalkundala first appears on the seashore, she seems to invite the secular Nabakumar into her enchanted realm, where he might be inspired to abandon observation of caste and other orthodox customs and social rituals of Hinduism. For all his prior abjuring of the pilgrim's mindless observation of religious strictures, Nabakumar, even in the midst of the forest, seeks confirmation of Kapalkundala's brahminical caste status if he is to marry her and rescue her from her menacing kapalik father. Further, his caste-consciousness catalyzes the central

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<sup>269</sup> Nabakumar's superficiality of belief is thrown into contrastive relief with Kapalkundala's unrelenting superstitious belief, when he steps over a corpse in the cremation ground while she steps around it—a gesture of respect for a deep religious taboo.

crisis of the novel and the eventual downfall of his beloved Kapalkundala. For it is because his first wife's father lost caste and converted to Islam that Nabakumar has given up Padmavati-cum-Lutfunnissa who, later, goes to great and dangerous lengths to recapture his love, even at the expense of his (second) marriage to Kapalkundala. Finally, it is Nabakumar's *bhadralok* (middle-class) conservatism that disables him from appreciating and enabling Kapalkundala on her own terms; he insists on her playing the customary role of Hindu housewife—a role she will finally reject through death. That the central problematic of the novel turns on issues of caste and its blind observation leads us to conclude that Bankim is, as we would expect from the banter between the old pilgrim and Nabakumar himself, criticizing caste. Not just Kapalkundala, but also the ever-caste-plagued Nabakumar, is killed off by the text. If Kapalkundala has not fulfilled her promise as the New Woman to be brought into the safety of society by her husband, then Nabakumar too has betrayed his promise as the New Man to be saved by the natural woman by his side. The inverse of the fecund Edenic Genesis scene of mutual attraction at the novel's opening, the final scene aptly takes place in a cremation ground littered with corpses to which will be added this couple's. Death abounds: a husband intent on killing his wife and an impervious wife prepared to sacrifice her life not to her needy husband but to a goddess. The literal death of the couple also signals the death of the possibility of the marriage of the old with the new, the natural with the social. And herein lies the failure of the ending. Finally we are left with a husband and wife estranged by their incompatible worldview—Nabakumar: over-attached, jealous, covetous, mentally hemmed in by social conventions; Kapalkundala: under-attached, life-renouncing, consequentially resistant to and ignorant of social custom.

Meanwhile, the secular subordinated storyline of Nabakumar's first wife, Lutfunnissa, bears rotten fruit as well. If Kapalkundala is too enchanted, too otherworldly, too antiquated, too detached, too naïve, then Lutfunnissa is too disenchanting, too worldly, too secular, too covetous, too sinful. While both bewitching, strong-willed beauties are outsiders to mainstream orthodox Hindu society, neither can serve as an exemplar of modern womanhood, nor can she can be a model for a humanist religiosity—the one too religious, the other too secular. The 'middle way' model will come in the form of Suryamukhi, the contemporary heroine of *The Poison Tree*. This later heroine is, like Kapalkundala, deeply religious; however, unlike Kapalkundala, she believes in a monistic God rather than pantheistic goddesses and is very wedded to dharma and social relationships in a novel that highlights the different possibilities for religiously-inflected human agency in the social yet enchanted world. In a sense, *Kapalkundala's* failure sets up *The Poison Tree's* success: Bankim shows us first what does not work, before showing us what does. *Kapalkundala*, a novel that above all effects a transition from one epoch to another, ends up the inevitable failure that a culturally and epistemologically paradigm-shifting work often is.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London, New York: Verso, 1992). Take for example, Schwarz's excellent study, *Misplaced Ideas*, regarding the awkward (initially unsuccessful) translation of European Enlightenment philosophy to Brazilian soil in the form of the novel.



## CHAPTER 2

*“Oh when shall we be able to sing it?”*

**The poetry of the prosaic in the organic Indian lifeworld:  
Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World***

At the beginning of Anita Desai’s introduction to *The Home and the World*, we find none other than Georg Lukács, denouncing the 1916 novel as “a petit bourgeois yarn of the shoddiest kind” authored by

a wholly insignificant figure...whose creative powers do not even stretch to a decent pamphlet. He lacks the imagination even to calumniate convincingly and effectively, as Dostoevsky, say, partly succeeded in doing in his counter-revolutionary novel, *Possessed*...He survives by sticking scraps of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagvadgita* into his works amid the sluggish flow of his own tediousness...<sup>271</sup>

Such a glib dismissal of India’s most influential, most internationally renowned, most gifted and most visionary writer partakes of something of the spirit of Macaulay’s notorious “Minute on Indian Education.”<sup>272</sup> But coming as it does a century later from a one of the world’s foremost (Marxist) literary critics rather than a reactionary colonial administrator, Lukács’s statement is curious. Interestingly, Lukács looked East to Russia’s Tolstoy, and more so Dostoevsky, for intimations of a new form for a new age—for a form that might redeem the European novel and its own unfortunate historical conditions; but he could find nothing of the sort looking South to the man who has been called “India’s Tolstoy.” Unlike Yeats, did Lukács see Tagore’s India as simply too far beyond his own literary and cultural universe?

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<sup>271</sup> Anita Desai, “Introduction,” *The Home and the World*, trans. Surendranath Tagore (London and New Delhi: Penguin, 1916 [1985]) 7.

<sup>272</sup> Macaulay 241: “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

If Lukács could have overcome that estrangement (some might call it ethnocentrism), he might have seen in *The Home and The World* a provisional solution to the irreducible problem of the novel form he diagnosed. For in Tagore we find a novelist struggling formally and philosophically to carve out an arena for what Lukács calls “pure soul-reality in which man exists as man, neither as a social being nor as an isolated, unique, pure and therefore abstract interiority.”<sup>273</sup> At the vortex of the heady swirl of an Independence movement fast gaining momentum, Tagore’s three protagonists feel themselves to be indispensable agents of history-in-the-making. Yet, linked to their divergent utopian visions and dystopic fears are their affective relationships to one another and their even more intimate soul-relationships to God and the cosmos. Any one layer cannot be filtered out from the other two, as reflected by the very title whose two overdetermined words, “home” and “world,” denote, respectively, soul/family/zenana<sup>274</sup>/estate/Bengal and public sphere/Calcutta/India/world/cosmos. Deliberate national allegory meets domestic saga meets philosophical rumination, yet in no clear one-to-one equation.

Regrettably, most of Tagore’s European contemporaries read the political and love-triangular dimensions of the novel to the exclusion of its philosophico-religious ambitions—and even then, all too superficially. E.M. Forster, for example, mocked the novel as a “boarding-house flirtation that masks itself in patriotic talk.”<sup>275</sup> As for the alienating diction of the novel—a diction that is appreciated for its ease and naturalness in Bengali, and derided for its Victorian

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<sup>273</sup> Lukács 152.

<sup>274</sup> Women’s inner quarters. Upper-class orthodox Hindu households borrowed from this Indo-Muslim arrangement.

<sup>275</sup> Desai 7.

ornateness in English translation<sup>276</sup>—Forster scornfully writes, “[Tagore] meant the wife to be seduced by the World, which is, with all its sins, a tremendous lover; she is actually seduced by a West Kensingtonian Babu.”<sup>277</sup>

Even some local writers reproached Tagore for his “Babu sentences” and his aristocratic remove from the harsh material realities of Bengali life during a time of extreme political unrest—namely, the Partition of Bengal.<sup>278</sup> It is indeed tempting to dismiss the insular realism of a novel whose scene never moves beyond the chambers of a zamindar’s<sup>279</sup> mansion: all political action takes place off-stage and comes to the reader only by word of mouth—mouths that are constantly displaying rhetorical and philosophical virtuosity. Indeed, only one of the three protagonists, the incendiary Sandip, ever leaves the premises of the estate. When Nikhil, the aristocratic benefactor, inadvisedly does so himself, he is injured unto the point of death. Meanwhile, Bimala, the object of desire of these two “modern” men who, in their different ways long to bring her out of the zenana and into the world, makes it only so far as the outer rooms of the mansion. I will later come to some multivalent conclusions about the consequences of the treacherous path from home to world.

In my view, all the superficiality of *The Home and the World* lies with the critics, not with the novel. In this chapter I hope to acquit the novel of all these points of criticism—the

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<sup>276</sup> Mary M. ff, “Tagore in Translation: A Case Study in Literary Exchange,” *Books Abroad* 46:3 (Summer 1972) 420-421.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000) 154-157.

<sup>279</sup> Land-holding aristocrat.

accusation of its lush diction, insufficient realism, elite insularity, and perfunctory religious reference—as I plumb its abiding preoccupation: truth versus illusion. We will see how the three protagonists’ agonistic personal struggles to come to terms with this basic philosophical issue play out in terms of nationalism, the genre of the novel, the nature of the real, and religious outlook.

The question of truth versus illusion gets framed in the language of politics; in turn these political stances are profoundly shaped by the characters’ divergent religious attitudes. The religious discourse of the novel is at least as prominent as the political questions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. And yet critics tend to focus on the latter to the exclusion of the former,<sup>280</sup> even though it is impossible to ignore the religiosity of the text: nearly every page explicitly debates some aspect of religion, and one can hardly go for three paragraphs without encountering the words God, god, or goddess.

Not only is the novel bathed in an atmosphere of divine immanence, but all three protagonists—fundamentalist-secularist Sandip, devoutly orthodox Bimala, and Vedantist Nikhil—wrestle with their faith as they get caught up in the storm of nation-formation. If fifty years prior Bankim had carved out a place for divine immanence in workaday life, then Tagore painstakingly spins out and compares its various modes, and their relative dangers and prospects. Adumbrating nationalism without having yet had to reckon with its consequences, pre-Independence movement Bankim guilelessly roused patriotic sentiments by setting up the nation as a sort of deity; by writing the jingoistic *Anandamath*, a rallying cry that conjoined religious

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<sup>280</sup> See for example, Homi Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” *Social Text* 31:32 (1992) and Rick Livingston, “Global Tropes/Worldly Readings: Narratives of Cosmopolitanism in Joyce, Rich, and Tagore,” *Narrative* 5:2 (May 1997) to take just a couple.

enchantment to the armed overthrow of the colonizer; and finally, by overlooking Muslim India in his conflation of Indian identity with orthodox Hindu metaphysics.

But with Lord Curzon's Partition of Bengal several decades later (1905-6), the consequences of such Hindu nationalism were beginning to be felt: Hindu enchantment was being peddled in the service of a disenchanting statist outlook; a nationalism overrun by Hindu fundamentalists had sidelined Muslims; and elite leaders had elevated the nation to symbol and abstraction at the expense of the large Muslim and poor populations that bore the brunt of the Swadeshi boycott on cheap British goods. Tagore's Swadeshi-era novel, all too reductively considered anti-revolutionary, presciently depicts the splintering within Hinduism and its implications for nation-formation. The stakes of these implications were high: on one end, sectarian strife, generalized violence, and the post-Westphalian fate of secular Europe couched in Hindu rhetoric and played out on Indian soil; on the other end, a genuinely enchanted philosophy that might have deterred all of that. My verb conjugation here indicates which of these strains prevailed, and to what sorry effect.

*The Home and the World* marks a crossroads in the political trajectory of the Indian nation essentially paved along the lines of religious outlook. Tagore, even more than Gandhi, was able early on to pinpoint the philosophico-religious roots and dangers of the sectarian strife and statist abuses that would become India's post-Independence fate. Retrospectively, many have come to see Tagore's prescient wisdom in admonishing India to go the way of neither a spiritually denuded Nehruvian secularism nor Hindu nationalism—by the latter I mean a post-Westphalian trajectory veiled in the kind of fundamentalist rhetoric spouted by the anti-hero Sandip. In a last-ditch effort to stave off this outcome, Tagore passionately argues for his

fictional-proxy Nikhil’s alternative: a syncretically-based, monistic,<sup>281</sup> transcendental, and transnational mystical enchantment that could be equally embraced by Hindus, Muslims, and secularists. He does this not only at the level of content—Nikhil’s ventriloquism of Tagore’s ethos as elaborated throughout his non-fictional writings—but also at the level of form. First, he rescues *darśan* from the fundamentalist abuse of it (nation rendered as Hindu god or goddess) by using it as a mode of literary re-consecration of the humble, intimate affective modes elaborated by Hindu dharma. More specifically, he captures the “eternal in everyday life” by poeticizing a Hindu household’s prosaic rituals and objects whose shifts in symbolic value serve as an index

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<sup>281</sup> Right at the outset of this chapter, I should be clear about my distinctions among monism, monotheism, pantheism, and polytheism, all of which have existed in various combinations in Hindu praxis and have therefore been much confused by religious scholars of India over the past few centuries. By monotheism I mean the doctrine that there is only one true God. By monism, I mean that reality is a unified whole made out of the same substance. In a religious cast, this would mean that reality is comprised of divinity: God, man, and nature all share the same divine substance. The latter is Nikhil’s belief. Closely aligned with monism is pantheism, in which the Deity is identified with all the phenomena of the universe, i.e. nature. Nikhil would subscribe to this view also. Pantheism is justifiably often confused with polytheism, the worship of all/many gods. To the extent that Nikhil would endorse polytheism, it would only be of a pantheistic cast: where all the gods are really aspects of the one God. This sort of polytheism is the outcome of Vedic pantheism in which each aspect of nature was admired in turn as a particular named deity (the natural designation becoming the deity’s proper name over time); but these various gods were considered parts of a unified God. Bankim explains this sort of belief with the paradoxical term “monotheistic polytheism” when he rebukes Max Müller for adopting the term “henotheism” to describe the Hindu praise for each deity as supreme (*Bankim Rachanavali* 158-9). Bankim’s argument with Müller is that henotheism is in fact not much different from polytheism; whereas the Hindus’ “monotheistic polytheism” actually tends more toward monotheism—the one God celebrated as many. Nikhil’s gripe with a certain version of polytheism (the one exemplified by Bimala, for example), is that it smacked of henotheism more than “monotheistic polytheism,” to borrow Bankim’s term (though Tagore himself does not advocate monotheism per se, only monism). The reason for such a critique would be that that “bad” sort of polytheism lends itself too much to distinction rather than unity/connectedness, and it leads to the exaggerated tendency toward physical representation of the deity without the notion of the all-pervading transcendental Brahman behind it. Finally, that sort of crass polytheism had lent itself to the sort of propitiating and instrumentalizing of divinity that Tagore found so abhorrent. In general, I would describe Tagore/Nikhil as monistic and pantheistic because for him reality itself it permeated by divinity; each aspect of reality was only an aspect of God. His *darśan* would then be not the worshipping of icons (in any case not essential to Hinduism, according to Bankim and others), let alone their propitiation, but rather the seeing of the divine spirit all around him, including in nature and in the authentic, charged symbolic elements and gestures of organically lived life. This is the sort of “enchanted reality” that the “enchanted realist” text *The Home and the World* presents, as I elaborate in this chapter.

for (dis)enchantment. And finally, he lifts the novel into soaring song particularly during moments of personal communion with the divine.

Tagore tries to rescue form from politics, but his attempt does not quite work. If he was just beginning to perceive the disenchanting fallout of state politics that Bankim could not possibly have anticipated, then subsequent writers had no choice but to reckon with it. And with that reckoning came certain limitations in terms of enchanting the novel. Tagore crucially begins to adumbrate the fork in the road in the trajectory of novelistic enchantment I sketch out in this dissertation. In the end, although Tagore acknowledges that his utopian enchantment would not take the day, he leaves as his legacy a form that might have been used to reclaim some part of it. However, twentieth-century Indian politics, so thoroughly disenchanting, made even that provisional prospect nearly impossible.

It is important to note that religion, however splintered, has no real “outside” in this novel. The only figure who is not a deep believer is Sandip, who is made into such a strawman and caricature, that a reader cannot possibly sympathize with him, let alone privilege his perspective. Further, even he operates rhetorically and philosophically in a world in which religion was the sky above. Though aware of the risks of a certain fundamentalist strain of nationalism, Tagore does not recoil into a purely secular stance; rather he elaborates a stance that would be at once spiritual yet secularly-compatible in the sense of tolerance and syncretism. By specifying enchantment to this degree, Tagore goes one step further than Bankim. Like Bankim, Tagore was not willing to give up on spiritualism as a key element of Indian identity that would prevent it from going the way of the disenchanting West, even if he was necessarily more conscious than his predecessor of the thorniness of enchanting the nation. The novel’s

narration passes back and forth between the three protagonists whose interior monologues at times become more like dialogues with their silent interlocutor, God. External events and discussions are recounted and interpreted by the consecutive narrators. One perspective presses against another, as the issue of truth versus illusion couches itself in constant discourse on national politics, religious doctrine, and more obliquely, art. For all its poignant awareness of a dystopic enchantment serving the disenchanting ends of sectarian violence, *The Home and the World* makes a space—a distinctly literary space—for utopian enchantment.

The plot and stances on politics are fairly straightforward in this novel, but they become more complex when refracted through the prism of religion and philosophy, viz. the constant concern with truth versus illusion. Bimala is the orthodox Hindu wife who lives in the zenana (women's inner quarters) of an estate owned by her husband Nikhil, a maharaja with vast landholdings, who distinguishes himself from his family legacy of aristocratic dissolution by pursuing a rather ascetic path inspired by his tutelage under a guru. The maharaja's family lifestyle, the zenana (women's inner quarters), and the Baul mendicant-mystics who embody the mystical spirit cherished by Nikhil all partake of the syncretic spirit that characterized Hindu-Muslim Bengal at the time. Curzon's incursion, of course, intended to and succeeded in establishing a rather permanent rift between the two sects. Into the haven of Nikhil's estate comes lustful, power-mongering Sandip, a nationalist incendiary, who peddles fundamentalist Hindu rhetoric to rally the population living on and near Nikhil's landholdings to join the Swadeshi (self-sufficiency) movement, an economic movement meant to replace English-made goods with Indian-made ones.



Sandip and Nikhil both consider themselves modern men, and each longs to bring the happily domesticated Bimala out into his own wider world. However, their understandings of the wider world differ strikingly—for Sandip, the public sphere of the nationalist movement; for Nikhil, the world beyond the estate. If Sandip’s notion of the “world” is distinctly national, Nikhil’s is more nebulous—it comes alternatively to mean life beyond traditionally prescribed spousal roles, the outer chambers of the estate, Calcutta, and a transnational-transcendental plane.

While Bimala at first recoils from her husband’s attempt to bring the outer world to her in the form of Western education and fashions, she springs with alacrity at Sandip’s invitation to get caught up in the revolutionary zeal of the Swadeshi movement sweeping Bengal and the rest of India. Because Sandip renders the movement in the familiar topoi of Hinduism and, further, appeals to her narcissism by casting her as the “living goddess” who will serve as the incarnation of the movement, she is entirely seduced. While she seems altogether unconcerned with the concrete political concerns of the movement, she is mesmerized by its ability to generate widespread enthusiasm—a happening so inspiring and miraculous that she sees it as a supernatural event ordained by Divine Providence. For her, this is the most tempting invitation to join the world. Almost overnight, she cracks through her shell and grows intoxicated with her larger-than-life sense of herself as an all-important religious symbol to the nation. (Notably, while she moves into the outer chambers of the mansion and meets Sandip there alone, she never quite enters the public sphere—nor does she feel compelled to).

Bimala becomes the devoted disciple of Sandip who courts her through his deification of her, and the two of them together defend similar positions in their endless debates with a

cautious Nikhil who becomes further and further estranged from both. The latter, whom they scorn for his timidity and arid logic, had been one of the earliest supporters of Swadeshi, but now develops reservations because it has become a mere symbol wielded by leaders tyrannizing its intended beneficiaries, namely the vulnerable Muslim population and poor traders dependent on buying and selling cheap British-made goods. Repeatedly, Nikhil chastens Sandip to be careful not to turn the country into an idol—a situation that can only generate self-worship, xenophobia, and alienation from the concrete economic realities of life for most. By the end of the novel, the seeds sown by Hindu fundamentalist rhetoric have borne fruit: the neighboring zamindars exploit Swadeshi as a weapon to further tyrannize poor tenants, and Hindu-Muslim violence breaks out. On the personal level, Bimala comes to understand the error of her chaste seduction by Sandip, rues her emotional betrayal of her devoted husband, and is set to leave for Calcutta with the latter. The novel ends with Nikhil leaving his estate for the first time (up to this point, his tenants and various other personages have come to him), in order to quell the violence, but instead gets injured unto the point of death. With the elimination of Nikhil, Tagore seems to suggest, a particular path for Indian enchantment has regrettably been lost. Indeed, twentieth-century Indian history bears out Tagore's premonition.

Now let us look at the religious underpinnings of the characters' various political leanings. We will see how the characters' takes on reality, nation, abstraction, symbol, and art depend on their understandings of reality: truth versus illusion. Light, vision, illusion, delusion, and truth are the primary topoi that run through this novel, and all of them hinge on sight, a sense that obsesses Nikhil in particular. From the time he appears in the narrative, Nikhil is associated with an unwavering, courageous visual acumen. Fittingly, when Nikhil dies, the text becomes

visually occluded: “The roads...grew more and more vague. The lake in our grounds looked up into the sky with a dull luster, like a blind man’s eye. On the left the tower seemed to be craning its neck to catch sight of something that was happening.”<sup>282</sup> Precisely *what* vision gets lost when Nikhil dies? What road can no longer be glimpsed, let alone taken? Before we can answer that question, let us first see what Nikhil, the visionary Tagore’s proxy, sees and sees through.

As Nikhil sees it, his personal God is putting him to the test to look painful realities in the face, whether his wife’s emotional seduction by an abhorrent man, the burdens of Swadeshi on his poorest tenants, or India’s headlong plunge into violence, selfishness, domination, and disenchantment. As Bimala’s love turns to another man, a heartbroken Nikhil says, “The things that should not be seen, the things I do not want to see—these I must see.”<sup>283</sup> No matter how desperate, he resists the temptation to dress up reality, claiming “Names...do not change the facts of the world. If Bimal is not mine, she is not...The Creator is under no obligation to supply me with angels, just because I have an avidity for imaginary perfection.”<sup>284</sup>

It is precisely this avidity that afflicts Bimala and Sandip, who indulge themselves in whatever illusion suits their megalomaniacal desires. As Bimala is busy silently trying to reconcile her plainness with “the vision that I had of myself, as the *Shakti* of Womanhood, incarnate, crowning Sandip Babu simply with my presence, majestic and unashamed,” the two men debate patriotism and truth:

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<sup>282</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*, trans. Surendranath Tagore (London and New Delhi: Penguin, 1916 [1985]) 202.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.* 40.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.* 65.

[Sandip] was familiar with my husband's views on the cult of *Bande Mataram*, and began in a provoking way: "So you do not allow that there is room for an appeal to the imagination in patriotic work?"

"It has its place, Sandip, I admit, but I do not believe in giving it the whole place. I would know my country in its frank reality, and for this I am both afraid and ashamed to make use of hypnotic texts of patriotism."

"What you 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 country."...

"I have nothing against your worship as such, but how is it you propose to conduct your worship of God by hating other countries in which He is equally manifest?"<sup>285</sup>

At stake in this exchange are a couple of key issues. This passage could be read as a retrospective critique of Tagore's otherwise-revered predecessor Bankim, whose "hypnotic text of patriotism," *Anandamath*, inaugurated the key rallying cry of the Indian independence Movement, "Bande Mataram" ("Hail Mother"). Further, Sandip's sentiments, pressed into the service of his cultural chauvinism and power-mongering, pervert Bankim's naïve ethos of immanence of God in man and world. In Sandip, Tagore has followed Bankim's enchantment to its logical and historical outcome: anthropomorphizing of God meets deification of nation to produce national chauvinism.

Seeing the "country in its frank reality" means refusing to see India as divine image, a particular form of *darśan* that Sandip peddles among the generally polytheistic population to generate patriotic zeal. In an exact inversion of Nikhil's insistence on seeing the country in its frank reality, Sandip claims, "With our nature and our traditions we are unable to realize our country as she is, but we can easily bring ourselves to believe in her image."<sup>286</sup> Certainly Bimala is ready to believe in that image of the nation as Goddess, and even more so, in the image of herself as symbol of both. As both devotee and goddess, Bimala, comprehends everything around her—her husband, her aspiring lover, her nation, herself—in terms of divinity.

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid. 36-37.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. 121.

Polytheistic and trained in the arts of wifely devotion, she is susceptible to substituting and proliferating divinities. And this is precisely Tagore's worry. He feared that orthodox Hinduism, particularly polytheism, all too easily lends itself to leaders trading in a Hindu currency to shore up their power, passing off themselves and the nation as gods and stirring a widespread spirit of delusional self-worship. For Tagore, Bimala represents the masses forever seeking to add gods and demi-gods to their pantheon, and forever infatuated with tyranny.

Significantly, though, Sandip partakes of the cultural backcloth of Hinduism and even admires the *idea* of menacing figures of the pantheon such as Kali and Ravana, but he is nearly atheist. Angry with the Creator for his low birth (“*if there be a God*”), he makes it his life's agonistic mission to supersede it, to gain and snatch whatever comes to hand. Utterly strategic, he appreciates Durga as a political god who can be wielded to serve his purposes. However, he himself remains beholden to the disenchanting principles of militarism, statism, and the primal will to power. He clearly states in his interior monologue, “I want the western military style to prevail, not the Indian.”<sup>287</sup> Scornful of Indians' penchant for the very “poison of spirituality,”<sup>288</sup> he manipulates, he (only in his interior monologue) admits that the confusion of religion with nationalism makes a mess of both. Sandip is the fictional exemplar of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hindu secular-fundamentalist rabble-rousers Ashis Nandy denounces in his critique of secularism in the BJP-dominated era:

These are the people who often use, participate in, or provoke communal frenzy, not on grounds of faith but on grounds of secular political cost calculations...[though their] ideology may *appear* to be based on faith...their world is entirely secular. The use religion rationally, dispassionately and instrumentally,

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid. 81.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid. 80.

untouched by any theory of transcendence. They genuinely cannot or do not grant any intrinsic sanctity to the faith of even their followers.<sup>289</sup>

To put a simple phrase to it, fundamentalism in the hands of these secularists is insincere religious enchantment twisted to suit disenchanting, secular ends. One of the reasons *The Home and the World* reads so presciently, is that Tagore was able to adumbrate the toxic situation of secular leaders whooping up a fanatical religious base—a situation that, for all its religiosity, has come to define a modern India that has been unable to avoid the post-Westphalian fate of European nationalism.

Tagore is equally prescient in diagnosing the yin to Sandip's yang: the susceptibility of those fundamentalist followers, like Bimala, whose genuine religiosity is exploited at their own expense. So successful are his enchantments that even *after* Bimala has identified Sandip as a “demon, in the guise of a god,” she falls victim to him. In order to procure 5,000 rupees from her—as much for his alpha male conquest over Nikhil as for his “Cause”—he obsequiously declaims, “I am your Country. I am your Sandip...*Bande Mataram!*” And she responds, in perfect call-and-response: “You are my religion. You are my heaven. Whatever else is mine shall be swept away before my love for you. *Bande Mataram!*”<sup>290</sup>

Just as she worships this man-god, she accepts his worship as woman-goddess. To her, he verbally prostrates himself: “Do you not know that I come to worship? Have I not told you that, in you, I visualize the *Shakti* of our country?...When you have anointed me with your own hands, then shall I know I have the sanction of my country.”<sup>291</sup> Bimala notes at that point,

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<sup>289</sup> Nandy, *Bonfire of Creeds* 121.

<sup>290</sup> Tagore, *The Home and the World* 140.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.* 73.

“Sandip’s eyes took fire as he went on, but whether it was the fire of worship, or of passion, I could not tell.”<sup>292</sup> Indeed, where their religiosity ends and their attraction begins remains nebulous throughout the text, so thoroughly is the latter couched in the former.

What is *unambiguous*, however, is the heady excitement Bimala feels as she occupies the divine role designated for her by Sandip. She is allegorized as Kali, the menacing patron deity of Bengal, known for her force and beauty of cruelty. Of her, he speculates in his interior monologue:

Fascinated by the beauty of this terrible wrecking power, she will not hesitate a moment to be cruel. I have seen in Bimala’s nature the cruelty which is the inherent force of existence—the cruelty which with its unrelenting might keeps the world beautiful. If only women could be set free from the artificial fetters put round them by men, we could see on earth the living image of Kali, the shameless, pitiless goddess.

Through Sandip’s spell-casting eyes, she begins indeed to see herself as the living incarnation of Kali—a role she is all too eager to step into, a role that beckons her to the wider world, a role that dignifies her:

Whence came foaming into me this surging flood of glory? Sandip’s hungry eyes burnt like the lamps of worship before my shrine. All his gaze proclaims that I was a wonder in beauty and power...Had the Creator created me afresh, I wondered? Did he wish to make up now for neglecting me so long? I who before was plain had become suddenly beautiful. I who before had been of no account now felt in myself all the splendour of Bengal itself...My relations with all the world underwent a change. Sandip Babu made it clear how all the country was in need of me. I had no difficulty in believing this at the time, for I felt that I had the power to do everything. Divine strength had come to me. It was something which I had never felt before, which was beyond myself...It seemed to belong to me, and yet to transcend me. It comprehended the whole of Bengal.<sup>293</sup>

Once she has been elevated into the divine metonym for the nation of Bengal, she takes on a certain bravado, claiming that she would “smite and slay to avenge [the country’s] insults.”<sup>294</sup>

But what does she really know of them? If she asks whence came her glory, then I would ask

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid. 38.

whence came her self-professed anger? Having spent her entire life in the zenana, her only point of contact with the outer world has been her doting husband who has protected her from the wretched conditions of India touching the commoners. We cannot even conclude that her anger is entirely on her own behalf as a repressed woman, for the ever-renunciatory Nikhil has been, in vain, inviting her to take greater and greater freedoms and to move ever outward into the world. But, as colonial history has taught us, freedom granted is not the same as freedom taken, so perhaps Bimala bristles at the patronizing element in Nikhil's invitation to enjoy more freedom. Still, the primary motivation for Bimala's putative anger seems to stem more from the desire to fulfill her deified role whose ennobling power suddenly sparks her narcissism.

Her incarnation of Kali comes across a bit like play-acting. Significantly, at no point does she actually enter the wider Bengal for which she feels she is such an essential symbol. Rather, she gives herself over to the Bacchic death-courting orgy of emotion associated as much with Kali as with Dionysus:

In this desperate orgy, that gift of five thousand shall be as the foam of wine—and then for the riotous revel! The immovable world shall sway under our feet, fire shall flash from our eyes, a storm shall roar in our ears, what is or is not in front shall become equally dim. And then with tottering footsteps we shall plunge to our death—in a moment all fire will be extinguished, the ashes will be scattered, and nothing will remain behind.<sup>295</sup>

The language of intoxication permeates Bimala's interior monologues. She puts no stock in the real: "what is or is not in front shall become equally dim." The real, for her, is uninspired, unholy, all too ordinary. She is more than happy to overlook what stands in front of her. Why would she want to come back down to her ordinary reality? She revels in her delusion:

"Listening to [Sandip's] allegories, I had forgotten that I was plain and simple Bimala. I was

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid. 142.



*Shakti*; also an embodiment of Universal joy. Nothing could fetter me, nothing was impossible for me; whatever I touched would gain new life. The world around me was a fresh creation of mine.”<sup>296</sup> In her new demi-god role in the nationalist movement, she experiences an unprecedented degree of power, much as the once lower-class Sandip does in his. Here, perhaps, her gender factors into her relationship to reality and desire for deification, as class does in the case of Sandip. Tagore suggests that the desire to elevate oneself above the wretchedness of one’s station, the desire to avail oneself of previously unthinkable agency, would have a particular appeal for those who, unlike the maharaja Nikhil who has luxury of wealth and power to renounce, have none. Opportunity, for such people, lies in the possible, not in the actual. Hence Bimala’s preference for the orgiastic, the unknown, the illusory, the violence of passion, the Dionysian immersion into the extraordinary even unto nihilism—all of which, in her view, amount to a supernatural<sup>297</sup> event of which she is the epicenter.

Challenging her husband, she says: “You think this excitement is only a fire of drunkenness, but does not drunkenness, up to a point, give strength?”<sup>298</sup> If intoxication means strength, then reciprocally, clarity would mean loss of strength. Bimala cannot afford such clarity now that she has tasted power. So she willfully embraces blindness: “Blinded with the brilliance of my own glory I had decided to grant my devotee this boon.”<sup>299</sup> Blindness, brilliance of image, apotheosis of the human—all three go together in a dangerous cocktail of the

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid. 91.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid. 98.

Independence era as so many formerly disenfranchised Indians came for the first time into the orbit of power, possibility, and making. The compensatory craving for grandiosity demands blindness, and that blindness confuses person with god.

Thus, Tagore's take on *darśan*—a far cry from Bankim's naïve cultivation of it toward an enchanted naturalism—would, at first glance, seem a thorough-going critique. But that is not so. Soon I will show how Tagore replaces one form of enchanted naturalism with another, more salutary one. For now, suffice it to say that he bristles not so much at the idea of seeing the divine image incarnate in the phenomenal world, as at the idea of *mis*-seeing it. After all, it is blindness, not sacred vision, that enables such a perversion of *darśan*. Tagore condemns the conjuring tricks of all these nationalist enchanters towards the ends of power. These conjurers consecrate images and construe illusions at will, rather than allowing the phenomenal world to express itself in its honest and humble sacredness of the everyday. Note the deliberateness of Sandip's attempts: "I have long been *nursing a plan*... We must *make* a goddess of [the nation]. My colleagues saw the point at once. 'Let us *devise* an appropriate image!' they exclaimed."<sup>300</sup> Tagore highlights the sheer hubris and manipulative abuses of a hyperbolic *darśan* taken in the wrong direction—enchantment used against itself to serve a disenchanting worldview. For Nikhil, as for his template Tagore, this is unholy enchantment *in extremis*—a bastardization of the holy enchantment of traditional Hindu praxis.

Nikhil's objection to such unholy enchantment derives from its deliberate fabrication and external imposition of illusions—a far cry from the Hindu notion of *darśan* in which matter is animated through its inner source of divinity. *The Home and the World* highlights the

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid. 120, italics mine.

constructed quality of these avatars-cum-national symbols. Himself a cynical quasi-atheist, forever talking in double-speak to his devout followers, Sandip manipulates their so-called false consciousness: “Illusions are necessary for lesser minds...and to this class the greater portion of the world belongs. That is why divinities *are set up* in every country to keep up the illusions of the people.”<sup>301</sup> Clearly, he considers Bimala one of these “lesser minds” whose polytheistic imagination requires Sandip-made illusions. In a diagnosis of her own structure of faith that is so self-aware as to render it somewhat unconvincing, Bimala passionately cries, “I have my desire to be fascinated, and fascination *must be supplied* to me in bodily shape by my country. She must have some visible symbol casting its spell upon my mind. *I would make* my country a Person, and *call* her Mother, Goddess, Durga—for whom I would redden the earth with sacrificial offerings.”<sup>302</sup> All of this language of poesis, of making, suggests that Bimala is just as aware as Sandip of the fabrication—unreality, if you will—of the symbol she chooses to fetishize. How can that be? How can one believe in something one knows is a fabrication, in something one knows is imposed rather than inherent?

All this language of poesis, invites a discussion of the role of art in the fashioning of the nation—namely metaphor, allegory, hyperbole, symbol, idea, and abstraction. Indeed, these discussions transpire throughout the novel. Naturally, they finally implicate Tagore himself, an artist manifestly concerned with Indian self-understanding. Nikhil objects to the ornament and exaggeration so cherished by Bimala and Sandip. The reason Nikhil objects to these is not a failure of poetic sensibility on his part, but rather the imposed quality of both. Exaggeration and

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid. 121, italics mine.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid. 38, italics mine.

its offshoot, ornament, are distortions imparted from without; whereas the poetry from within requires no such distortion, only metaphor—the language of affinities.

Interestingly, Bimala and Sandip seem to grasp all these distinctions themselves. Bimala reflects, “all ornaments are exaggerations. They are not made by God, but by man... Only the trees and beasts and birds tell unmitigated truths, because these poor things have not the power to invent.”<sup>303</sup> Bimala is right to call exaggeration and ornament man-made. The bare, honest language of nature that she scorns Benjamin celebrates in his theory of enchanted mimetic language.<sup>304</sup> For Benjamin, the mute language of nature is God-given and man-expressed in the utterly reciprocal and enchanted pre-Fall universe. Man’s language is enchanted precisely to the degree that it expresses the *immediate* mind of God which has created the forms of nature perceptible to man. In this formulation, ornament and exaggeration, which move away from the natural, become elements of a *mediated* language; as they move away from the “unmitigated truth” of the natural, they move further and further from the mind of God. So, when Bimala advocates for ornament and exaggeration, she advocates for disenchanting language.

At the other end of the spectrum from the honest birds and beasts, stands Sandip, the crass materialist at heart, who seduces by spinning exaggerations, which he justifies in the name of imagination and feeling. Though he peddles exaggeration, he does not fall victim to it himself: “I may delude others, but never myself.”<sup>305</sup> However, he considers Nikhil, unlike

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>304</sup> Benjamin. I have discussed Benjamin’s theory of enchanted mimetic language in Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid. 118.

himself, a victim of his own metaphor (to be distinguished from exaggeration)<sup>306</sup>: “Well, well, let him be happy with his metaphors. We are the flesh-eaters of the world...we cannot allow your metaphor-mongers to bar the door to our sustenance.”<sup>307</sup> According to Sandip, Nikhil lives in an “idea-filled balloon” in “cloud-land” far away from reality. This is odd, considering how wedded Nikhil is to reality as it is. Both Sandip and Nikhil claim to be realists, but their understanding of the real is drastically different.

This brings us to a crucial distinction regarding the nature of the real. For Sandip, despite all his double-speak, reality is disenchanting brute materiality that exists merely for his instrumentalities. His worldview is a scientific one (perversely couched in precisely the opposite terms), for “whatever is true is neither good or bad, but simply true, and that is Science.”<sup>308</sup> He admires the “audaciously realistic manner”<sup>309</sup> of the European sexology book he comes across. And he considers himself a “clear-seeing” flesh-eater who takes at will from a brute Nature whose only lesson for him is survival of the fittest. If Nikhil’s interior discourse center on sight, Sandip’s centers on nature. But his discourse of the natural is not Romantic like Nikhil’s. Rather, it resonates with the Newtonian school which took a Deistic view of nature as available for human plunder with immunity:

Ever since we have come upon the Earth we have been plundering her; and the more we claimed, the more she submitted...no strong-box in Nature’s store-room has been respected or left unrifled. The one delight

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<sup>306</sup> Metaphor, as the language of natural affinities, need not be considered a distortion of nature. Rather, it is an establishment of a relationship between things. Given that harmonization is a key ethos for Tagore, we might speculate that metaphor, as the language of affinities, serves this principle.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid. 118.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid. 56.

of this Earth is to fulfill the claims of those who are men. She has been made fertile and beautiful and complete through her endless sacrifices to them. But for this, she would be lost in the wilderness, not knowing herself, the doors of her heart shut, her diamonds and pearls never seeing the light.<sup>310</sup>

This passage is fascinating, for it comes close to the brink of Benjamin's theory of the Pre-fall enchanted universe, only to pull back and radically disenchant it. Whereas Benjamin would agree that man and nature complete each other, that man gives a certain value, purpose, and voice to nature, Sandip sees all of that in terms of plunder and rape. Nature exists for our use, and we owe her nothing beyond desiring her fruits. Sandip's acquisitive view is a far cry from the principle of human sacrifice to nature, the balancing act required every time we take from it—a principle lived out by the tantrics in *Kapalkundala*, for example. That Sandip effects pathetic fallacy, that he sees Nature as having a "heart" and "delight" and self-knowledge, perhaps speaks to his inherited notion of *anima mundi*, but it does not alter his will to plunder. In fact, his stance is even more cynical than the Newtonians, who, at the very least, genuinely saw nature as brute.

Running somewhat at odds with his crassly materialist view of the world, Sandip's take on truth adumbrates postmodernism. A master rhetorician, he will manipulate so-called truth to fit his purposes. Despite his scientism, he mocks Nikhil for his "prejudice in favour of truth—as though there exists such an objective reality!"<sup>311</sup> In Harry Frankfurt's terms, Sandip is more of a bullshitter than a liar, because he does not care whether something is true or false: he has no investment in truth at all, unlike the liar who passes off a lie as truth, but, for that very reason, still has a stake in truth-value.

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid. 116.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid. 121.

Given his bullshitter's stance, it is not surprising that Sandip is the most adept artist in the novel, delighting in the play of forms. With postmodern canniness, he considers all life and particular lives merely texts with nothing to back them up. To him Nikhil is a character from a novel, Bimala an unwitting character in his five-act play, and himself "merely a book with a covering of flesh and blood." But it is not just Western forms that he juggles. He perversely delights in reciting Vaishnavite poetry at the precise instant that he has been secretly admiring the materialist European sexology book, and he equally savors sermonizing about Vaishnava Philosophy to Bimala. All of this from a man who lives a cynical life that runs counter to Vaishnavism's every enchanted principle of human-human and human-divine reciprocity of love.

Standing against all of this is Nikhil, whose conception of the real is entirely wedded to the notion of spiritual truth. This notion includes neither the excesses and overlays of illusions that Sandip casts as an outer shell on reality, nor brute objective reality in the scientific sense. We might think of reality in this novel, then, as triple-tiered: on the outermost level, it is the non-reality of distortion, of illusion, exaggeration, of man-made instrumental *darśan*; on the middle tier, phenomenal reality, retinally or photo-objectively perceived; on the innermost level, the inherent divine soul of everyday life humbly expressing its poetry to modestly enchanted eyes. It is the last of these that constitutes reality for Nikhil, and inspires the poetry of the prosaic that characterizes Tagore's narrative style. Before we analyze what *is* reality for Tagore, let us first understand what is *not*.

The type of *darśan* Sandip cultivates bastardizes the basic principle of mimetic enchantment. In mimetic enchantment, the phenomenal form is charged by the divine *from*

*within*, whereas in Sandip's inversion of mimetic enchantment, the enchantment is conferred on a form *from the outside*, with no necessarily animating force from within. In a sense, then, this resembles fetishism, in the traditional sense—the false *attribution* of spirit to matter or symbol. Indeed, Tagore, in his famous essay on nationalism, actually calls the latter a fetish.<sup>312</sup> He also calls the nation an abstraction—an “octopus of abstractions, sending out its wriggling arms in all directions of space”<sup>313</sup> Fetish and abstraction come together in the nation, crucially: “the individual worships with all sacrifices a god which is morally much inferior to himself. This could never have been possible if the god had been as real as the individual.”<sup>314</sup> In Tagore's formulation here, abstraction, non-reality, and the fetish come together in the nation, not in God as one might expect. For Tagore, God, while sublime, is palpably real and innately comprehensible to the individual because God is so personal. It requires no symbol—hence Tagore's preference for monism, and his wariness of polytheism's reliance on a *mūrti* that could readily lend itself to abuses of *darśan*. But the nation, an overgrown scientific organization, is an impersonal and incomprehensible abstraction, so it requires concrete symbols. India handles this by creating a fetish of it, a concrete representation cast in religious imagery, whereby representation is mistaken for what it represents: god becomes nation. Imposition rather than immanence, this is hardly divinity coursing through everyday life in the way Tagore wants. In fact, when it comes to the nation, he takes a distinctly disenchanting view of mimesis—the view that symbol and symbolized should not be conflated. Yet, he reserves an enchanted view of

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<sup>312</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1950 [1995]) 15.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.* 25.



mimesis for the particular form he prefers, namely that of the immanence of the divine alive in the poetics of everyday life.

While Nikhil sees through the fetishes, exaggerations, and illusions conjured by his foil, he will not settle for reality as mere collection of facts and inert materialities. Rather, in a spirit of apotropaic magic, he would fight gods with God. He sets monism against polytheism and illusion: “God is necessary to clear away our illusion. The divinities which keep them alive are false gods.”<sup>315</sup> For Nikhil, as for Tagore, the real *must* contain truth, and that truth must contain soul—the transcendental soul raised far above the fetish of the nation, yet coursing through the most humble dimensions of everyday life. This conception of divinity corresponds to the Vedantist one, in which *Brahman*, the transcendental soul, permeates *Atman*, the soul of world and self. Tagore, thus, opts for the scopes above and below the nation: the transcendental sphere (which corresponds to spiritual universalism, often problematically designated cosmopolitanism)<sup>316</sup> and the personal sphere of the individual heart.

Inspiring Sandip’s bemoaning of “the poison of spirituality” that runs through Indian blood, Nikhil remarks

“A machine is distinct enough, but not so life. If to gain distinctness you try to know life as a machine, then such mere distinctness cannot stand for truth. The soul is not as distinct as success, and so you only lose your soul if you seek it in your success.”

“Where, then, is this wonderful soul?”

“Where it knows itself in the infinite and transcends its success”

“But how does all this apply to our work for the country?”

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid. 121.

<sup>316</sup> Critics, particularly Western ones, are perhaps a bit too eager to claim Tagore for cosmopolitanism. While his universalism certainly involved a love of humanity beyond nations, and while his mystical monism made his poetics readily assimilable to his Western admirers like Yeats, he himself often voiced a certain skepticism about cosmopolitanism *per se*. See for example, his *Nationalism 2*: “Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship, is the goal of human history.” Tagore’s relationship to cosmopolitanism, modernism, and Europe is a much longer and very important discussion.

“It is the same thing. Where our country makes itself the final object, it gains success at the cost of the soul. Where it recognizes the Greatest as greater than all, there it may miss success, but gains its soul.”<sup>317</sup>

Machine and success—two of the keywords Tagore associates with the nation, along with intellect, abstraction, idea, and impersonality—are opposed to transcendence, soul, organic small-scale life, and the personal.<sup>318</sup> These antinomies run throughout his essay on nationalism, where he asks, “will this federation of steam-boilers supply you with a soul, a soul which has her conscience and her God?”<sup>319</sup> The Nation, “the creature of science and selfishness” cannibalizes the soul, resulting in “this haunted world of suffering man possessed by the ghastly abstraction of the organizing man.”<sup>320</sup> As Nikhil, in his most heated exchange with Sandip says, “in Europe people look at everything from the viewpoint of science...But man is infinitely more than the natural science of himself...You want to find the truth of man from your science teachers, and not from your own inner being.”<sup>321</sup>

So, the real as the true can be found neither in the scientific view of things, nor in super-imposed symbolism exploiting the praxis of *darśan*. Truth is neither illusion, nor bare fact, but exists on the small-scale of organic life, “its hum [harmonizing] with the music of life.” And, as I shall soon discuss, this “music of life” can be captured by an enchanted mimetic art, which Tagore attempts to practice in and beyond this particular novel.

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<sup>317</sup> Tagore, *The Home and the World* 80.

<sup>318</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism* 20, 22.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.* 61.

In *Nationalism* Tagore writes, “Take away man from his natural surroundings, from the fullness of his communal life, with all its living associations of beauty and love and social obligations, and you will be able to turn him into so many fragments of a machine for the production of wealth on a gigantic scale.”<sup>322</sup> Tagore’s utopian vision, not unlike Gandhi’s,<sup>323</sup> is to return man to these wholesome, living, small-scale, intimate relations, and he attempts to do it through his art. Subaltern studies historian Ranajit Guha points our attention to Tagore’s distinction between historiography of the statist world-history narratives, and the historicity of everyday village life that remains unassimilated to the former: “Literature, [Tagore] suggests, makes up for historiography’s failure...by addressing the life lived by people in their ‘everyday contentment and misery’ ...[in the recurrence] of something that has been there in all our yesterdays.”<sup>324</sup> That everydayness escapes banality and rather suggests eternity when “grasped in a creative manner;”<sup>325</sup> and that is where the artist can provide a model for creative organic

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>323</sup> While historians tend to focus on famous differences between Gandhi and Tagore, it is important to remember that they shared much in common: their localist preference for small-scale village governance, for slow-paced crafts (Tagore actually uses the image of the handloom as opposed to the power-loom in *Nationalism*), non-violence, and skepticism about national statecraft. Among their differences: Tagore’s preference for a more affirmative philosophy and his more moderate position on the role of modern science and technology. Tagore allowed more of a place for the latter than did Gandhi, for Tagore was keen for India to join the world rather than remain insular for its absolute refusal of certain salutary dimensions of modernity. For more on the Gandhi-Tagore debates, see Ahluwalia and Ahluwalia, *Tagore and Gandhi (The Tagore-Gandhi Controversy)*. Despite their overarching similarities, Tagore was criticized by the Gandhianists and other revolutionaries for representing Sandip as a craven, power-hungry, self-interested revolutionary, when in fact, most revolutionaries (whether or not in the armed struggle) were seen as precisely the opposite: unselfish martyrs. Tagore was seen as being politically evasive, naïve, and ungenerous.

<sup>324</sup> Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 92.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid. 93. See especially 93-94: According to Guha, Tagore makes this point especially regarding *Galpaguccha*, his collection of short stories of village life: “Its themes are age-old and rendered stale by tradition. But they come alive again by being narrated creatively to show how time and literature work together to recover the living historicity of the quotidian. Tagore relies here on a combination of two of the most commonly used words in his language to explain what he means. To write creatively, he suggests, is to write about *pratyahik sukhdhukha*, that is,

living. Abjuring the characteristic hyperbole of Sandip's inauthentic artistic impulse, Nikhil-cum-Tagore's poetry finds its inspiration in what Michel Leiris, in his own secular context, has called "the sacred in everyday life." For Tagore, this consists of nature and sacred household objects charged with affective investment and living associations. These humble objects and elements of nature are God's living metaphors for the divine spirit waiting to be grasped by the enchanted eyes of the poet of the prosaic. Herein lies Tagore's recuperation of *darśan* from the grandiose super-impositions of a Sandip. Metaphor—the language of affinities—makes it possible to "[see] the eternal that lay beyond the 'veil' of the everyday."<sup>326</sup> More generally, the mimetic symbol, in Tagore's hands, is an aesthetic device which, however compatible with secularism, is assimilated to the philosophy of *darśan*. Symbol and metaphor, for him, allow mundane reality to gesture to something beyond, namely *Brahman* (transcendental soul) coursing through the phenomenal and emotional world as *Atman* (world-soul).

When Nikhil determines to face painful truths, his sight is associated not with the optical but with the emotional: "My heart has become all eyes."<sup>327</sup> What exactly does his heart full of eyes see? It focuses on a few particular household objects loaded with the affective bond he shares with Bimala—objects whose resonance changes as that bond breaks: sacred vermilion, the husband's photograph and garland of flowers, a pair of slippers, her jewel-box, and an orchid

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about everyday contentment and misery...the discourse of weal and woe, *sukhdukhher katha*, has come to signify the concern that characterizes the solidarities of a shared world. How these solidarities build up and tissues of sharing form in the course of habitual transactions between people, is what *sukhdukhka* is about. By predicating it on the everyday Tagore invests the latter with the concreteness of historicity that he believes to be the privilege and responsibility of creative writing to illuminate and display for unseeing eyes to see."

<sup>326</sup> Chakrabarty 151. N.B.: The quotation is Chakrabarty's paraphrasing of Tagore. The idea about metaphor is my own.

<sup>327</sup> Tagore, *The Home and the World* 40.

plant. There comes a point when the couple is so estranged that their only emotional communication lies in these everyday objects whose evolving meaning is every bit as apparent to Bimala as to the husband with whom she once shared them. Tagore makes poetry of these prosaic objects, chronicling the affective shifts they undergo.

These objects communicate so expressively in large part because they emanate from a shared cultural backcloth that has sacralized them. The first of these is the vermilion that signifies wifely devotion to her husband. In the very first sentence of the novel, Bimala recalls her mother's vermilion mark in the parting of her hair. The subsequent interior monologue discusses her resemblance to her mother, for better and for worse: worse because, like her mother, she is not blessed with good looks; better because her astrological signs indicate that she will become an ideal wife like her mother.<sup>328</sup> And indeed, until Sandip's arrival, Bimala is an exemplar of the devoted Hindu wife—not just in outward form, but in spirit: “To surrender one's pride in devotion is woman's only salvation.”<sup>329</sup> She refers to Nikhil as her personal god, even secretly taking the dust off his feet (a traditional ritual of reverence) despite his humble protestations. During these moments she “could feel the vermilion mark upon [her] forehead shining out like the morning star.”<sup>330</sup> From her childhood, she has come to understand that “devotion is beauty itself, in its inner aspect,” and one's service to one's spouse is of the sort of beauty that “[passes beyond outward form]...pure music.”<sup>331</sup> She carries her family tradition of

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

spousal devotion into her own marriage, earning herself the appreciation of her mother-in-law, who feels that “with the conspiracy of favourable stars which attended [Bimala], [she] had been able to attract [her] husband’s love”<sup>332</sup> and to prevent him from plunging downward into lust and dissolution like his brothers. Note the sense of religiosity that informs all of these notions of marriage. The vermillion mark not only signifies the sanctification of marriage, but it is also a sacred mark priests don on worshippers during the ritual puja;<sup>333</sup> so a wife’s daily application of vermillion, when enacted with the kind of spiritual zeal that Bimala exhibits, signifies her re-dedication to her divinely-ordained dharmic role. At its best, the vermillion mark is more than “outward form;” it is the very spirit of love, loyalty, and bond with one’s husband.

That Bimala begins like this, with her vermillion mark shining forth like the morning star, only makes her fall from grace that much more dramatic. When she switches her allegiance to Sandip, to whom she is cataclysmically attracted, she re-signifies her vermillion mark. Now hers is the vermillion mark worn by a goddess, not a humble wife, and her loyalty has shifted from

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>333</sup> The vermillion mark is one of the most over-determined symbols in the Indian sacred imaginary. Partha Chatterjee observes: “The practice of married women putting a vermillion mark in the parting of the hair is not “religious.” There is nothing of this kind in Brahmanical marriage rituals. Its origin is probably the tribal customs of Eastern India and the ceremonies associated with it are preformed separately from the shastra-ordained ritual as *lokachar* (popular custom)” (comments, March 2011). Yet, like so many other Hindu symbols that are the result of assimilation of tribal practices that were once outside the fold, vermillion has become ubiquitously associated with Hindu ceremony. One need only spend a day in India to see that the ubiquitous vermillion is nearly a metonym for Hindu auspiciousness. As such, there are various Hindu legends and explanations for the vermillion mark. One such explanation is that vermillion worn between the eyes symbolizes the third eye of the soul’s inner knowledge. In another explanation by way of legend, the vermillion mark worn by a woman specifically signifies the original mark of his own blood that Lord Rama smeared on his wife Sita before going into exile. It is said that he asked her, as an indication of her loyalty in his absence (the core controversy of the epic *Ramayana*), to preserve the mark during his long banishment. The association of the vermillion mark with that most iconic couple in the Hindu pantheon is what has been primarily carried into the ritual praxis of Hindu women’s vermillion-wearing. Certainly in Tagore’s novel, there is no question that vermillion is intensely associated with the sacral and the wifely. Such associations reach their apogee when Nikhil, deserted by Bimala, identifies his true wife in the everlasting divine lover manifesting as a star in the night. See footnote 346.

her husband to her nation in the guise of Sandip: “I felt that my resplendent womanhood made me indeed a goddess. Why should not its glory flash from my forehead with visible brilliance?”<sup>334</sup> Gone is all her humility, her sense of salvation to be found uniquely in devotion to one’s husband. When, at the height of their estrangement, a heartbroken Nikhil—heart all eyes—finds himself again in their precious bedroom niche, he takes painful stock of what remains and what has altered. He is struck when he sees among her usual hairpins and perfumes “still, her vermilion box!”<sup>335</sup> His shock suggests a sharp dissonance now between outward form and inner spirit. She may still wear the vermilion mark, but it is no longer animated by the spirit of wifely devotion. This radical disjuncture between object and the spirit animating it inaugurates disenchantment, which is precisely what has been taking place in Nikhil’s drawing room since the arrival of Sandip. The tissue of traditional and deeply felt organic social relationships has been torn, and the closed circle of meaning has been punctured by the alienating discourse and violence of nationalism, just as Tagore lays out in *Nationalism*.

While other personal effects of the couple undergo changes, none are as religiously loaded as the vermilion mark, the most ubiquitous, sacred, and charged emblem of daily Hindu religious life. Regrettably, neither I nor Tagore’s translator can do justice to the intensity this emblem conveys in the Hindu cultural backcloth. Still, these other objects haunt the couple as they move from the enchanted sphere of organic home life to the disenchanting sphere of national politics (telescoped into the person of Sandip). Just as the orchid plant the couple lovingly nurtured together now silently reproaches Bimala to the degree that she can no longer look at it,

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid. 87.

the jewels Nikhil bought her that now secrete her taboo photograph of Sandip shame her: “Ah, wretched woman! What a wealth of love was twined round each one of those jewels! Oh, why am I not dead?”<sup>336</sup> As the translator’s footnote tells us, “There is a world of sentiment attached to the ornaments worn by women in Bengal. They are not merely indicative of the love and regard of the giver, but the wearing of them symbolizes all that is held best in wifedom—the constant solicitude for her husband’s welfare, the successful performance of the material and spiritual duties of the household entrusted to her care.”<sup>337</sup> The metaphorical intensity, then, of having buried Sandip’s photo in her jewels from Nikhil, cannot be overestimated. The nearly religious sense of mutual devotion betokened by the jewels has been eroded—rotten to the core; and, again, the object is shorn of the animating essence it contains. The final transvaluation of the jewels occurs when Bimala, at the acme of her performance as goddess, lifts the jewel-box above her head and majestically dedicates it to Sandip as a boon to his cause—all while in Nikhil’s presence. In the interim, through a circuitous chain of events, she has nearly attempted to have the jewels pawned for the money Sandip has demanded of her. Thus does the utmost symbol of love get liquidated into the crassness of exchange-value, only to be finally and explicitly sacrificed to the very disenchanting ethos—nationalism—that has catalyzed this rapid descent into disenchantment.

The last of these formerly enchanted, now disenchanting, objects I will discuss is Nikhil’s photograph—not hidden and secretly cherished like Sandip’s, but manifest and manifestly uncherished. In the same niche as the vermilion box, Nikhil finds his photograph:

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid. f. 125.



My portrait there is looking the same as ever, in spite of the flowers scattered round it having been withered black! Of all the things in the room their greeting strikes me as sincere. They are still here simply because it was not felt worth while even to remove them. Never mind; let me welcome truth, albeit in such sere and sorry garb, and look forward to the time when I shall be able to do so unmoved, as does my photograph.<sup>338</sup>

The garland of flowers that Bimala had replaced daily with affection and adoration has gone black, just as her love has. As disillusioning as this is, the black flowers are the one symbol that actually corresponds to the emotion it symbolizes. But that emotion is the negative of emotion itself: black, dead, inert like its concrete manifestation. And indeed, this is what Nikhil's world has become since Sandip's incursion into it: all blackness and death. For one who has abjured photo-realism—the coldly objectivist view of life and man as mere matter—Nikhil's desire in this instance to be like his unmoved photograph is an index of his disenchantment. Here, he longs for a disenchanted, third-person point of view on himself and on the recently disenchanted “sere and sorry” domestic world around him. Only then, he reasons, will he be in sync with his surroundings.

That time does come soon enough, but it only lasts a moment. Indeed, once his heart has become all eyes, he comes to grasp the extreme gap between Bimala's outward forms and her inner beauty. One day, seeking a favor for Sandip's sake, she dresses up in a manner she knows her husband will approve. Nikhil sees all of this now that his “mind [is] freed from all mistiness.” He laments, “Till that moment, I had never viewed Bimala's adornment as a thing apart from herself...But today the elaborate manner in which she had done up her hair...made it appear a mere decoration. That which before had the mystery of her personality about it, and was priceless to me, was now out to sell itself cheap.”<sup>339</sup> Nikhil's language here returns to the

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid. 109.

issue of decoration as overlay, rather than emanation from within; it also introduces the idea of crass materialism, the very principle of commerce.

An alienated Bimala now approaches her own outward form as mere “*bostu*,” an object of mere utility—all surface, no depth. Tagore elaborated a well-known critique of utility by playing on this Bengali word, “*bostu*,” and this critique fundamentally informed his approach to realism. Inspired by European Romanticism, he effected this critique of Benthamite utilitarianism, the “stomach-outlook,” in many ways, including a close reading of Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The urn “was not made merely to reveal a human need,”<sup>340</sup> but to express something of the eternal. But the primary rhetoric on which he drew was derived from Sanskrit poetics and Upanishadic philosophy, which saw the minutiae of the world as the *jiban leela* (life-play) of the transcendental spirit. That cosmic spirit courses through the things of this world, inspiring *rasa* (aesthetically-inspired mood) rather than remaining mere *bostu* (thing of utility).<sup>341</sup>

Dipesh Chakrabarty, who explicates all of this, goes on to align *rasa* with poetry, and *bostu* with realist prose, a division of labor that he feels Tagore did not reconcile until the 1930s when he developed a genre of gritty urban prose-poetry called *gadyakabita*.<sup>342</sup> I would like to suggest, however, that one can find this reconciliation between the poetic and the prosaic much earlier in all of Tagore’s prose fiction, including his 1890s short stories of village life on the

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<sup>340</sup> Tagore quoted in Chakrabarty 169.

<sup>341</sup> Chakrabarty 167.

<sup>342</sup> For an iconic example of *gadyakabita*, see Tagore’s earliest experiment in the genre, *Lipika: Prose Poems*, trans. Aurobindo Bose (London: Rupa & Co., 1977 [2005]). Aside from this isolated initial attempt, he did not actively cultivate the genre until the 1930s when the majority of his *gadyakabita* books came out.

Padma River,<sup>343</sup> and here in his 1916 novel *The Home and the World*. And this is no incidental matter.

I would argue that it was essential for his philosophy of realism to be able to find a place for poetry and *rasa* in the form dedicated to the prose of life, namely the novel. Chakrabarty's dichotomy between Tagore's poems and prose is too pat. It does not take into account the fact that Tagore's very notion of the real, even in prose, is shot through with value (to use Bilgrami's defining term for enchantment) and with symbolic weight. Through the value-laden and affect-laden things and gestures of everyday life informed by religious ethics, Tagore wants us to experience and see the real anew, with enchanted eyes. In *The Home and the World*, he elaborates an enchanted realism, making poetry of the prosaic. He achieves this through insisting on the symbolic expressiveness of the objects and rituals of everyday life, and through lifting prose into song, a formal experiment I will soon discuss. Thus does he presence the eternal in the everyday. When he was around age sixty, in a period deemed his final major output of poems, Tagore wrote a poem "In the Eyes of a Peacock," which gives us the key to his novelistic enterprise. In the poem, the young speaker says to her poet-grandfather, "Prose, when *you* recite it, can take on the colour of poetry...I'm the one who passes the touch of poetry into your voice; I may even have awoken song."<sup>344</sup> Prose, when Tagore recites it, certainly does take on the colour of poetry, and he even awakens song. In the end, formally and epistemologically, disenchantment does not take the day, even if historically it does.

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<sup>343</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Short Stories*, trans. William Radice (London: Penguin, 1991 [2000]).

<sup>344</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Poems*, trans. William Radice (London: Penguin, 1985 [2005]) 111.

All three of the symbolized objects I have discussed devolve from enchanted to disenchanted: form conflated entirely with its animating spirit becomes divorced from it. Yet, the poetic mode by which Tagore charts this process depends on the enchanted associations of these objects; and moreover that sustained mode effectively re-enchants them. We are reminded of what vermillion means, what a garland around a husband's portrait means, what jewelry gifted from him means. Tagore's chronicling of the evacuation of these meanings only serves to remind us how deep they go. In other words, while each particular symbol may undergo an evacuation of the spirit it is meant to capture, Tagore's symbolizing mode persists as the primary mode of his prose. He does not adopt the epistemology of disenchantment any more than his proxy Nikhil does, even when these objects betray that to which they are meant to gesture. Rather, other dimensions of the real come to take their place: nature and an even deeper simplicity, as I shall soon discuss. Applied to nature, Tagore's mimetically symbolic mode—a mode in which the symbol contains the animating spirit within—actually gains force; thus empowered, the symbolic mode will return to the realm of the domestic-social provisionally to reconstitute its enchantment. So, while the closed circle of enchanted meaning in this couple's domestic context may have been temporarily ruptured, the narrative mode itself—symbolization and song—will suture it finally. The story of Nikhil and Bimala is not yet over.

Even after Nikhil's most disenchanted moment—his moment of coldly viewing Bimala in her *bostu*-finery—he does not adopt a disenchanted view of the world. He comes to the brink of disenchantment in this passage, only to find on the other side of it an even vaster arena for enchantment: nature. The breaking of his domestic-affective bond proves more liberating than damaging. Suddenly the world opens up to him, and it is a world far beyond the scope of home

and nation. In nature and simplicity he finds a realm at once more transcendent and more elemental than these other realms. Immediately following the passage of extreme domestic disillusionment comes his spiritual turning point:

As I came away from that broken cage of a bedroom, out into the golden sunlight of the open, there was the avenue of bauhinias...suffusing the sky with a rosy flush. A group of starlings beneath the trees were noisily chattering away. In the distance an empty bullock car, with its nose on the ground, help up its tail aloft...I seemed to have come closer to the heartbeats of the great earth in all the simplicity of its daily life; its warm breath fell on me with the perfume of the bauhinia blossoms; and an anthem, inexpressibly sweet, seemed to peal forth from this world, where I, in my freedom, live in the freedom of all else...Today I feel that I shall win through. I have come to the gateway of the simple; I am now content to see things as they are... Save me, Truth!<sup>345</sup>

In “the heartbeats of the great earth in all the simplicity of its daily life” Nikhil finally discovers his truth, his reality, and his enchantment.

Indeed, even before this moment of liberating epiphany, whenever he is most despairing of Bimala’s love, nature rescues him. In a third re-association of the vermilion mark, Tagore inverts the original vermilion metaphor that had associated Nikhil’s devoted wife with a star shining forth. Now, an actual star shining forth becomes Nikhil’s devoted wife since Bimala has failed him in this capacity. On an ordinary evening, Nikhil detects a big star in the sky that

seemed to say to me: “Dreamland ties are made and dreamland ties are broken, but I am here for ever—the everlasting lamp of the bridal night.” All at once my heart was full with the thought that my Eternal Love was steadfastly waiting for me through the ages, behind the veil of material things...My beloved, your smile shall never fade, and every dawn there shall appear fresh for me the vermilion mark<sup>346</sup> on your forehead!...She is true; that is why I have seen her and shall see her so often...even through the thickest mist of tears. I have seen her and lost her in the crowd of life’s market-place, and found her again; and I shall find her once more when I have escaped through the loophole of death...Ah, cruel one, play with me no longer!...The unveiled star tells me not to fear. That which is eternal must always be there.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Tagore, *The Home and the World* 110.

<sup>346</sup> This resignification of the wifely vermilion mark, now transferred from Bimala to Nikhil’s everlasting divine lover, is powerful precisely because the text has already laden vermilion with heavy charge.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.* 66-67.

This lyrical passage, in which the cosmos communicates intimately with a man, seems a near-facsimile of the poetry of Vaishnavism and the Bauls, who are the mendicant-singers of Bengal. Both heterodox<sup>348</sup> sects' view of mysticism and love were a source of great inspiration for Tagore, particularly in his collection of Nobel-prize winning poems, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, in which God and lover are rendered as one.

In a perfect articulation of the enchanted philosophy, the *Gitanjali* and Baul poems present a God, readily perceived in nature, who needs us as much as we need God. The one exists for the other, to dignify the other, to fulfill the other. One might at random select any poem from *Gitanjali*, and its divinely erotic intimacy would resonate with the epiphanic passage above. Here I provide a few snippets of Baul poetry that Tagore himself offers in an essay on the Bauls in his *Creative Unity*:

I have been travelling to seek you, my friend, for long;  
 Yet I refuse to beg a sight of you, if you do not feel my need.  
 I am blind with market dust and midday glare,  
     and so wait, my heart's lover, in hopes that your own  
     love will send you to find me out.<sup>349</sup>

After sunset, your song wore a tune of ascetic grey,  
     and then came night.  
 Your message was written in bright letters across the black.  
 Why is such splendour about you, to lure the heart of one who is nothing?<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Of the many distinctions between Bankim and Tagore, one of the most crucial is Bankim's Hindu orthodoxy, and Tagore's heterodoxy. Tagore took his inspiration from the popular religious traditions, rather than the Brahminical one. In Vaishnavism and the Bauls, he found a grassroots equivalent of the mystical philosophy of Vedanta. What is more, the Bauls were an inherently syncretic sect that combined Muslim and Hindu heterodox strains to develop a unique philosophy of the body, love, nature, and God. Against caste, gender prohibitions, and other orthodox oppressive Hindu customs, the Bauls, like the Buddhists and the Vaishnavites, created a radical religion of direct mystical union with the Godhead, accessible to all. It must be noted, however, that while Tagore was an ardent admirer of the Bauls' mystical poetry, he did not endorse the more esoteric ritual practices of their cult. Thanks to Partha Chatterjee for prompting me to make this caveat.

<sup>349</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "An Indian Folk Religion," *Creative Unity* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1922 [1995]) 82.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

I am poured forth in living notes of joy and sorrow  
 by your breath.  
 Morning and evening in summer and in rains, I am  
 fashioned to music.  
 Yet should I be wholly spent in some flight of song,  
 I shall not grieve, the tune is so precious to me.<sup>351</sup>

Tagore consciously borrows from this devotional mode whose central symbols are nature, music, and love. Throughout *The Home and the World*, Tagore gives us many lyrical riffs that convey this nexus, none more powerfully than the “Eternal Lover” passage I have quoted above. Tagore writes,

The Vaishnava religion, which has become the popular religion of India, carries the same message [as the Bauls’]: God’s love finding its finality in man’s love. According to it, the lover, man, is the complement of the Lover, God, in the internal love drama of existence; and God’s call is ever wafted in man’s heart in the world-music, drawing him towards the union. This idea has been expressed in *rich elaboration of symbols verging upon realism*. But for these Bauls this idea is direct and simple, full of the dignified beauty of truth, which shuns all tinsels of ornament.<sup>352</sup>

This passage describes precisely what is happening to Nikhil when he is drawn by the star which does not just symbolize but actually *is* his Eternal Lover, God. Enchantment is restored, not just in terms of cosmological relationships—the continuity, reciprocity, and communicability between otherworld and this world—but also in terms of mimetic symbolism wherein symbol is collapsed with symbolized. In his own symbolic language of the novel, Tagore combines the Vaishnavist “rich elaboration of symbols verging upon realism” with Baul pantheistic monism.<sup>353</sup> In fact, his very notion of realism is unique in its enchanted symbolic richness,

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid. 84-85; italics mine.

<sup>353</sup> The Vaishnavite sect featured Lord Krishna, the humble and erotic cow-herd, as its patron saint. The various *rasas* (aesthetic attitudes) and *bhavas* (moods) of devotion to this immortal avatar are modeled on ordinary human love relations: a mother’s love for her son, a lover’s desire for her lover, a son’s love for his mother, and the spurned lover’s pain of loss and longing. The Bauls also model religious devotion on the human experience of love; however, they abjure polytheism.

which gets invigorated through Nikhil's foray into nature—only to return to and restore the sphere of affective relationships.

Chief among the topoi of this symbolically-charged mode, music permeates *The Home and the World*, as much in moments of disillusionment and despair as in divine epiphany.

Indeed, along with sight, music is a central motif of the novel. Further, the very narrative structure of the novel itself resembles melodic exchange we have come to associate with the classical Hindustani musical tradition, as the lyrical narrative passes from voice to voice.<sup>354</sup>

Each new solo takes over from the last while the other voices become *subito piano* (suddenly quiet) for the duration. Snatches of actual song, particularly that of Vaishnavite poets, pepper the novel. Further, the relative enchantment and disenchantment of the characters' world is articulated in terms of harmony, a major trope that runs throughout Tagore's writing. (Notably, even more than for his literature, Tagore is beloved in Bengal for his oeuvre of 2,000+ songs, a genre named *Rabindra Sangeet* in his honor.)

To charm Bimala, Sandip constantly sings Vaishnavite songs in a thick and tuneless voice. He disingenuously justifies his tunelessness in the name of passion, which he contrasts

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<sup>354</sup> My musical rendering of Tagore's serial monologues is, admittedly, debatable. Most critics tend to see Tagore's structural choice as modernist. However, I would be loath to jump to that conclusion, in part because of his tense relationship to modernism (see end of this chapter), and in part because the critical tendency to read non-Western formal innovations as modular (Metropolitan) is all too common and all too problematic. Given Tagore's musical pedigree, his enormous musical oeuvre, his patent admiration for the music of the Bauls and Vaishnavites, his own privileging of his songs over all his other artistic work, the patent musical preoccupations of this novel, and his desire for his art to emanate from the Indian backcloth, I am inclined to think that the serial monologues ought to be thought of more in terms of music than in terms of modernism's perspectivalism—although there is no reason that both interpretations should not co-exist. Another caveat I must make, thanks to Partha Chatterjee, is that the sort of Hindustani melodic exchange I describe is a fairly recent innovation (the last 50 years or so). That said, even in the solo recitals that had been the bread and butter of Hindustani musical performance before then, there were supplemental pieces in which the primary instrumentalist and the accompanist would engage in the sort of exchange I describe above. So, such a musical arrangement of melodic exchange, though not the main musical genre, would have traditionally existed and been known to the polymath Tagore.



with Nikhil's timid (proverbial) scale-practicing.<sup>355</sup> Tagore actually offers us verbatim Sandip's snatches of song, so we can appreciate the egregious disconnect between song and singer. It is significant that Sandip cannot carry a tune. He cannot hear or harmonize with the music within and around him. The ambassador of disenchantment is, not surprisingly, out of sync with the world he means to conquer and subdue. His attitude toward the world is one of discord and domination, not harmonization, the very foundation of Tagore's over-arching enchanted worldview. If Sandip sounds any note, it is the "manly note, the note of power,"<sup>356</sup> ever-seductive to Bimala. As she resets her scale to his discordant note of power, she becomes entirely alienated from the original music of her domestic sphere. Once she is finally chastened, she laments, "But what keeps crushing my heart is the thought that the festive flutes which were played at my wedding, nine years ago, welcoming me to this house, will never sound for me again in this life."<sup>357</sup> When Bimala registers her alienation from her bedroom—bereft of "the all-pervading heart which used to be there, over all. No feeling, only furniture!"<sup>358</sup>—she muses, "how easy life would be if only one could keep in harmony with one's surroundings."<sup>359</sup> This sentence might do well to serve as a very basic definition for enchantment.

Like her, Nikhil at this point, long before his divine nature epiphany and immediately preceding his affective stock-taking of the bedroom, has fallen out of harmony with his world.

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<sup>355</sup> Tagore, *The Home and the World* 92.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.* 186.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.* 137.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

But, in a typical Tagore move where content is belied by form, he can only express this disharmony in terms of song itself. Gazing upon the pregnant earth of harvest season, Nikhil asks, “Why cannot I sing?”<sup>360</sup> Everything around him sings: “The water of the distant river is shimmering with light; the leaves are glistening; the rice-fields, with their fitful shivers, break into gleams of gold; and in this symphony of Autumn, only I remain voiceless.”<sup>361</sup> And yet, he expresses that very voicelessness, his “lack of expressiveness,” his “dumb depths” in terms of a Vidyapati refrain that runs throughout this chapter:

It is August, the sky breaks into a passionate rain;  
Alas, empty is my house.<sup>362</sup>

This refrain occurs twice more and sounds the final note of this chapter which might be called “Nikhil’s song.”<sup>363</sup> Indeed, the chapter reads like a song about song. Throughout it run the metaphors of music, which relate directly to Nature. Nikhil wistfully recalls that every anniversary prior to this one, he and Bimala stayed in a house-boat in the countryside, a decision motivated by the following logic: “The original refrain of every song is in Nature, where the rain-laden wind...keeps its ear close to the speaking water. There, at the beginning of time, a man and woman first met—not within walls. And therefore we two must come back to Nature, at least once a year, to tune our love anew to the first pure note of the meeting of hearts.”<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> I borrow this designation from Sarah Cole, whom I thank for introducing me to *The Home and the World*.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid. 86.

And yet, this year, their anniversary tryst has been altogether neglected. After eight years of domestic fullness and harmony, the “next octave of [his] life” begins without music at all: “The house which becomes empty through the parting of lovers, still has music left in the heart of its emptiness. But the house that is empty because hearts are asunder, is awful in its silence.”<sup>365</sup> Yet, for all the emptiness and silence of his house and heart, this chapter lifts off into song. What could that mean? Just as Tagore uses symbolization to index even the disenchantment of particular symbols, he uses song to express even disharmony and silence. Enchanted narrative mode outstrips provisional disenchantment of content, so as to come full circle and re-enchant that content (as I will soon show).

Song-in-novel stands outside the forward trajectory of the plot that cannot contain it. It lifts up the “prose of the world” into a lyrical register that stands outside of time and gestures beyond the text. Song-in-novel, here, functions as an *über-tirtha*, a crossover point between the world of the here-and-now and the world beyond. When these enchanted visions are spoken from the first-person perspective of those genuinely experiencing them (Nikhil in particular), they dissolve meta-critical distance, inviting us and incantatorily singing us into enchantment. When the text itself sings, as in Nikhil’s song, the novel actually performs enchantment, rather than merely representing it. Note, however, that the prose in which it is embedded is essential, for the worldliness of the text is necessary for a *tirtha*, just as *tirthas* exist as sites of hierophany in *this* world. God comes down to earth, just as we lift up to God. It is the very worldliness of the novel that enables such *tirtha*, making God part and parcel with workaday reality, “at the gateway of the simple.” This cannot happen in, say, the unchecked *frisson* of beatitude in lyric

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

poetry. In other words, it is the very prosaicness of the prose that throws into relief the value of the enchanted moments lifting us out of and beyond the text: when everything is enchanted, nothing is enchanted. This is what Dipesh Chakrabarty's poetry/prose division of labor does not take into account.

In a striking passage, Nikhil, in response to his spiritual guru, laments: "It was Buddha who conquered the world, not Alexander<sup>366</sup>—this is untrue when stated in dry prose—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 Gangotrie?"<sup>367</sup> Ironically, the very novel—if not the very passage—in which this wish appears fulfills it. Nikhil's commentary on the difficulty of conveying enchantment and belief in dry prose not only performs a meta-critique of the standard disenchanting (arguably photo-objective) novel form, but also hopefully looks toward a new form—a musicalized prose—that would be the ideal vessel for such enchantment. Critics since Tagore's own day have criticized and dismissed the lyrical riffs in his prose as being non-realist, but what these critics overlook is his self-conscious and urgent imperative to enchant the real.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid. 79: Aptly, Sandip's professed exemplar is the same Alexander, the "world-conqueror."

<sup>367</sup> Ibid. 134-135.

<sup>368</sup> Yet many of the critics who dismissed Tagore's politics in, or the compromised realism of, *The Home and the World* were often deeply and personally moved by his songs and poetry. In fact, as Partha Chatterjee has pointed out to me, "the autoographies of revolutionaries are strewn with their memories of life in the underground or the prison where they found courage, hope, and solace in Tagore's songs and poetry. A puzzle there!" (comments on chapter draft, March 2011). Indeed, this is a puzzle. Perhaps it can be partially explained in terms of genre: Tagore's music appealed to people across the board, whereas his novel, as a foreign form in which he takes an experimental approach, did not have such a broad appeal. Tagore himself seemed aware of the communicability of his songs over and above his novels. As William Radice explains in the introduction to his edited volume of Tagore's poems, "Tagore expressed his romantic and religious perception most profoundly in his songs: the essential harmony and beauty of the universe (a harmony and beauty that could never be described by science, for all his interest in science) was best conveyed through music. It is vital to understand this. It explains why Tagore—

Through nature, Nikhil crosses over a *tirtha* to access the cosmic. Nikhil, not coupled but alone, comes back to nature indeed to tune himself anew. Nature becomes a resource not only for his spiritual welfare, but also for Tagore's mode of enchanted mimetic symbolization. Nature fortifies the relationship between symbol and animating spirit. Here, the things of the phenomenal world—star, bauhinia blossom, river, wind—do not merely symbolize the divine spirit animating it all, but *are* the divine spirit. As in the Baul poetic mode, the star is not just a symbol for the Eternal Lover, and the Eternal Lover a symbol of God; rather, the star *is* the Eternal Lover, and the Eternal Lover *is* God. To put it simply, in the *anima mundi*, Nature *is* God. Enchanted mimesis in the spirit of *darśan*<sup>369</sup> is properly reconstituted—no longer hijacked

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mistakenly, as he must later have realized—tried to translate his songs, or poems that were close to the world of his songs. He felt that his greatest gift was for music, and it was this that he should try to communicate with the outside world. I have no doubt that he was right in his self-assessment. Ambitious and intelligent though his prose was, daring and original though his drama was, endlessly varied and inventive though his poetry was, Tagore's genius showed itself most naturally and faultlessly in his songs...It is in his songs that Tagore is nearest to his people and culture. They appeal to a wide social range; they keep alive in an increasingly urban people a responsiveness to nature and landscape and the seasons, a sense of the divine, an ideal of love, a patriotism that is distinct from chauvinism. The Tagore who with his songs rallied massive processions against Curzon's proposal to partition Bengal in 1905, or who marked the breaking of Gandhi's fast-unto-death in Poona Jail in 1932 by singing a song from *Gitanjali* for him, is no longer here; his intermittent involvement in public life may even be embarrassing to memory; but his songs live on, and transcend by their genius all distrust of his idealism or egoism, all criticism of failings in his other works of art" (William Radice, "Introduction," *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems* 30-31). If Radice is right, then we see that it was the enchantment—love for the divine, for nature—that communicated most powerfully to Bengalis across the board. Therefore, one can speculate that it was precisely this enchantment, so alive in his songs, that Tagore meant to import into the novel form, with the goal of enchanting workaday reality itself. He seems aware of the limitations of this worthy and ambitious enterprise of lifting prose up into poetry, as in the intra-textual plea, "when shall these pages sing?"

<sup>369</sup> Throughout this chapter, I use "*darśan*" in the most capacious, philosophically-oriented way possible. I mean, at bottom, seeing the divine in the worldly world. This can take a number of different forms, and as I argue in this chapter, Tagore/Nikhil was certainly not an advocate of all praxes of *darśan*. In particular, he inveighed against the popular practice of seeking *darśan* from divine or powerful figures in order to propitiate or seek favor from them (cf., Sandip and Bimala). This instrumentalist approach to *darśan* is by no means required by or even suggested by the basic tenets of *darśan*. Indeed, even in Diana Eck's seminal study on *Darśan* as popular Hindu practice, she does not indicate such. Rather, her emphasis is on the deep spiritual communication between devotee and deity in the act of *darśan*, a practice Tagore would not have opposed. In fact, in the more monistic/pantheistic register, he advocates for it, as I argue in this chapter.

by a nationalist rhetoric that would superimpose an abstract and inorganic idea onto organic things.

Nature permeated with divinity retunes Tagore's enchanted mimesis, just as it retunes Nikhil. Music finds its original refrain in nature permeated with divinity, so in returning to nature, Nikhil rediscovers his faith, his music, his harmony with the world. Now he describes his broken union with Bimala differently. He is no longer mute, but ever-responsive to the larger music of the spheres, even when that music conveys loss. Thus does enchantment return to Nikhil, despite the rupture he has suffered: "My union with you, my love, was only of the wayside...After that there is the larger world-path, the endless current of universal life. How little can you deprive me of, my love, after all? Whenever I set my ear to it, I can hear the flute which is playing, its fountain of melody gushing forth from the flute-stops of separation. The immortal draught of the goddess is never exhausted."<sup>370</sup> Compare his keen perception of the flute-music to Bimala's rueful inability to hear the festive flutes of wedding.

But Bimala is not altogether abandoned to disenchantment. No, Nikhil comes back to rescue her provisionally. A *tirtha* is a two-way street, after all. Tagore has Nikhil in the transcendental sphere find his lover in God; now he will mirror that image, as Bimala in the worldly sphere finds God in her lover (Nikhil). Just as the human crosses over to the divine, the divine crosses over to the human: not for nothing do *avatar* and *tirtha* share the same Sanskrit root. But en route to Bimala, Nikhil dallies a bit longer "at the gateway of the simple" where he has begun to hear the heartbeats of the great world. His newly experienced mysticism has allowed him to disregard his own personal pain and domestic drama. As a coda to his epiphanic

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid. 187.

nature passage, he says, “Now that I know [my pain] concerns only me, what after all can be its value? The suffering which belongs to all mankind shall be my crown.”<sup>371</sup> After this Christ-like epiphany, he concerns himself primarily with the trials and tribulations of “the small man,” in particular Panchu, a poor tenant who has come upon extremely hard times. Standing up for those crushed by the tyranny of Swadeshi becomes “my work [that] will be my salvation.” Whether it be small traders, like Panchu, or the marginalized Muslim community, Nikhil makes it his noblesse-oblige task to speak for the subaltern.

Of the three narrators, only Nikhil takes an interest in the concrete lives of the commoner. Despite his class distance from such lives, the situations of the simple, still living in communal harmony, become as much a source of his inspiration as does Nature. Once he has liberated himself from the embroilments of his drawing room, having enlarged his soul, he can salutarily return to it. This is first time he intimately re-encounters Bimala since their estrangement. Bimala, having herself gone through an emotional crucible, has been recently disabused of all her delusions. The source of such disabuse is Amulya, a tender-hearted young follower of Sandip’s, who inspires in her the sentiments of a mother, as modeled on the *bhava* of maternal love that is one of the Vaishnavist modes for loving Lord Krishna. When she makes Amulya, “my God in the form of a child,” she realizes the extent of her “guilt which had contimated my life at its very root.” Dearly chastened, she honors Amulya as divine son, and he her as divine mother, in the ritual of *Raksha Bandhan*, the “Brother’s holiday” in which vows of protection and hand-made delicacies are exchanged.

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid. 110.

Having been brought back down to earth, recognizing holiness in the genuine intimacies of life, she reckons with the enormity of her sin (betraying and stealing from her own husband) and her guilt. Now, she has her own moment of divine convergence, on par with Nikhil's recognition of his Eternal Lover. Her soliloquy is a prayer of direct address to God, beseeching Him to save her. Her ultra-lyrical prayer, akin to song itself, invokes the ever-mystical metaphor of music as she begs God:

Oh forgive me just once, only this time, Lord! All that you gave into my hands as the wealth of my life, I have made into my burden...O Lord, sound once again those flute strains which you played for me, long ago, standing at the rosy edge of my morning sky—and let all my complexities become simple and easy. Nothing save the music of your flute can make whole that which has been broken, and pure that which has been sullied. Create my home anew with your music. No other way can I see.

I threw myself prone on the ground and sobbed aloud. It was for mercy that I prayed—some little mercy from somewhere, some shelter, *some sign of forgiveness*, some hope that might bring about the end. “Lord,” I vowed to myself, “I will lie here, waiting and waiting, touching neither food nor drink, so long as your blessing does not reach me.”<sup>372</sup>

Now it is as if her silent interlocutor, God, hears her prayer. For he immediately sends her a mortal avatar for her salvation.

I heard the sound of footsteps. *Who says that the gods do not show themselves to mortal men?* I did not raise my face to look up, lest the sight of it should break the spell. Come, oh come, come and let your feet touch my head. *Come, Lord, and set your foot upon my throbbing heart*, and at that moment let me die.

*He came* and sat near my head. Who? My husband! At the first touch of his presence I felt that I should swoon. And then the pain at my heart burst its way out in an overwhelming flood of tears...*I strained his feet to my bosom*...He tenderly stroked my head. *I received his blessing*. Now I shall be able to take up the penalty of public humiliations which will be mine tomorrow, and offer it, in all sincerity, at the feet of *my God*.<sup>373</sup>

Note the indistinction between the immortal God and the divine avatar she perceives in her husband. That indistinction is emphasized by the delay in Bimala's identification of the “He” who comes to absolve her. Who says that the gods do not show themselves to mortal men,

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid. 185-186; italics mine.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid. 186; italics mine.



indeed? Here God presences himself on earth not in the artificial terms of the national imaginary, but in the affective terms of an intimate, everyday, enduring relationship. The couple's gestures—his hand on her head received as a blessing of forgiveness, her clutching his feet as a sign of gratitude and reverence—are *technique du corps* that emanate from a particular cultural backcloth. Visceral, unconscious, and habitual, these gestures are charged with affective content, with symbolic value—now, a restored symbolic value.

This scene constitutes the climax of the novel, after which follow two short chapters of denouement. The tragic heroine has recognized the gravity of her error, and catharsis has occurred. That the climax of this novel should come in the form of a prayer *in extremis* is significant. The novel in this moment of communication with the otherworld, becomes itself a *tirtha*. I find it significant that the heart of her prayer occurs outside quotation. Here Bimala does not, as she does a mere paragraph later, recount her silent words to God; rather, she—or the text—speaks them directly, in the present tense. There is absolutely no critical distance here as the text reaches toward the otherworld. What is more, the otherworld responds! Tagore orchestrates this scene in such a way that all the spheres line up: the cosmic, the domestic, the affective. Nikhil, having reconstituted his enchanted relationship to the world by crossing over into the larger cosmos, can cross back down to the domestic-social world and invigorate it with his renewed enchantment. Likewise, Tagore's own enchanted mimetic mode, which has drawn power from the direct correspondence between God and nature/simplicity of organic life, can now resuscitate the domestic-affective sphere of everyday lived intimacy.

In short, Tagore effects a perfect parallel: a nearly-disenchanted Nikhil recuperates his enchantment by finding his lover in God, only to cross down and enable a nearly-disenchanted

Bimala to find God in her lover. The two-way street that is *tirtha* has done its work in relating the worldly to the otherworldly. In the spirit of Baul mysticism, to experience love with one's earthly lover is to experience love with one's transcendental lover, God.<sup>374</sup> Nikhil makes this earthly-divine connection when he says, "I will leave a kiss on [Bimala's] forehead without waking her—that shall be the flower-offering of my worship....some vibration of the memory of that kiss would remain; for the wreath which is being woven out of the kisses of many a successive birth is to crown the Eternal Beloved."<sup>375</sup>

One might see the trajectory of the novel as moving in five steps:

1. The given: a closed circle of organic social relationships in which sacred objects and rituals are animated by the divine spirit. Enchanted mimetic mode intact.
2. Incursion of Nationalism: foreign intellectual abstraction hijacks enchanted mimetic mode by applying divine symbols inorganically and exaggeratedly to the social sphere.
3. Closed circle of organic social relationships is broken, brought to the brink of disenchantment.
4. The move outward (transcendental sphere) and downward (nature, simplicity) recuperates lost enchantment and re-invigorates the enchanted mimetic mode.
5. Re-invigorated enchanted mimetic mode provisionally sutures closed circle of organic social relationships.

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<sup>374</sup> The notion of the divine-as-lover can also be found in the Vaishnavism that Tagore endorsed, and in the tantrism that he did not.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid. 67.

This schematic, however crude, distills the movements of the novel from one sphere to the next and back again. Critics of Tagore (including Lukács) see the novel's movement outward from the social as sheer apolitical escapism. But they do not take into account the fact that the novel actually tacks back-and-forth, generating energy in its symbolic mode so as to finally re-constitute the social. The novel does not oppose the transcendental to the social, but re-connects them during a time when they had been dissociated by nationalism. And the novel achieves this by way of a particular mode of symbolization that derives from the Hindu philosophy of *darśan*, in which the sacred things of the world do not merely represent but are charged with divinity. Tagore also effects this enchantment with his unique form of song-in-novel, a marriage of the poetic with the prosaic. Song-in-novel recalls the chant at the heart of enchantment, never more powerfully than in the prayer-like passages in the novel when characters speak directly to their personal yet monistic God.

Tagore's novel reminds us that enchantment is a larger set than religious enchantment, and religion is a larger set than religious enchantment; these two sets overlap in the religious enchantment of *The Home and The World*. This sort of religious enchantment is located in the world, not just in interiority, as we would find it in a novel like the Catholic Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. The latter may be religious, but it is not enchanted, precisely because it does not ventilate out into the world from the believer. As Bilgrami puts it, enchantment exists out there, in the world. For Tagore, enchantment still existed IN the world, despite the counter-impulses to both transcendence and interiority that we find in Nikhil. By locating the enchantment in lived organic relationships and in the symbolically-laden, value-laden objects

and nature in the world, Tagore refuses to allow modernity to banish enchantment to mere interiority.

Yet, in the final analysis, it seems that even Tagore was resigned to the fact that the engines of nationalism were already churning at such a rate that it would be impossible to pull back and return to a utopia of small-scale human relations in close connection with nature, religiously-inflected ethics, and a sense of divinity coursing through humble everyday life. As Sandip accurately predicts, “Who says ‘Truth shall Triumph?’ Delusion shall win in the end. The Bengali understood this when he conceived the image of the ten-handed goddess astride her lion, and spread her worship in the land. Bengal must now create a new image to enchant and conquer the world. *Bande Mataram!*”<sup>376</sup> *The Home and the World* is an invective against precisely this perversion of enchantment that exploits the polytheistic imaginary; but the novel is as much a resignation to such a fate.

Significantly, Tagore’s fictional proxy, Nikhil, dies the minute he ventures beyond his home and into the world—not the greater world of the simple and the transcendental, but the sphere of the national-political. He has gone into town to intervene in the communal violence that has erupted between the Hindus and the Muslims (conveniently, Sandip has left town in a hurry). But, the situation is too far gone for Nikhil to do anything about it, given his aristocratic remove and his particular version of the enchanted ethos. Tagore came to feel personally some of the political superfluity and impotence that he finally depicts in the character of Nikhil. As the Indian Independence movement generated energy as well as violence, the statist model came to seem ineluctable, and the disenchanting worldview displaced the enchanted worldview, Tagore

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid. 125.

withdrew from the sphere of politics, focusing his energies instead on his small-scale agricultural and experimental educational project at Santiniketan. There, away from Calcutta in the midst of his utopian experiment intended to recuperate some part of the enchanted communal life of pre-national India, he wrote and he wrote.

One significant fact about the publishing history of Tagore's novel is that there are considerable differences between his Bengali original, *Ghare Baire* (1916) and the English translation, *The Home and the World* (1919).<sup>377</sup> His nephew Surendranath Tagore did the original English translation I have used, but critics suspect that large parts were translated by Tagore himself and that the latter certainly authorized all the changes to the English version. Indeed, the changes, which include certain simplifications, the dropping of some characters, plot differences, are substantial enough that *Ghare Baire* and *The Home and the World* ought to be, and are often, thought of as two different novels. (Of course, my chapter has treated the English *The Home and the World* only.) We are therefore invited to speculate—yet do no more than speculate—as to Tagore's motivations behind these changes.

Among the various changes from the original, the most significant is the ending itself. In the Bengali version, Nikhil does not die from his injuries, and there is a hint of promise for his restitution of his married life with Bimala. On the other hand, in the ending of the English version, Nikhil dies, suggesting (according to my argument) that there is no future for Nikhil's vision and no promise of reinvigorated organic, lived intimate relationships as embodied by his and Bimala's married life. (Satyajit Ray's film adaption of *Ghare Baire* uses the ending of the

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<sup>377</sup> Thanks to Partha Chatterjee for prompting me to discuss these differences between the two versions, particularly the plot ending.

English version, showing Nikhil's dead body being taken away while Bimala, wearing the widow's white sari, looks on.)

How can we account for this crucial difference? My speculation is that in the three year interim between the Bengali and English translations, Indian history had taken a much more disenchanted course, and Tagore might have wanted to register that unfortunate turn in his novel. My temporal-historical speculation is grounded in the knowledge that *The Home in the World* was restructured from the character-driven *Ghare Baire* into a much more plot-driven English version.<sup>378</sup> If events and emplotment become the motor of the English version, then it would make sense that events in the outer world would dictate a particular ending to the plot. The deepening of communalism and aggressive, state-centered, masculinist nationalism during the teen years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century troubled Tagore increasingly:

A parting of ways between Tagore and the swadeshi movement came with the shock of Hindu-Muslim riots in some villages of East Bengal in the early months of 1907. The evident ebbing away of hopes in a mass movement led some extremists towards methods of individual terror, accompanied by an intensification of Hindu revivalism. For Tagore, in sharp contrast, the riots demanded deep introspection and self-criticism. These were first expressed through a series of essays around 1907-8, some passages of which would be echoed in the reflections of Nikhilesh eight years later. The internal shifts through which Tagore was passing also found visible embodiments in [the novels that preceded *Ghare Baire* between 1907-1915]. This was followed by an onslaught on nationalism through lectures in Japan and the USA during 1915-17, published in book form as *Nationalism* (1917).<sup>379</sup>

Sarkar adds that the outbreak of World War I in 1914 only deepened Tagore's pessimism about nationalism. Indeed, his U.S. lecture tour during WWI gave him a much closer view of the violent large-scale, international upshot of nationalism, thus only exacerbating his critique and reinforcing his sense of impotence in the face of this world-wide phenomenon. His choice to

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<sup>378</sup> Tapobrata Ghosh, "The Form of *The Home and the World*," in *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and The World: A Critical Companion*, ed. Pradip Kumar Datta (London: Anthem, 2005 [India Permanent Black, 2001]) 71.

<sup>379</sup> Sumit Sarkar, "Ghare Baire in its Times," in *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and The World: A Critical Companion*, ed. Pradip Kumar Datta (London: Anthem, 2005 [India Permanent Black, 2001]) 46.

present as a failure the alternative to aggressive nationalism in his 1919 *The Home and the World* reflects this resignation. It is reasonable to surmise that his sense of distress had grown considerably enough during the the three years intervening between the Bengali and English versions—the very crux of World War I—that he would have wanted to send out a loud and unambiguous clarion call to the entire world, not just to India.

Further, the late teen years and early twenties were the immediate preamble to the massive communal mobilization and riots that ensued with the collapse of the Muslim-Hindu unity of the non-Cooperation/Khilafat movement in 1923, the point of no return. It is well known that “from 1907 onwards, [Tagore] became uncompromisingly hostile towards Hindu communalism.”<sup>380</sup> So it would make sense that he would be even more hostile in 1919 than 1916. Tagore’s prescience lies in identifying long in advance of the non-Cooperation/Khilafat collapse that the seeds for communalism had already been sown with aggressive nationalism.

While fellow writers, Hindu and Muslim alike, began to adopt “a self-conscious attitude towards communal unity” in the 1920s, Tagore did so much earlier. Indeed, Tagore stood at the head of this literary resistance to communalism: “his universalist notion of creativity proved to be crucial in motivating influential Muslim authors, notably Abdul Wadud. Analyzing the histories of the two cultures, Wadud tried to locate Hindu-Muslim unity in the overlapping and negotiable spaces between them.”<sup>381</sup> As for Tagore’s own role in that later moment he spawned, Datta writes: “In the twenties he located communal antagonism in religious orientation...Tagore

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<sup>380</sup> Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1999): 85.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

felt—a little desperately perhaps—that unity could only be achieved through education and *sadhana* (devotion).”<sup>382</sup> To this end, he dedicated himself to writing imaginative literature that would mitigate the divisiveness semi-unwittingly generated by his forebear Bankim’s legacy. Whereas Bankim had made no effort to write for Muslims, and indeed was at times Islamophobic in his writing (c.f. *Dugeshnandini* and *Rajsingha*),<sup>383</sup> Tagore purveyed a syncretic ethos that could be embraced by Hindu and Muslim alike. This, I believe, is why he goes to such lengths to elaborate a non-sectarian doctrine of enchanted realism in *The Home and the World*, and to inveigh so harshly against the Swadeshi campaigners who “terrorized” the Muslim population.

In short, *The Home and the World* concedes a certain ground to disenchanting politics, but it tries to recuperate enchantment in the literary realm, one that had a palpable and politically unique presence in the Bengali socio-political reality at the time of his writing. That the visual field at the end of the novel is occluded presciently indicates the loss of Nikhil-cum-Tagore’s vision. Yet the novel tries to preserve the enchanted worldview in its narrative mode. From the onslaught of nationalist disenchantment, Tagore rescues at least his narrative mode of enchanted mimesis—symbolism deriving from *darśan*, and a poetry of the prosaic inviting the otherworld into the mundane world—as a resource for the future. As we shall see in our subsequent novels of enchantment, that resource could not really extend beyond mere form in the post-Westphalian India. This unfortunate fate transpired because of the “unremitting opposition [that] resulted in the alienation of the literary intelligentsia from the orthodox” who “described [the syncretically-

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid. 85-86.



oriented] novels as ‘pitchers of poison’ [that] debilitated the youth.”<sup>384</sup> If, after Tagore, the tradition of the enchanted novel by dint of historical-political necessity moved in the direction of formalism, another branch of novels moved in the direction of social realism. This latter branch,<sup>385</sup> flourishing in Bengal in the generation after Tagore, meant to document the very social ills that Tagore predicted and bemoaned. However, its narrative mode was entirely disenchanted: it prided itself on an almost journalistic photo-objectivism that seems to have learned nothing from Tagore’s strenuous efforts to use enchanted narrative modes as a means to convey a modestly enchanted notion of the real.

#### CODA: TAGORE, MODERNISM, AND INTERNATIONALISM

Tagore’s vexed romance with the West had largely to do with the relationship between modernism and enchantment in England and India. Initially beloved by the British literati for a universal mysticism shorn of both its politics and its local allusiveness, Tagore, in his excessive simplification of his translations of his collection of Nobel-Prize winning poems *Gitanjali*, inadvertently played into the Orientalist perception of him as a mystic prophet from the spiritual East. He suffered for and rued this designation for the remainder of his interaction with the West—a fate against which Edward Thompson, his great translator, friend and critic, had warned. Although Yeats, Rothenstein, Sturge Moore, and others had initially relished his Romantic-mystical style to the extent that they launched his cultural ambassadorial career in the West in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after WWI they became harsh critics of precisely

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>385</sup> I do not discuss this branch in my thesis which is devoted to experiments in enchanting the real.

this “anachronistic late romanticism” (to borrow Srinivas Aravamudan’s phrase). They bristled at what they had theretofore held up as the mysticism of his poetry which, to their minds, naively shuttered out the post-war devastation of the world. For them, a new kind of literature had been conceived to respond to the radically disillusioned world, and Tagore insisted on keeping his head in the clouds. Further, modernism had become the preferred mode for this “new age,” not just in Europe but increasingly in Bengal as well.

But Tagore remained vociferous in his resistance to the new experiments in modernism—even suffering a painful estrangement from his earliest and staunchest admirer, W.B. Yeats, who had made the modernist turn in his own poetry and sharply attacked Tagore in an infamous letter to Rothenstein in 1935. This falling out of favor with the West turns on more than literary technique, for those differences in technique are rooted in philosophies of art and culture that alienated Tagore from his cherished international community, a community that he, in an Arnoldian spirit, had hoped would constitute a worldwide artistic clerisy pulling the world back from the brink of destruction. Tagore maintained that modernism, with its fetish of the fragment and the irreducible materiality of things, its valorization of irony, violence of juxtaposition, and its cognitive detachment, capitulated to a disenchanted worldview. He felt betrayed by his artistic compatriots in Europe, and even more so by the younger generation in Bengal.

But, by the end of his life, when he wrote “Crisis in Civilization,” a hopeless lament about the state of a world at war once more, he seems to have resigned himself to disenchantment and its artistic corollary, modernism. As a sextagenarian, he took up painting. Modernist-expressionist, these paintings verge on the grotesque, revealing a sinister darkness not to be found in his writing. In fact, it is hard to believe that the same man could have produced

both. The massive disjunction between his earlier writing and his later painting can be viewed as the index of the disenchantment that India underwent during the first half of the twentieth-century.

### CHAPTER 3

*“The Air was thick with religion”*

**The difficult passage into enchantment in the last days of the Raj:  
E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India***

Postcolonial critics across the board, from Benita Parry to Edward Said, Gauri Viswanathan, Theo D’Haen, Graham Huggan, and even Salman Rushdie as critic, have uniformly indicted E.M. Forster’s 1924 novel *A Passage to India* as a high fiction of Empire written in the last desperate and nostalgic days of the Raj, a fiction committed to the imperialist *weltanschauung* and its political corollary. That pat reading, however, overlooks a crucial literary-philosophical dimension of the novel that in turn bears on its *complex*, prescient, and finally anti-colonial politics: namely, E.M. Forster’s desire to enchant the novel form.

For Forster, enchanting the novel meant confronting realism with supernaturalism. Below, Frank Kermode elucidates Forster’s particular creative ‘method,’ in the terms the novelist himself used in his defense against Virginia Woolf; but this description could just as well apply to the imperative of any of the diverse writers in this dissertation:

Broadly speaking he developed [his method] in order to accommodate in his fiction a union between the solid and the mythical, or perhaps one should say ‘the magical’, or whatever adjective seems best suited to the presence in his work of that quality of the religious or supernatural that he found lacking in James...incursions from another world that could not be called ‘liberal’ or ‘solid’. It must be insubstantial, mythical, and it must coexist with what, after generations of training in the conventions of realism, all normal persons can be persuaded to regard as reality. Neither of these worlds can be neglected without great loss. The threat, for Forster, was mostly to the supernatural element. The stories he most enjoyed writing tended to be too heavy with the supernatural to please most readers.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>386</sup>Frank Kermode, *Concerning E. M. Forster* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009) 143 and 140.

That Forster felt the supernatural element to be threatened by the realism to which he nevertheless felt wedded reverberates with Bankim's indigenization of the imported form and Tagore's anxiety about the new disenchanted modernist experiments. It seems that Forster, in the Orientalist spirit, looked especially to India to restore that capacity for the numinous, which always fascinated him. Indeed, while "another world" whose incursions Forster strove to accommodate in his fiction patently refers to the outer cosmos, the phrase might suggest another valence: the Indian "muddle" that seemed to him to have a more direct, even aboriginal relation to the supernatural realm. For Forster, the two realms—so far from the here and now of contemporary England—seemed to stand in for each other, as in his gnomic description of *A Passage to India* as "about the search of the human race for a more lasting home, about the universe as embodied in the Indian earth and the Indian sky, about the horror lurking in the Marabar Cave and the release symbolized by the birth of Krishna."<sup>387</sup>

This condensed description, to which we shall return, magically telescopes the universe (the transcendental home) into Indian nature, cosmology, and ritual. If Forster's synopsis here sounds cryptic, then so too does his marginal manuscript note in which he averred that *A Passage to India* is about the "larger disaster that has its roots outside humanity." All of this suggests his transcendental aspirations, and his intuitive funneling of them through the enchanted Indian world. In Lukácsian terms, the "larger disaster that has its roots outside humanity" might refer to the abandonment of the world by God, and the spiritual dereliction and longing felt in

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid. 71.

our disenchanting, transcendently homeless world.<sup>388</sup> Forster thought of himself and the select few artistic compatriots in his “beloved Republic” as sending out “their signal lights flickering yet uncomprehended...in a darkening world.”<sup>389</sup> Like Yeats and many of his fellow Bloomsbury compatriots, Forster seemed to feel that the spiritual dereliction of the world, while sparing no site, was relatively less complete in “the tropics [where] the [human] indifference [to governance] is more prominent, the inarticulate world is closer at hand and readier to resume control as soon as men are tired.”<sup>390</sup> That assertion of nature as exerting normative demands on men who agentively perceive and respond to it corresponds to the bottom-line definition of enchantment with which we have been working. Here, Forster seems to suggest that the enchanted world simply IS, yet in the “tropics” men are not nearly as immune to it as in the West; hence, his attraction to India as training ground to sharpen his own perception of the enchanted world which he sought to convey in his realism.

Although Forster was eager to prove his secular credentials, it is no secret that his attraction to religion—particularly Eastern religion—was deep. As Kermode states, “the two predominant Indian religions, Islam and Hinduism, were in different ways of serious concern to him; both were central to his idea of the East, and to his understanding of the ways in which they retained their power just as the power of European religions seemed to be fading.”<sup>391</sup> Forster felt

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<sup>388</sup> However, for Forster, this “disaster” dates back much further than it does for Lukács, and it is more existential than historico-philosophical. In fact, although Lukács’ describes the watershed moment as “the abandonment of the world by God,” his theory actually responds more explicitly to the (Western) world’s abandonment of God.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid. 138.

<sup>390</sup> Forster, E. M., *A Passage to India* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, Inc, 1984 [1924]) 123.

<sup>391</sup> Kermode 145.

that for non-mystics, art could be the only viable (secular) route for spiritual recuperation.<sup>392</sup> He was clear that the only two routes toward spiritual ordering in a disenchanted world would be that “which emanates from ‘the divine author, the mystic harmony’ which only adepts can perceive, and art, ““the one orderly product which our muddling race has produced.””<sup>393</sup>

It is not surprising, given their affinities, that Forster’s artistic credo borrowed its vocabulary and principles from religion, even the Christianity with which he had more reservations than Eastern religions. Art was all the West had left of its spiritual resources, and “one must, if necessary, protect it with language borrowed from religion.”<sup>394</sup> He indeed does precisely that in his 1938 credo “What I Believe,” the document that, according to Kermode, finally and explicitly brings into concert his orientalism and his evangelism of a “more secular spirituality”<sup>395</sup> In this essay, Forster claims to share concerns with the thirteenth-century Franciscan poet Jacopone da Todi, who was important to both Matthew Arnold and the author of the canonical work *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill,<sup>396</sup> both of whom were in turn important to Forster.<sup>397</sup> Jacopone, like Forster, felt ‘a need for change ‘in the sphere of morals and

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid. 134.

<sup>393</sup> Forster quoted in Ibid. 134.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid. 133, 135.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid. 132.

<sup>396</sup> Evelyn Underhill was Bloomsbury’s resident expert on mysticism.

<sup>397</sup> Kermode 133.

politics”<sup>398</sup> but while Jacopone used prayer to eliminate spiritual muddle, Forster could only use art.

Significantly, that art was trained on a distinctly religious subject in *A Passage to India*, thus amplifying the spiritual potential of his art. In other words, form-giving art derives its content, inspiration, and analogy from religion: two alternate registers of order to make sense of the lack of order since the disenchantment of the world.<sup>399</sup> It is well known that much of Forster’s time in India was spent engaging in conversations with mystics and quasi-mystics—in particular, a fakir and the devout Maharaja of the Hindu princely state of Dewas whom he served as secretary. These conversations helped him find a parallel between artistic epiphany and religious epiphany, a parallel that converges completely in the Gokul Ashtami scene I will later discuss in detail.

However, it is not clear that Forster considered the relationship between art and religion to be entirely analogical. At times, it seems more antagonistic. Kermode claims that, “an antithesis between order and ‘muddle’ is a recurring element in Forster’s thought,”<sup>400</sup> and we see that antithesis played out most strenuously in the relationship between artistic form (realism) and enchanted content (numinosity) in *A Passage to India*. Indeed, that dialectic drives the narrative forward. On one hand, he saw artistic and mystical perception as equal and compatible routes to ordering the post-Einsteinian muddle of the heavens; on the other hand, he found the mystical-cosmological scheme of the East itself a muddle. His artistic form at times strains to overcome

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<sup>398</sup> Forster quoted in *Ibid.* 134.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.* 134.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*



the religious muddle of Hindu and primordial India, just as the lumbering colonial grid tries to organize the inchoate fields and jungles of India. Yet, in rare moments, such as the Marabar Caves and the Gokul Ashtami episode, Forster attempts to immerse his prose into the muddle, to honor the insubstantiality of the mythical, the magical, the supernatural, the religious. These two moments—the caves and the Gokul Ashtami festival—represent the two diametrically opposed kinds of spiritual muddles Forster was dealing with: the primordial caves being the orderless abyss of the universe verging on nihilism, the Gokul Ashtami the muddled *jouissance* of lived Indian enchantment. Only when the text manages to approach and to relate these two kinds of muddle, and even to absorb such an indigenous cosmic scheme into his form, does Forster achieve his enchanted realism, albeit provisionally.

He achieves this is via exoticism: the classic push-pull dynamic that attends on fascination with an alien cosmology and culture and that becomes an aesthetic mode of cultural interaction. This exoticist impulse drives *A Passage to India*: “a passage not easy, not now, not here, not to be apprehended except when it is unattainable: the God to be thrown was an emblem of that.”<sup>401</sup> For Forster, that passage is aesthetic, and the never-quite attainable goal, cosmic. As a non-believer vigilant of his secularism even while aware of the losses attendant on it, the most he can do is artistically render the enchantment of the believers he beholds; this I call second-order enchantment. It is an aesthetic enchantment that attempts to enter as deeply as possible into the structure of belief without quite inhabiting it as a believer could. As he always held (particularly after his conversation with the fakir in 1914), fiction alone allows inspiration to

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<sup>401</sup> Forster 353.

come unbidden to him, just as would the experience of Godhead to a mystic;<sup>402</sup> at the end of *A Passage to India*, the very fictive inspiration that comes to Forster unbidden is the experience of religious transcendence, in the form of Godbole's final dance-trance, which we will look at more closely. It is here, at the professed climax of the novel, that several of these antinomies finally get worked through: art and religion, order and muddle, immersion and distance.

But this and other moments of enchanted narrative (already qualified), are always evanescent. And that is not just because of the pendular exoticist swing from immersion back to distance, nor even simply because of Forster's outsider's relation to India's deepest spiritual life, but because Indian enchantment itself was, to Forster's view, evanescent—already nearly choked off by the general disenchantment that, through colonialism, urbanization, and nationalism, had already begun its encroachment. Like the Marabar Caves or the Hindu princely state that is the site for the final enchanted epiphany, enchanted sites and moments were temporary, circumscribed exceptions to the disenchanted modern India Forster presciently lamented. The remainder of this chapter will refract Forster's ambivalently enchanted narrative through the prism of the politico-religious landscape. In light of that analysis, I will finally double back to evaluate the successes and limitations of his effort to enchant the realist novel and to relate that effort to his predecessors and successors in the tradition of enchanted novels in/about India.

Our textual investigation will swirl around an obvious question that has no obvious answer: exactly *why* is the local Dr. Aziz as bewildered and undone by the caves as the foreign

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<sup>402</sup> Kermode 130-131.

guests he leads there?<sup>403</sup> Facing this central but unresolved enigma takes us right to the nexus of enchantment, its representability, and twentieth century Indian politics—including especially sectarianism, urbanization, colonialism and incipient nationalism. But before we can explore the caves episode, we must look at the broadest brushstrokes of this most iconic of British Raj novels.

This famously “high imperial” novel is set in Chandrapore, a colonial city presumably near Calcutta, in the early 1920s, Forster’s contemporary period. An earnest young woman Adela Quested arrives to India with her old and spiritually-oriented Christian companion Mrs. Moore, the mother of Ronny Heaslop, the City Magistrate to whom Adela is affianced. Adela longs to see “the real India,” as opposed to the India of the British colonial club, embodied by characters facetiously named Turton and Burton. At a deliberately orchestrated tea, a tenuous friendship begins among Aziz, a Muslim yet anglophilic medical doctor, Fielding, the secular humanist principal of the Government College, and the two unconventional British women—much to the chagrin of the entire British community of Chandrapore. The nascent friendships come to a screeching halt when crisis strikes: on an Aziz-led expedition to the Marabar Caves, Adela has a hysterical, hallucinatory episode in which she believes she has been raped by Aziz. Unjustly accused, Aziz is then arrested and imprisoned. At this point, the already strained dynamics between the Indian and British communities of Chandrapore become downright hostile. The British take the formerly iconoclastic Adela into their fold, reject Fielding who stands by Aziz, and retrench in their authoritarianism, while the Indians realize their “mistake” in

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<sup>403</sup> I am *eminently* grateful to Akeel Bilgrami for posing this central question to me—a question which then begot a brainstorming session that germinated my core ideas in this chapter.

having thought cross-cultural friendship possible. Mrs. Moore believes in Aziz's innocence, but is so undone by her own existential crisis in the caves that she leaves India and dies en route to England before Aziz's trial. After the trial, where Adela recants and Aziz is acquitted, Fielding gives refuge to Adela, now castaway mercilessly by the British community. This gesture on Fielding's part leads to an estrangement between him and Aziz that is only temporarily sutured during a brief encounter years later in the Mau, the Indian native state where the incipiently nationalist Aziz has relocated to evade the British domain. The final third of the novel focuses on the Hindu festival of Gokul Ashtami, at the climax of which a boat collision with the ritual icons of the festival leads to a temporary ebbing of tensions between Aziz and Fielding's British party which includes his wife, Stella and her brother Ralph—both, the younger, spiritually-inclined children of Aziz's beloved late Mrs. Moore.

It is important to note that the novel begins with a cosmopolitan promise staked on an ecumenical human fellowship transcending nation-state—Forster's own personal ethos—and ends by starkly defaulting on that promise. In one of the earliest and most significant scenes in the novel—the mosque scene that inspires the title of the first third of the novel—the Muslim Dr. Aziz, while romantically indulging his pan-Islamic reverie, encounters a Unitarian Mrs. Moore who articulates his own belief that “God is here [i.e., everywhere].” This single avowal earns her his devotion even beyond her death, despite their rather brief and superficial acquaintance, and despite the linked but separate caves crises that disabuse them of this very belief. In sharp relief to the opening mosque scene, the closing scene of the novel gives us a much-chastened, incipiently nationalist Aziz and his estranged best friend Fielding with whom he has recently had a provisional *détente*, a last ride together spent contemplating the possibility of friendship, the

very article of faith that, for Forster, served to supersede both religion and nation. But the very earth proclaims the answer to Fielding's importunate "Why can't we be friends now?"<sup>404</sup> "No, not now" say the horses that suddenly swerve apart... "No, not here"<sup>405</sup> says the sky above—famous last words for this famous fiction of Empire, spoken not by any character, but by India's "inarticulate world" itself.

Indeed, what lies between the novel's diametrically opposed bookends is, in fact, the intransigent enchanted *land* of India itself—a land whose primeval enchantment the urbane Aziz, Fielding, and Mrs. Moore are all consequentially unable to grapple with. Forster's "beloved republic," his "post-Apostolic interplanetary coterie," like Mrs. Moore's Unitarianism and Aziz's transnational Islam, is denied inauguration because it audaciously strives to circumvent the recalcitrant place-based autochthonous enchantment that Hinduism and Indo-Islam understands. It is, I argue, the inability to grasp Indian enchantment that determines not only the trajectory of the novel, but the trajectory of 20<sup>th</sup> century India which will split into two—a recalcitrantly enchanted folk India and an urbanized, modern, post-Westphalian disenchanting India. These two fundamentally estranged Indias will, from this point forward, require quite two radically different modes of novelistic representation of enchantment: the realism of first-order enchantment (cf. Bankim, Tagore, and Narayan) versus the formalist representation of second-order enchantment (cf. Forster, Rushdie).

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<sup>404</sup> Forster 362.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

## INDIAN ENCHANTMENT AND ITS OUTSIDERS

“God is here”/everywhere; “No, not now. No, not here”: these bookend pronouncements set up antinomies between everywhere and here and between eternity and the contingent present of the Raj. Yet they also set up an antinomy between the spiritual and the national. At a quick glance, it would seem, particularly because the conversation between Aziz and Fielding leading up to the final horse-swerving scene treats anti-colonial politics, that the national finally trumps the spiritual. But that reading is too pat. There is a third, constantly enigmatic term, embodied most significantly by the bewildering Marabar caves and the archetypically “inscrutable Oriental,” the Hindu professor Narayan Godbole. This third element I will call Indian enchantment—an element that determines the course of the plot, and the affective, political, and existential breakdowns therein.

Despite the intransigence of the autochthonous Indian enchantment the novel strives to register, the latter remains alienated from the former. On the three pivotal occasions when *A Passage to India* approaches enchanted India—the Marabar Road “ghost,” the Marabar caves, and the Gokul Ashtami episodes—the novel, to varying degrees, treats it obliquely, always thwarted by its own bewilderment by it. In other words, the text has no choice but to reproduce the lethal blindspots of its Muslim urbanite and British characters. This is, I feel, not a failure, but a virtue of Forster’s novel. It acknowledges the degree to which colonialism and urbanization have already destroyed India’s long-standing, lived sense of enchantment—the sense of the otherworldly numinous forces coursing through nature and being. In the history of the enchanted novel in India, Forster’s 1924 novel marks a fork in both the formal and political roads. At the level of form, this novel wrestles with the realist limitations and possibilities for

representing an enchanted worldview to which it means to pay homage without having full access; at the level of content, it concedes the high degree to which that worldview has become unrecoverable for the portions of the Indian population who have come into the ambit of colonialism-cum-nationalism.

Dominating Forster's narrative, the close if not untroubled relationship between the Brits and the urbanized, transnationally-oriented Muslims with whom they share monotheistic, anti-iconic, secularly-tending affinities, reflects the well-known historic preference of the Raj for an international orthodox urban Islam over the Hinduism and the rural Indo-Islam that developed together syncretically, particularly outside the cities. In other words: a predictable foreign preference for everywhere over here. But the "here," the long-standing enchanted, hierophanic religiosity of syncretic indigenous India proves to undo not only the Brits but also the urbanized Muslims of the story. These characters' fateful estrangement from India's inherent enchantment is the measure of the Raj's alienation.

Indeed, Indo-syncretic enchantment constitutes the absent center of the novel; and, like the central catalytic caves episode, neither the main characters (the Brits and Muslims) nor even the text itself can fully account for it. Forster weaves his story around this absent center, obliquely indexing the disenchantment of India via colonialism, urbanization, and colonialism's by-product, nationalism. The novel's three cosmopolitan modes—Fielding's ecumenical secularism, Mrs. Moore's ecumenical monotheism, and Aziz's pan-Arabianism—all prove too abstract and inadequate to deal with an Indian enchantment rooted in the land yet connected to transcendence.

## I. PART I: THE BRITISH RAJ VERSUS ENCHANTED NATURE

The first third of the novel does not focus on that enchanted Indian nature, but rather the second nature—the social dynamics and built environment—the British Raj has imposed on it. Yet, while this section shuttles, like its focal hybrid character Aziz, between the social happenings of the native and the British quarters of the colonial city of Chandrapore, it occasionally manages to intimate the power of autochthonous India's nature that lies beneath and beyond the reach of the colonial grid, where the roads, “named after victorious generals and intersecting at right angles, were symbolic of the net Great Britain had thrown over India.”<sup>406</sup> In fact, the very first pages of the book adumbrate the elemental struggle between disenchanting colonial urbanism and enchanted nature that will propel the remainder of the story. The entire first chapter of the novel is dedicated not to the social dynamics that occupy the remainder of Part I, but to the detailed geography of Chandrapore: the Gangetic bazaar's squalor, the Eurasians' nondescript hill, the charmless grid-like civil station, the chaotic but beautifully lush “city of gardens” where the locals live, and far off in the distance the iconic Marabar Hills.

Even here in the city, enchantment obtains only where the common natives live—so much so that “It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts.” Here in the native quarter, nature asserts itself against city:

It is a tropical pleasaunce washed by a noble river. The toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and peul that were hidden behind the bazaars now become visible and in their turn hide the bazaars. They rise from the gardens where ancient tanks nourish them, they burst out of stifling purlieus and unconsidered temples. Seeking light and air, and *endowed with more strength than man or his works*, they soar above the lower deposit to greet one another with branches and beckoning leaves, and to build a city for the birds.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Forster 13.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid. 4.



Whatever men have built here harmonizes with and feeds nature, such as the ancient garden tanks that suggest an antiquity closer to primeval India than to the newfangled adjacent civil station. Trees versus man-made market, city for birds versus city for men: these oppositions and separations between nature and second nature, and the victory of the former over the latter, will be borne out most strikingly, if more dystopically, in Part II of the novel when we get to the caves. But here itself, Forster is laying out the scheme of enchantment versus disenchantment: the natural world inhabited by the natives versus an urban world inaugurated by colonialism. The latter tries thoroughly to subdue the former, but autochthonous nature will not be subdued, even if it is reduced to pockets like the native valley within Chandrapore, the Marabar Caves, or the Hindu princely state of Mau.

#### EXOTICISM: DISENCHANTED FRIEZE VERSUS ENCHANTED FORCE

These natural splendours of Chandrapore's native zone, "a totally different place"<sup>408</sup> from the civil station, "glorify the city to the English people who inhabit the rise, so that newcomers cannot believe it to be as meager as it is described, and have to be driven down to acquire disillusionment."<sup>409</sup> Precisely such a close-up disillusionment occurs when the newcomer Adela encounters all too directly the indigenous enchantment of the Marabar caves which, like the native section of Chandrapore, pleases the exoticist's eye so long as it remains distant—but "it is easy to sympathize at a distance."<sup>410</sup> Until her caves crisis, Adela longs to see "the real India,"

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid. 4-5.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid. 35.

fearing that as an Anglo-Indian wife she will not be able to penetrate it, instead remaining a mere alienated exoticist (in the strictly Orientalist sense). As she admires the Marabar hills from her Club vantage—the quintessential imperial view from on high—she laments her own aerial detachment (not yet realizing that her up-close-and-personal encounter with them will destroy her):

the true India slid by unnoticed. Colour would remain—the pageant of birds in the early morning, brown bodies, white turbans, idols whose flesh was scarlet or blue—and movement would remain as long as there were crowds in the bazaar and bathers in the tanks. Perched up on the seat of a dog-cart, she would see them. But the force that lies behind colour and movement would escape her even more effectually than it did now. She would see India always as a frieze, never as a spirit, and she assumed that it was a spirit of which Mrs. Moore had had a glimpse.<sup>411</sup>

That force or spirit that lies behind the Indian visual field—the force of enchantment—completely escapes all the alienated foreign characters. The only provisional exception to this rule would be Mrs. Moore, whose unique if still bewildered grasp of it finally unravels her psyche, and the narrator, whose realism instinctively recoils from “muddle” even as it tries to capture it. Even though the novel kills Mrs. Moore off (too much unmitigated enchantment for her own good), she is consistently and peculiarly associated with enchantment: from her keen alertness to nature, to her immediate and profound grasp of the existentially nihilist effect of the caves, to her commemoration and co-optation as a patron deity of the Indian masses, and finally to her consciousness as a conduit for Godbole’s meditative trance.

The frieze consists of mere pageant, bodies, and idols, whereas the force behind it would animate these respectively into nature, humanity, and divinity: i.e., brute objects on one hand (disenchantment) and inspirited, interrelated subjects on the other (enchantment). Forster’s dichotomy of frieze versus force correlate to Bilgrami’s formulation of the third-person,

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid. 48.

detached, scientific point of view on the world versus the first-person, engaged, integrated point of view on the world. The world is *viewed* as frieze or object from the aesthetically- or scientifically-detached point of view, whereas the world is *felt* as force from an immersive point of ‘view’ that relates phenomenologically to the world as a reciprocal part of it. The third-person point of view suggests verticality, the first-person horizontality; the third-person privileges the ocular, the first person the visceral.

Moreover, both Forster, implicitly, and Bilgrami, explicitly, go further relate the detached point of view to a particular view of both nature *and* humanity in the colonies as brute and “stupid.” The conceptual connection among detached observation, disenchantment, and colonialism is crucial. Forster’s ‘frieze versus force’ passage indicates that Adela and other British expatriates—again, excluding Mrs. Moore—view Indian people as mere bodies decorating the landscape. Such a dehumanizing, if aestheticizing, perspective on colonial peoples resonates with the infantilizing view of colonial subjects on which many have commented. Bilgrami goes further to connect this infantilizing take on colonial subjects to the view of matter as inert and desacralized: both views were necessary to justify the uninhibited exploitation of colonial lands. One might say that in the disenchanting worldview that prevailed in the Newtonian orthodoxy, brute “stupid” matter went hand in hand with brute “stupid” colonial subjects—neither of which could possibly impose any normative constraints on the colonizers. Bilgrami explains:

It was this scientific rationality, seized upon by just these established religious and economic alliances, that was central to the colonizing mentality that later justified the rapacious conquest of distant lands... colonized lands, too, were viewed as brute nature to be conquered and controlled. This hypothesis is wholly plausible *as long as one was able to portray the inhabitants of the colonized lands in infantilized terms*, as a people who were as yet unprepared—by precisely a *mental lack* of such a notion of *scientific rationality*—to have the right attitudes towards nature and commerce and the statecraft that allows nature to be pursued

for commercial gain. And such a historically infantilizing portrayal of the inhabitants was explicit in the writings of John Stuart Mill and even Marx.<sup>412</sup>

It is not a big leap from an infantile view of the colonial inhabitants to an objectivizing one, such as that which Forster assigns here to Adela and her fellow expats. In both views, colonized subjects are seen as deficient in proper humanity. And at bottom, the alienation of colonial subjects, as extreme Other, was also the basis of “bad exoticism,” of the sort attributed to Adela here. When I say “bad exoticism,” I mean the type that statically fixes the poles of Self and Other, such that the latter, while vaguely or distantly attractive, never effectively draws the former to it—both remain permanently and extremely estranged from each other, according to an unmistakably third-person point of view on the world. For all Adela’s longing to see “the real India,” she will remain stuck in this third-person point of view on it, a post-Enlightenment inheritance from her home culture.

Forster, however, makes some progress in this regard. His own exoticism moves from “bad exoticism” to “good exoticism” as the narrative progresses; as it does, I will show how his more dialectical version of exoticism allows for a more intimate, *nearly* immersive, dynamic between self and other that approximates a first-person point of view on the world, in which self and other are mutually related. In other words, Forster surpasses his British characters by attempting to enter into the force behind the frieze. Although his social realist narration of Part I remains mainly rooted in the third-person perspective of his alienated British characters, it does edge into an enchanted, “first-person” perspective once: namely, in the opening chapter of the novel, itself an “exception,” like the caves it marks off. In fact, any time Indian nature is

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<sup>412</sup> Bilgrami, “Occidentalism, The Very Idea” 399-400, italics his.

invoked in the novel, Forster moves out of his mediated narration (a meta, third-person perspective mediated through the grossly limited perspectives of his characters), and into a direct representation of the nature itself (closer to a “first-person” view of the world).

The force Forster refers to in the force versus frieze passage can be most generally understood as the force of enchantment, a force Forster longs to grasp and tends to see in terms of nature rather than religion until Part III: it is a force of stubborn beauty (“tropical plausance”) as much as unrelenting horror (caves). Two sides of the same coin, the landscape descriptions heading off Parts I and II fit like spoons, and they are explicitly linked by the ominous caves, whose description ends Part I and begins Part II: “fists and fingers are thrust up through the soil...These fists and fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves.”<sup>413</sup> Note, again, the language of thrusting, bursting, seeking, and soaring to depict the Indian terra that trumps all that has been constructed on it. Such verbs convey the force, the energy driving the *anima mundi* that cannot be grasped by the Brits on the hill whose objectivizing aesthetic detachment renders the world in static terms. Englishmen do not just keep their rooms neat, as Aziz notes, but also their worlds—“everything ranged coldly on shelves.”<sup>414</sup> Force cannot be ranged on shelves nor can it be managed by the colonial grid or the Cartesian arrangement of the world.

The final sentence of Chapter 1, announcing the extraordinariness of the caves rounds off the opening gambit, which has been entirely dedicated to geography. It is meet that the end of the first chapter doubles back to the caves which constitute the very first words of the novel. The

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<sup>413</sup> Forster 6.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid. 68.

striking first sentence of the novel reads: “Except for the Marabar Caves—and they are twenty miles off—the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary.” As Frank Kermode points out, the syntax of this sentence, where exception is placed before rule, suggests that exception is stronger than rule. The extraordinary, however distant and bounded, asserts itself over the meager, the disillusioned, indeed the disenchanting. In this case, Forster suggests that the numinous land of pre-Aryan India will finally trump British India’s imposition of itself, for “the sky settles everything...because it is so strong and so enormous.” For Forster, the sky (the final speaker of the novel) is an extension of the earth, itself quite strong and enormous. The sheer hubris of British India in presuming to dominate such colossal forces will be fully laid bare in Part II, the “Caves” section; but even here at the outset, these forces are adumbrated.

#### AZIZ, “NOT-QUITE NOT-WHITE”:

Forster’s rendering of the town layout and Adela’s awareness of her own alienation show us clearly that British India is starkly separated from indigenous India’s natural bounty. Less clear is where to place the demographic to which Aziz belongs. He shuttles between the native city where he and his friends live and the civil station where he works as a physician, a colonial man of science. So we might consider Aziz the quintessential colonial hybrid, our not-quite not-white figure of limbo and displacement. Part One, “Mosque,” focuses on Aziz’s semi-secular, semi-cosmopolitan urban Muslim habitus. Aziz and the rest of his élite comprador class have little connection to the commoners’ India: he works directly for the British; he speaks nearly

impeccable English;<sup>415</sup> he fraternizes with fellow Muslim professionals who have had colonial education and who work in the colonial administration; he ingratiates himself with the British; his thoughts run less to contemporary India than to a utopian Arabia-oriented Islamic ecumene of yore; he rhapsodizes on the poetry of the court poet Ghalib (quintessentially élite cultural capital) who would be unknown to most peasant Muslims; he scorns the superstition of his countrymen; he constantly advocates for secular ideals; his trips outside his colonial city are to even larger cities—Calcutta and Hyderabad. Forster leaves no doubt that Aziz's is a colonial, urban sensibility. In fact, he could well serve as poster boy for MacCaulay's brain-child, a class of natives "Indian in blood, British in manners."

If every day Aziz feels "caught in [the] meshes" of the "net Great Britain had thrown over India"<sup>416</sup> when he crosses the civil lines, he feels relief when he crosses back into the native quarter "to shake the dust of Anglo-India off his feet! To escape from the net and be back among manners and gestures that he knew."<sup>417</sup> And yet, for all his vaunted resistance to the Raj, he cannot escape its net. The dust of Anglo-India cannot be shaken off so easily, for it is part of Aziz's very being. From his Western scientific practice to his shirt-studs, Aziz is ever the colonial mimic-man. But that is not to say that he does not also participate in a distinctly Muslim culture. However, it need be noted that this is a very particular segment of that culture: an élite, urban Muslim culture whose manners and gestures would actually have been at least as distant from the Indian masses as from the British culture with which Aziz's coterie seems much

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<sup>415</sup> His English is sophisticated, despite bungling idiomatic expressions. Fielding comments on the young generation of Indians' fluency, when Aziz eloquently renders the phrase, "coldly ranged on shelves."

<sup>416</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid. 15.

more familiar. Never once in the novel does Aziz associate with Indians outside his class, except for perfunctory commands to servants whose putative laziness, impudence, and slovenliness offends Aziz almost exactly as his own do his virulently racist British boss, Major Callendar.

#### COMMUNALISM, COLONIALISM, NATIONALISM, SECULARISM

Aziz refrains from fraternizing not only with commoners, but with Hindus of any class. While in Chandrapore, all of Aziz's encounters with Hindus are marked with suspicion and/or disdain. He cannot stand even the sound of Hindus. He and his Hindu colleague Dr. Panna Lal view each other with extreme suspicion and loathing, a dynamic exemplified in their interaction in Aziz's house when the latter is ill. Aziz believes that Panna Lal, Major Callendar's "spy," has come to see if he is fibbing about his illness. Even Aziz's view of his new friend Godbole diminishes in light of his recent medical connection with his "co-religionist" Panna Lal, and Aziz and his Muslim friends' conversation degenerates into unabashed scorn for Hindus:

Before long they began to condemn [Godbole] as a source of infection. "All illness proceeds from Hindus," Mr Haq said. Mr. Syed Mohammed had visited religious fairs, at Allahabad and at Ujjain, and described them with biting scorn...at Ujjain the little river Sipra was banked up, and thousands of bathers deposited their germs in the pool. He spoke with disgust of the hot sun, the cowdung and marigold flowers, and the encampment of saddhus, some of whom strode stark naked through the streets. Asked what was the name of the chief idol at Ujjain, he replied that he did not know, he had disdained to enquire, he really could not waste his time over such trivialities. His outburst took some time, and in his excitement he fell into Punjabi (he came from that side) and was unintelligible...Aziz liked to hear his religion praised.<sup>418</sup>

Note how deeply the viscerality of the Hindus' religious life, part of the praxis of their mimetic enchantment, disgusts the more refined and intellectual Muslims that Aziz and his urban friends consider themselves. Further, the final sentence of the passage above suggests that a diatribe against Hindus is tantamount to praise for Islam, an inverse equation that is only possible in a

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid. 112-113.



context in which the two faiths had become antagonistic. This was indeed the case, particularly in the cities, by the incipiently nationalist early 1920s, despite the brief Hindu-Muslim entente during the Non-Cooperation/Khilafat movement<sup>419</sup> that Forster was prescient enough to realize would be fleeting.

If the twenties marked the moment of hope for Hindu-Muslim unity with the Non-Cooperation/Khilafat movement, it also revved up the engines of country-wide sectarian organizations that were to drive the course of Independent India/Pakistan. Pradip Kumar Datta, whose focus is Bengali communalism, writes that a

consequential factor that moulded the twenties was the emergence of the Hindu Maha Sabha as the mass organization of Hindu communalism in the country... The HMS had been inactive during the greater part of the Non-Cooperation/Khilafat movement, being revived by Malaviya in 1922. Its swift assumption of a mass, all-India character at the very point when the N/K was subsiding expresses the deeply felt anxieties that the spectacle of mass mobilization of both Hindu Hindus and Muslims raised in communalists... Punjab and Bengal provided two of the heaviest centres of rioting in the twenties... What integrated Bengal into the communal map of the subcontinent was the HMS... Interestingly, the inspiration behind the [organizational shape that constituted the HMS] was none other than the constellated structure of the Congress, of which the HMS remained a subsidiary till the thirties.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> The Non-Cooperation/Khilafat Movement defined India-wide politics between 1920 and 1924. In this non-sectarian movement, Hindu and Muslim politics actively came together on a variety of issues to challenge colonial rule: particularly, swaraj and the campaign to protect the Ottoman caliphate (the titular head of the global Islamic ummah) from its disbanding in the wake of WWI. The Gandhian congress and even many Hindu leaders we would now identify as right-wing joined in with full support, while Muslims pledged to support swaraj (self-rule). Ironically, the communal violence between Hindus and Muslims got much worse in the period immediately following the 1924 collapse of Khilafat/Non-Cooperation. The communal tensions within the movement begin emerging as early as 1922 when the Muslim leaders of Khilafat criticized Gandhi's suspension of non-Cooperation activities in light of an outbreak of violence. In fact, the internal tensions of that movement are believed to be at the root of Partition, the founding of Pakistan, and the general retrenchment between Hindus and Muslims in the Independence period (primarily through the rise of the Hindu Maha Sabha and the Muslim League). Forster was prescient in adumbrating the communalism that was not only to re-assert itself soon after the all too precarious détente of the Khilafat/non-Cooperation movement, but also to define the course of nationalist politics during the Independence era and beyond. He seems to suggest that anti-colonial nationalism never provides a solid enough foundation for non-sectarian unity, for nationalism is always the secret sharer of communalism.

<sup>420</sup> Datta 50-52.

Datta's attribution of Bengali communalism to a nation-wide Hindu organization that was a subsidiary and replica of Congress shows just how imbricated nationalism was with communalism, emanating octopus-like from the national seat of power all the way into regional and rural enclaves that had previously remained relatively untouched by communalism.

Gyanendra Pandey, another authority on communalism in India, claims:

By the early years of [the twentieth] century, the sense of religious (as of caste) community was far more widespread and more keenly marked than ever before. Pushed by the reform movements, religious debates, administrative demands and, not least, the pressure of census operations and 'representative' politics, elite groups among the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and other communities moved quickly to appropriate the marginal groups ('untouchables' came to be classified as unambiguously 'Hindu' for the first time now by Hindu leaders), to purify their domains ('Muslims' must not be contaminated by 'Hindus' and vice versa), and to establish their separate identities (among religious communities, most notably in the case of the Sikhs). The temper and pace of 'Hindu', 'Muslim', 'Sikh' and other communities' politics, therefore, greatly increased.<sup>421</sup>

Of these various factors, Pandey tends to emphasize the role of the colonial census in establishing hard-and-fast classifications of communities that had once been much more flexible. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial regime's will to mastery combined with its somewhat exaggerated notion of religious primacy and fixity of Indian identities led to the sort of classifications that in turn generated the communalism that exploded in the twentieth century: "Without doubt, this process was considerably accentuated by the Census Commissioner's decision in 1901 to classify 'castes' and 'communities' all over the country in accordance with their ritual purity and standing in local society."<sup>422</sup> In the early years of the census, people often entered themselves as "Hindu Mussulman," and even today, Ashis Nandy claims that one out of seven Indian communities cannot be identified as exclusively Hindu or Muslim. In addition, at least one out

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<sup>421</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1990) 204.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.* 83.

of five Indian communities that do identify along the axis of Hindu or Muslim, in fact live multiculturally.<sup>423</sup> To have maintained such flexible identity and interfaith integration in the face of the census legacy and the identitarian campaigns of religious nationalism suggests the unrelenting force of interfaith traditional lifeways.

Pandey explains the intimate and complex relation between nationalism and communalism thus:

From the 1920s, then, ...there arose a new contest between two different conceptions of nationalism—one that recognized the givenness of ‘pre-existing’ communities which were to form the basis of the new India, and another that challenged this view of history, past and present. Alongside these there developed yet another kind of ‘nationalism’/‘communalism’ that sought to establish a hierarchy of cultures among the cultures of India...and to assign one or another a primary place in the future of the society. This last led on, of course, to the politics of separatism, to exclusive demands for particular religious communities and even to the demand for nationhood on that basis (which has surfaced periodically from the 1920s to today).<sup>424</sup>

There is no question that of these three strands, the early Aziz subscribes to either the first or the third, both of them leading to separatism and communalist tension.<sup>425</sup> But secular nationalism is implicated in the latter two as well for two reasons: a) its secular, abstract statism excludes religious concerns and therefore generates communal identities as a counter-response; and b) the demographic imperative of democratic, statist nationalism encourages people to identify by communal group identity (solidarity begets state goodies). Pandey goes to great lengths to explain that communalism is a colonial construction that nationalism then inherits as its foil: both colonialism and nationalism justify themselves by claiming to supersede the very communal

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<sup>423</sup> Nandy, “The Twilight of Certitudes” 116.

<sup>424</sup> Pandey 260-261, with footnote 59.

<sup>425</sup> What is significant, though, is that in Pandey’s and others’ view, nationalism inevitably produces communalism: the two are not so much at odds as they are two sides of the same coin, never existing without the other.

identities they have generated.<sup>426</sup> In short, colonialism-cum-nationalism and communalism turn out to be secret sharers, the one never existing without the other. Such a dialectic explains the rise of communalism during the colonial, and even more so, the nationalist period.

It also explains the rise of communalism in the cities, the energetic locus of nationalism. The sort of sectarian bile Aziz and his friends' spew was a predominantly urban phenomenon. Indeed, sectarianism has historically been more of an urban than a rural phenomenon, even today when fundamentalist organizations use the city as their theatre for chauvinist violence. Ashis Nandy, using contemporary Hindu nationalism as his case study, puts forward the paradox that "Hindutva is meant for those whose Hinduism has worn off."<sup>427</sup> The same might be said for the sort of Muslim chauvinism that an alienated and basically secular figure like Aziz champions. Nandy, among others, believes that

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<sup>426</sup> It would be possible to make the argument that India was not as communalist as Forster depicts it in *A Passage to India*; in that argument, Forster would be imputing to his characters his own colonialist view of communalism as irrational primitive essence. However, the historical record bears out the fact that communal tensions were verifiably on the rise during Forster's period, a fact to which Pandey himself attests. In order to properly place Forster, it is worth understanding the complexity of the colonial-communal-national nexus as Pandey further elaborates it: "In the colonialist view the phenomenon of communalism in India is age-old; it flows from the essential character of the peoples of India; and it affects more or less the whole population, with only a few enlightened, liberal, western-educated men and women being truly free from the communal spirit. The nationalists, by contrast, recognize communalism as a problem of recent origins, as the outcome basically of economic and political inequality and conflict, and as the handiwork of a handful of self-interested elite-groups (colonial and native), with the mass of the people being essentially 'secular'" (11). Yet, "both nationalist and colonialist positions derive from the same liberal ideology in which 'rationalism' and 'secularism' operate as adjacent elements of thought" (13). Forster distinguishes himself from the colonial view of communalism by creating characters like Aziz who are putatively enlightened, liberal, and western-educated, yet certainly not free from the communal spirit. He is also wise to the fact of the urban orientation of communalism, for the communal tensions in the novel are presented not in the Mau where the "masses" live, but in Chandrapore where the westernized intelligentsia lives. If anything, in his depiction of an urban, enlightened, liberal, western educated man with fierce communalist loyalties and prejudices, Forster aligns himself more with the nationalist view of communalism, a view that would explain the communalism as a result of political conflict (read: colonialism). Yet, he does not fully align himself with the nationalist view either, given his depiction of Aziz's class's rabid communalism, which is anything but 'essentially 'secular.' If anything, the 'essentially secular' masses of people are to be found in the countryside, where different religious communities have lived more or less in harmony side by side, thus manifesting the spirit of secular tolerance, if not syncretism.

<sup>427</sup> Nandy 128.

Hindu nationalism has its territorial limits. It cannot spread easily beyond the boundaries of urban, westernizing India. Nor can it easily penetrate those parts of India where Hinduism is more resilient and Hindus are less prone to project on to Muslims the feared, unacceptable parts of their self. Hindutva cannot survive where the citizens have not been massified and come to speak only the language of the state.<sup>428</sup>

In other words, Hindutva ironically depends on the terms of secularism (and its ideological corollaries—nationalism, national identity, and the modern state). And secularism is and has always been more of a city sensibility. Nandy claims that resistance to religious nationalisms that rest on the ballast of secularism has been

stronger where communities have not splintered into atomized individuals. Not only do riots take place more frequently in the cities, but also they are harder to organize in villages. The village community is breaking down all over the world, but it has not broken down entirely in South Asia. Even the smaller towns in South Asia have often escaped massification....The Babri mosque was turned into a political issue only after India's urban middle class attained a certain size and India's modernization reached a certain stage...the ruling culture of India, predominantly modern and secular has lost much of its faith in—and access to—the traditional social and psychological checks against communal violence."<sup>429</sup>

As against the colonial myth of primordial religious animosity, the historical record shows that in the countryside especially, Hindus and Muslims have tended to live together in relative harmony. Nandy explains that, prior to the introduction of secularism by colonially-inspired social reformers and intellectuals,

traditional ideas of inter-religious understanding and tolerance...had allowed the thousands—yes, literally thousands—of communities living in the subcontinent to co-survive in reasonable neighbourliness for centuries. The co-survival was not perfect; it was certainly not painless...But the violence never involved such large aggregates or generic categories as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Tamils, or Sinhalas.<sup>430</sup>

Where traditional religious doctrines and practices were in themselves syncretic, the interfaith harmony was of course even stronger. It is one thing to understand and tolerate your neighbor's practices for centuries; it is another thing to actually participate in them and/or integrate them

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid. 129.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid. 114-115.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid. 116.

into your own. Dominique-Sila Khan, an expert on Indian religious syncretism, tells us that Hindus and Muslims have been sharing not just civic but sacred space for centuries. Her examples include: the Muslim shrines (especially Sufi dargahs) of India that have long since been visited by Hindu, Jain, and Sikh devotees, the Muslim worship of particular Hindu deities as protector deities of artisanal clans, and the participation in each other's religious holidays, such as Mohurram, Holi, and Diwali.<sup>431</sup> In many cases, "the devotees have simply struck an alliance with a divine figure whose power they acknowledge...Rather than a change of identity, all this implies the recognition of the fundamental unity of the Divine and of the Sacred that knows no boundaries."<sup>432</sup> In a moment, I will be looking more specifically at the shared doctrine of mimetic enchantment in syncretic Islam and Hinduism, which suggests an even greater overlap between the two religious communities—an overlap unbeknownst to the secularly-oriented Forster and Aziz.

In summary: other identities can supersede the sectarian, and those communal identities are not air-tight in theory or practice to begin with. But this syncretic life-world is unfamiliar to both Aziz and his author. Let us look at the differences between metropolitan and peasant/folk Islam, their political and theological implications, and Forster's relationship to both.

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<sup>431</sup> Dominique-Sila Khan, *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2004) 36.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid. 37.

### AZIZ'S METROPOLITAN ISLAM:

Metropolitan Islam is the only version of Islam Forster presents; indeed, it was the only one he knew. On the level of doctrine, this transnational Islam's transcendental emphasis renders it amenable to cultural translation, thus making it even more accessible to the British than its basic affinities with Christianity would have already enabled (a monotheistic Abrahamist religion with Christian era origins in the Levant). It is an intellectual Islam, associated as much with "Cordoba and Samarkand" as with the Delhi Sultanate of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There is nothing in this Islam specifically rooted in the land of India: this is Islam, not Indo-Islam. As I shall explain, this metropolitan, cosmopolitan version of Islam is, even in Forsterian terms, less enchanted-- because less rooted in the land, less embodied, less mimetic, and less immanent-- than the more syncretic<sup>433</sup> folk version of it practiced in the countryside.

Furthermore, Forster renders the doctrinal elements of Metropolitan Islam marginal to its secularly-tending cultural aspects. This foregrounding of cultural sensibility over religious praxis is clear even in the first association of Aziz with Islam: the early mosque scene that gives the title to Part I. Notably, the mosque as architectural icon, not to mention the character most closely associated with it, is shorn of its religious freight and thus rendered more akin to European secularism than to the lived enchanted religiosity of Hindu and syncretic Islam.

In the novel's inaugural reference to Indian religion, Forster presents Aziz seeking refuge in his favorite mosque just at the edge of the civil station. The proximity of the mosque to the British quarter is reflected by affinity in architecture as well, the unusual depth of the mosque

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<sup>433</sup> Read: syncretic with Hinduism and other Indian religions.

having the effect “of an English parish church whose side has been taken out.”<sup>434</sup> Not surprisingly, into this mosque so adjacent—literally and metaphorically—to the British, meanders Mrs. Moore. Notably, it is she, not Aziz, who invokes God at all. Her statement that “God is here” becomes the basis for their cultural affiliation rather than theological reflection. While the statement smacks of enchantment—the notion that the transcendent is immanent in the physical world—Forster makes light of this already slight statement. Unlike other representations of Mrs. Moore’s enchanted view of the world, this one remains superficial: the narrator does not enter and render the feelings that inspire her statement—a phrase that is, for Mrs. Moore, uncharacteristically hackneyed. And Aziz does not delve any deeper. For him this banality serves merely to qualify her as “Oriental” in sensibility, thus inspiring him to tell his community about her. That the exchange has to do more with cultural proximity than religious matters is reinforced by the subsequent discussion, which centers on Aziz’s petty social grievances with his British superiors. At no point during his romantic sojourn at the mosque (or during his unjust imprisonment after the caves, for that matter) does Aziz contemplate God, let alone experience the enchantment of God coursing through the physical world—not even in the sensually inspiring mosque. In short, the only reference to God in this episode, which comes not from the Indian Muslim but the British Christian, points toward cultural rather than religious concerns.

Even on a less cultural and more contemplative level, the mosque’s architectural appeal for Aziz has less to do with religion than it does with aesthetics. Indeed, Aziz’s religious attitude uncannily resembles the aestheticizing tendency of the British I have just discussed. The

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<sup>434</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 16.



physicality of the mosque awakens “his sense of beauty. Here was *Islam, his own country, more than a Faith*, more than a battle-cry, more, much more...”<sup>435</sup> Beauty inspires feelings of love *not* for his own country, but for a nebulously transnational cultural sensibility. Here too we have an indication of his distance from India-on-the-ground.

Aziz’s effort to inspire feeling through aesthetic appreciation is a forced and cerebral and, as the text insinuates, somewhat silly and unsuccessful exercise: “The contest between this dualism [the black-and-white play of the frieze against the night sky] and the contention of the shadows within pleased Aziz, and he tried to symbolize the whole into some truth of religion or love.”<sup>436</sup> Like Adela’s frieze, Aziz’s frieze offers an occasion for serene aesthetic appreciation that longs to supersede its own detachment, yet remains stuck in mere abstraction. There is something callow and forced in both of their strivings.

Aziz is alienated from the religious ritual of community; in fact, he is alienated from religion entirely. Instead he, in a secular-Romantic spirit (minus the nature-worship, which would actually bring him closer to enchantment) fetishizes the solitary individual’s contemplation of beauty: “The secret understanding of the heart! He repeated the phrase with tears in his eyes.” Forster’s rhetorical rendering of Aziz’s mosque experience, emphasizing belabored effort and nebulosity (“*some* truth of religion *or* love”), is touched by the gentle mockery that often marks the author’s rendering of the melodramatic, grandiose, and often absurd Aziz. Aziz “decked [the mosque] with meanings the builder had never intended,” but none of these meanings has any reference to divinity, let alone the immanence of divinity.

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid. 16, italics mine.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

Instead, he has worked himself up into a fantasy of the mosque he dreams of personally building, one that will be “in perfect taste, so that all who passed by should experience the happiness he felt now.”<sup>437</sup> Clearly, what matters to him are aesthetic taste and happiness, not divine immanence and religious transport *per se*. Punctuating his personal architectural monument would be a saccharine Persian inscription, a *secular* quatrain he had once seen and “regarded...as profound philosophy—he always held pathos to be profound.”<sup>438</sup>

In short, the minimalism and abstraction of the mosque’s architecture catalyze aesthetic, romantic, and philosophical impulses, but not quite religious ones. Forster makes this distinction clear: “A mosque by winning his approval let loose his imagination.” There may be romance here, but not enchantment of the strictly religious sort. The passage explicitly identifies Aziz’s Islam as “more than a Faith;” rather, it is “an attitude towards life” reflected in the “manners and gestures” of his habitus—a habitus he sharply distinguishes from the Hindus whose drumming in the background disturbs his reverie.

It is a measure of the cultural rather than doctrinal nature of his religiosity that he recoils from the sensuous excess of the Hindus: “he knew they were Hindus, because the rhythm was uncongenial to him,—and others were bewailing a corpse—he knew whose, having certified it in the afternoon.”<sup>439</sup> Here, his headiness, in contradistinction to the Hindus’ viscerality of faith, is reflected not just in his aversion to their ritual drumming, but also in his scientific rather than spiritual relationship to death and the human body. Enchanted religion would approach the

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

body—particularly a body at a threshold like death—as a medium of communication with the otherworld. Rituals, including death rituals, would involve “‘corporeal techniques’ that, according to Marcel Mauss, “underlie all our mystic states for entering into communication with God.”<sup>440</sup> By contrast, science, the apotheosis of disenchantment, denies the body any permeability with God. Instead, the human body is treated as mere matter, most emphatically so when pronounced dead. Aziz explicitly aligns himself with science rather than religion not just here, but on the two occasions that he strenuously rejects superstition among his own kind. The first occurs when he supersedes his own initial apprehension of Mrs. Moore as a ghost: “Belief in ghosts ran in his blood, but he sat firm.”<sup>441</sup> Much later, when his coterie is discussing the ghost on Marabar Road that stalks the Nawab Bahadur, “the company shuddered and invoked the mercy of God. Only Aziz held aloof, because a personal experience restrained him: was it not by despising ghosts that he had come to know Mrs. Moore?”<sup>442</sup> On the basis of this inter-cultural affective payoff, he admonishes young Nureddin and his generation to reject belief in spirits, the long-standing bane of Indian culture. All of these instances show the disenchanting effects of urbanization and the influence of British epistemology on Aziz, our paradigmatic colonial mimic-man.

Poised as he is in the comprador position, he knows himself best through the eyes of the colonizer. Mrs. Moore, who sympathizes with his anti-British grievances, confers onto him cultural self-respect. He needs her British stamp of approval to validate his Muslim cultural

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<sup>440</sup> Michael Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic,” *Walter Benjamin’s Grave* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 155.

<sup>441</sup> Forster 17.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.* 106.

pride. After their encounter, he comes away feeling that “he owned the land”—again, his nostalgic Mughal pride has nothing much to do with religion as it does temporal power and glory.

All in all then, the mosque scene perhaps unexpectedly shows us a disenchanted, rather than an enchanted Aziz. Halfway to secularism, Aziz’s religious sensibility does not partake of the visceral sense of divinity coursing through the sites, objects, and beings of the perceptible world.

## SYNCRETIC ISLAM

In stark contrast to Aziz’s metropolitan, transnational, secular-Romantic Islam, consider the more Indo-syncretic version of the religion lived in the countryside and among Muslim commoners in pockets of the cities. In fact, we need not belabor the distinction between village and urban working-class Muslims, who even today maintain their heterodox ritual praxis, quite distinct from elite orthodox Islam. For example, *dargahs*, shrines of martyred Muslim saints whose icons are to this day worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike, are found even in large cities like Delhi and Hyderabad. This folk Islam is not one that Forster was familiar with or conveys much in the novel, though he alludes to it once in his letters. In that 1913 letter, he recounts walking up the eponymous hill of the Devi temple and spying “a grave of earth under a peepul tree, polished roots forming its precincts. A garland of jasmine hung on the head of the grave, sticks of burning cotton wool soaked in incense were stuck in its sides, a heap of grain with divine cooking utensils in front.”<sup>443</sup> Forster’s more initiated friend Malcolm thinks this

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<sup>443</sup> E.M. Forster, *The Hill of Devi* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, Inc, 1985 [1953]) 40.

rudimentary altar is a shrine of the Hindu goddess Durga, “but he was wrong, it was Moslem; one was always going to be wrong.”<sup>444</sup> His self-deprecating tongue-in-cheek humor notwithstanding, Forster tellingly points to the general British (and his personal) ignorance of subaltern forms of religiosity, particularly the syncretic, animist forms like this altar. Not only does this Muslim altar defy the Islamic orthodox prohibition on icons, but it strikingly resembles a Hindu animist altar. Further, it exists for an explicitly instrumental, materialist purpose: to win the supplicant a raise of one rupee in monthly salary; and in turn a piece of land for the old woman who tends the shrine. This instrumentalist, materialist, animist Islam of long-standing peasant India bears more resemblance to tribal proto-Hinduism (or even to orthodox Hinduism)<sup>445</sup> than to the abstract, intellectual metropolitan Islam of Aziz and his comrades. After all, such instrumental “charms” evoke a “sorcery,” in which humans use mimetic magic to gain influence over the transcendental sphere; such a practice takes for granted a communicability and reciprocity between human and heaven.

Similar to the examples Dominique-Sila Khan offers to demonstrate Indian religious folk syncretism, Roy Burman offers countless examples, many of which share with Hinduism animistic practices, particularly among hinterland peoples. One specific example of this would be the Natharwalli cult of South India. Burman, drawing on Bayle, identifies the Muslim pir cult tradition of South India exhibiting a link to Saivite devotionalism, theistic Vaishnavism, and the mother goddess tradition. The Natharwalli dargah in Trichi features a pir who transcends

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>445</sup> See my extensive discussion in Chapter 1 regarding early Aryan animism and its relation to later orthodox Brahminical Hinduism.

Muslim and Hindu designation and is viewed more generally as “a figure of the forest [who] inhabits the same domain as the demonic spirits and marauders who lie beyond the margins of the settled social order. In formal Hinduism this world of dangerous uncontained forces is the resort of the divine at its most awesome and terrifying. More specifically, this is a saivite world, a place of sakti divinities and of Lord Shiva and the terrible Lord Bhairava, hideous ascetic.”<sup>446</sup> Similarly, “For Muslim and Hindu peasants of Sundarban the cult of Bonbibi is much more important than other major gods and goddesses.”<sup>447</sup> Roy goes on to explain this syncretic-animist cult in the words of Saba Naqvi Bhowmick: “In response to their environment [the Sundarbans] the locals have evolved a religion which is a curious mix of animism, pir-ism and Shakti cult...The three most popular cults of the region are those of a Shakti-like figure named Bonbibi, a legendary pir called Mobrah Gazi and a tiger-god named Dakshin Ray. The legends of these three deities are inextricably woven together.”<sup>448</sup> Generally speaking, syncretism has always been associated with animist shrines (i.e., shrines to spirits or deities that embody nature), an animism which might in fact be thought of as the longest-standing syncretic tradition in India. If I have drawn special attention to peasant syncretism oriented towards nature, it is because that is precisely what Forster and Aziz are estranged from and precisely what ends up constituting Indian enchantment, the absent center of the novel.

What syncretic Islam and Hinduism crucially share—and orthodox Islam does not—is ritual praxis based on enchanted mimesis. The broader, orthodox Islam enforces a strict taboo on

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<sup>446</sup> Bayle quoted in J.J. Roy Burman, “Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 31:20 (May 18,1996) 1214.

<sup>447</sup> Roy 1212.

<sup>448</sup> Bhowmick quoted in Roy, 1212.

images, akin to the Judeo-Christian taboo (hence the British historical preference for Islam over Hinduism: in fact, both the Christian missionaries and the Muslim orthodoxy launched sustained campaigns against Hindu idolatry).<sup>449</sup> But the more heterodox Indo-Islam has always had a much more sympathetic relationship to images—so much so that the Muslim 18<sup>th</sup> century anti-idolatry campaign was directed as much within the fold as without.

Those prohibitions notwithstanding, the animist practices of the early Aryans vigorously live on to this day in rural India, not only among Hindus, but also the Muslims with whom they have long since shared a syncretic way of life. Forster writes: “Unfortunately, India has few important towns. India is the country, fields, fields, then hills, jungle, hills, and more fields... The important towns [generations of invaders] build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home.”<sup>450</sup> Aziz is one of those invading urban men whose quarrels—marked by sectarianism, nationalism, then sectarianism again—bespeak a malaise and a fundamental estrangement from the far vaster India. Here, Forster recognizes the chasm between enchanted India and the disenchantment of urban, colonial India—indeed, the disenchantment brought by colonialism, and urbanism, and I would even say, a certain cosmopolitanism that is gained only at the cost of alienation from a more syncretic, enchanted relation to India. This trade-off will prove not to be worth it, either for Aziz whose rather superficial cosmopolitanism does not get him through; or for post-Independence India whose record of communal violence—a primarily urban phenomenon, according to Ashis Nandy and

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<sup>449</sup>Gauri Viswanathan, “Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism,” *Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Malden, MA, Oxford, Victoria, Australia: Blackwell, 2005 [2003]) 23-44.

<sup>450</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 150.

others—has betrayed its secular Nehruvian vision. That is because communalism is connected up with disenchantment, not only at the level of ideology as I have shown in my Tagore chapter, but also Hindu-Muslim praxis.

Forster and his main characters' alienation from syncretic India's enchanted worldview proves irrevocable. While the novel's reference to this worldview is pitched in an entirely Hindu register, it is important to recognize that it was, historically, also shared by heterodox Muslims primarily living outside the cities. In the cities, under the pressure of colonialism and the attrition to Christianity, both Hinduism and Islam underwent reform movements, the Islamic one predating the Hindu by about a hundred years.

That said, the tension in South Asian Islam goes back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, even if the orthodoxy did not decisively prevail until the colonial/reform period. This long-standing doctrinal tension is essentially between monotheism and monism, the essential unity in various manifestations of the divine. I will quote at length from anthropologist Anand Taneja's treatment of this genealogical split within Indian Islam and its implications for doctrine, practice, and politics:

Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1724) was the proponent of the Sufi doctrine of *wahdat al shuhud* (the unity of perception/witnessing) which was opposed to the doctrine of *wahdat al wujud* (the unity of all being) which dominated the political theology of Mughal India. The doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*...is widely understood as having made Sufi Islam a far more accommodating, tolerant and gentle tradition, particularly with regards to the ethics of governance. The doctrine of *wahdat al shuhud* challenged the idea of the oneness of all being by suggesting that the unity was simply of the (Sufi's) perception, which failed to see the distinction between the created and the creator. Based on this theological distinction, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi critiqued the Hindu idea of incarnation (*avtari/hulul*) as being fundamentally at odds with and incommensurate with Islamic belief; and based on this theological articulation of difference, expressed a politics which critiqued the inclusive and tolerant politics of the Mughal Empire as being un-Islamic. "*Wahdat al shuhud* thus endeavored to modify *wahdat al wujud*, allowing it to act only marginally as a basis for Muslim 'syncretic' beliefs. An average literate Muslim was expected to believe that Islam and



Hinduism belonged to two radically diverse traditions, and that the twain would never meet (Alam 2004, 163)."<sup>451</sup>

An important aspect of enchantment is highlighted by this distinction between *wahdat al shuhud*'s emphasis on epistemology and *wahdat al wujud*'s emphasis on ontology. In an enchanted worldview, enchantment exists in the world, not just in the perception of the believer/viewer. In a religious framework, such enchantment in the world depends on monism: the sharing of substance between God (the creator) and man and nature (His creations). We shall see how Forster's text gradually and almost imperceptibly moves from the *shuhud*-esque take on enchantment to the *wujud*-esque one, as it finally identifies enchantment as existing in the world itself.

Another important dimension of Taneja's gloss is that the *wahdat al wujud* heterodoxy's monistic doctrine accommodated and even analogized the Hindu doctrine of *avatar* (*hulul* in the Muslim lexicon): the crossing down of Divinity into a human form. This shared monistic doctrine then justified a tolerant politics, for Hindus and Muslims would not be seen as so far apart, even from a doctrinal standpoint. The final implication, then, is that such tolerant politics depends on a shared monistic doctrine that posits enchantment in the world, one that manifests in the immanent and perceptible phenomena of this world (including avatars) which share the same substance as the divine. So, immanent enchantment has an ontological status which—not only because it happens to emerge from a shared doctrine, but also because it implies that everything and EVERYONE (Hindus and Muslims alike) share the same essence as the divine—demands a

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<sup>451</sup> Anand Vivek Taneja, "Sacred Histories, Uncanny Politics: Jinns and Justice in the Ruins of Delhi" (draft), *South Asia Institute, Columbia University, October 19, 2009*.

tolerant politics. We see now, how the eradication of a monistic praxis of syncretism in India would lead to an intolerant and sectarian politics.

Taneja goes on to explain the ritual space and praxis of “dargah culture,” a uniquely Indian version of Islam that has always been highly syncretic, sharing with Hinduism the practices of supplication, worship of icons, and sanctification of holy men:

The rituals of supplication... that the Imam and others look down upon... are... part of a larger ritual vocabulary which Carla Bellamy (2007) refers to as “dargah culture,” the unique culture of shrines identified as “Muslim holy places,” which (unlike mosques) are open to non-Muslims for prayer and supplication. Such shrines are usually (but not always) built around the grave of a Muslim holy man, revered by Muslims and Hindus.

What is the historical underpinning of such a unique culture? I believe that it is linked to what Muzaffar Alam (2004) has called “the Sufi intervention” in the politics of the pre-modern Indian Muslim states. To radically simplify Alam's thesis, the Islamic polities of pre-modern India dealt with the “problem” of having a largely non-Muslim population by following a political theory which broadened the scope of what was understood as shari'a to be more expansive than legalist Islamic law, and thus being inclusive of the laws and life ways of other communities. This political theory came out of the larger philosophy of the “unity of all being (*wahdat al-wujud*),” and the Sufis who believed and practiced this doctrine (which made them stand in opposition to narrower definitions of Islam) also made a deliberate intervention in politics from the thirteenth century onwards, giving an ethical direction to the state, orienting it to a justice beyond the narrowly legalist definition of shari'a.<sup>452</sup>

This passage further emphasizes the connection between enchanted mimesis (the worship of icons as divinely charged), monism, syncretism, and a politics of tolerance.

Finally, Taneja relates *wahdat al wujud* to the Islamic notion of the *batin/zaahir*, one that even Borges, let alone Islamic writers such as Tahar Ben Jelloun have put to great symbolic use in their fiction. Taneja gives us a historical context for this allied doctrine.

The doctrine of *wahdat al wujud* has a long history of being linked to the *batin*, the realm of the hidden. As Muzaffar Alam writes, “At a popular level, Sufism developed several offshoots, absorbing evidently anti-Islamic features... support of this behavior was sought in the doctrine of *wahdat al wujud* and its extended implications ... to the sixteenth century saint Abd al-Quddus Gangohi, neglect of the injunctions of the sharia by the qalandars and other such Sufis was only “apparent” (*zaahir*)... he argued the paradox that the destruction of external aspects of religion sometimes becomes

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

essential... and that it is for this reason that some true men of God shave their beards, put on sacred threads and pray in temples...(2004, 152-153).<sup>453</sup>

Such devaluation of the outward appearance of religion should remind us of the medieval Sufi saint Kabir's poetry whose themes so inspired Tagore's own. Kabir diminishes such ritual observances, saying that God lives in each of our hearts, in nature, and in others. The particular rituals and sects that have developed historically are not, in themselves, indications of devotion. Further, this diminishing of the importance of the "external aspects of religion" necessarily encourages a spirit of tolerance, for what is apparent matters less than what is at the hidden heart of the matter. Whether one shaves a beard, puts on a sacred thread, prays in a temple or a mosque, it matters not: the Hindu and the Muslim way to knowing God may be equally viable, if pursued with a deep and genuine spirit.

Taneja translates the notion of the *batin* into our more familiar term, the uncanny, although the latter lacks the sacral sense:

We can think of the *batin* as the "Islamic" uncanny. Apparent reality, the *zahir*, is never the whole picture. There is always an excess, beyond the frame of the apparent. Reality is incomplete with the complementary notion of the hidden realm, that which is unseen, the *batin*, which can be accessed or manifests at certain times. And while the *batin* is often terrifying in the Islamic tradition as well, it is also more importantly, as Michael Gilson's work indicates, a space of blessing and gift, from where, "flow forces that are witness to the interrelations of God and man and nature (1982, 79)." To experience the Islamic uncanny often means being blessed, being inspired by dreams and signs and portents from the hidden world.<sup>454</sup>

What is important here is that the invisible forces of the spiritual erupt into, *manifest* in, and can be accessed from, the phenomenal world. So, in the Muslim heterodox register as well as the Hindu one, we find the notion of divinity coursing through everyday life. This view takes for granted "the interrelations of God and man and nature," in short, enchantment in its most basic

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<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid.

terms. I particularly like Gilsean's rendering here for its emphasis on "flow" and "force," the keyterms in the rubric Forster sets up in contrast to form. I will turn to that discussion of force versus form in just a moment. For now, it is important to see that in the heterodox Islam described above (*wahdat al wujud, zaahir/batin*), divine force is seen as flowing through the world in just the same way that Hindus think of it in terms of *darśan*. In fact, the notion of *zaahir/batin* can be mapped onto the Hindus' notion of *murti/Brahman*.

A huge number of Indians continue to perpetuate the syncretic tradition of *wahdat al wujud*, whether or not they self-consciously identify themselves as the heirs to this genealogical branch of Sufism. Indeed, this popular praxis is most vigorous among the unlettered Muslims, the very people who were *not* expected, as average educated Muslims were, "to believe that Islam and Hinduism belonged to two radically diverse traditions, and that the twain would never meet." But Aziz, not surprisingly, belongs to the latter group; and indeed, he appears to have been successfully convinced by the orthodoxy that the Hindu-Muslim twain would never meet. In light of the extensive treatment above, I think we can safely establish the monotheistic Aziz as belonging to the *wahdat al-shuhud* orthodoxy that came to prevail among the urban educated class. And with it, Aziz's intolerance for Hindus that Forster so incisively depicts, just as he does the anti-Muslim prejudice of Aziz's colleague Dr. Panna Lal. The only context in which Hindus and Muslims come together in this novel lies outside its scope: the nationalist committee to which Hamidullah belongs, where "Hindus, Moslems, two Sikhs, two Parsis, a Jain, and native Christian tried to like one another more than came natural to them. As long as someone abused the English, all went well, but nothing constructive had been achieved, and if the English

were to leave India, the committee would vanish also.”<sup>455</sup> This, of course, is exactly what sadly came to pass, such that communal tensions immediately rose back up, determining the course of post-Independence India.<sup>456</sup>

## FORSTER’S ISLAM

Forster’s orthodox Islamic bias was apiece with the general British preference for Islamic over Hindu doctrine. While his own particular preference seems rooted more in aesthetic than doctrinal issues, his aesthetic emphasis only further underscores the inextricable relationship between doctrine and aesthetic form in both religions and, more importantly, their perception by the British. The British were more disposed toward Islam because the latter’s monotheism and anti-idolatry shared common ground with Christianity. Gauri Viswanathan explains that while Christian missionaries did not go so far as to align themselves with the Muslims in their campaign against Hindu idolatry, the British were generally less threatened by orthodox<sup>457</sup> Islam which never posed quite the same challenge to British rule that Hinduism did.<sup>458</sup> The notorious Hindu idolatry—the perception of divinity in self-manifesting and crafted deities, a version of enchanted mimesis, often disparagingly called “fetishism”—repulsed the British when they encountered not only the animistic cults of Hinduism, but also orthodox Hindu practice. The

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<sup>455</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 114-115.

<sup>456</sup> Please see Part III for a lengthy gloss of this passage that diverges significantly from Edward Said’s.

<sup>457</sup> N.B.: When I refer to Islam in this paragraph, I am referring only to orthodox Islam—the monotheistic Islam that banned images. It is important to note that orthodox Islam (and its antagonism to Hinduism) was a primarily urban phenomenon. In the rural areas (and even some cities at certain times of year), a syncretic religion has fused heterodox Islam with Hinduism in interesting ways that persist to this day.

<sup>458</sup> Viswanathan, “Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism,” 3.

monotheistic religions' general ban on idol-worship is, as I have explained, rooted in a worldview that refuses the enchantment of mimesis. So we see that a feedback loop of doctrine and broader worldview effected a permanent rift between the two major religious communities in India, and between the Brits and the Hindus--rifts that Forster experienced, recorded, and reinforced in both his non-fictional memoir *Hill of Devi* and his fictional *A Passage to India*.

Forster's aversion to Hindu idol-worship and his affinity for Indian Islam have to do with his sense that Hindus have an improper sense of form, unlike the (orthodox) Muslims. Forster's problem is that he is trying to enchant his own mimesis while philosophically rejecting the enchantment of mimesis in the Hinduism he nevertheless attempts to present. While Forster finally manages to penetrate mimetic enchantment by entering into Godbole's soul, his success is qualified by his residual aversion to idol-worship. The result is the text's second-order enchantment: an estranged, exoticist enchantment with the immersive, lived Hindu enchantment.

Syncretic Islam and its kindred Hinduism—with their sense of divinity coursing through nature and its enchanting of matter and mimetic images—remains alien and alienating to both Forster and Aziz, men who have both come irretrievably under the sway of disenchantment.

## FORSTER AND FORM

However, Forster, unlike Aziz, at least longs to capture something of Indian enchantment, understanding that it holds the key to resistance against a thorough-going disenchantment brought by colonialism, urbanization, and sectarianism—elements already rife and entrenched among the urban middle class that will unfortunately follow the road for post-Independence India paved by the Raj. Forster's narrative dilemma lies here: he wants to enchant his narrative,

he wants to enchant the real, and yet he has a knee-jerk aversion to precisely that approach within Indo-Islam and Hinduism. He will, in Part II, provisionally try to get around this dilemma by deracinating and desacralizing a pre-Aryan, indeed primordial, nature whose numinosity he, as a secularist, can manage to appreciate and more or less directly represent. But something will remain locked out of even that enchantment of Forster's, until Part III, when he finally overcomes his aversion to the Hindu (and, by unwitting implication, syncretic Indo-Islam) attitude to form. He continues to be afflicted by man's "itch for the seemly," prior to the manipulations of which "the planet must have looked thus [as it does at the Marabar]." <sup>459</sup>

Forster will struggle to the end with his ideas around form and enchantment. He famously said that he reached Islam by way of Hinduism <sup>460</sup>: although initially attracted to Hinduism, he could not contend with it, so he turned to the more accessible (orthodox) Islam. Forster's portrayal of Islam emphasizes abstraction of form, which in turn conduces to both the formalist imperative of the secular Forster and the ecumenical tendency in the Christian Mrs. Moore. For all of Forster's gentle mockery of Aziz's religious pretension, it is precisely the intellectualism and abstraction of that religious orientation that draws the former and his characters to a rather Levantine Islam over indigenous enchantment. Note that Mrs. Moore is magnetically drawn to the mosque, where she finds welcome—as diametrically opposed an experience to the caves as can be imagined. Likewise, Fielding, the dyed-in-the-wool secularist, finds mosques to be the only admirable form in India. Abstraction has a deracinating effect, and an intellectual or aesthetic attitude within a religion is easier for a foreigner to approximate than

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<sup>459</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 162.

<sup>460</sup> Kermode 145.

a visceral, ritualistic one; moreover, such tenets dovetail even with the vaunted tenets of secular art. For the formalist Forster, like the Fielding of his novel, the Indian (read: Hindu and autochthonous) squalor, tawdriness, disproportion, and hyper-mimesis of form creates “muddle”—a muddle from which only solidity of form can offer an escape. Under the frieze versus force rubric, form would belong with frieze, muddle<sup>461</sup> with force. Forster is caught in a contradiction, then. Where earlier he seemed to align himself with force as against frieze, he now seems to have gone over to the other side. Indeed, it is his stubborn clinging to well-proportioned, composed (one might even say disenchanting) form that constantly tugs him back from the enchantment that he reaches for with his other hand.

For the historical Forster, India’s only antidotes to muddle were the mosque form and the urban Islam he experienced in Hyderabad after an exasperating stint as secretary to the Prince of Dewas Senior, a native state rife with the Hindu carnivalesque. In *The Hill of Devi*, he wrote a 1921 letter expressing relief at not having to be steeped constantly in (Hindu) religion anymore. In his Hyderabad visit, the only occasions for religion transpire when Mr. Hydari “prostrates himself...but when it is over it is over, and he does not require red powder or drums to see him through. I have passed abruptly from Hinduism to Islam and the change is a relief. I have come too into a world...intelligible to me.”<sup>462</sup> Forster, though a secularist while in England, often went to meditate in mosques in India, not unlike Mrs. Moore.<sup>463</sup> Kermode explains his inclination to Islam thus: “With his love of order, especially intellectual order, he preferred

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<sup>461</sup> See Kermode 128 for a nuanced, disambiguating gloss on Forster’s overdetermined keyword, “muddle.”

<sup>462</sup> Forster, *The Hill of Devi* 235.

<sup>463</sup> Kermode 145-146.



Islamic intellect and order to the happiness of the messy improvised rituals of the Gokul Ashtami celebrations and the hilarious profundities of the nativity of Krishna, wonderful though they were.”<sup>464</sup> For the likes of Forster, the mosque, an imported architecture of a transnational ecumene based in Arabia, would be India’s anti-mimetic minimalist antidote to Hinduism’s disproportionate, excessive, slippery, bewildering, or ill form—inappropriately mimetic form that gives way all too easily to the enchanted force that courses through it.

When the secularist Fielding ships off to Europe after a long and sympathetic tenure in India, he finally reunites with the solidity of form which India had failed to deliver:

He had forgotten the beauty of form among idol temples and lumpy hills; indeed, without form, how can there be beauty? *Form stammered here and there in a mosque...*but oh these Italian churches!...something more precious than mosaics and marbles were offered to him now; *the harmony between the works of man and the earth that upholds them, the civilization that has escaped muddle*, the spirit in a reasonable form, with flesh and blood subsisting...[his Indian friends] would miss the joys he experienced now, the joys of form, and...this constituted a serious barrier. They would see the sumptuousness of Venice, not its shape...The Mediterranean is the human norm. When men leave that exquisite lake, whether through the Bosphorus or the Pillars of Hercules, they approach the monstrous and extraordinary; and the southern exit leads to the strangest experience of all.<sup>465</sup>

Significantly, for paradigmatic “shape” Forster selects, out of all possible European architectures, the church. Churches of course allow for a direct, favorable comparison with the idol temples and “stammering” mosques. But Fielding’s reference to Italian churches also serves to desacralize religious architecture altogether. From the secular perspective, religious architectures are to be valued according to their form (or lack thereof): there can be no beauty without “reasonable form,” and beauty is the end all be all.

This logical sequence is the more triumphant version of Forster’s elegiac thoughts about art and spiritual life in “What I Believe.” In the latter, Forster laments that the West that has lost

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid. 146.

<sup>465</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 313-314, italics mine.

its spiritual way must turn to art as the only resource for recuperating order in the apparently muddled universe. Only the spiritual adept can perceive the order “emanating from the Divine author, the mystic harmony,”—a perception now unavailable to Europe. This distinction between artistic imposition of order on the world and mystical perception of spiritual order is crucial. The first, more active and secular approach corresponds to *poesis*, the making of a world in the more Aristotelian than Platonic sense. The second, more receptive and mystical approach corresponds to *sruti*, the divine revelation of cosmic order to the spiritual adept. Both *poesis* and *sruti* pertain to art, but the first has a human author, the second a divine author; the first, a human response to a darkened world, the second a divine revelation to be received by humans in a still-illuminated world; values are created in the first, values are given in the second; the first imposes synthetic order through man-made forms with their own internal logic, whereas the second expresses inherent cosmic order through force.

So, we are back to the form (or frieze) versus force dichotomy, with form corresponding to art and secular disenchantment, and force corresponding to mystical perception and religious enchantment. But whereas Forster in Part I found himself on the side of force, he in the later Fielding passage finds himself on the side of form. How different this Venetian scene, where earth “upholds...works of man” imposed on it, and the Chandrapore native quarters scene, where earth—the “tropical plausance”—bursts through the architecture! In Venice, the subdued earth exists to support the works of man that have subdued it; in the Chandrapore native quarter, the earth “seeking light and air, [is] endowed with more strength than man or his works.”<sup>466</sup> Where Forster spoke admiringly of the “tropical plausance” scene, he would now no doubt re-evaluate it

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid. 4.

as yet another instance of the natives' inability to create solid and purposeful forms—the same inability that would lead them to see not shape but sumptuousness in Venice. And this difference in sensibility for force/form constitutes a “serious barrier” between Indians and Brits. (Oddly, he allows, rather admiringly, for the mystic's perception of the divine author's revelation of cosmic order, but he does not allow for such perception among the common Indians who remain unknown to him.)

What has brought about this change in Forster's attitude toward force and form? The intervening caves episode has led to his recoil from force and into form. Once he has unsuccessfully grappled with the sinister underside of the force of enchantment, he temporarily renews his appreciation for solidity of form: for Fielding, European secular architecture; for him, the secular realism of the novel. Thus, aside from the two circumscribed moments (the opening chapters of Parts I and II) when he falteringly gives himself over to Indian enchantment, he remains solidly realist in his narration in the first two-thirds of the novel. After the caves episode, the narration reverts to a strictly realist depiction of the most social realist sort: the narration moves from club house to court house, chronicling the reshufflings of social relationships therein.

If the historical Forster reached Islam via Hinduism, the destination seemed to have been preferable to the journey. The mosque—“stammered” form, inferior in its mosaics and marbles to the Venetian church—nonetheless asserts form over force. Hence its being a “positive relief” for Forster after too much Hindu immanence of force. The lead physical icon of *A Passage to India*, the mosque, appeals to both the Brits and the urban Muslims precisely for the feature that alienates it from both Hinduism and a more syncretic, embodied Islam: namely, the tendency

toward transcendence rather than immanence. In his recoil from Hinduism/syncretic Islam, Forster clings to a Platonic view of form: form as absolute idea rather than as myriad, protean worldly appearances. Better that such an appearance should reach up to the transcendental idea, that it should aspire to the absolute, that it should have some unified artistic principles, rather than wallowing willy-nilly in infinitely various, ungoverned, ephemeral instantiations. The form/idea for the mosque exists on the transcendental plane and is to be translated by intellect into artistic principles; the form/incarnation of the Hindu/Muslim syncretic shrines emanates from the immanent plane and is to be channeled as purely as possible by the particularities and diversities of the devotee's senses.

Furthermore, transcendence and abstraction allow for easy translatability across cultures, almost as transnational Buddhism does in our present moment. If so, then transcendence of form corresponds to abstraction and to translatability whereas immanence of force corresponds to mimetic concreteness and to place-rootedness (force emanates from a specific site manifesting as a highly particular and changeable form). What is more, Forster-via-Fielding in the preceding passage claims in unabashed terms that Europe sets the norm for form.

#### AZIZ AND FORM

What continues to be striking, though, is not Fielding's or Forster's preference for form over force, but Aziz's. He is as aerially detached from the autochthonous enchantment of nature as Adela is, but without her callow curiosity. To him, the caves are merely a frieze—brute objects to be dominated by the eye and to serve as subdued backdrop for the exotic pageant he

stages for his English guests. Given the crisis that follows, the tents and elephants<sup>467</sup> and cliché decorations he imposes on the caves retrospectively strike one as absurdly out of place. Furthermore, they betray Aziz's naïveté regarding "the force that lies behind the colour" of the "true India." He grossly underestimates this force which pays him back with interest. Indeed, the caves might be seen as the negative force of enchantment that corresponds to the positive one driving the assertively beautiful nature of Chandrapore's indigenous quarter.

There is something fundamental about the interconnected Hinduism, Indo-syncretic Islam, caves, and animist India that Aziz cannot even vaguely fathom—from beginning to end of story. From his dismissal of Godbole's foreboding about the caves during the early meeting at Fielding's house, to his unjust imprisonment, to his abstention from the Gokul Ashtami celebrations in the Hindu princely state of Mau, he misses the point: namely, the Indian enchantment that is all around him but just beyond his reach. The justifiably indignant accused cannot understand what has happened in the caves because he cannot understand what they are finally all about. While it is understandable that the Brits are bewildered by the caves, it should surprise us that a native of a city whose only noteworthy feature is the caves, would be heedless of the caves' enchantment, whereas the villagers and the Godbole are keenly aware and duly cowed by them. It is Aziz's oblivion to enchantment that does him in: his oblivion is both the effect and the cause for his own thorough-going disenchantment. For him as much as for the Brits, Indian enchantment remains locked away in the caves and in Godbole's silence and inscrutability.

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<sup>467</sup> Note even Adela's association of elephants with the exoticist trumpery of the Raj: "We should never have seen [the sunrise over the caves] if we'd stuck to the Turtons and their eternal elephants" (Forster, *A Passage to India*, 151).

## FIELDING'S TEA

Merely the domino effect of cross-cultural misunderstandings that have already occurred at Fielding's tea, Aziz's grandiose invitation to take the party on an expedition to the Marabar Caves only catalyzes his chagrined realization that he himself has never been and is in no position to describe them. Significantly, one of the reasons he has not visited the local attraction is that "they were so far"<sup>468</sup>—less distant geographically than culturally, it turns out. When he passes the buck to the aloof, "enigmatic," heretofore silent Godbole, who *has* in fact visited the caves, the latter thwarts Aziz's wrongheaded querying as to what makes the caves so extraordinary after all. The narrator and even Aziz, if not Adela, realize that Godbole is holding back what is essential: he certainly knows what makes the caves extraordinary, but he adroitly refuses to divulge the secret. Cryptically, he offers only the most minimal responses to Aziz's battery of wrong guesses in a sustained game of trial-and-error (all error, it turns out). Aziz attributes Godbole's tense evasiveness to a quality of Indian inhibition in the presence of Brits that he himself has often suffered. But he is wrong: Godbole's silence is not inhibition, but active concealment; and the two men are not, as he imagines, similar vis-à-vis the Brits or much else.

The narrator describes the difference between the two men thus: "the comparatively simple mind of the Mohammedan was encountering Ancient Night."<sup>469</sup> But while the text manages to be one step ahead of the blissfully ignorant, semi-secular Aziz by insinuating

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid. 80-81.

something untenable and possibly nefarious about the caves, it cannot go so far as to penetrate Ancient Night. While the term “Ancient Night” patently refers to Godbole’s mind, it could also connote the sinisterly primeval caves themselves, or the existential abyss reflected by them. Indeed, I believe Forster here is beginning to forge a connection among all three that he will reinforce as the novel progresses. That the enchantment of the autochthonous Indian landscape and the existential cosmic sphere are telescoped into the orthodox Brahmin scholar’s sealed-off mind suggests three things: 1) Forster’s intuition that even orthodox modern Hinduism has a sustained connection to the primordial enchantment of nature; 2) all of these elements have become inaccessible to both secular, urban Muslims like Aziz and the British; and 3) the narrator will ultimately have to penetrate Godbole’s mind in order to unlock some of these inaccessible elements of indigenous India. At this point, however, the text has not yet gained access to Godbole’s mind any more than to his song.

#### GODBOLE’S SONG

When Godbole belatedly breaks into religious song, Fielding’s party is as bewildered by it as it will be by the caves. In fact, the narrator describes Godbole’s song in the very obfuscatory terms that he will echo in the description of the caves:

...one *sound* after another. At times there seemed rhythm, at times there was the illusion of a Western melody. But the ear, baffled repeatedly, soon lost any clue, and wandered in a maze of *noises...none intelligible*. It was the song of an *unknown bird*. Only the servants understood it. They began to whisper to one another. The man who was gathering water chestnut came naked out of the tank, his lips parted with delight, disclosing his scarlet tongue. The *sounds* continued...<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> Ibid. 84-85, italics mine.

Significantly, Godbole's song is described primarily as sounds and noises. Devoid of meaning, value, and cultural familiarity, an alien music comes across merely sounds and noises, thus bringing it closer to the animal world. Not surprisingly, even the single reference to Godbole's song *as* song is rendered in animal terms: the "song of an unknown bird." I believe Forster's association of Godbole's religious song with the realm of nature is not mere cultural condescension or simple-minded Orientalism; rather, it weaves the thread of enchantment through song (again, the "chant" in enchantment), Hinduism, and nature—the three enchanted, interlinked entities we have discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Moreover, the nexus Forster establishes here highlights the foreigners' alienation from all three: as with the caves, only the Hindu subalterns grasp the song's enchantment—this is a bird that is very familiar to them.

For all his intuitive linking of nature, enchantment, and religiosity, Forster remains an exoticist in the 'bad' sense in this scene, for he is as alienated from Godbole's song as his main characters are, as even Adela is when she sits up high in her dog-cart surveying the Indian frieze. Yet, this is merely the starting-point for Forster's exoticism, which gradually evolves from this more Orientalist variety, in which fixed positions of self and other, subject and object, remain intact and separated, to a more humanist variety, a dynamic relationship wherein those polar positions nearly dissolve. It is this more complex dialectic of exoticism that will drive Forster's narrative to the end as he asymptotically approaches Godbole's mind and enchanted sensibility. In fact, the novel will end with Godbole's religious singing again, but this time the narrator will have made considerable progress into an understanding and keenness for the enchanted attitude driving it. Then, at the Gokul Ashtami celebration in the Mau, Krishna will have come down to



earth, so much so that even the narrator can nearly grasp the god; but for now, the he “refuses to come.” This phrase is repeated several times. One might read *GODbole* as a stand-in for the god Krishna about whom he sings. At Fielding’s tea, Godbole refuses to “come,” his enchanted sensibility remaining unintelligible to all but the few commoners who (as will be the case throughout *A Passage to India*) remain marginal to the story; at the Gokul Ashtami celebration at the end of the novel, he, like Krishna, will have come. When he does, not just the contents of his mind, but his general worldview will become finally accessible to Forster.

But here, in Part I of the novel, the narrator more or less shares the same nonplussed, estranged perspective on indigenous enchantment as Fielding’s non-Hindu guests. This collective foreign point of view is indicated by Forster’s universalizing deployment of the definite article “the” rather than the third person possessive pronoun to describe “*the* ear, [which] baffled repeatedly, soon lost any clue, and wandered in a maze of noises...none intelligible.” This maze of noises that baffles and leaves outsiders clueless anticipates the echo in the maze of caves—an echo that reduces everything to the same horrifying “bom.”

At this point in the novel, Forster’s narrative point of view is still thoroughly third person, the perspective typically associated with solid social realism. Further, characters’ interiorities are sealed off to one another, which is not the case in Part III when the Hindu celebrants seem to share one mind, and the narrator is able to penetrate into Godbole’s mind. It is, I will argue, enchantment that allows for this inter-psychoic communicability. Auerbach’s wonderful essay, “Odysseus’s Scar” explains that in the Homeric (read: enchanted) mode of narration, meaning lies at the surface and is accessible to all in a shared lifeworld.<sup>471</sup> Thus the

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<sup>471</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus’ Scar,” *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* 3.

Homeric style distinguishes itself not only from the interiority of the Bible, according to Auerbach, but also from the interiority of the modern novel according to Lukács who dwells on the inaccessible interiorities of the fallen world. Whereas in an enchanted world there is not yet any interiority because there is not yet any exteriority, in a disenchanted world, there is only interiority because it is divorced from the external world and from other interiorities. To use Bilgrami's language, the enchanted eye sees value where the disenchanted eye sees only darkness.

Throughout Part I, Forster seems to be making a clear connection between disenchantment and detachment vis-à-vis three interlinked phenomena (nature, mimesis, and colonial subjects). Because detached observation is also the default mode of traditional third-person realist narration, the latter naturally lends itself to a disenchanted worldview. As we have seen, in Part I, Forster's own narrative mode is still generally grounded in detachment and disenchantment, despite the fact that he has begun provisionally to elaborate an implicit critique of both. In Part II, however, he will decisively shift his own third-person realist narration toward an enchanted perspective. Though no small feat, it is not quite successful (at least not until Part III, and even then debatably). However, his efforts in "Caves" to enchant third-person realist narration will manifest heretofore unthinkable capacities of realism, and their even more unexpected affinities with indigenous mythpoetics.

## II. PART II: “CAVES”

### THE DISENCHANTED ALIENS:

Aziz remains blissfully ignorant of not just the caves’ nebulous and possibly nefarious quality, but also the reason for Godbole’s tense silence. Significantly, those Indians who are familiar with the caves’ primordial enchantment are marginalized from the caves expedition. Godbole, whose foreboding if evasive allusions to the caves while at Fielding’s tea are dismissed, misses the train because—and this is important—he is waylaid by his Hindu ritual of puja. While Aziz, consumed in a charged conversation laden with misunderstanding and alienating sexual subtext, takes Adela’s hand to support her on the climb, the local guide “adhered to the surface like a lizard and scampered about as if governed by a personal centre of gravity.”<sup>472</sup> This anonymous guide, presumably from the surrounding villages, seems natively familiar and adept in this environment, but he, much like Godbole is evasive when it comes down to it: when Aziz asks him which cave Adela entered while he was off smoking, all the guide does is “indicate the group [of caves] vaguely,”<sup>473</sup> and then finally disappears from the scene of the alleged crime, never to be identified or located as the case unfolds.

As the train, that most iconic symbol of British colonialism in India, moves further from the city and closer to the caves—to the India described above—Aziz, the Brits, and the text become increasingly confounded. As the train pulls up to the caves, Aziz’s party fails to heed the local villagers’ animist acknowledgement of the sacral quality of the caves: “a splash of red

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<sup>472</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 168.

<sup>473</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 170.

paint,”<sup>474</sup> where “Hinduism has scratched and plastered a few rocks.”<sup>475</sup> Here, “the shrines are unfrequented, as if pilgrims, who generally seek the extraordinary, had here found too much of it.”<sup>476</sup> In another subjunctive sentence, Forster writes, “It is as if the surrounding plain or the passing birds have taken upon themselves to exclaim “extraordinary,” and the world has taken root in the air. As Frank Kermode points out, this word “extraordinary”<sup>477</sup> is mentioned in the novel only in connection with the caves and with the conduct of Adela that results from her crisis there. But all this extraordinariness of the caves is lost on Aziz and his party:

Aziz noticed nothing. His guests noticed a little...and wished it could have turned into some Mohammedan object, such as a mosque, which their host would have appreciated and explained. His ignorance became evident, and was really rather a drawback. In spite of his gay, confident talk, he had no notion how to treat this particular aspect of India: he was lost in it without Professor Godbole, like themselves.<sup>478</sup>

What is this particular aspect of India, lost on Aziz and his British guests, but grasped by Godbole, the local guide, and the village animist worshippers? It is *anima mundi*: a world shot through with spirit,<sup>479</sup> a world already lost to the Indian cities fast encroaching on the countryside. In other words, enchantment exists, but only in the periphery, far removed from those who will generally be the narrators, characters, and authors of Indian fiction going forward.

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid. 150.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid.

<sup>477</sup> Kermode 68. I will treat extraordinariness in relation to enchantment later in this chapter.

<sup>478</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 156.

## FORSTER SIDE-STEPS RELIGION

While Aziz and his British friends remain oblivious to, or at best nonplussed by, indigenous enchantment in Part II, the novel itself approaches it considerably more. If the story has thus far been taken up with the culture of British India as exemplified by Chandrapore's civil station, it now abruptly shifts to a primeval landscape. Social realism gives way to enchanted realism as the narrator attempts directly to present the caves. As intimated in the native quarter and cruel sun descriptions—the rare hints of an enchanted point of view in Part I—the narrator gains access to enchantment via nature. Here, in the *mise-en-scène* of the caves, Forster reaches back to a pre-Aryan nature in order to circumvent religion, which thus far he knows only to be either disenchanting in its sectarianism (Metropolitan Islam, urban Hinduism) or opaque, vague, and inaccessible (Hindu mysticism).

Thus, in a complex move, he asserts the primacy of geology over religion in order to convey the unfathomable antiquity of the Indian land; in other words, he uses a disenchanted epistemology (natural science) to render an enchanted ontology (primordial Indian landscape). Forster begins “Caves” by rendering the Deccan plateau in terms that are at once geological and mythic:

The Ganges, though flowing from the foot of Vishnu and through Siva's hair, is not an ancient stream. Geology, looking further than religion, knows of a time when neither the river nor the Himalayas that nourished it existed, and an ocean flowed over the holy places of Hindustan. The mountains rose, their debris silted up the ocean, the gods took their seats on them and contrived the river, and the India we call immemorial came into being. But India is really far older. In the days of the prehistoric ocean the southern part of the peninsula already existed, and the high places of Dravidia have been land since land began...They are older than anything in the world.<sup>480</sup> No water has ever covered them, and the sun who has watched them for countless aeons may still discern in their outlines forms that were his before our

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<sup>480</sup> Flood basalts circa 65 million years ago when there is a break in the fossil record (cf. mass extinctions, end of the age of dinosaurs). Flood basalts, usually found only in ocean plates, erupted on continental plates in only a few locations. I am grateful to geologist Kyle Nichols for this information.

globe was torn from his bosom. If flesh of the sun's flesh is to be touched anywhere, it is here, among the incredible antiquity of these hills.<sup>481</sup>

Forster's impulse to declare that India was enchanted long before Hinduism arrived smacks of a mild cynicism toward a religion with which he shares the impulse to enchant nature. In "Caves," Forster seems relentlessly determined to assert the primacy of nature over second nature, in this case religion. Such a human "contrivance" cannot contend with the sublimity of this landscape—a landscape that asserts its indomitability by its unfathomable primordiality and intransigence. He actively deracinates the caves, which are shorn of all the Buddhist sculptural iconography cut into the stone of the Barabar Caves that were the historical basis for his fictional Marabar Caves.<sup>482</sup> He further undercuts indigenous cosmology by relegating the Hindu presence at the caves to a mere footnote: "Hinduism had scratched and plastered a few rocks, but the shrines are unfrequented." The sentence conveys the shabbiness, inadequacy, and triviality of religion compared to the immensity of an overpowering nature.

All told, such strenuous diminishing of religion vis-à-vis the pivotal caves begs the question: why? My tri-partite conjecture: 1) secular bias; 2) like Aziz and the Brits, he was too alienated from peasant indigenous religiosity to allow it to help him grapple with the caves; and 2) thus alienated, he knew only urban, middle class, orthodox instantiations of Hinduism and Islam, about whose sectarianism he had enough misgivings to want to reach back to a pre-

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<sup>481</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 135. This passage provides the epigraph for a chapter in Hinduism scholar Wendy Doniger's recent book *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. The chapter for which she uses the Forster epigraph deals with the consequential if variant myths of origin of the Indian subcontinent, all three of which are mixed up in Forster's mythological imaginary of India. For a lively analysis of Forster's construction of primordial India, as well as other theories and myths of subcontinental origin, see Doniger, Chapter 2 "Time and Space in India: 50 Million to 50,000 BCE."

<sup>482</sup> Kermode claims that Forster deracinated the caves in order to render the caves extraordinary, but I think Forster may have had other motivations, as I explain. See Kermode 68-69.

religious India to find his enchantment. By treating nature as such, Forster the secular-atheist could gain access to Indian enchantment (e.g., the caves) without recourse to gods in whom he himself did not believe.

#### LANGUAGE AND RELIGION: PARALLEL TRACKS

Ironically and unwittingly, his own strenuous narrative efforts to contend with the sublimity of the primeval Indian landscape reproduces the very cosmological efforts exerted by the Hindus from whom he seeks distance. Indeed, the parallel tracks to the spiritual that Forster identifies in “What I Believe”—the mystical and the artistic—are tread, on one track, by Forster in his artistic rendering of the formidable Indian landscape, and, on the other, by the early Hindus. (Not until “Temple” will these parallel tracks of the mystical and the artistic be explicitly and productively linked.)

Let us, for a moment, in the spirit of Vico, project ourselves imaginatively into the mind of the early Aryan invaders of the subcontinent as they drove further and further unto the Deccan plateau, also known as Dravidia, or aboriginal India. Their poetic record gives voice to a foreign peoples, not unlike Forster, daunted by the unforgiving landscape and humanity of autochthonous Dravidia—so much so that they recoiled from it, traversing and settling instead throughout the more hospitable Gangetic plain of the North. Though the South/Dravidia was not pulled fully into the Hindu fold until much later in the development of Hinduism, the early encounter figures heavily in the early development of Hinduism’s cosmology, as recorded in the poetry of the Rg Veda. In fact, one could say that Hinduism was forged in the crucible of the early Aryan’s first contact with the forbidding terrain and inhabitants of aboriginal India. So

when Forster contends narratively and philosophically with the caves, he re-invents the wheel because he is rather ignorant of a pre-existing, contextual tradition (Hinduism) which has had thousands of years to grapple with what he encounters as a solitary and foreign novice now.

Forster's premature dismissal of indigenous religion belies his own implicit analogizing of it to language: two man-made phenomena that, he claims, cannot begin to stand up to the sublime enchantment of the caves, but that end up, to my view, proving fairly competent to it. According to Forster, however, just as religion can make only the feeblest attempt to grapple with the primeval landscape, so too does language falter. Nonetheless, the first few pages of "Caves," perhaps the most stunning modernist writing in the entire novel, manifest Forster's vigorous struggle to force open his own realism to admit the "insubstantial" or "supernatural," as he would call it. These few rich pages are a fascinating study in language—in the limits and possibilities of a realism coping with numinosity.

Unlike the confident social realist narrator of "Mosque," the narrator of "Caves," underscores his own inability to render his object. No sooner does he set himself the task of straight-forward description than he abandons it. His heavily ironic assertion, "The caves are readily described,"<sup>483</sup> is followed by a mere two-sentence empirical description of the physical structure of the caves. The aborted effort at a photo-objective rendering has the effect of highlighting precisely the limitations of that kind of traditional realist description in conveying numinosity.<sup>484</sup> Forster is most able to convey the gravitas of the caves' enchantment by

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<sup>483</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 136.

<sup>484</sup> Here, it would be helpful to recall Tagore's critique of photo-objective realism. See Chapter 2.



explicitly NOT conveying it; he admits the failure of language and thought to contend with such primeval nature:

There is something unspeakable in these outposts. They are like nothing else in the world...they bear no relation to anything dreamt or seen. To call them 'uncanny' suggests ghosts, and they are older than all spirit. [The visitor] finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in his mind...Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation—for they have one—does not depend on human speech.<sup>485</sup>

Forster is beginning to approach the understanding of the conspicuously absent Godbole, who back at Fielding's tea, had already indicated that the caves' reputation does not depend on human speech; and so he then, like Forster now, abstains from such gratuitous speech. Forster's "description"—if we can call it that—operates primarily in the negative: unspeakable, unlike anything else, no relation to anything dreamt or seen, not even uncanny, attaching to nothing.

#### FORSTER AND THE PRINCIPLE OF THE NEGATIVE

Indeed, the very essence of the Marabar Caves' enchantment is the negative. Despite Forster's caveat that the hollowness that remains sealed inside the innermost sancta is value-neutral (it would not "[add] to the sum of good or evil"), he certainly renders in the negative the *force* that invisibly sweeps through the caves taking its toll. The rendering of this negativity is multivalent. First of all, the caves level difference: every sound becomes the same "boum," the dull experience is indistinguishable from the interesting one, each cave indistinguishable from the next.<sup>486</sup> Moreover, their enchantment, hardly value-neutral in itself,<sup>487</sup> has entirely negative

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<sup>485</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 137.

<sup>486</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 137.

<sup>487</sup> The quotation, just below, claiming that the caves are beyond good and evil belies Forster's own coloring of the caves in sinister hues, despite his caveats that they are beyond good and evil. The caves' sinister hue is adumbrated by the vaguely connected earlier episode of the accident on Marabar Road.

*effects* when it spills into the disenchanted arena (secular lives, colonial courts) of the alienated characters. Finally, the caves' hollowness itself is a physical manifestation of the existential void, the ultimate nothingness, the irreducibly negative: "Nothing is inside them...if mankind grew curious and excavated, nothing, nothing would be added to the sum of good or evil."<sup>488</sup> Note that Forster uses the word "nothing" thrice in a mere two sentences. This nothingness clearly has a stupefying effect on the narrator.

When he claims that the caves are "older than all spirit," he takes an unusually disenchanted view of nature: he implies that they do not contain spirit. In doing so, he belies his own persistent sense that a peculiar spirit permeates the caves—a perception of his that gains strength throughout the caves episode, most sparkingly so when he describes a visitor striking a match in the caves. As with the Marabar Road—the accident-ridden, ghost-plagued, mystery-shrouded road—the Marabar caves, whose confusion of violence and bad sex<sup>489</sup> the former adumbrates, even more thoroughly lack the affirmative force of divinity. Kermode puts a clever turn on Forster's own phrase: "on that road there isn't enough god to go round; here, in the caves, there is absolutely none."<sup>490</sup> *But that is not to say that the caves are disenchanted.* Enchantment is here, but it is a negative enchantment—the spiritual force of the sinister, the void, or the dangerous. This force of negative enchantment fascinates Forster, but he struggles to comprehend and convey it; he must come up with his own language to render a force that he intuits. He would not be the first European artist to grapple with the negative: even within

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<sup>488</sup> Ibid. 138.

<sup>489</sup> Kermode 66.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid. 69.

literature the gothic, surrealism, and magical realism all try to express the dark numinosity of the world.<sup>491</sup> But what is striking about the more traditionalist Forster is that he eschews radically alternative frames like these, instead stubbornly insisting on realism's ability to capture that numinosity. His solitary effort finding his way in the dark to make space for the darkly numinous is limited, but impressive precisely because he is faring his way with limited resources and precedents.

#### HINDUISM AND THE PRINCIPLE OF THE NEGATIVE:

If Forster struggles to give voice to the existential negativity, Hinduism, by contrast, has always had a certain ease with it. I would like to trace this accretive tradition of accommodating the negative in terms of Wendy Doniger's scheme of the changing alliances of gods, humans, and anti-gods over the three phases of Hinduism: the Vedic, the Puranic, and the bhakti traditions. The early (Vedic) Aryans dealt with negative enchantment by rendering the most indomitable elements they encountered, chiefly in pre-Aryan Dravidia, in terms of antigods. It is no coincidence that the Aryans depicted the antigods (*asuras*) and their earthly helpmates, the demons or ogres (*raskhasas*), as aboriginal Dravidians or *Anāryas/Dasyus/Dāsas* (the 'black-skinned' original inhabitants who "know no gods, no laws, and no sacrifices"<sup>492</sup>). These *asuras* and *raskhasas* are the poetic (and patently racist) reckoning with the daunting autochthonous

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<sup>491</sup> For example, the College of Sociology (1937-1939), including Leiris, Caillois, and especially Bataille, elaborated the sacred in everyday life (the secular sacred), particularly the left-hand sacred (the dark sacred).

<sup>492</sup> Winternitz 57.

landscape and people that fought and often thwarted the divine missionaries the early Aryans took themselves to be as they spread from West to East.

But what is important is that the antigods are not all that different from the gods. They are considered the

older brothers of the gods, the ‘dark, olden gods’ in contrast with the ‘mortal gods of heaven,’ like the Titans of Greek mythology; the Veda still calls the oldest Vedic gods—Agni, Varuna—Asuras. The gods and antigods have the same moral substance (indeed the gods often lie and cheat far more than the antigods do; power corrupts, and divine power corrupts divinely); the antigods are simply the other team. Because the players on each side are intrinsically differentiated by their morals, the morals shift back and forth from one category to another during the course of history, and even from one text to another in any single period: As there are good humans and evil humans, so there are good gods and evil gods, good antigods and evil antigods. In the absence of ethical character, what the gods and antigods have is power, which they can exercise at their pleasure. The gods and antigods are in competition for the goods of the sacrifice, and since humans sacrifice to the gods,<sup>493</sup> they are against the antigods, who always, obligingly, lose to the gods in the end.<sup>494</sup>

A comforting arrangement for the Aryans, who saw themselves as earthly handmaidens to the gods, just as rakshasas (bearing striking resemblance to the Dasyus) were earthly proxies for the antigods. The antigods are the negative only in the sense that they are the inverse of the gods. But negativity as evil, per se, is not the exclusive reserve of the antigods. Rather, evil, viewed in this frame, originates from the same source as good and moves just as fluidly among all beings and throughout the entire cosmos, sparing no one in an interconnected enchanted world. This is what Godbole understands when he, at the height of Aziz’s crisis, makes that exasperating, platitudinous, and perverse nonsequitur about good and evil: “according to our philosophy [...] nothing can be performed in isolation. All perform a good action, when one is performed, and

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<sup>493</sup> Doniger 109. Humans sacrifice to the gods only, only because gods—NOT antigods—are legitimately entitled to sacrifice. This gives the gods their competitive edge, and explains the strategic alliance between gods and humans against antigods.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

when an evil action is performed, all perform it...When evil occurs, it expresses the whole of the universe...[good and evil] are both of them aspects of my Lord...”<sup>495</sup>

Indeed, the notion that both good and evil comprise divinity becomes even more emphatic by time of the second alliance in the Brahmanas, which posit evil as actually emanating from the gods who need to unload it onto their scapegoats, the humans and antigods, in order to remain superior to both.<sup>496</sup> The Brahmanas are a late Vedic text that provides commentary on the significance of rituals sparingly delineated in the Rig Veda; as such, it explicitly elaborates an ethics of evil which is nearly absent in the Rig Veda itself. The god-human-antigod alliance has shifted, such that evil is more explicitly associated with the antigods who come across now more like ogres than gods. Yet, “evil originates in the gods themselves and is then disseminated to both antigods and humans. More precisely, it originates in Prajapati [the first being], who, as he attempts to create, falls into the grasp of evil.”<sup>497</sup> That evil attended creation itself says much about the Hindu moral economy: evil is necessarily the secret sharer of the cosmos. Many a divine myth follow the Prajapati precedent, in which evil originates in a god and is subsequently distributed to antigods and humans, suffused throughout the world. For example, Indra, the early Aryans’ version of Zeus, having committed the ultimate sin of killing a Brahmin, gets so intoxicated on soma that when it permeates out of him, so too does his brahminicide, which transmogrifies into wild beasts that will forever stalk men. In a subsequent act of brahminicide,

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<sup>495</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 198.

<sup>496</sup> By now, “sacrifice” has become more internal and individualized, such that both humans and antigods, by pursuing virtuous practices and storing up “tapas” (internal heat) could gain access to the power normally reserved for gods. This is why it became so imperative for the gods to unload their evil onto the threatening humans and antigods.

<sup>497</sup> Doniger 161.

he contractually transfers his sin to the earth, the trees, and the women; he negotiates a deal with all three in which he will grant them fertility in exchange for bearing his sin. Indeed, their fertility will forever depend on their bearing the load of divine sin. Thus is evil yoked to creation itself. Doniger puts it simply: “evil on earth in general results from fallout from heaven, from the cosmic struggles of gods and antigods.”<sup>498</sup> Could this be the “aboriginal disaster” to which Forster alludes, without having a philosophy or mythology to undergird him as the Hindus do?

The Vedas, particularly the Rg Veda, are filled with black as well as white magic, with sorcery spells, and charms, all of which were meant (in very practical ways) to grapple with the negative. The problem of the negative did not fade away as Hinduism evolved. Instead, it got rarefied into a highly arcane, but important philosophical debate among the heterodox critical schools of the Shramanas and breakaway groups like the Jains and Buddhists. This debate centered on how being can be generated from nothingness. Indeed, the problem of mutuality of presence and absence, of good and evil underwrites Hinduism in all its forms—from its metaphysics to its mythology. This view of interconnectedness, given voice by Godbole the bhakta-cum-philosopher, could not be further removed from Enlightenment the Enlightenment split-think that dogs Forster in his realism even as he tries to fit it to another register: the numinous.

As the embodiment of the existential nothingness of the universe, the caves might be seen as the flip side to the irrepressible beauty and vigor of the enchanted “tropical plausance” of the native quarter of Chandrapore that Forster admires. Yet, they might also been seen as the flip side to the Hindu formless excess Forster found so problematic. But at this point, these

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<sup>498</sup> Ibid. 162.

connections among the various dimensions of enchantment remain vague and subcutaneous in the text. Godbole does, however, make the connections, proving yet again that he, though peripheral, is more than a stock Orientalist type; rather, he repeatedly holds the key to the enchanted cosmological vision Forster is so strenuously trying to capture. Like Fielding, we peremptorily dismiss Godbole's infuriatingly vague *ex post facto non sequitur* about the interconnectedness of opposites in an enchanted world. But, in fact, it contains the clue to the cosmological coherence of the novel—a cosmology that is well-worn territory in the Hindu tradition to which Forster only gradually turns. (In "Caves," Forster has not yet hitched his enchanted narrative mission to the indigenous religious vision; in fact, he still sees the two in nearly competitive rather than mutually enabling relation.)

Godbole's excursus links the issue of good and evil to that of presence and absence of divinity. He claims, "[good and evil] are both of them aspects of my Lord. He is present in the one, absent in the other, and the difference between presence and absence is great, as great as my feeble mind can grasp. Yet absence implies presence, *absence is not non-existence*, and we are therefore entitled to repeat, 'Come, come, come, come.'"<sup>499</sup> He implies that the catastrophe in the caves has been allowed to occur because the force of evil took over in the absence of divinity. (That this evil should be explicitly linked to the disenchantment of colonialism and urbanism is significant.) But such absence of God implies—through the operation of the negative—presence of God, just as Forster's intuition that "there was not enough God to go around" on the sinister Marabar Road implies a plenitude of God elsewhere. As Godbole says, absence does not mean non-existence. Indeed, both Forster's Marabar Road claim and his

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<sup>499</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 198, italics mine.

rendering of the caves as a God-forsaken place tacitly manifest his own (borrowed) sense that God can and does course through the world.

However, in Part II, Forster generally belies his fleeting Marabar Road intuition. The narrator remains nonplussed by the presence/absence dualism that Godbole elaborates. In fact, muddle is for the Brits what enchantment is for the Indians. The former see the Indian enmeshment of extremes/opposites (good and evil, presence and absence, august and ridiculous, extraordinary and ordinary, visible and invisible) as mutually nullifying, rather than additive. In Enlightenment thought, things need to be kept separate in order to remain distinct. Fielding and Mrs. Moore are both horrified by the suggestion that it is all the same, hence Fielding's indignation at Godbole's excursus and Mrs. Moore's existential undoing by the cave echoes' leveling of all difference. Forster, by emphasizing the horror of the caves through the very leveling of difference that so fatally affects Mrs. Moore (and, in another sense, Adela), seems to share his British characters' repulsion to Indian parataxis. But, they all misunderstand something basic about it. Godbole does not claim that it is all the same, but that it is *all together*. The novel's "come, come, come" recitative is India's muddle beckoning, inviting the Brits to experience the enchantment of enmeshment the way Godbole does. But in Part II, the call is still at best an *appeal* and, at worst a revulsion (a classic exotic combination) for the Brits; whereas it is a *promise* for the Godbole.

And it is a promise for Godbole, in part, because as a practicing bhakta he lives the philosophy of divine presence/absence. For the Hindus, especially bhaktis, the notion that certain sites and moments have been "abandoned by God" does not carry with it the Lukácsian implication of complete desacralization of the world. Rather, those temporary abandonments



only reinforce the relationship between human and God. In the Hindu cosmology (which Forster just barely co-opts in his Marabar Road reference), God never entirely abandons the world, for the world is *part* of the Him; when He seems absent, He has merely become temporarily unconscious of a particular part of Himself. I would like to quote from Forster's letters of 1913 a very relevant and intriguing conversation he had with his employer, the Maharaja of Dewas Senior, more affectionately called Bapu Sahib (who, as we recall, served as the nonfictional template for Godbole):

[The maharaja's] attitude was very difficult for a Westerner. He believes that we—men, birds, everything—are part of God... That isn't so difficult, but when I asked why we had any of us ever been severed from God, he explained it by God becoming unconscious that we were parts of him, owing to his energy at some time being concentrated elsewhere. 'So,' he said, 'a man who is thinking of something else may become unconscious of the existence of his own hand for a time, and feel nothing when it is touched.' Salvation, then, is the thrill which we feel when God again becomes conscious of us, and all our life we must train our perceptions<sup>500</sup> so that we may be capable of feeling when the time comes. I think I see what lies at the back of this—if you believe that the universe was God's conscious creation, you are faced with the fact that he has consciously created suffering and sin... I expect that as I have tried to describe it to you, this reads more like philosophy than religion, but it is inspired by [the maharaja's] belief in a being who, though omnipresent, is personal, and whom he calls Krishna.<sup>501</sup>

It is helpful to read this conversation back into Godbole's more cryptic explanation of divine presence and absence. The bhakta implores God to "Come, come, come, come" back to consciousness of the part of him that is the bhakta himself. Seeming absence of God—which allows enchanted nihilist forces to enter—means neither non-existence of God, nor complete abandonment by God. Rather, it "entitles" the bhakta to a certain agency: the agency to recall (in

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<sup>500</sup> I would argue that the "Caves" episode is Forster's own training of perception so that he may be capable of feeling when the time comes. In particular, in this chapter he seems to be training his perception for an intuition regarding presence-absence. We have seen this training develop in a few different ways: the Godbole clue, the Marabar Road episode, and parallels between language and Aryan cosmology. The epiphanic time will come at the Gokul Ashtami festival, when God comes to Godbole and his fellow Hindus, and God-bole comes to Forster. The central recitative of the novel "Come, come, come" expresses both *viraha* (love-in-longing) and exoticism. Exoticism exceeds itself: the moment of capture is always ephemeral, just as neither divinity, nor perception of the divine, does not stay with one; rather, they are always fleeting, incomplete.

<sup>501</sup> Forster, *The Hill of Devi* 44-46.

both senses of the word) God, and to put himself in the way of God's grace. "Entitles" is an interesting word for Godbole to choose: it implies a reciprocal—even a contractual—relationship, which is how *bhakti*, or devotion in general, might be considered.

*Bhakti*, for Godbole, the Maharaja of Dewas, and other Vaishnavites, means devotion to Krishna. The devotee draws his model from the figure of Radha, Krishna's primary but non-exclusive lover. The *inamorata*, so intimate as to be part of her lover, has the right to entreat him to return to her (or, to that part of himself that is she) when he has become occupied elsewhere. Though she fears he has abandoned her completely, she continues to long for, seek, beseech, and await him. And indeed, his putative abandonment always turns out to be merely a temporary absence, their bond ecstatically reaffirmed with his return. In fact, she feels his presence most exquisitely in his absence—a privileged *rasa* (taste) of love and devotion called "viraha": love-in-longing. And so divine presence and absence enhance each other: two sides of the equation in an enchanted world where people and god exist in an intimate, reciprocal, and responsive relationship.

The problem with the caves episode is that in the absence of benevolent divinity (and presence of other, negative, numinous forces), there is no believer to summon divinity back to consciousness of this site. We must wonder: If Godbole had been there, might the disaster have been averted? Tellingly, Godbole escapes the caves, replete with all its negativity, because he is *praying*. It is as though the God whom he supplicates extends His grace by protecting him from the sinister force coursing through the caves. However, the (secular) others are unspared, (temporarily) abandoned by a God who has been abandoned by them. Without Godbole in the entourage, all we have is a party of foreigners oblivious to and impotent in the face of the

negative enchantment of the caves (i.e., the absence of divinity). Meanwhile this negative enchantment wreaks its vengeance on the party that has imported and imposed their disenchantment on the site: their incursion is the initial “evil action” that sets into motion the domino effects of Mrs. Moore’s nervous breakdown, Adela’s rape-hallucination, and Aziz’s unjust imprisonment. Via train, the very icon of colonial disenchantment,<sup>502</sup> they bring their urban problems—bad exoticism, estrangement from nature, and the fraught sexual politics of colonialism—with them into the circumscribed caves. Without Godbole, they remain locked out of an understanding of the caves’ enchantment (though affected by it all the same); further, without Godbole the faithful, this group of secular outsiders are impotent to invoke divinity’s apotropaic magic to counter evil. They are locked out of the caves’ enchantment because they do not have a relationship of reciprocity with God/nature; in Bilgramian terms, they do not realize that nature imposes normative constraints on humans. And so they obviously transgress and, in turn, are punished by the caves. If there were a moral to the caves episode, it would be that urbanization/colonialism ought not to encroach upon the remaining enclaves of enchantment that obtain in India—rare enclaves that, for Forster, salutarily distinguish India from Europe at that time.

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<sup>502</sup> Adela, tellingly, misses the message of the train’s “pomper pomper”: “Its message, for it had one—avoided her well-equipped mind” (Forster, *A Passage to India*, 150). What is the message? Perhaps it has to do with its disenchanting effects on enchantment, and the disastrous results that will ensue from it, both macro-cosmically (colonialism) and micro-cosmically (her misapprehension in the caves).

## FORSTER WORKING FROM SCRATCH: THE FAILURE OF LANGUAGE?

Forster, for all his relative sensitivity to the negative enchantment of the caves and his valiant striving to convey it in secular terms, remains somewhat locked out of it as well—albeit self-consciously so, unlike his main characters. He, like them, is estranged from the local villagers’ view/relation to the caves, and he has banished Godbole—his only key to the Indian cosmological scheme for enchantment—from the caves episode. Without his liaison to autochthonous India, Forster can only go so far. The degree to which he feels locked out of the caves’ enchantment is reflected by his symbolic choice to imagine whether there are “certain chambers that have no entrances?...Chambers never unsealed since the arrival of the gods...sealed up before the creation of pestilence or treasure.”<sup>503</sup> At this point, enchantment is indeed ‘sealed up,’ locked away from the narrator.

In “Caves,” having prematurely dispensed with religion, the narrator is working on his own, “from scratch,” linguistically striving to capture an enchantment that lies beyond the ken of traditional realism. When it comes to the caves, the resources of realism over which Forster has such command fail him. As “nothing, nothing attaches to [the caves],” the caves offer no toehold of reality onto which realism can hang. Language does not know what to reflect. Moreover, language is rendered irrelevant: the caves “do not depend upon human speech.” That is to say, enchantment exists, with or without language. In other words, Forster having already dethroned religion earlier in the chapter, now does the same with language vis-à-vis primordial enchantment.

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<sup>503</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 138.

Forster's most enchanted sentence in the caves introduction strikes me as a quasi-secular echo of the Maharaja's belief that "we—men, birds, everything—are part of God." It reads: "It is as if the surrounding plain or the passing birds have taken upon themselves to exclaim 'extraordinary,' and the world has taken root in the air, and been inhaled by mankind." This vision presents us with an extreme enchantment of a nature that bypasses language altogether. Here, the humans are an integrated part of the natural universe, but they in no way have the kind of linguistically-privileged position that the Bible, and even Benjamin describing enchanted mimetic language before the Fall, claims they do. Here, the "mute language of nature" (to use Benjamin's phrase) is not so mute: the speakers are the birds and the plains, not the humans. In this radical reversal of the Biblical hierarchy of being, we can identify Forster's belief that in India "the inarticulate world is closer at hand and readier to resume control." Man does not name, but inhale: he relates to the world not through the mind (not even a mind shared with God), but through the body.

And yet, Forster has no recourse but to mind, to language, however limited vis-à-vis enchantment. His claims against language belie his own indefatigable drive to manipulate language into something that can do justice to the enchantment he encounters. The effort is beautiful. Even when he pushes himself beyond negative definition, he still can only approach description obliquely: conditional turns of phrase and exaggerated metaphoricity, two literary techniques that are, of course, related. The conditional mode invokes what is 'not-quite' to imply what 'is'; metaphor does the same, relating disparate entities by likening the unlike (mimesis).

Forster's most metaphorized description of the caves pictures a visitor striking a match:

Immediately another flame rises in the depths of the rock and moves toward the surface like an imprisoned spirit...The two flames approach and strive to unite, but cannot, because one of them breathes air, the other stone. A mirror inlaid with lovely colours divides the lovers, delicate stars of pink and grey interpose, exquisite nebulae, shadings fainter than the tail of a comet or the midday moon, all the evanescent life of the granite, only here visible. Fists and fingers thrust above the advancing soil—here at last is their skin, finer than any covering required by the animals, smoother than windless water, more voluptuous than love. The radiance increases, the flames touch one another, kiss, expire.<sup>504</sup>

This extended metaphor operates at three levels: the social, the philosophical, and the natural.

“The two flames [that] approach and strive to unite, but cannot because one of them breathes air, the other stone” stand in for the Indians and the Brits, the former having been persistently associated with air, sky, and force, and the latter with solidity of form. The two long to unite, but are fundamentally of such different elements, that their convergence will always remain impossible; even when they seem to meet, it is only for an instant; expiration immediately follows. This is, after all, the main lesson of the novel, the turning point of which occurs right here, right now, in these very caves, when cross-cultural love expires. The book’s final lesson, whose socio-political seed is sown by the caves episode, is brought home explicitly in the last words of the novel, “No, not yet...No, not here”: another moment when the land of India itself indicates that, in Edward Said’s words, “There is resolution and union, but neither is complete.”<sup>505</sup> Said critically glosses the final words of the novel to conclude that they leave the reader with “the feeling that the political conflict will simply be resolved in the future.”

However, such a gloss focuses only on time, not place, whereas the text claims both as a problem for the British-Indian relationship. My argument, writ-large, is that the place, the intransigently enchanted land of India, presented the British with a problem that could never be resolved as

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid. 137-138.

<sup>505</sup> Said 201.

easily as the temporal one: the political arrangement may change (and will change) superficially, but the fundamental difference in worldview, particularly in relation to the enchantment of nature, will constitute an unbridgeable gap. So much so that the Brits and Indians might be considered to be of different elements, as the conceit above suggests.

At a second level, the metaphor of the two flames expresses the dynamic of good exoticism: the longing for the Other, the asymptotic approach, the impossibility of capture—indeed, union that is not complete. Further, the flames metaphor well describes Forster's own thwarted narrative effort: his longing to capture the ethereal, insubstantial quality of India in his solid (stone-like) realist form. Finally, that the flames' union is cast in sexual terms not only foreshadows the sexual nature of the catastrophic caves episode, but also dovetails with the *viraha* of the Radha-like bhakta longing for her Krishna. She longs and longs, approaches, but never quite captures—not for long, anyway—the heart of her lover-god. Indeed, *viraha* functions quite similarly to the “good” exoticist dynamic—yet another unexpected parallel between Hindu and Forsterian epistemology. But *viraha*'s spirit is marked by imminent beatitude, exoticism by inevitable disappointment.

Finally, at the most straightforward level, the passage expresses Forster's desire to enchant nature. In two ways this passage, which comes as close to enchantment as he gets in Part II, gives the lie to his heretofore more disenchanting view, the geologically-inspired view that so vigorously rejected religion's imposition on the caves. The metaphorical intensity of this description ratchets up with each sentence: spirits, breath, lovers, mirror, heavenly bodies, fists, fingers, skin, animals, water, love itself. Forster enlists every element of enchanted cosmos to animate this rock-cave that, only a page before, he had claimed was “older than all spirit,” i.e.

devoid of spirit. This passage longs to show “the evanescent life of the granite,” itself an oxymoronic phrase from the disenchanted perspective on matter. Forster’s effort to dynamize that most putatively inert of substances—rock—demands a thoroughly enchanted view of the material world. Though the strictures of realism require Forster to embark on this description with a qualifying simile—“*like* an imprisoned spirit”—that simile gives way to a conceit in which we become immersed; so that “the imprisoned spirit” quickly breaks free of its metaphorical cage and takes over the description, making itself increasingly felt and real.

For a moment, Forster has achieved his goal for fiction: he has found a chink in realism to inspirit the phenomenal world, to render the insubstantial substantial. So, what then makes this different from, say, the romantic prose of the European 18<sup>th</sup> century? My conjecture is that Forster and fellow twentieth-century modernists like Conrad, felt that finding such enchantment in the Western world had become nearly impossible. So they had to seek it elsewhere, in the colonial periphery, in “these outposts....like nothing else in the world,”<sup>506</sup> where enchantment, though gradually eroding under the influence of colonialism and urbanization, still obtained. Here, in the periphery, enchantment was not for the locals ‘extraordinary’ (Forster’s keyword)—as it would have been for foreigners who sought it. Enchantment is “extra”-ordinary only for the latter because it lies outside their experience of the ordinary, which has become thoroughly disenchanted. “But someone else’s ordinary...is another person’s epiphany,”<sup>507</sup> as Jamaica Kincaid writes in her lyrical essay on the encounter between Columbus and the New World natives.

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>507</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, “In History,” *Callaloo* 24.2 (Spring 2001) 621.



Here, the locals may not feel quite the force of Forster's epiphany encountering the caves, for they live perennially among them and have developed a cosmology to accommodate them (just think of the local guide who so ably and familiarly scampers about). Forster may be wrong, then, in his diagnosis for the minimal presence of Hindu pilgrims at this site. In a sentence that brings together his leitmotif "extraordinary" and his predilection for the hedged formulation "as if," he speculates: "the shrines are unfrequented, *as if* pilgrims, who generally seek the extraordinary, had here found too much of it."<sup>508</sup> An intriguing notion, but, I believe, a wrong one (the hedge was wise). Forster's error turns on the unacknowledged difference between his and the Hindus' versus his relationship to enchantment—ordinary in their case, extraordinary in his. For all his unwitting parallels with the Hindu—especially the pre-orthodox—relation to nature, this different relationship to extra/ordinariness of enchantment constitutes a significant difference. The "scratched and plastered" rocks that are Hindu shrines at the caves may not be all that unfrequented, *but they exist all the same*. These are animist shrines that Forster may well be incorrectly assessing, much as he and his friend Malcolm had in their forays on the Hill of Devi: when it comes to native religion, "One was always going to be wrong."<sup>509</sup>

Hindu pilgrims, according to Diana Eck, would indeed seek out sites either once visited by the deities or perennially manifesting divinity. The first class includes the traditional pilgrimage sites of orthodox Hindus (e.g., Rama's and Krishna's birthplace, the bodhi tree under which the Buddha reached enlightenment); the second includes *svayambhu*, or self-manifesting, natural incarnations of the divine spirit. The "scratched and plastered shrine" at the caves

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<sup>508</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 136.

<sup>509</sup> Forster, *The Hill of Devi* 41.

indicates that here animist spirits—the spirits of nature—are revered and probably propitiated. Even Forster, despite his effort to strip the caves of any religious association, finds himself unable to banish this Hindu trace. The fleeting mention of this shrine, combined with the “as if” speculation suggest that Forster himself is not entirely confident in his religious assessment and fictive purging of the caves. I am making much about this minor reference because I believe that it, like the handful of other minor references to autochthonous modes of relation to the caves in Part II, indicate Forster’s contradictory impulses toward them. These marginal entries testify to a Forster who humbly acknowledges his own estrangement from autochthonous life-ways that he, in good faith, cannot but register at least. Indeed, one of the key misunderstandings resulting from this estrangement is his imposition on the locals of his uniquely foreign sense of the caves’ “extraordinary” enchantment.

Pilgrims, whether orthodox or not, avow a generally enchanted view of nature, throughout which divinity—in both its benevolent and terrible aspects—is seen to course. Some sites are more narratively-charged by legend, but plenty of unstoried self-manifesting natural (*svayambhu*) forms of immanent divinity have been designated by *ad hoc* rudimentary shrines in an animist praxis that has been folded into even orthodox Hinduism. One finds these shrines all over India, particularly in rural “outposts”; and, as Forster reminds us, “India is the country, fields, fields, then hills, jungle, hills, and more fields.”<sup>510</sup> (And it is precisely that rural India that lies far beyond him and his characters.) The animation of nature by divinity is thorough-going: as such, it is actually ordinary, not extraordinary, in the enchanted worldview. And so, to me, the reason (i.e., too much extraordinariness) Forster offers for the marginal Hindu presence at the

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<sup>510</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 150.

caves is implausible; I would speculate that this marginalization is more an act of his fictional will than a reflection of anything inherent in the Hindu cosmological relation to such as the Marabar caves. After all, their historical correlate, the Barabar, was duly assimilated, ornamented, and celebrated by religion (Buddhism considered, in this case, a heterodox outgrowth of Hinduism). It is important to remember that Forster's marginalizing of the indigenous religious presence was entirely his own fictional imperative; moreover it betrays the crucial blind-spot in his understanding of native religion.

#### ORDINARY-EXTRAORDINARY, ENCHANTMENT, AND EXOTICISM

It is only in a disenchanted world that enchantment is experienced as a miracle, an exception, a mere punctuation mark.<sup>511</sup> In an enchanted world, these putative miracles are taken more in stride—they exist within the everyday realm of possibility. Thus, it is not impossible to imagine that something like Forster's fictionalized Marabar caves would also be taken in stride—a stride we see (albeit somewhat interpolatively) in the *in situ* familiarity and ease of the local guide and the nonchalant retinue trailing Aziz's party. This is not to say that the locals would not appreciate the power and even the sublimity of such hierophany, but that such appreciation is part and parcel with the enchanted worldview; in fact, it is what constitutes the enchanted worldview. The enchanted worldview, in its everyday modulation, prepares the way for moments of intensified divine immanence, but they would not jump out as exceptions to the rule of disenchantment. So, Forster's leitmotif "extraordinary" that constantly accompanies the caves serves actually as an index of his own disenchanted worldview. He makes a valiant effort

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<sup>511</sup> Thanks to Akeel Bilgrami for this observation.

to assimilate the extraordinary into his ordinary prose, stretching his realist prose into its most poetic register as in the lyrical “two flames” conceit; but such narrative moments are few and fleeting: he, for the most part, remains somewhat locked out of the ordinary-extraordinary because he does not share with the locals their inherited cosmological backcloth that has already assimilated it into its worldview.

Ironically, the ordinariness of the extraordinary could conceivably be well suited to realism, a form that grounds in the mundane occasional, otherwise seemingly extraordinary elements. To do this, though, said extraordinary elements must lie within the orbit of the possible—an orbit that depends entirely on worldview. The problem for Forster is that he must stretch himself (and his readers) from the disenchanted to the enchanted worldview, registering into the West’s realm of possibility “implausible” phenomena that would be taken for granted in India. This strikes me as a remarkable effort, akin to ethnography but rallying the resources of art. Forster adeptly approaches his translational task by selecting an *unlikely*—but not wholly *implausible*—natural phenomenon (the exotic and extreme Marabar Caves); but he does not dare explicitly import the indigenous supernaturalist mythopoetics associated with it. In other words, he opts for a stripped-down enchanted naturalism (albeit one that he conveys from a qualified, or at times second-order, perspective) over an enchanted supernaturalism—thus extending the enchanted realist mode of Bankim and Tagore.

Nonetheless, he, unlike these native writers, has a hard time trying to assimilate India’s particular cocktail of ordinary-extraordinary. He writes, “[India] calls ‘Come’ through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august. But come to what? She has never

defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal.”<sup>512</sup> At stake in this query are two fundamental themes related to Forsterian enchantment: exoticism and the ordinary-extraordinary relationship. His bafflement at the propinquity of disproportionate forms—‘objects ridiculous and august’—extends to Forster’s aversion to the Indians’ exaggerated response to those disproportionate forms (hyper-enchanted mimesis). Moreover, this unsettling propinquity of disproportionate *form* is similar to the confounding enmeshment of disproportionate *forces* of extraordinary and ordinary. Clearly, Forster intuits that the enchantment that calls to him lies in its unique blend of the ordinary and the extraordinary, but he cannot fully grasp it, precisely because he is dogged by the Enlightenment-think that tends to split the one off from the other. Further, the quotation above presents enchantment in its most classic exoticist formulation: it draws one in, but does not deliver. This enchantment will always lie just beyond Forster’s reach since he lacks the cultural backcloth that precedes and motivates the preservationist impulse of a Bankim or Tagore. So, in the spirit of dynamic exoticism, he can only approach Indian enchantment obliquely—either by registering caveats and opacity, by second-order channeling of an aloof and marginal native character’s thoughts, or by emphasizing enchantment’s effects over its essence.

However, though he cannot claim the Indian religious backcloth as his own, its existence is precisely what impels him to locate enchantment in the Indian outpost. If enchantment exists—meaning that spiritual forces course through the phenomenal world—then it exists the world over; but only in certain non-European peripheries has culture cultivated and maintained a worldview that registers it deeply. In this sense, epistemology counts even more than ontology when it comes to enchantment. We know that as much as Forster balked at native religiosity in

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<sup>512</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 150.

its most alien (and most enchanted forms), he was intrigued by it. He could not deny its force in culture. I imagine this is why, even here in the caves stage-setting where he tries to purge the religious presence, he has to admit certain references to culturally-instantiated religion (e.g., the scratched and plastered rocks of the Hindu shrine). It is his secular artistic loneliness—a flickering light going out in a darkening world<sup>513</sup>—that leads him to be both attracted to and repelled by a cosmology that is broadly shared by a culture that is not his own. He lacks this toehold on enchantment, longs for it, yet admits his remove from it. Again, we can interpolatively glean this complex of attitudes through his silences and marginal mentions.

On one hand, he deracinates the caves in order to double-back to the “original aboriginal disaster” in universal (and decidedly secular) terms affecting all of us; on the other hand, he feels that those universal terms can only be rendered in the specificity of the Indian land: his professed topic of the novel is after all “the universe as embodied in the Indian earth and the Indian sky....the horror lurking in the Marabar Cave.”<sup>514</sup> Like Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, he must go abroad to find an enchantment that inspires and requires his particular artistic experiment—a modernist art that at once seeks to capture primeval enchantment (and horror) while conceding its distance from the local experiential and cosmological modes of dealing with it. Both authors’ provisional resolution is to create a re-enchanting art form for European modernity that can serve as an analogue to the primitive enchanted cosmology. The West requires re-enchantment because it has lost its enchantment; whereas the East retains an enchantment that has not yet been (completely) lost. My formula for these modernist authors’ “good” (by my lights) exoticism

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<sup>513</sup> Kermode 138.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid. 71.

runs as follows: *exoticism is European disenchantment's longing for foreign enchantment*. Like all exoticism, this impulse is driven by a push-pull dynamic, as evidenced in Forster's contradictory impulses toward a native religiosity he found both inspiring and off-putting. The conversations Forster had with fakirs and with his Bapu Sahib indicate that Forster was seemingly very conscious of this parallel between his own isolated artistic effort and Indian—especially Hindu—religiosity.

#### PARALLEL TRACKS OF LANGUAGE AND RELIGION MEET?

##### **Metaphoricity:**

Now, let us look closely at some of these parallels between Forster's effort to enchant his realism, and the autochthonous cosmology. The mechanism and reliance on metaphor which we already discussed in the 'two flames' passage, are also of course, the trademark of Hinduism, especially in its mythopoetic renderings of early animist and later orthodox deities alike. In fact, the metaphorizing impulse is strong in nearly every religion. Notably, the narrator's direct descriptions of the Marabar scenery in Part II, are so heavily, unrelentingly metaphorized that they take on a nearly religious—or at least hyper-poetical—tone, much more so than in other parts of the novel. Nature conceits abound in a sort of *mise-en-abyme*, where he can only describe one sublime aspect of nature by invoking another. For example, to describe the caves awful, infinite "bom," Forster writes, "echoes generate echoes, and the cave is stuffed with a snake composed of small snakes, which writhe independently"<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 163.

But Forster's nature conceits are never more striking than when Forster (unwittingly) invokes Hindu religious metaphor itself to describe nature:

Colour throbbed and mounted behind a pattern of trees, grew in intensity, was yet brighter, incredibly brighter, strained from without against the globe of the air. They awaited the miracle. But at the supreme moment, when night should have died and day lived, nothing occurred. It was as if virtue had failed in the celestial fount. The hues in the east decayed, the hills seemed dimmer though in fact better lit, and a profound disappointment entered with the morning breeze. *Why, when the chamber was prepared, did the bridegroom not enter with trumpets and shawms, as humanity expects?* The sun rose without splendour. He was presently observed trailing yellowish behind the trees, or against insipid sky, and touching the bodies already at work in the fields.<sup>516</sup>

Here, colour is in full *force*, throbbing, mounting, and straining. (Recall in Part I that Adela in the “frieze” passage lamented that she would miss the colour and force of India. But Forster, here, does not.) Moreover, colour is personified, most remarkably as the bridegroom forsaking his beloved. The allusion could come straight out of Tagore's *Gitanjali*, which trades on precisely on the God-as-bridegroom metaphor, itself borrowed from the syncretic Bauls, medieval Sufi saint Kabir, and Vaishnavite Hindus. The entire passage is bathed in religiosity, going so far as to invoke “miracle,” “virtue,” and “the celestial fount.” How conscious is Forster of his religious invocations here? We cannot know.

Although we cannot know, we can certainly identify strong parallels with Hindu rhetoric. Forster is right to say, in his original *mise-en-scène* of the Marabar, that Shiva and Vishnu arrive relatively late in the game; but he fails to refer to an earlier Hinduism—primitive Aryanism—which was more animist in nature, and more unmediated in its mimetic imaginary. The early Aryans were animists who considered the sun, wind, and fire the primary deities—deities that were later folded into and subordinated by the brahminical orthodoxy that privileges the Vishnu,

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<sup>516</sup> Ibid. 151-152, italics mine.



Shiva, Brahma trinity. In fact, Indologist Winternitz, who sees the *Rg Veda* as “a mythology in the making...the gods rising up so to say before our eyes,”<sup>517</sup> observes:

many of the hymns are addressed not to a Sun-god, not to a Moon-god, not to a Fire-god, not to a Sky-god...but the shining Sun, the beaming moon at the nocturnal firmament, the fire in the flames on the hearth or on the altar or the lightning striking from the cloud....—all these natural phenomena are as such glorified, prayed to and invoked. And only gradually does a change take place in the songs of the Rgveda itself of these natural phenomena into mythological figures, into gods and goddesses, like Surya (Sun), Soma (Moon), Agni (Fire), Dyaus (Sky)...whose names also indicate still without any doubt, what they have been originally. Thus the songs of the Rgveda prove indisputably that the most excellent mythological figures have originated from personifications of the most conspicuous natural phenomena.<sup>518</sup>

So, the animist to supernaturalist trajectory in Hinduism runs like this: from nature, to personification, to mythological figures. In a sense, Hindus literalize the metaphor: the metaphorical quality of mythological figure, originally a poesis of nature, is forgotten, so that the mythological figure is taken to exist ontologically. It is this evacuating of metaphoricity of metaphor that Forster cannot, will not, achieve. Still, by piling metaphor atop metaphor, to the degree that the original referent lies imperceptibly buried underneath, Forster approximates Hindu metaphorization.

### **Sun/Sky:**

The early Aryans’ cosmology originally emanated from the sun that was seen as the first being (and the first dead, because it sets every day). Their propitiatory impulse toward the sun god, Surya, suggests a keen experiential understanding of his power, which would have been at its height on the punishing and indomitable Deccan plains, the very site of the Marabar. Thus, it

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<sup>517</sup> Winternitz 67.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid. 67-68.

is striking that the secularist Forster, like the early Aryans, seizes on the sun as a being—a *ur-god* in communication with his domain, the earth.<sup>519</sup>

In Part I, Forster had presented us with a brief, enchanted and anthropomorphized vision of the cruel sun in paratactical relation to other creatures; this paratactical relation is a fundamentally enchanted cosmic vision, for it brings the outer cosmos down to the level of the earthly world with whom it is in mutual relation:

April, herald of horrors, is at hand. The sun was returning to his kingdom with power but without beauty—that was the sinister feature. If only there had been beauty! His cruelty would have been tolerable then. Through excess of light, he failed to triumph, he also; in his yellowy-white overflow not only matter, but brightness itself lay drowned. He was not the unattainable friend, either of men or birds or other suns, he was not the eternal promise, the never-withdrawn suggestion that haunts our consciousness; he was merely a creature, like the rest, and so debarred from glory.<sup>520</sup>

Already, in that passage, Forster has adumbrated the possibility of the beautiful, the sinister, the cruel, the glorious, and the inglorious in the sun, a dynamic creature that is in intimate if not inspiring relation to us. Now, in the caves description, Forster returns to “the sun who has watched [the high places of Dravidia] for countless aeons [and] *may* still discern in their outlines forms that were his before our globe was torn from his bosom.”<sup>521</sup> This notion of the earth being torn away from its progenitor, the sun, sounds an awful lot like the *deus absconditus* of Lukács’ theory of disenchantment. But here—here in the high places of Dravidia, the beginning of land itself—the sun *may* remain in touch with his offspring. Thus does Forster strike us with the exceptional enchantment of this site—a pocket of enchantment, a piece of the earth that he readily sees as still in communication with the outer cosmos.

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<sup>519</sup> Bankim has observed that European Indologists have been perennially afflicted with “heliomania,” when it comes to understanding Hinduism. He uses Max Müller as his case study. See Bankim, *Bankim Rachanavali*, 159.

<sup>520</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 124.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid. 136, italics mine.

Yet, with “may,” Forster hedges his bet, as he tends to with most of his enchanted depictions, for this is not a cosmology that he can claim as his own familiar ground as the Hindus can. He goes on: “*If* flesh of the sun’s flesh is to be touched anywhere, it is here, among the incredible antiquity of these hills.”<sup>522</sup> Again the subjunctive in the most enchanted sentence of “Caves”: “It is *as if* the surrounding plain or the passing birds have taken upon themselves to exclaim ‘extraordinary,’ and the world has taken root in the air, and been inhaled by mankind.”<sup>523</sup> The idea of the world, the air, speaking birds, and inhaling humans all in cosmic communication is as enchanted as it gets. Here is the communication between the earthly and the unearthly, matter and spirit, animal and human that is the hallmark of the enchanted worldview. But Forster cannot put his weight entirely behind the enchanted view; hence the “as if.” The conditional, subjunctive, hedging qualifier allows him to stay within the parameters of realism while rendering something that lies beyond its ken. Furthermore, the invocation of “extraordinary” here again indicates an ordinariness of enchantment that exists beyond his purview. Even so, there is no doubt that, the sky and especially the sun take on a special significance in Forster’s own cosmology (akin to the early Aryans), as in the sun-as-bridegroom passage, not to mention the final moment in the novel, in which the Indian sky rejects colonial disenchantment.

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<sup>522</sup> Ibid. italics mine.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid. 137.

## ASSESSMENT

In a certain light, Forster's attempt to find his own language to render a transcendental numinous force (negative enchantment) immanent in the phenomenal world would seem nearly as successful as Hindu attempts. Like them, he simultaneously holds the dual registers of transcendence and immanence by enchanting his mimesis via metaphorization. However, he does not grant himself this success because he cannot recognize the affinities between both imaginative efforts, language and religion. Thus, he pronounces himself more locked out of the caves than perhaps he is: the provisional, conditional, oblique, and lacunae-ridden nature of his narration testifies to his insecurity regarding his competence to convey the caves' enchantment. In fact, he is not so much locked out of the caves's enchantment as he is locked out of the indigenous tradition with which he has unexpected, unacknowledged affinities. It will not be until Part III, "Temple," that he forges a deep connection to that Hindu enchanted mimetic tradition, linking it to his own artistic-imaginative effort. Then and only then will he go all the way with enchantment. For now in the caves, having not yet fully escaped the "net of British India" himself, he is dogged by many of the same disenchanting tendencies of the caves expedition party. To be specific, he allows his aversion to muddle to undercut his attraction to enchantment, not yet realizing they amount to the same thing. Only when he has liberated himself from the tyranny of the binary, which he can only do with the help of Godbole's Hindu consciousness, can the Indian muddle come across to Forster as enchantment. Moreover, only then does force enter form: the Indian force of enchantment finally enters his realist form, albeit through a second-order rendering.

For now, though, the caves remain rather disenchanting, despite Forster's attempt to enchant his prose. For all his directness, Forster still remains in the merely representational mode because there is no enchanted figure whose consciousness he can channel. In Part II, Forster can register enchantment's effects on the world, but his language cannot quite effect enchantment. Language is somewhat castrated in a secular text (c.f., Lukács on form as compensation for loss of relationship with world); language cannot affect nature as it can in a religious text through chants, spells, rituals, and mantras. Thus, enchantment becomes impotent and cut off from world when it becomes merely textual. It can be at best a second-order enchantment. Language can at most enchant mimesis only in ONE direction; it can reflect, but it cannot effect. And that is because mimesis in the disenchanting worldview is no longer a two-way street. This is why, vis-à-vis mimetic enchantment, religion is more powerful than secular literature. Unlike Tagore and Bankim, Forster does not quite have the option to draw on the religious backcloth that would put his enchanted mimetic efforts in a more effective frame. Forster in Part II acknowledges that enchantment exists IN the world, just as Hindus believe. But Hindus have many modes—in praxis and philosophy—to work with this ontological enchantment. By contrast, the European realist point of view can barely handle that, so Forster forces the language open, into new purposes. However, he himself recognizes the limits of this already circumscribed effort.

### **III. PART III: TEMPLE**

Both Aziz and Forster try to get closer to enchanted India, the rural India more removed from colonialism, when both text and protagonist move to the Mau, a Hindu princely state where

Godbole has taken up residence. The text itself, the fictional prerogatives of which Forster was mightily aware, is able to penetrate into the Hindu enchantment much further than Aziz can. The final section of my analysis will analyze this significant distinction.

## THE SETTING

The novel, in this final section titled “Temple” culminates in the only thoroughly enchanted consciousness of the novel, that of Godbole, who, like the enchanted enclaves of autochthonous India, has remained until now at a remove from the main narrative. That the narrative’s final enchanted epiphany, achieved via Godbole and the Gokul Ashtami celebrations, should occur in a Hindu princely state is significant. First, it indicates Forster’s sense of the imminent end of the enchanted worldview in India. Enchantment at this juncture can only be found in the cordoned-off womb-tombs like the caves and the Hindu princely states, the latter fast disappearing in the swift nationalist gallop to Independence. *The Hill of Devi*, Forster’s travel memoir, is really the twain of two strands: the chronicle of both the demise of the native autonomous zone and Forster’s bewildered foray into Hinduism. Forster admired the mystical genius of his Bapu Sahib, but he lamented that there was no room for such as him in the New India.

The princely state of Dewas Senior, not unique in its fate, rapidly dissolved during the years the book recounts, 1912-1937. In any case, “between 1947 [the year of Indian Independence] and 1949, all 600-odd ruling princes in India were pensioned off and their ancestral domains—the so-called “princely states”—were submerged in the body politic of the

Indian union.”<sup>524</sup> As is well known, Dewas Senior was the template for Forster’s fictional Mau, just as his Babu Sahib was for Godbole. Not long after the time of Forster’s novel, India went the way of post-Westphalian disenchantment, finally choking off even these last few remaining native pockets of enchantment, which, during the Raj, had constituted two-fifths of India: two-fifths of India that had its own sovereignty from the British. Forster, even more so than Tagore, was prescient enough to anticipate this disenchanted outcome as early as 1924, the very height of optimism in the Independence movement. I believe that Forster’s prescience can be attributed to his canny grasp of the enchanted worldview and its incompatibility with statism of any sort, whether that of the Raj or the (abstraction) of Indian nationalism.<sup>525</sup> Forster was keen enough to realize that both were of the post-Westphalian cut of cloth, thus making him a strange bedfellow of Tagore and Gandhi.

Edward Said is unequivocal in his well-known final judgment of *A Passage to India*: “The novel’s helplessness [in the face of the Indian sublime] neither goes all the way and condemns (or defends) British colonialism, nor condemns or defends Indian nationalism...[it] founders on the undodgeable facts of Indian nationalism.”<sup>526</sup> The author “cannot connect [Aziz’s incipient nationalism] to the larger coherent movement for Indian independence”<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>524</sup> Ian Copland, *The princes of India in the endgame of empire, 1917-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 1. Copland’s book is the prevailing authority on the creation and especially the demise of the princely states in India. For that larger story of strategic coalition building and breaking between the British and the princes, please see Copland’s book.

<sup>525</sup> Odd that Said is so critical of Forster’s take on nationalism, but not Tagore’s, when in fact, both writers were critical of it, and for much the same reasons.

<sup>526</sup> Said 203.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid. 203.

because “Forster’s India is so affectionately personal and so remorselessly metaphysical that his view of Indians as a nation contending for sovereignty with Britain is not politically very serious, or even respectful.”

Said’s critique makes sense only if Forster had a serious or respectful view of nationalism in general, which he famously did not. Instead, he calls the post-Westphalian order of nations, “the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood,” and he hopes, for India’s sake, that it will refrain from joining it belatedly. The narrator/Fielding exclaims, “India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood! Waddling in at the hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps!”<sup>528</sup> If anything, this ejaculation expresses an admiration for India, a civilization much grander than the drab nation-state, a civilization on par with the Holy Roman Empire, a civilization that still has the chance to avert the banality and degeneracy of nation-statehood, a civilization that still has the chance to build its future on principles more exalted than those of the latter. Such exalted principles, I am arguing, are those of the enchanted worldview. Forster intuits the incompatibility between Indian enchantment and imported nationalism; and he was right to intuit that, as the historical record of the past sixty years of Indian political life proves.

It seems to me that Said’s own critique “founders on the undodgeable facts” of disenchantment and its normative relationship to Indian nationalism. What Said identifies as Forster’s political evasiveness may in fact be political prescience. Said cites the following passage as evidence of Forster’s patronizing attitude toward Indian nationalism:

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<sup>528</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 361.



Hammidullah had called in on his way to a worrying committee of notables, nationalist in tendency, where Hindus, Moslems, two Sikhs, two Parsis, a Jain, and Native Christian tried to like another more than came natural to them. As long as someone abused the English, all went well, but nothing constructive had been achieved, and if the English were to leave India, the committee would vanish also.<sup>529</sup>

Was Forster wrong to predict that the hot peace established in the trans-sectarian committees would soon dissolve into communalism? In fact, such communalism resurfaced long before the English left India: it spiked sharply soon after the Non-Cooperation/Khilafat movement of 1920-1924, the period in which the novel is set. Forster connects something far more substantial than Aziz to the Independence struggle: the author connects modular nationalism to the disenchanting worldview. Without enchantment, nationalism would prove to be superficial and temporary. Forster's conception was not far from what Chatterjee describes as the Bengal Renaissance understanding that the nationalist movement would have to be undergirded by a revitalized "inner sphere" permeated by the enchanted worldview. I suspect that Said's own secular bias is what leads him to oppose "relentless metaphysics" and political commitment, in much the same way he does in his analysis of Yeats' mysticism.

Startlingly, Said concludes from his gloss on the passage above that Forster believed Britain ought to go on ruling India since Indian nationalism was puerile and doomed. This seems to me a willful misreading of a novel that patently posits colonial rule as normatively antithetical to cross-cultural intimacy AND to Indian metaphysics. First, the novel comes down clearly on the fact that healthy relationships between the British and Indians will not be possible so long as colonialism obtains, that colonialism inevitably polarizes the communities it claims to connect. Second, need post-Westphalian nationalism and colonial rule be the only political alternatives? Said does not consider a third way, e.g. the Gandhian enchantment that enabled

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<sup>529</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* quoted by Said 204.

Indian independence, and whose abandonment to Nehruvianism has ultimately led to the regrettable sectarian strife and statism that marks Indian political life to this day.

Forster's judgment of colonialism is harsher than Said imagines. In his depiction of the colonial city's sectarian tensions (in contrast to the native state's peaceable relations between Hindus and their occasional Muslim neighbors), in his association of disenchantment with the British characters and the colonially urban one, in the text's frustrated longing to capture Indian enchantment: in all these ways, Forster makes it clear that not only is colonialism responsible for the disenchantment of India, but also for generating the kind of chauvinist nationalism that cannot but degenerate into communal tensions. That colonialism and postcolonial nationalism are two sides of the same coin is a notion repeatedly stressed by Said himself through his many works. And it is precisely this notion that the critic admires in Tagore's diatribe against nationalism. So, it seems incongruous that he reads Forster in such a way as to not see the latter's critique of nationalism as an extension of his critique of colonialism.

Moreover, Said's emphasis misses the crucial dimension of enchantment/disenchantment that proves to be the deeper source of India's colonial crisis. Forster's brilliance lies in identifying the two-India fault line (between urban and rural, and between British India and native state) that emerged out of the tectonic shift from enchantment to disenchantment, entirely brought on by colonialism. That he goes further to show just how threatened is the latter India, the one he longs to understand and preserve, indicates a prescience even keener than Tagore's in showing up the limitations, short-sightedness, and superficiality of a statist nationalism.

If Said is too quick to conclude that Forster's novel advocates the continued presence of the Raj, the critic is also puzzling in the contradictory claims he makes about Forster's "will to

know.” In the same breath that Said compares Forster unfavorably to—of all people—Kipling, who sees “Indians [as] a various lot, they need to be known and understood,” the critic endorses Benita Parry’s comment that “ ‘*A Passage to India* is the triumphant expression of the British imagination exploring India.’”<sup>530</sup> In other words, he emphasizes on one hand Forster’s mystificatory impulse, and on the other, his conquering vision of India. It seems to me Forster’s vision of India can hardly be called “triumphant,” when the text, as well as the British characters, remain humbled before it. As for the mystificatory impulse, it registers Forster’s frustrated longing to grasp the enchantment that he rightly sees as threatened by colonialism and necessary to withstand it. If anything, that modernist mystificatory impulse, which James Clifford and Said himself say indicates Europe’s loss of global confidence, is the result of the regrettable barrier between two incompatible worldviews. Moreover, this worldview barrier in *A Passage to India* takes on a particular political piquancy in that it thwarts not only the author and his British characters, but even urbanized, colonially-influenced Indians who variously and vainly endeavor to connect to autochthonous India.

The second implication for Forster’s choice to site the text’s enchanted epiphany at a Hindu festival in a Hindu princely state, with Aziz an anomalous outsider, indicates the author’s somewhat skewed attribution of enchantment exclusively to Hinduism. His choice also reflects his strong, and only somewhat historically spurious, sense of the Hindu-Muslim split. Forster’s exaggerated depiction of this split may of course simply be the foregone conclusion to his monolithic notion of Islam—in other words, his relative unfamiliarity with the Indo-Islamic tradition nesting syncretically with Hinduism. Nevertheless, communal strife was indeed fast

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<sup>530</sup> Said 204.

becoming a corollary of colonial-era urbanization, and Forster's depiction of the city tensions between urbanized Muslims and Hindus was not only fair, but prescient. So, depicting a citified Aziz unable to relinquish his long-cultivated prejudices against Hindus, and thus unable to fully commune with his chosen Hindu neighbors, would be a fair and incisive critique of the sectarianism of India's modern cities. Though Forster is too unfamiliar with Indo-Islamic syncretism in the countryside duly to treat it, he does minimally register the presence of a syncretic Islam even in the Hindu native state. Further, he takes care to depict peaceable relations between the native state's Hindus and the Muslim Aziz, notwithstanding the latter's urbanized, alienated, transplanted, and secularly-inclined sensibility. Even in a Hindu princely state, at a major festival like Gokulashtami, one would find some Muslim neighbors participating (and vice-versa for Mohurram). But such interfaith mingling is insufficiently presented in "Temple," probably because of Forster's own obliqueness to it (yet another aspect of Indian enchantment out of which he remains locked).

Utopian nonetheless, Forster's Mau seems a world away from Chandrapore. Such distance reflects Forster's Two India apprehension: the split between urban and rural India; in other words, between British India and native state. His grafting onto this geographical fissure the religious one (disenchanted communalism in the city; enchanted syncretism, or at least social harmony, in the countryside) perhaps lacked adequate historical basis. Yet, such grafting proved to be remarkably prescient in terms of twentieth-century Indian politics, as the disenchanted, communally violent (post)colonial cities not only edged out enchantment to ever-more marginalized pockets, but also masterminded communal riots to be staged in precisely those heretofore harmonious pockets.

## AZIZ, THE INCIPIENT NATIONALIST

After Aziz's unjust imprisonment, he decides to sever with the British and to throw in his lot with Indians of all faiths:

He vowed to see more of Indians who were not Mohammedans, and never to look backward. It is the only healthy course. Of what help, in this latitude and hour, are the glories of Cordova and Samarcand? They have gone, and while we lament them the English occupy Delhi and exclude us from East Africa. Islam itself, though true, throws cross-lights over the path to freedom. The song of the future must transcend creed.<sup>531</sup>

*Not here, not now:* in this latitude that is India and this hour that is imminent Independence, Aziz deems irrelevant his heretofore beloved nostalgic sites of transnational Islam. Thus, in one fell swoop, Aziz throws off his earlier allegiances to cosmopolitan Islam and the British. The result of his new nationalist commitment is to retire to "a quiet Hindu jungle native state, far away from foreigners."<sup>532</sup>

Yet, despite his deliberate undertaking, he is still unable to grasp the nation as anything but an abstraction—an abstraction of the sort that Tagore decried. Aziz's unwritten nationalist poem "led him towards the vague and bulky figure of a mother-land. He was without natural affection for the land of his birth, but the Marabar Hills drove him to it. Half closing his eyes, he attempted to love India."<sup>533</sup> Mere politics cannot induce love: Forster's message here reflects Tagore's.<sup>534</sup> However hard he tries to relate to the land of India, he cannot. The indignity he has suffered at the hands of the British cannot induce him automatically to connect to the very land

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<sup>531</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 298.

<sup>532</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 309.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.* 298.

<sup>534</sup> See Chakrabarty, 150-151.

from which he has been estranged all his life, an estrangement that triggered the political indignity in the first place.

If his grasp on the enchanted land of India is weak, then his grasp on the lifeworld of “these quaint Hindus” and their syncretic Muslim neighbors who inhabit it is equally slight. He continues to be blind especially to the enchanted immanence of *darśan*, whether it be Hindu or Muslim. In the Mau, he encounters the legend and double shrine of the Muslim saint who had freed prisoners. The Shrine of the Head and The Shrine of the Body are worshipped by Hindu and Muslim alike—a rare instance of *A Passage to India*’s registering of mimetically enchanted syncretism in village India. Aziz’s colonial humiliation inspires him to accept Islam’s “idolatry,” but he can do nothing more than play Emperor, as has long since been his wont:

When Aziz arrived [to the Mau], and found that even Islam was idolatrous, he grew scornful, and longed to purify the place, like Alamgir. But soon he didn’t mind, like Akbar. After all, this saint had freed prisoners, and he himself had lain in prison. The Shrine of the Body lay in his own garden and produced a weekly crop of lamps and flowers, and when he saw them he recalled his sufferings. The Shrine of the Head made a nice short walk for the children.<sup>535</sup>

Forster’s tone here as gently mocking as it always is when Aziz encounters sites of religion. The shrine serves only to remind Aziz of the political indignity he has suffered at the hands of the British, and his Akbar-like tolerance for syncretic immanence is superficial at best. Again, he awkwardly forces himself into an all-Indian embrace, including this milieu of “mostly villagers, for whom anything outside their villages passed as in a dream.”<sup>536</sup> But, we can infer, his urban (and anti-iconic) sensibilities prevail. He cannot be said to have any genuine insight or even curiosity regarding the praxis of the Hindus and Muslims who worship the shrines. For him, the

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<sup>535</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 332.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.* 332.

shrines serve only secular purposes, such as reviving his political indignation and, more mundanely, staking out a path for a ramble.

If he is only superficially tolerant of the syncretic religiosity he discovers in the hyper-enchanted rural enclave of the Mau, he is downright incurious about the Hinduism that surrounds him there: “Aziz did not pay attention to these sanctities, for they had no connection with his own; he felt bored, slightly cynical.”<sup>537</sup> Forster does not mince words when he asserts that “[Aziz] had no religious curiosity, and had never discovered the meaning of this annual antic.”<sup>538</sup> To the repatriated Fielding inquiring about the Gokul Ashtami festival from which Aziz has thoroughly insulated himself, the latter makes a series of proud assertions of ignorance: “I know nothing at all about the religion here”<sup>539</sup>; “how else should [Gokul Ashtami] concern *you and me?*”<sup>540</sup>; and finally, “It is useless discussing Hindus with me. Living with them teaches me no more.”<sup>541</sup>

Not only do these statements confirm Aziz’s continued estrangement from Hindu enchantment, but they (re-)associate him with the British. Urban Muslims and the British are quickly re-united in their mutual aversion (to Aziz’s lights, anyway) to Hindu ritual. His semi-unwitting rejoining of “you” (British) and “me” (urbanite Muslim) recurs when he observes to

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid. 343.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid. 327.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid. 338.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid. 358, italics mine.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid. 358.

Ralph, “They are happy out there with their savage noise, though *we* cannot follow them.”<sup>542</sup>

Despite his protestation to Fielding that “My heart is for my own people henceforward,” his utter lack of curiosity or sympathy for Hindus leads to another conclusion: namely, his continuing relative proximity to the British more than the Hindus. Within hours of the British party’s arrival, a party with whom he has deep personal tensions, Aziz has already aligned his sensibilities with theirs.

Alienated as he is by the “savage noise” of their ritual, Aziz has hardly progressed toward the Hindus since the beginning of the story when he recoiled from Hindu drumming accompanying the death ritual of a corpse that he, as a doctor, had pronounced dead earlier that day. As in that earlier episode, the colonial man of science is here, albeit marginally, to apply his Western knowledge to a dying body, this time the Maharaja’s. Once again, Aziz remains locked out of Hindu enchantment: as a colonial man of science, he may only attend to the dying Maharaja “in a room accessible to Western science by an outer staircase.” Indeed, the detached perspective from which he disdains the Hindus’ “savagery” is implicitly and explicitly linked to his scientism. Though he claims to “[love] poetry—science was merely an acquisition, which he laid aside when unobserved like his European dress,”<sup>543</sup> his science is part of the colonial inheritance that keeps him removed from the spiritual life of the enchanted Hindus around him. He may, in a voice that uncannily echoes that of Tagore’s Nikhil, protest that “Life is not a scientific manual,”<sup>544</sup> but the fact is that his very life, disenchanting epistemology, and milieu

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<sup>542</sup> Ibid. 350, italics mine.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid. 298.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid. 312.



seem to have been dictated by such a manual. Indeed, all throughout the Gokul Ashtami celebration, Aziz seems unbearably lonely and listless. He is V.S. Naipaul's classic caricature of the colonial man cut off: estranged from his native land and ways—from even the élite Muslim company he had once kept—yet, only begrudgingly or unwittingly admitting that his alienation from the Hindus only places him more proximally to the very British he has come to hate.

It is an index of both his double-alienation and his frustration at it that Aziz chooses rather incongruously and sadistically to inflict physical pain on Ralph Moore—holding the latter responsible for all his anti-British grievances—at the very height of the Hindu festival that “[flings] down everything that is petty and temporary in [men's] natures...all men loved each other, and avoided by instinct whatever could cause inconvenience or pain.”<sup>545</sup> A bit inexplicable a decision on Aziz's part, in part because Ralph is the least British and certainly the least threatening of the visiting party.

Ralph, like his sister Stella and his mother Mrs. Moore, share an intuitive sense and longing for Indian enchantment that Aziz and Fielding do not. Fielding who admits that he “never really understood or liked [Hindus]”<sup>546</sup> also admits that he “could never develop” the echo that so plagued Mrs. Moore: “It belonged to the universe he had missed or rejected. And the mosque missed it too. Like himself, those shallow arcades provided but a limited asylum.”<sup>547</sup> Again, urban Islam and secular England are drawn together in their mutual estrangement from Hindu enchantment, the negative valence of which is the caves' echo, the positive, the Gokul

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<sup>545</sup> Ibid. 341.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid. 358.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid. 307.

Ashtami assembly's "tender, happy state unknown to an English crowd."<sup>548</sup> The Moores, however, are "after something," something Hindu yet beyond Hinduism's forms.<sup>549</sup>

In a sense, Forster is after the same, and his trouble is the same: he has not been able to get at India's transcendental essence because he has not been able to contend with its forms. But, when he captures the *immanence* of transcendence at the Gokul Ashtami celebration, he finally grasps the Hindu cosmology that eludes his variously "outsider" characters. However evanescent the narrative's immersion into enchanted immanence, it is remarkable, the more so for its previous inability to do so. Justifiably, the text's cosmological coup constitutes the climax of the novel.

#### FORSTER'S ENCHANTED EPIPHANY

About the Hindu festival, the narrator comments, "they did not one thing which the non-Hindu would feel dramatically correct; this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it) a frustration of reason and form."<sup>550</sup> Forster's overdetermined muddle returns. But now for the first time he successfully wades through it, thus separating himself from the generic "non-Hindu." Normally, he would not qualify the observation by specifying its perspective. Here he is unusually careful to relativize the statement: what is a triumph for India is a frustration for the outsider. And, indeed, what is a triumph for India becomes a triumph for the novelist in "Temple." Forster's achievement occurs in three successive stages: an objective gauging of the

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<sup>548</sup> Ibid. 318.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid. 359.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid. 319.

subjective experience of the worshippers, the narrator's subjectivity converging with Godbole's, and finally the narrative's objective enchanting of reality.

#### SUBJECTIVITY I: THE DEVOTEES' ENCHANTED FACES

Though Forster's success is enabled primarily by the narrator's focalizing of Godbole's acutely enchanted mind, it does not happen all at once. Forster's foray into the *mind* of the heretofore marginal character—an intersubjective coup that is the apotheosis of second order enchantment—is prepared by the narrator's second-order enchantment at the villagers' beatified *faces*:

Hindus, Hindus only, mild-featured men, mostly villagers, for whom anything outside their villages passed in a dream. They were the toiling ryot, whom some call the real India...The assembly...seethed like a beneficent potion. When the villagers broke cordon for a glimpse of the silver image, a most beautiful and radiant expression came into their faces, a beauty in which there was nothing personal, for it caused them all to resemble one another during the moment of its indwelling, and only when it was withdrawn did they revert to individual clods. And so with the music.<sup>551</sup>

Forster locates enchantment distinctly in the rural enclaves of so-called “real India.” For these villagers, the colonial world of the city, would seem unreal, so far removed are they from it. Forster's entirely approving description, highlights two important and related elements of enchantment: its communicability<sup>552</sup> and its subjective power. Having already discussed the first—the communicability of subjectivity in an enchanted worldview where the subjective and objective have not yet split off from each other—I will pass to the second.

Of the second aspect, subjectivity, Gauri Viswanathan offers an astute but limited reading. She insinuates that Forster's recalcitrant Protestantism restricts him to granting

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<sup>551</sup> Ibid. 318.

<sup>552</sup> See my discussion on interiority and disenchantment on pp. 265-266.

begrudgingly his approval to only the subjective experience, most certainly not the objective display of Gokul Ashtami.<sup>553</sup> (Incidentally, she appraises his approval higher in his memoir than in his fiction, a point to which we shall return.) Eloquently, she recapitulates the historical Forster's first encounter with Gokul Ashtami:

In their taut, compressed faces he finds a Hinduism to which he can relate, as surely as he is alienated by the other face of Hinduism blazoned by conch shells, camphor, and cymbals. He can conclude that "though there is no dignity, no taste, no form...I don't think one ought to be irritated with idolatry because one can see from the faces of the people that it touches something very deep in their hearts."<sup>554</sup>

Viswanathan is right to observe that Forster is moved by the internal sense of religiosity of the believers, but repulsed by the physical display of the festival (whose center is the Krishna icon, irreverently renamed by Forster as "Dolly"). And perhaps such appreciation for the subjective experience of God and revulsion at the objective sensual "excess" of ritual are, indeed, part of his Protestant inheritance.

But what Viswanathan does not acknowledge is that this privileging of the subjective in the *Hill of Devi* is the result of his being still "locked out" of Indian enchantment. Over the course of the ten years between his first and second visit, between his aborted initial draft of *A Passage to India* and his final one, Forster would slowly find some keys to unlock Indian enchantment. Of those keys one was the subjective experience of others, another was the novelistic prerogative, both of which finally allowed him to crack the objective enchantment he joyfully depicts in the climax of his final version of the novel. Of his early distaste and bewilderment at India, Forster duly admits. In the 1953 preface to *Hill of Devi*, Forster makes an

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<sup>553</sup> Comment made by Gauri Viswanathan in a conversation on Forster in June 2006.

<sup>554</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 161 quoted by Viswanathan, "Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism" 23-24.

extremely important caveat that should inform our reading of his Gokul Ashtami report whose humor is lost on Viswanathan:

The 1912-1913 letters are printed without introduction in the hope that the reader may share my bewilderment and pleasure at plunging into an unknown world...Most of my letters were addressed to my mother and to other relatives. They are, unfortunately, none the better on that account. I was writing to people of whom I was fond and whom I wanted to amuse, with the result that I became too humorous and conciliatory, and too prone to turn remote and rare matters into suburban jokes...I did not really think the Indians quaint, and my deepest wish was to be alone with them. "Amusing letters home," from Miss Eden's onward, have their drawbacks. Aiming at freshness, they may sacrifice dignity and depth. I hope that the fineness of Dewas Senior, as well as its strangeness, may occasionally shine through. It was the great opportunity of my life...this [is the] record of a vanished civilization...something precious has been thrown away amongst the rubbish—something which might have been saved.<sup>555</sup>

Viswanathan's reading sufficiently acknowledges neither the overt campiness of his humorous epistolary distortions, nor what it deliberately masks: the depth, sincerity, and seriousness of his long engagement with the Hindus. His performative excesses are clearly the upshot of his desire to meet the cultural prejudices of his letter recipients in England. Or, we might place his memoir-letters in the British gentlemen high camp travel writing tradition, with its light-hearted emphasis on misfitness, misadventure, and generally folly. Either way, we ought not to take too seriously such mockery as follows: "I have already helped to choose the "Lord of the Universe" some new clothes...The altar was as usual smothered in mess"<sup>556</sup>; "Choked somewhere in rose leaves, lay chief Dolly, but I could not locate him"<sup>557</sup>; "I saw the thing at last—face like an ill-tempered pea: curious little lump for so much to centre round."<sup>558</sup> These exaggerations strike me

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<sup>555</sup> Forster, *The Hill of Devi* 7-8.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid. 151-152.

<sup>557</sup> Ibid. 164.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid. 167.

as a young man's jejeune apologetics that belie his sincere and abiding interest in a foreign religion disdained by his interlocutors.

All the same, that sincerity comes through more often than not. Interspersed with these comical passages are as many that convey Forster's "deepest wish to be alone with [the Indians]." Given his own caveat, it is a wonder that such serious and approving passages exist at all in the midst of the Gokul Ashtami letters that were clearly written in the "amusing letters home" spirit. Even when he disparages the festival for its alienness and excesses, he catches himself with the following sort of self-aware comment: "of course the festival is not more illogical than Christmas, though it seemed so, owing to its realism." For such a novice, this statement is remarkably keen on the question of enchanted mimesis and its relativist cultural reception. Similarly, after wondering at the Bapu Sahib's religious ecstasy that initially strikes Forster as "ordinary mundane intoxication," Forster admits "Yet I am very much muddled in my own mind about it all, for H.H. has what one understands by the religious sense and it comes out all through his life. He is always thinking of others and refusing to take advantage of his position in his dealings with them; and believing that his God acts similarly towards him."<sup>559</sup> There is as much admiration for Bapu Sahib as there is admission of limited perspective in himself. Here, the muddle lies within him, not outside in the Indians' celebratory mess.

Struck by the devotees' ubiquitously beautiful expressions and the Dewan splendidly singing bhajans "with his austere but devoted face and an attitude of absolute unity with the Deities in front of him,"<sup>560</sup> Forster develops a deeper interest in what animates this expression.

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<sup>559</sup> Ibid. 160-161.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid. 172.

As Viswanathan observes, Forster's appreciation is for the subjective aspects of devotion. But she does not go further to see where that leads him.

The subjective enchantment he apprehends from viewing the devotees' faces serves ultimately as a mere key into the objective enchantment of the Indian world around him. He longs to know what philosophy underwrites these facial expressions that transfix him; he longs to know the enchanted Indian world all around him, to which he is thus far somewhat blinkered. In particular, what he observes at the festival inspires him to inquire into his own Bapu Sahib's extreme devotion there: "But what did he feel when he danced like King David before the altar? What were his religious opinions?"<sup>561</sup> An understanding of the Bapu Sahib's mentality, established through many substantial conversations, then primes him for the fictive double-success of *A Passage to India*: the narrator's deep immersion into Godbole's meditative subjectivity and ultimately an objective rendering of Indian enchanted reality.

What Forster learns from his Bapu Sahib is that in the mystic state, "he was in touch with the reality he called Krishna. And he was unconscious of the world around him...The unseen was always close to him...Yet he would condemn asceticism, declare that salvation could not be reached through it, that it might be Vedantic but it was not Vedic, and matter and spirit must both be given their due."<sup>562</sup> Under the Bapu Sahib's tutelage, Forster learns that "the devout were in direct contact with their god" and that "affection, or the possibility of it, quivered through everything, from Gokul Ashtami down to daily human relationships." In short, whatever Forster's initial balk at Gokul Ashtami, however exaggerated, it quickly led to a genuine

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<sup>561</sup> Ibid. 175.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid. 175-176.

endeavor to learn. That we find in the fiction no trace of the mockery or disgust of the letters shows that much transpired between Forster's first moments at Gokul Ashtami and his final fictional rendering of it.

Three significant elements combine to give us the richer rendering of Gokul Ashtami in *A Passage to India*: Forster's theological apprenticeship under Bapu Sahib, inspired by the festival; the maturing of the former's perspective over the next decade; and finally the full realization of the special privilege of fiction vis-à-vis alternate worldviews. We would do well to think of Forster's jointly historical and fictional odyssey—from his ignorant early days in the Dewas through his valiant if inadequate attempt to unlock the caves' enchantment in Part II of the novel—as his effort to “train [his] perceptions so that we may be capable of feeling when the time comes.”<sup>563</sup> That time comes when he finally writes “Temple.” While Viswanathan claims that Forster is more religiously nuanced in his memoir than in his fiction, I hope my reading will prove otherwise, and with consequence.

## SUBJECTIVITY II: GODBOLE'S MIND

Kermode describes Forster's novelistic attempt to get inside the mind of the beatified, meditative, dancing Godbole thus: “Up to this point Godbole has been pious but evasive on matters of the spirit...Odd, inexplicable, a bit of a joke! But now the clairvoyance induced by his religious ecstasy becomes, as it were, the possession of the novelist.”<sup>564</sup> Indeed, the privilege of fiction allows Forster to do what he could not do ten years earlier in the historical setting: to fuse

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>564</sup> Kermode 64.



his own consciousness with that of Godbole's template, the dancing, singing, meditative Bapu Sahib. In the memoir, Forster extols his beloved patron as "certainly a genius and possibly a saint, and he had to be a king"<sup>565</sup>; but, for all his affection and admiration, the latter remains finally an "unknowable character."<sup>566</sup> Yet in the fiction, he can be known. In fact, Forster can apply what he learned from Bapu Sahib to fictionally penetrate his enchanted mind. Thus, one might argue that the fictive apotheosis realizes not just Forster's novelistic but also his experiential longing for Indian enchantment.

While "Temple" begins with the sort of paradox characteristically associated with Godbole and characteristically unnerving to Forster—" [God] is, was not, is not, was"<sup>567</sup>—the narrator soon penetrates the paradox. This time, the paradox is the simultaneity of transcendence and immanence: "Godbole stands in the presence of God. God is not born yet—that will occur at midnight—but He has also been born centuries ago, nor can He ever be born, because HE is the Lord of the Universe, who transcends human processes."<sup>568</sup> Ultimately, this particular paradox of the simultaneity of transcendence and immanence constitutes the core belief of the Hindus,<sup>569</sup> to whom it is not paradoxical at all; only in a disenchanted frame are transcendence and immanence mutually exclusive. But this time, the narrator cracks the paradox, unlike that of the good-evil interconnectedness that Godbole elaborated in connection with the Caves. No longer is the

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<sup>565</sup> Forster, *The Hill of Devi* 73.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>567</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 317.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.* 317.

<sup>569</sup> See Bankim on purusha and prakriti, *Bankim Rachanavali*, 213.

narrator's take on Godbole's philosophy filtered through an irritable and intolerant Fielding; rather, the narrator penetrates directly into Godbole's consciousness just three pages later. The stakes are high: to penetrate this particular putative paradox is not only to grasp something fundamental to Hindu mimetic enchantment, but also to resolve Forster's writerly dilemma allowing for the supernatural even while abiding solid realist parameters.

Here is Godbole's epiphany, shared by the narrator:

[The singers] loved all men, the whole universe, and scraps of their past, tiny splinters of detail, emerged for a moment to melt into the universal warmth. Thus Godbole, though she was not important to him, remembered an old woman he had met in Chandrapore days. Chance brought her into his mind while it was in this heated state, he did not select her, she happened to occur among the throng of soliciting images, a tiny splinter, and he impelled her by his spiritual force to that place where completeness can be found. Completeness, not reconstruction. His senses grew thinner, he remembered a wasp seen he forgot where, perhaps on a stone. He loved the wasp equally, he impelled it likewise, he was imitating God. And the stone where the wasp clung—could he...no, he could not, he had been wrong to attempt the stone, logic and conscious effort had seduced, he came back to the strip of red carpet and discovered that he was dancing upon it...he threw up his hands and detached the tiny reverberation that was his soul.<sup>570</sup>

The transcendent experience turns out to be nothing more than an opening of the self to very small physical elements of *this* world—woman, wasp, stone: transcendent immanence.

Moreover, the enchanted quality that Forster has thus far called India's disproportionateness he now calls completeness. That tiny details and the whole universe can be registered on the same plane—namely, the plane of music—is a fact Forster now very much admires. Through Godbole's spiritual force, Forster finally finds “that place where completeness can be found. Completeness, not reconstruction.” Completeness, not reconstruction: it is as if Forster were never disenchanted to begin with; he does not need to re-enchant, for Godbole's unperturbed enchantment comes to him directly. Just as Godbole summons through spiritual force his object of meditation, Mrs. Moore, so too does Forster through his own spiritual-artistic force that is the

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<sup>570</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 321.

prerogative of fiction, summon Godbole's consciousness. This is precisely what he could not accomplish through mere letters or memoir. Fiction allows him a unique freedom to rove in alternate consciousnesses, such that, as Kermode says, "the clairvoyance induced by...religious ecstasy becomes, as it were, the possession of the novelist."

That Godbole's meditation should center on Mrs. Moore is significant. She has been consistently associated with Indian enchantment, the only outsider to grasp the India's "metaphysical depth" and to live so close to nature. Let us take each of these aspects in turn.

It is appropriate that Godbole should recall a wasp, the very creature on which Mrs. Moore herself lavished attention early in the novel in what would otherwise seem a gratuitous passage. Without recalling that earlier passage, we might find Godbole's collocation of the wasp silly. But the earlier passage gives the later one its depth. Here is Mrs. Moore, having just been introduced to us, observing a wasp on her coat peg:

She had known this wasp or his relatives by day...Perhaps he mistook the peg for a branch—no Indian animal has any sense of an interior. Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon nest inside a house as out; it is to them a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces houses trees, houses trees. There he clung, asleep, while jackals in the plain bayed their desires and mingled with the percussion of drums.

"Pretty dear," said Mrs. Moore to the wasp. He did not wake, but her voice floated out, to swell the night's uneasiness<sup>571</sup>.

Mrs. Moore's perception here reflects Forster's own conception of the "inarticulate world being closer at hand in India." Just as, in his opening description, enchanted nature irreverently overtakes the built environment of Chandrapore's native quarters, the small animals could not care less for man's distinctions between the human and the natural worlds. And, indeed, Mrs. Moore, by affectionately addressing the little (gendered) wasp, also seems not to make such distinctions. She even contemplates the wasp's "thought," so it is no wonder that, through the

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<sup>571</sup> Ibid. 34.

summoning of her consciousness, Godbole is led to the wasp. In this enchanted passage, animals, old British woman, and Hindu singers contribute the night's symphony.

It is equally fitting that Forster would revive his most enchanted outsider in Godbole's epiphany. If, as Said claims, Mrs. Moore has a "[deep] experience of India that she does not understand,"<sup>572</sup> only to die soon afterward, then here, in her spiritual revitalization in Godbole's trance, her character closes its aborted circle. In her half-life, she *becomes part of* the deep metaphysical experience of India. In other words, her new status moves her beyond a bewildered epistemological enchantment and into a bona fide enchanted ontology.

#### OBJECTIVE ENCHANTMENT

Forster's own textual move is similar to that of Mrs. Moore's character: from enchanted epistemology to enchanted ontology. This *mise-en-abyme* of subjective immersion (reader-narrator-Godbole-Mrs. Moore-wasp) in the Godbole epiphany does not end there. If it did, I would not consider this final section the success that it is. For Forster to leave the text at mere epistemological enchantment would not only be to presume against the actual enchantment of the world, but also to merely derivatively enchant at the second order. But he goes further.

The text, for the first time, successfully immerses itself into religion, "a living force,"<sup>573</sup> much like nature's color that "flooded the world"<sup>574</sup> and the festival that "flowed on."<sup>575</sup> These

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<sup>572</sup> Said 203.

<sup>573</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 341.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.* 342.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.* 341.

commingled metaphors of religion, life, and color as forces indicate that the text has finally gotten beyond form to enter into force, the stuff of enchantment. As “joy had *seethed* to jollity,”<sup>576</sup> Forster participates in enchantment, not just depicting it from his aloof, detached point of view. The emotion evoked in “each man, according to his capacity” by the mimetic play of the festival, “an emotion that he would not have had otherwise,”<sup>577</sup> infects the narrator himself. As he describes the mimetic excess of the celebration, Forster writes, “No definite image survived; at the Birth it was questionable whether a silver doll or a mud village, or a silk napkin, or an intangible spirit, or a pious resolution, had been born. Perhaps all these things! Perhaps none! Perhaps all birth is an allegory!”<sup>578</sup> No longer bothered by the muddle, Forster is exuberant in this passage. He jubilates in being able to hold the various spiritual possibilities on the same plane: the transcendent, the mimetic, the ethical, the artistic. In this sense, he too, “according to his capacity,” gets into the spirit of the festival. Godbole’s thought, “It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself,”<sup>579</sup> could just as well apply to Forster.

Further, Forster finally grasps the all-inclusive spirit of Hinduism elaborated earlier, confoundingly, by Godbole in a more ominous valence. Now, though, Forster can appreciate this ecumenical spirit of Hindu enchantment, the merging of the profane and the sacred.<sup>580</sup> For

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<sup>576</sup> Ibid. 324, italics mine.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid. 325.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid. 325-26.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid. 326.

<sup>580</sup> Another example of the convergence of the profane and the sacred in the universal scheme would be the ritual performance of the “Despised and Rejected”: “the God could not issue from his temple until the unclean Sweepers played their tune, they were the spot of filth without which the spirit cannot cohere.” Ibid. 342.

example, about the celebrants' playing of games to simulate Krishna's own games in Brindaban, Forster writes, "By sacrificing good taste, this worship achieved what Christianity has shirked: the inclusion of merriment. All spirit as well as all matter must participate in salvation and if practical jokes are banned, the circle is incomplete."<sup>581</sup> Never before has Forster cast his vote so clearly in favor of Hinduism. What a distance he has traversed from his scornfully jocular letters of a decade earlier! His language is entirely adulatory: "the scene was magnificent" in all its sensual excess.

But Forster's enchanting of the text does more than praise and sympathize with the spirit of the celebration. The enchantment of the festival takes over the whole world of his text: nature, the state, the outsiders' party, and even the plot. Enchantment is no longer merely subjective—as expressed through the beatified faces of the celebrants and Godbole's mind—but **IN THE WORLD**. In other words, enchantment exists not merely in the moral sentiments and psychological projections of the characters, as even in Bankim; rather, it exists out there.

Even Aziz and the foreigners get involuntarily pulled into the vortex of the Hindus' enchantment. "Rumours of salvation enter the Guest House" when the festival reaches its bombastic half-way moment: the State guns go off, a rocket from the Jail garden gives its signal, the prisoner is released and kisses the feet of the singers.<sup>582</sup> This moment affects even Aziz, that other prisoner who had been released in the midst of Hinduized jubilation (the "Esmiss Esmoor" chant in the Chandrapore courthouse). Notably, Aziz, having treated his nemesis Ralph unkindly, suddenly and "completely [forgets] that they were not friends, and [focuses] his heart

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<sup>581</sup> Ibid. 324.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid. 348.

on something more distant than the caves, something beautiful. His hand was taken, and then he remembered how detestable he had been, and said gently, ‘Don’t you think me unkind any more?’”<sup>583</sup> The Hindus’ spirit of superseding their petty grievances in the moment of celebration touches even our estranged Aziz, so that he too, forgets about the Caves and reaches to something yet more transcendental—something even Forster is after. Finally pledging his heart to Mrs. Moore’s son, Aziz hears in the Hindus’ chant, his own salvational chant: “ ‘Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Krishnaradha,’ went the chant, then suddenly changed, and in the interstice, he heard, almost certainly, the syllables of salvation that had sounded during his trial at Chandrapore.”<sup>584</sup> Aziz’s patron, rendered by the Chandrapore courthouse Hindus as a goddess, pays a visit to his heart, “and indeed, until his heart was involved, he knew nothing.”<sup>585</sup> By musically rendering the one chant a counterpoint to the other, Forster finally draws together Caves and Temple, and in doing so, involves even Aziz in the Hindu enchantment. For a moment, the religious life trumps the political, as it did in the final moments of the trial.

But of course, the most well-known instance of enchantment *happening to* outsiders is the climax of the climax, when the boats of the four outsiders collide with each other and with the servitor of the Gokul replica which, in microcosm, also finally jumbles up enemies and allies as the mythological figures slip and dissolve into the waters. As they all capsize—Brits, Muslim, icons of Hindu deities—“a tornado of noise” breaks out: “Artillery was fired, drums

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<sup>583</sup> Ibid. 349.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid. 352.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid. 352.

beaten, the elephants trumpeted, and drowning all an immense peal of thunder, uncaccompanied by lighting, cracked like a mallet on the dome.”<sup>586</sup> The remarkable coincidence of these events makes it seem as though the outsiders collision has been choreographed as part of the festival’s finale. And in fact, it has—by Forster. He draws the whole world into the Hindu enchantment, even those formerly inimical to it. Further, the force that draws them in is one that elides differences, that jumbles everything together—friend and foe alike. Something higher seems to be compelling the scene. This transcendental force expresses itself through even nature: a “wild tempest” swirls up as the climax approaches, the thunder announces it, and then the rain that washes away the scene of denouement. In a sense, Forster has emplotted the very principle of the interconnection of all things that Godbole elucidated in Part II. Part III has gradually allowed Forster to comprehend this principle, finally using it to craft his own art. “That was the climax, as far as India admits of one,” writes Forster. As well, it is a climax for his own self-professed intention to render the insubstantial in his solidly realist prose.

Viswanathan reads the climax less generously:

As the birth of the god Krishna is celebrated, virtually turning princes and paupers alike into frolicking adolescents, the very imagery of Hinduism as an infantilizing religion fuses into the central image of the infant Krishna. It is no wonder that after the explosive confrontation between colonizer and colonized unleashed by Aziz’s wrongful arrest, no one can tell, as the English accuser Adela Quested discovers, whether evil lies in dark, hollow mountain caves or in the cavernous courtrooms of the colonial state. The raucous Hindu festival confirms the indeterminacy of events and their causes.<sup>587</sup>

Viswanathan is right to connect the earlier scenes of cave and courtroom to the carnivalesque celebration scene. But I see a certain progression, whereby the latter scene completes, redeems, and retrospectively makes sense of the earlier ones; whereas she sees all three as instances of the

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<sup>586</sup> Ibid. 354.

<sup>587</sup> Viswanathan, “Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism” 24.



spiritual chaos that uniformly exasperated Forster. Where Viswanathan sees Forster's infantilization of Hinduism, I see his genuine appreciation for its sense of play, mimesis, and transcendence beyond good and evil. Where she, like an earlier Fielding,<sup>588</sup> sees a lamentable confounding of moral principles, I see in this final scene, their admirable simultaneity—a hard-won sense for Forster. Finally, where she cannot admire the confirmation of indeterminacy, I would suggest its appropriateness to an India poised at as indeterminate a political moment as would ever be—something that Forster understood well. Again, Viswanathan, like most critics, reads the novel through a strictly political valence, rendering religion in this novel a mere epiphenomenon of politics. She, like most, overlooks Forster's deep interest in enchantment (alongside its political corollaries).

#### NOVEL, RELIGION, MUSIC, INSPIRATION

But Kermode does not overlook enchantment. In fact, he keenly perceives the connection between novel, religion, and music. Music, of course, permeates "Temple": Godbole's beatified singing, that of the celebrants at large, the special song of the Despised and Rejected, and finally, the ecstatic song of the wild beautiful young female saint. That so much music should mark the climax of the novel should not come as a surprise. According to Kermode, Forster's novel is itself composed like music: "The music comes from the placing of

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<sup>588</sup> Viswanathan confuses the sequence of events. She claims that after all these events, Fielding sets sail from India, finding reassurance in "the stately proportionate architecture of Venice, described with barely disguised relief as 'the civilization that has escaped muddle.'" (24). However, that journey, and those thoughts occur PRIOR to the Gokul Ashtami celebration, which marks his temporary repatriation to India. The celebration also marks a slight shift in his attitude: he has become much more inquisitive about Hinduism, inspired by his wife's interest in it. Significantly, by the climax of the novel, even Fielding has softened toward Hindu enchantment—not the reverse, as Viswanathan suggests.

these intermittent discoveries [of creative brilliancies] and their inter-relations. The novel enshrines them in its prose, putting quasi-musical motifs within its realist structures.”<sup>589</sup> This description of Forster’s novelistic imperative—prose that occasionally soars into song—might remind us of Tagore’s in *The Home and the World*. About the devotional singing at the Gokul Ashtami celebration in the princely state of Dewas that was the template for the climax of his novel, Forster wrote, “I have no doubt I was listening to great art. It was so complicated and yet so passionate.”<sup>590</sup> In Kermode’s understanding, “He thought art should be like that. To produce it required inspiration....It is these moments, and not the ‘elaborate apparatus’ Forster deprecated, that are the means by which novels can be complicated and passionate,”<sup>591</sup> Forster’s highest aspiration for the novel form. We might conclude then, that Forster used India’s religious enchantment infectiously to enchant the novel—a version of exoticism one might call second-order, or derivative, enchantment. By the same token, the nexus among music, religion, and novel suggests that Forster used the novel form to approach Indian enchantment, not unlike Tagore in *The Home and the World*, albeit in tellingly different ways and from tellingly different subject positions.

That both writers relate the musical not just to the novelistic, but also to the religious, puts all three terms in intimate relation. Kermode, discussing Forster’s treatment of the scene of Godbole’s devotional singing at Fielding’s tea party, equates the musical with the spiritual:

“Godbole has specified the raga he is using, which reminds us that the purpose of this passage is

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<sup>589</sup> Kermode 73.

<sup>590</sup> Forster quoted in Kermode 72.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid. 73.

musical. Forster says he ‘got the spiritual reverberation’ by means of a trick; ‘but “voluntary surrender to infection” better expresses my state.’”<sup>592</sup> Here, Godbole’s religious song infects the author, inspiring the latter’s prose. Writerly technique gives way to voluntary immersion into a character’s religious reverie. But, to my view, that earlier situation at Fielding’s tea was only a partial success, for then the narrator still remained locked out of the meaning and, to some degree, the spirit of Godbole’s song. Only the anonymous subaltern figures understand and are moved by Godbole’s song; narrator and tea party remain nonplussed. However, by the climax of the novel, the narrator has entered fully into what he now explicitly refers to as Godbole’s “reverberation,” a word that at once suggests sound/music, the once-malignant-now-redeemed echo, and the subjective *mise-en-abyme* of Godbole’s meditation. Kermode makes much of the “come, come, come” recitative running throughout the novel. For him, this is chief among Forster’s musical motifs that structure the prose: “intermittent discoveries [of creative brilliancies] and their inter-relations.” In Godbole’s dance-trance, God finally comes to the latter, just as he comes to the late Mrs. Moore, to the narrator, and to us—all three formerly estranged, just as divinity is estranged from devotee in the mode of *viraha*. The perfect symmetry of the novel is achieved through religious music, now given to us in words: whereas at Fielding’s tea, Godbole’s music was merely a bunch of alienating sounds sung to an uncomprehending foreign audience, now the lyrics to the Radhakrishna and Tukaram bhajans are given to us, thus inviting us finally and fully into the Indian enchantment. Likewise, the novel as a whole lifts up into a sort of religious music given to us in (Forster’s) realist words, not only mirroring but immersing itself in the “living force” of religion.

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<sup>592</sup> Ibid. 72.

## A PASSAGE NOT EASY

However impressive the achievement of this joint religious and novelistic apotheosis, it is all too fleeting and limited. Forster uses Hindu, natural, and Muslim-syncretic emblems to illustrate his central metaphor of passage from the temporal to the transcendent:

Thus was He thrown year after year, and were others thrown—little images of Ganpati, baskets of ten-day corn, tiny tazias after Mohurram—scapegoats, husks, emblems of passage; a passage not easy, not now, not here, not to be apprehended except when it is unattainable: the God to be thrown was an emblem of that.<sup>593</sup>

Here, besides finally aligning the Hindu, the animist, and the Muslim-syncretic modes of mimetic enchantment, Forster provides the key to the quadruple-level meaning of his title, *A Passage to India*. Immanence does not easily lead to transcendence: there is too much now and here to allow for a perfect passage to the unattainable. However, in an ultimate paradox, the passage can be apprehended only when it is unattainable, only once the devotee has come as far as he can through mimetic enchantment.

This idea not only corroborates with Hindu philosophy, but it also underpins Forster's notions of friendship, politics, and art. If the transcendent be fully attained "not here, not now," then Forster's beloved fellowship between Brits and Indians (e.g. Aziz and Fielding) be fully attained "not there," "not yet." The Raj stands in the way. However, the passage from Raj to Independence will also not be easy, particularly if it entails attenuating precisely the sort of religious *jouissance* Forster depicts in the Mau. As Forster writes in *The Hill of Devi*, "indeed almost everything was shrinking. Only the religious festival, Gokul Ashtami, which connected

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<sup>593</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 353.

the dynasty and its subjects with God, retained its former splendour.”<sup>594</sup> Soon that too would go, with the elimination of the princely states in 1947-1949, a prospect about which Forster was not happy. Whereas Said reads not only Raj triumphalism but optimism regarding cross-cultural friendship in the last line of the novel, “No, not yet...No, not there”, Forster’s passage about passage and indeed the entire section in the Mau, invites us to read the final words as more chastened than Said’s interpretation. Forster lamented the demise of the native state, of native autonomy, and the religious intensity that obtained there. He foresaw, with a shocking prescience, that the native states would dissolve, despite being at their strongest at the time of his writing. Perhaps this foreknowledge came through his idiosyncratic lived experience of a particularly decadent Native State. Whatever the reasons for his foresight, what he saw on the cloud of the future was an Independence marked by a nationalism whose secret sharers would always be, as Gyanendra Pandey avers, colonialism and communalism.

Last, this rich passage on passage provides the key to understanding Forster’s general ethos in the novel. Finally he has connected the religious passage to his own narrative one, something he was unable to do in “Caves.” The religious passage, like the narrative one, resembles an asymptote: the nearer one’s goal, the more it becomes clear how impossible the perfect capture will be. God, like enchantment in the realist novel, can be glimpsed in snatches, but never in any permanent way. Mimetic enchantment, whether religious or novelistic, proves to be ephemeral, impossible. It is a difficult passage from the phenomenal world into the transcendent vision. No sooner than the vision is glimpsed, does it evaporate. Here is how Forster puts it:

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<sup>594</sup> Forster, *The Hill of Devi* 214.

Infinite Love took upon itself the form of SHRI KRISHNA and saved the world. All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars; all became joy, all laughter...Not an orgy of the body; the tradition of that shrine forbade it. But the human spirit had tried by a desperate contortion to ravish the unknown, flinging down science and history in the struggle, yes, beauty herself. Did it succeed? Books written afterwards say "Yes." But how, if there is such an event, can it be remembered afterwards? How can it be expressed in anything but itself? Not only from the unbeliever are mysteries hid, but the adept himself cannot retain them. He may think, if he chooses, that he has been with God, but as soon as he thinks it, it becomes history, and falls under the rules of time.<sup>595</sup>

The human spirit may journey for a moment into the unknown, but it eschews both recollection and record of that experience. Language, forever at a remove from experience, evacuates the epiphanic experience itself, particularly in a novel whose time-boundedness occludes the timeless transcendental sphere.<sup>596</sup> But lest Forster's admission smack of the same self-defeating quality as his meditation on language in "Caves," now at least the adept and the unbeliever are brought together in their dilemma.

This explicit intra-textual paralleling of adept and unbeliever bear heavily on Forster's scheme articulated in "What I believe." There, the mystical and the artistic vocations were given as alternatives: the non-believer, lacking the adept's perception of cosmic order had recourse only to art. But here in the novel, those two alternatives come even closer, for the difference between what the adept and the non-believer experience in relation to registering enchanted epiphanies turns out to be quite similar. Throughout his conversations with Indian mystics, whether the fakir or Bapu Sahib, Forster was persistently moving toward a theory of art as parallel to religion, nearly a commonplace endeavor for disenchanted Europeans looking to find in art what was lost in religion. But Forster's finale regarding passage comes closer than most to

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<sup>595</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 323.

<sup>596</sup> For a fascinating and consequential discussion of time, metaphysics, theology, and narrative, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

a deep elaboration of the analogical relationship between the religious and the artistic experience; ironically, he accomplishes his goal by admitting the limitations of both spiritual experiences.

The fictional endeavor has brought Forster closer to an understanding of the adept's activity. Whether he '[gets] the spiritual reverberation' by means of a trick; or "voluntary surrender to infection,"<sup>597</sup> his process mirrors Godbole's: "it made no difference whether she was a trick of his memory or a telepathic appeal. It was his duty, as it was desire to place himself...in her position."<sup>598</sup> Similarly, Forster felt it his duty, through the fictional leap, to place himself in the position of the spiritual adept, a substitution much in the spirit of the many mimetic substitutions of the Hindu ritual. Forster thus writes, not just with an attitude of not just admiration, but replication, "those 'imitations,' those 'substitutions,' ...awakened in each man, according to his capacity, an emotion that he would not have had otherwise." Likewise for Forster, his own substitution conjures a feeling for Indian enchantment he would not have had otherwise. And if Godbole reflects on his spiritual effort, "How inadequate! But each according to his own capacities, and he knew that his own were small," then Forster might say the same thing about his own. "It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself": Forster's novelistic accomplishment lies in precisely this enlargement, one that allowed him to take on a longed-for and radically different worldview from his own.

Longing, too, is suggested by the passage on passage. Because complete beatification can only be approached asymptotically, a longing remains; and this longing sustains faith. It is

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<sup>597</sup> Ibid. 72.

<sup>598</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India* 326.

precisely this love-in-separation that Vaishnavities, devotees of Lord Krishna, savor as *viraha*. God can never be fully known or permanently captured, just as India and its enchantment cannot be for Forster/foreigners: that the love object necessarily eludes the lover to some degree does not obviate the effort to love. We might read Forster's own asymptotic approach to India, especially in its heightened moment of the final section, as "good exoticism": the kind of exoticism that involves a near, if finally incomplete, immersion of self into other. This good-exoticist near-immersion is achieved in the evanescent moments where his prose illuminates "intermittent creative brilliancies," brilliancies that connect the various aspects of enchantment both negative and positive. That said, Forster's success is necessarily momentary, and it depends on others' religious backcloth, one that allows for their epiphanies that are themselves momentary, now becoming even more so with the imminent dissolution of native autonomous zones.

#### POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF LIMITED ENCHANTMENT

Indeed, it is important to remember that *A Passage to India*'s limited grasp of enchantment extends beyond the limitations of art and exoticism; it bears on temporal politics. While it is tempting to let the finale's instantiation of the art/religion analogy overtake one's reading of the entire novel, such delinking from politics would make the novel vulnerable to the sort of argument that Said makes: the familiar Weberian argument that Eastern mysticism is fundamentally apolitical. The particular power of Forster's text is that the religious, the artistic, the political, and the historical operate as mutually impinging valences. Forster would, I think, not want us to read the politics out of his encounter with enchantment. First, he implies that



enchantment carries with it a politics of tolerance, as exhibited by the Hindu celebrants' melting away of petty grievances, their generosity toward their phobic Muslim neighbor, and the syncretic and mimetic practices of the local Muslims (e.g. the Shrine of the Head and the Body, the Mohurran tazias similar to Hindu emblems); whereas disenchantment carries a politics of intolerance and separation, as exhibited repeatedly by the British and Aziz.

Second, a large part of Forster's difficulty in passing into "the real" India has to do with historical contingency. He makes no effort to hide this fact. In fact, he showcases it, for his overall difficulty in grasping the enchanted Indian worldview is just the common condition of not just colonizers, but also increasingly, that of the urban colonial middle class. In that sense, the novel's "failure" to sustain enchantment is precisely the mark of its success, for it accomplishes two important things—beyond establishing the felicitous parallel between the adept and the artist—particularly in the first two sections: 1) it indexes the loss of enchantment attendant to colonial urbanization, and even certain cosmopolitan visions that are unable to accommodate the lived religiosity of India's vast if marginalized majority; and 2) it rather presciently recognizes all the intercultural, affective breakdowns in the last days of Raj as a result of a failure to grasp Indian enchantment. And so, when the land of India finally balks, with its "not there, not yet," at Mrs. Moore's and Aziz's "God is everywhere," it insists on a specific worldview of Indian enchantment—a hierophanic vision of God—and rejects a secular cosmopolitanism. This must have been a heart-rending concession for Forster to make as a true believer in the possibility of his worldwide secular clerisy: his Beloved Fellowship.

Still, he grants the final words of the novel, "not there...not yet" to an enchanted Indian land, thus suggesting a certain intractability of enchantment even as its sphere is radically

reduced. This indomitable enchantment will play out in one of the two estranged Indias and one of the two lines of the enchanted novel in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the village and small-town India of R.K. Narayan's fiction. Narayan's line is an altogether separate line from the urban national-allegorical magical realist, metatextual novels like that of Rushdie, Forster's heir.

Confronted with the enchantment-impasse, Forster acknowledges it: he admits that his subject position, and other colonial and urban types like him, prohibits him from fully crawling back into that ever-shrinking womb of enchantment; moreover, he was prescient enough to realize that the ranks of those barred from enchantment would swell as an effect of an Independence movement that took a particularly statist, and regrettably communalist turn. In 1924, enchanted reality was still somewhat intact, and in moments even articulable, but neither the reality nor its novelistic representation could last—hence his emphasis on the evanescence of enchantment. His novelistic enchantment is therefore made modest by Indian political history as well as his own subject position and the constrictions of realism. His narrative successes at enchantment are necessarily circumscribed: he, as an outsider, can only glimpse enchantment in rare snatches; further the very worldview that gives him the model from which to derive his novelistic enchantment was on the wane; and finally, the realism to which he remained beholden can only allow for limited openings out onto the transcendental sphere (much like mimetic enchantment as a ritual praxis). While he is able to show that enchantment exists in the world, he cannot fully capture it. His choice of religious ethos—namely, the difficulty of the passage from the immanent to the transcendent—as his novelistic analogy may be strategic. Modernism's obfuscatory techniques of representation conveniently dovetail with the particular Hindu ethos he chooses as his central trope.

Yet, what other choice does Forster have if he wants to yoke to Indian enchantment his effort to re-enchant the novel-at-large? His re-enchanting of the novel via Indian lived enchantment is necessarily derivative. Unlike Bankim and Tagore, Forster generally cannot relate directly to Indian enchantment. Aside from the extremely rare, fleeting epiphanies when he breaks through directly to enchantment, Forster can, in the main, only enchant his text at the second order—whether by poaching off the subjectivity of his most enchanted character, using good exoticism to approach asymptotically the axis of enchantment, or borrowing a Hindu philosophical trope to inspire his artistic method and form. Because his novel is not backed up by the rich literary-religious tradition that has created, transmitted, preserved, and contended with Indian religious enchantment, the best he can do is derive from that tradition. At least in Part III, Forster realizes that necessity of linking his own independent effort at enchantment to that of the Hindus.

However, *like* Tagore, Forster wants to locate an enchantment in a land beyond Indo-British India: in the universe at large, yet expressed especially on Indian soil. Both authors refer to a transcendental plane, a “home” in the cosmos that is at the same time directly related to Indian soil. (Here we might recall Lukács notion of a transcendental home corresponding to the organic lifeworld of the Greeks: the rounded world). But unlike Tagore, Forster stands somewhat outside of this transcendental-yet-immanent home, despite his intimations of it. His outsider status has to do less with his Britishness and more with his estrangement from the religious lifeworld of the Indians and the drastic reduction of the latter (hence, Aziz being equally, if not more, estranged). Such estrangement explains Forster’s initial will to deracinate the Indian land: shorn of Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, or British claims, primordial India offers a

potential for a secular enchantment of nature. He wants to get back to a pre-religious enchantment, a primordially enchanted view of nature itself, but Forster's "Caves" acknowledges that he remains locked out of it (unlike Tagore, who keenly grasps Indian nature in every register—secular Romantic, poetic, Hindu, mystical). For a long time, Forster is muddled by the very view he longs for: his disenchantment is set in relief against the enchantment he perceives around him and appreciates, but cannot enter into until he hitches his text to the Hindu backcloth.

Like Tagore, Forster wanted originally and ultimately to elaborate a secular enchantment using the resources of religion: religion as a means to the ends of secular enchantment. For him too, art becomes the new religion: the principle of creative unity. When Forster met a fakir at Benares in 1913, he discovers the similarity between the creative experiences of mysticism and writing. Kermode recounts the story and draws out its implications:

"We had a long talk chiefly about 'inspiration'—i.e. the mental process through which one goes during the act of writing...I was interested to find that it was the same in his case as mine, though I produce novels and he Sanscrit Poems.' Elsewhere he noted that the fakir explained the Tree of the Universe to him and confirmed that they had had similar experiences when they entered a creative state. Somehow inspiration offered itself at last, and he finished *A Passage to India*...<sup>599</sup>

One could think of the Maharajah, of Bapu Sahib, as having powers not unlike the fakir's, or Godbole's, or Virginia Woolf's. I have mentioned Forster's theory that creative power is independent of intelligence. This may be frivolous but it does allow for inspiration as possession, as the product of dreams rather than intellect. So one might account for the fakir and for the Maharajah, whose chaotic personal life, indicating a catastrophic intellectual disorder, failed to damage the spiritual power to which Forster had access.<sup>600</sup>

Forster may have had access to this spiritual power of the mystics, but he was did not actually have it as Tagore, our vatic-poet, did. So Forster could come to possess artistically another's spiritual possession: again, a second-order relation.

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<sup>599</sup> Kermode 130.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid. 131.

Yet for all his limitations, Forster can be said to have been even more prescient than the indefatigably idealistic Tagore. *A Passage to India* begins and ends with the Indian sky/earth: they do not want Indo-British friendship because, it is implied, disenchantment has taken root in that relationship, and the enchanted earth is opposed to it. By indexing not just his, or the comprador class's, but soon the India-wide alienation from enchantment, he—and he only—honestly registers the deep impact of twentieth-century Indian politics on worldview.

CHAPTER 4<sup>601</sup>

*“The feasibility of the chutnification of history”?:  
A critique of magical realism*

**Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children***

Even Rushdie, whose vaunted subject is twentieth-century Indian politics retains a certain idealism regarding Indian enchantment that flies in the face of a disenchanted politics. His romantic view of India is less forgivable than Tagore’s, for the India of 1980 had become much more thoroughly disenchanted than that of 1916 when Tagore was poised just before the Fall. Communal strife had not broken out in the countryside with any remarkable intensity until the 1920s and 1930s, the heyday of the nationalist moment. But thirty-plus years after Independence, sectarian violence, the foreclosed promise of secularism, and the adoption of all the ideologies associated with Weber’s disenchanted Europe had taken the day.

Like Forster, Rushdie will adopt second-order enchantment, albeit in a very different manner, namely magical realism. While both Forster and Rushdie adopt the enchanted cosmology of the Indians at the macro-formal level, to my view the latter less successfully conveys the attitude of belief native to the characters. Another difference between the two non-resident writers is their level of epistemological confidence in relation to Indian enchantment: unlike Rushdie’s confident all-encompassing magical realism, Forster’s modernist obfuscation and his asymptotic approach to India indicate a recognition that he will never quite grasp what

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<sup>601</sup> Large parts of this chapter have been adapted from my undergraduate honors thesis, “Pickled Words, Magic Bodies: Varieties of Realism in Rushdie and Roy,” Harvard University, Department of English and American Literature and Language, 1998.

lies beyond his secular, finally foreign ken. This sense of self-conscious subjective limitation differentiates Forster not only from his cosmopolitan successor Rushdie, but also from his native predecessor Tagore with whom he otherwise shares much in common—a theory of creativity rendered in religious terms, a desire for a worldwide clerisy of vatic artists, a belief in the salvific power of art, and a fascination with the lived enchantment of India. But the difference between Tagore and Forster goes beyond mere subject position; it also has to do with historical contingency. Forster’s moment of engagement with India a crucial eight years after Tagore’s registers the disenchanting and sectarian effects of incipient nationalism, itself a byproduct of colonialism.

Whereas Forster acknowledges the limitations of his (realist) language to capture enchantment, Rushdie, another cosmopolitan with tremendous affection for India, dares to invent a new language to get at Indian enchantment. His technique has been called magical realist “chutnification,” a last-ditch synthetic effort to recuperate both syncretism and enchantment in an India that, by 1980, had long since been lost to the disenchanted worldview. Strictly speaking, his magnum opus *Midnight’s Children* ought not to be called an enchanted novel, but a re-enchanting novel. After all, the primarily urban South Asia that he takes as his scope had already undergone a complete and regrettable disenchantment; so his meta-fictional effort to *restore* pre-modern Hindu and Islamic epic modes (*Ramayana* meets *Arabian Nights*) can only be viewed as *re*-enchantment. While Rushdie’s may seem a more impressive accomplishment than Forster’s—and it is certainly more striking and grandiose than the latter’s humble effort at enchantment—I would argue that, for a variety of reasons, it is not nearly as successful.

In part, the reason is historical: Rushdie simply finds himself at a later juncture when South Asia has crossed the point of no return from disenchantment. There is no genuinely enchanted reality for him to reflect: whatever humble enchantment exists in those dramatically circumscribed pockets of small-town and rural India (as depicted in *Narayan*) is neither accessible to Rushdie nor suitable to his national-allegorical ambition.

Another problem is that Rushdie's re-enchantment is evacuated of politics: it no longer designates a worldview that corresponds to the particular politics usually associated with Romanticism (egalitarianism, respect for nature, tolerance, syncretism, anti-statism, anti-industrialism, anti-capitalism). Rather, his promiscuous magic catches anything and everything: from the secular Nehruvian visionaries (Saleem's telepathic *Midnight's Children* Conference each of whose constituents has magical gifts), and middle-class élites (the Sinai men with dynasties in their noses, Alia with her ability to stir her emotions into her food), to urban proletariat folk astrologers (Ramram Seth's cryptic prophecy of Saleem's life), hawkers (Lifafa Das's encyclopedic diorama), and prostitutes (the 512-year-old Tai Bibi whose body can produce any scent in the world) to urban fundamentalists (the Ravana gang), to military leaders (General Zulfiquar's "movements performed by pepper pots"), corrupt premiers (Indira Gandhi, the Black Widow), to Pakistani soldiers (Saleem the sniffer) to Communist squatter magicians (Picture Singh), to characters with the same names and traits of their Puranic templates (Shiva and Parvati). The list could go on for pages. There is nothing Indian that does not get caught in the sieve of Rushdie's magic, perhaps the result of his exilic-romantic vision of India. Whatever his motivations, the effect is definite: when everything is re-enchanted, nothing is re-enchanted. In other words, enchantment gets depoliticized, ironically in this most politically explicit of novels.



*Midnight's Children* is driven by a dialectical tension between official/political and unofficial/cultural history. Rushdie associates realism as the chosen form of the former, and magical realism as the ideal form of the latter. In doing so, he creates an opposition in (enchanted) form and (disenchanted) content. Most critics who take a meta-fictional approach to the text argue that its exuberant, anti-mimetic, critically historiographic form offsets the bleakness of the novel's content. Though Rushdie has the magical epistemology prevail over the disenchanted ontology of Indian political life, I hesitate to consider that a victory for enchantment. After all, if the magic lies entirely in epistemology—arguably shared by both the superstitious characters and the experimental writer—but it fails to effect an ontological politics of resistance, then what good is it? Magic may dominate and permeate even Indian political life, as Rushdie depicts it, but it in no way changes the course of disenchanted politics and ideology. The magic Rushdie associates with figures like the Ravana Gang, General Zulfikar, and Indira Gandhi is mere flourish. Worse yet, he allows magical/religious topoi to be mobilized by disenchantment, without ever making clear the distinction between that and radical enchantment as Tagore does; by glibly flattening out this distinction, he empties out the political tension between the two. Tagore explicitly opposes Nikhil's enchanted worldview to Sandip's cynical and disenchanted manipulation of religion. Thus does that author stage a yet-to-be-decided struggle with high stakes: the actual political domain, the ethical imperative of Indian reality. Moreover, Tagore's enchanted form correlates to enchanted content: the author's mimetically enchanted mode reflects not only Nikhil's worldview but also the ritually laden symbolic objects of everyday organic Indian life. Rushdie, on the other hand, by indiscriminately assigning magic to anything and everything, levels out the differences between enchanted magic and

disenchanted magic, however paradoxical the latter might sound. Yet, despite that ontological leveling of magic, he finally associates magic with form and disenchantment with content (politics, ontology). In doing so, he does not allow the enchanted worldview to have an ontological effect IN THE WORLD. For Rushdie, unlike Tagore, the stakes are low and pre-determined. The deck is stacked against ontological enchantment, the enchantment of reality.

#### IS MAGICAL REALISM REALLY TRANSFORMATIVE HISTORY?

Having abdicated content, can Rushdie really claim to transform history as magical realists most often do? If history belongs to reality/ontology, then how can a transformative history be transformative when the only transformation occurs at the level of epistemology, not ontology? In other words, to revisit Bilgrami's formulation: it is not enough for (enchanted) value to come from us: it must exist out there, in the world. If enchantment exists IN THE WORLD, then it would seem realism—albeit an enchanted realism—would be not just the preferable but the necessary representational mode (as opposed to, say, even lyric poetry, where the enchantment is an emanation of the lyric subject, a frisson of beatitude that need not be corroborated by ontology). In order to answer this crucial question about the transformability of history through magical realism, let us investigate the notion of transformative history in the critical discourse on magical realism; then let us see how it plays out in *Midnight's Children*.

## A REVIEW OF THE DISCOURSE ON MAGICAL REALISM (AND ITS RELATION TO POSTCOLONIAL HISTORY)

Magical realism is a literary category steeped in controversy. The major critical debates relate to the ontological category of history and the epistemological category of historiography. Controversy surrounds magical realism's geographic applicability. Is it specific to colonized New World cultures, does it extend to all postcolonial situations, or can it function as an entirely cosmopolitan (non-regionalist) category? This territorial tension also undergirds the discussion of magical realism as a primarily formal or historical category. Is its polemical stance toward the European tradition of realism underpinned by an antagonistic historical relationship with the Metropole, or is it an international postmodern manifestation? Critical discourse continues to define and refine the still unanchored genre that is nonetheless preoccupied with history.

Much of the debate about the term centers on its regional versus cosmopolitan tension—a tension germane to most of its contemporary practitioners who are Metropolitan intellectuals with a nostalgic, exilic relationship to their postcolonial birthplace. Yet a European tradition of magical realism, conceived in 1925 by German art critic Franz Roh to define post-Expressionist painting, still survives. The evolution of the term from art to literature occurred before it left Europe.<sup>602</sup> These pioneers characterized Magic Realism as the combination of precision, bizarre

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<sup>602</sup> Massimo Bontempelli revived magical realism in the latter years of the decade, expanding it to the arena of literature as well as painting, thus commencing the universalist European usage. The Italian writer and critic discussed the term in his journal *900* as the discovery of magic in the quotidian: "This is pure Twentiethcenturyism, which rejects both reality for the sake of reality and fantasy for the sake of fantasy, and lives with the sense of magic discovered in the daily life of human beings and things" (Menton, quoting Bontempelli, 131). Expanding a tradition that nonetheless grew from the visual arts, Bontempelli traced the roots of Magic Realism to fifteenth-century Italian artists who depicted a "precise realism enveloped in an atmosphere of lucid amazement" (Bontempelli quoted by Menton, 131). Though Bontempelli had expanded the term to include literature, it continued to be applied primarily to visual art. Pierre Roy's visual art provoked the response that "All the artist has to do is open his surprise box with a push of the thumb in order to have a marvelous, unusual element, a mirage, an illumination spring forth from

juxtapositions, and matter-of-factness.<sup>603</sup> The last major evolution of Continental magic realism occurred in 1950, when Leonard Forster used the term to describe post-World War II German poets who sought in the genre an optimism that would serve as an antidote to the Nazi crisis and an imminent atomic war: “myth lives in us, Nature’s original powers are interwoven in us, powers that we had for so long forgotten because of our concern with the atomic bomb. That is the spirit of Magic Realism which put it up to us to draw out the consequences.”<sup>604</sup> Thus in an ironic twist, European writers themselves bind the category to a mythic consciousness and the specificity of a traumatic historical moment—the very conditions Latin American magical realist pioneers would use to exclude Europe from the tradition. Regardless of geography, though, the magical realist imperative is clearly a RE-enchanting response to a post-traumatic disenchanted world.

The regionalist trend in magical realism began in 1927 when New World writers appropriated the category to describe the bizarre reality of the colonial encounter that brought together vastly different cultures.<sup>605</sup> Around 1948, Cuban expatriate novelist Alejo Carpentier, a landmark figure in the field to this day, coined the term “*Lo real maravilloso*” in an essay published in the Caracas’ newspaper *El Nacional*. Carpentier, the pioneer of this term, was the

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banality” (Waldemar George quoted by Menton, 135). However, in the 1930s, the Netherlands generously dilated the term to include the literary counterparts of artists Hynckes, Kock, and Willink.

<sup>603</sup> Seymour Menton, “Magic Realism: An Annotated International Chronology of the Term,” *Essays in Honor of Frank Dauster*, ed. Kirsten Nigro and Sandra Cypess (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 1995) 136.

<sup>604</sup> Forster quoted in Menton 143.

<sup>605</sup> The term traveled in 1927 to Latin America. Ortega y Gasset had Roh’s book translated for the *Revista de Occidente*, a journal esteemed and read not only by the Buenos Aires literary circles, but also by their counterparts in many Latin American countries. This journal couriered cultural information from the Old World to the New. Arturo Uslar Pietri, a friend of Bontempelli’s, first appropriated the Old World term in 1948 to describe the Venezuelan literati of the Generation of 1928.

first to distinguish between Latin American “*Lo real maravilloso*” and European Magic Realism.<sup>606</sup> He claimed that “*lo real maravilloso*” could apply only to Latin America,<sup>607</sup> whose history was intimately linked not only to indigenous and black mythologies, but also to the colonial encounter:

Because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing [mestizaje], American is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?<sup>608</sup>

Tracing the marvellous to the ontological reality of the colonial superimposition on autochthonous culture, Carpentier insists on a historical basis for the marvelous real.<sup>609</sup> More specifically, he limits the term to the New World’s historical reality.

Diverging from Carpentier, a critical counter-current maintains that magical realism is an international genre that need not apply to a colonized culture. Early on, Carpentier’s colonial, New World championing of the term was contested by a few Latin American critics. Angel Flores endeavored in 1955 to expand the term to include all cosmopolitan, avant-garde literature dealing with social protest, emphasizing the Latin American magical realist writers’ debt to their European predecessors.<sup>610</sup> This line of argument has been pursued by some recent scholarship.

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<sup>606</sup> Carpentier is perceived unanimously as one of the landmark figures in the field of Magic Realism. Jeanne Delbaere, J. Michael Dash, Stephen Slemon, and many others point to him as the figure who galvanized Magic Realism, or more correctly, *lo real maravilloso*, as a powerful concept applicable (only) to Latin American fiction.

<sup>607</sup> Roberto Gonzales Echevarria, another monolithic figure in Latin American writing, also prefers Carpentier’s New World privileging of Magic Realism.

<sup>608</sup> Alejo Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America (1949),” *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) 88.

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>610</sup> Menton 144-5. In 1967, Louis Leal rejected Flores’ categorization of Borges and Kafka as Magic Realists, asserting that the two writers were Surrealists instead (Menton 146). Leal’s differentiation was not unprecedented. The progenitor of the term, Roh, had distinguished, during the Continental wave of Magic Realism, between the

For example, Rawdon Wilson writes: “locating the bizarre unlikelyhoods of magical realism in the bizarre landscape of Latin America collapses many levels of textual evidence and seems, flatly to deny the parallels between Latin American (or Anglo-Indian or Canadian) magical realism and the tradition of European fantasy exemplified by, way, Kafka or Bulgakov.” Such critics understand the function of magic in magical realism as “satire and political commentary”; magic, thus, operates as an alternative to the official, bureaucratic record.<sup>611</sup> Magical realism, as an international postmodern sub-category, antagonizes traditional realism;<sup>612</sup> self-consciously foregrounding its literariness, magical realism wages against a realism that tends to obscure its fictiveness through persistent mimetic gestures.<sup>613</sup>

Despite this dynamic internationalist school of magical realist critics, the category continues to rest on postcolonial specificity (though it has traveled beyond the exclusively Latin American terrain).<sup>614</sup> Postcolonial discourse has subsumed the genre as writers from India,

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often collapsed categories of Surrealism and Magic Realism: The Surrealists treat the fantastic, imaginary, while the Magic Realists treat everyday reality, “imbuing it with a strange, uncanny, eery character” (Menton 139). The debate over the categorization of writers like Borges and Kafka extends today when consider a current cosmopolitan “minority” writer like Rushdie.

<sup>611</sup> Wendy Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,” *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) 168. Faris uses *Midnight’s Children*, a postcolonial text, to make these points about the cosmopolitan, de-centering tendencies of magical realism.

<sup>612</sup> John Burt Foster, “Magical Realism, Compensatory Vision, and Felt History: Classical Realism Transformed in The White Hotel,” *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) 268.

<sup>613</sup> Rawdon Wilson, “The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism,” *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) 226.

<sup>614</sup> I do not mean to conflate Latin American magical realism with other postcolonial strands of the genre. But, because of a relative dearth of scholarship on specifically Indian magical realism, I am forced to contextualize the Indian tradition within a larger postcolonial one that rests on the precedent set by Latin American magical realism.

Africa, Australia, and Canada contemporize it and remodel it according to their specific socio-cultural situations. Postcolonial critics, following Carpentier's lead, insist on geographical peripherality as the requisite for magical realism.<sup>615</sup> This school also insists on the primacy of ontological/historical facticity, which distinguishes magical realism from its cosmopolitan variants, like surrealism or psychic realism. (We will soon ask where *Midnight's Children* falls on this issue). Despite its rhetorical similarities with postmodernism, the ontological preoccupations of magical realism, these critics maintain, enable it to resist absorption into the epistemologically-driven Western school of postmodernism.<sup>616</sup> Magical realism's inevitable conflation with postmodernism derives from the decentering preoccupations of both schools<sup>617</sup> that are, nonetheless, quite separate. Kumkum Sangari claims that magical realism is different from the self-collapsing postmodern epistemology in that it "reinvents a more acute and comprehensive mode of referentiality."<sup>618</sup> Ultimately, Sangari claims that the Western postmodern "crisis of meaning"<sup>619</sup> does not necessarily apply to other cultural loci. While the voracious postmodernists avidly seek nonmimetic Third World texts to add to their arsenal, they fail to distinguish the nonmimetic and the antimimetic (the latter, and not the former, falling within the category of the postmodern). She writes:

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<sup>615</sup> Faris 165.

<sup>616</sup> Ibid. 165.

<sup>617</sup> Theo D'haen, "Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers," *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) 201.

<sup>618</sup> Kumkum Sangari, "The Politics of the Possible," *Science and Society* (Spring 1987)163.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid. 184.

The nonmimetic narrative modes of Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie inhabit a social and conceptual space in which the problems of ascertaining meaning assume a political dimension qualitatively different from the current postmodern skepticism about meaning in Europe and America. Yet such nonmimetic, non-western modes also seem to lay themselves open to the academized procedures of a peculiarly western, historically singular, postmodern epistemology that universalizes the self-conscious dissolution of the bourgeois subject, with its now characteristic stance of self-irony, across both space and time. The expansive forms of the modern and the postmodern novel appear to stand in ever-polite readiness to recycle and accommodate other cultural content, whether Latin American or Indian.<sup>620</sup>

A somewhat simplistic reading of postcolonial magical realism claims that these texts, resting on the historical experience of colonization, embody a duality resulting from culture clash. Stephon Slemon treats Canadian literature in an effort to claim that magical realist texts “recapitulate, in both their narrative discourse and their thematic content, the real social and historical relations that obtain within the post-colonial culture in which they are set.”<sup>621</sup> Driven by the constant, unresolvable tension between two incompatible worlds and discursive systems,<sup>622</sup> the magical realist text serves as the metonymic site for this dialectic; the binary narrative mode, language, and tradition reflect the double vision that results from the unlikely clash of the colonizer’s and colonized disparate cultures.<sup>623</sup> The “magic” works within and against the realism; the magical realist dilates a monolithic colonial space into a “dual spatiality”; we are forced to see the singular perspective as problematic.<sup>624</sup>

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<sup>620</sup> Ibid. 157.

<sup>621</sup> Stephen Slemon, “Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse,” *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) 410.

<sup>622</sup> Ibid. 411.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid. 412.

<sup>624</sup> Susanne Baker, “Binarisms and Duality: Magic Realism and Postcolonialism,” *Span: Journal of the South Pacific Association for the Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 1.36 (1993): 87.



A concurrent model for postcolonial magical realism replaces duality with multiplicity. This multiplicity model, championed by Kumkum Sangari, involves an imaginative, future-oriented, synchronic “politics of the possible; multiplicity suggests a liberating infinity of ways of being and perceiving. Such Marquezian marvelous realism—a mode which marries the real to the possible (a particular reading of “marvelous”)—allows colonized cultures to look toward a more optimistic future by reaching into their bottomless archive of pre-industrial folk traditions.<sup>625</sup> The polyglot magical realist narrative multiplies previously silenced voices, reflecting the inherent hybridity of postcolonial culture while deconstructing the simple binaries which construe the colonized as the “other.” Sangari draws out to its farthest implications Slemon’s argument that magical realism, as an ontological strategy, defies the totalizing, generic classification schemes of the West. (One must wonder, though if perhaps these critics are not, themselves, totalizing realism, which, to my view, proves much more capacious and complex than they deem it.) She veers away from the dichotomization that even Slemon codes as postcolonial “double-vision.” In her interpretation, magical realism confounds the notion of a singular, “original” pre-colonial historical condition that would balance the colonial condition, thus constituting a binary. Instead, the polyglot, multi-lenses “original” site reflects a fecundity that the postcolonial future can revisit and reappropriate.

This belief in the diversity of “roots” (or, the fallacy of origin), has led certain scholars to see magical realism as a liberating alternative to an essentializing nativism, a movement that seeks to reclaim purist, pre-colonial, indigenous historical roots. J. Michael Dash, using Négritude as his case study for nativism, explains that the Négritude movement sought to imbue

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<sup>625</sup> Sangari 162.

with pride the black stereotypes attributed by the colonizer.<sup>626</sup> However appropriate this strategy was, “implicit in this universalizing black myth was a denial of the existence of any unique national communities formed from that cultural alchemy influenced by specific historical, social and economic factors.”<sup>627</sup> Négritude also ignored any cultural productivity that occurred during the colonial regime. In an impossible effort to reclaim a singular origin, the authenticist proponents of the mid-twentieth-century Négritude movements essentialized black cultures. Magical realism, on the other hand, offers a potential not only for recuperating pre-colonial traditions, but also for acknowledging the cultural life during and after the colonial regime. Rather than presenting itself as the victim of tragic historical accident, the colonized culture can now claim autonomy and pride in its creative, survivalist response to oppression: “Such an investigation of the process of adaptation and survival...could well change the vision of the past which froze the Third World writer in the prison of protest and reveal the colonial legacy as a positive and civilizing force in spite of the brutality and privation which cloud this historical period.”<sup>628</sup>

A speculative consciousness is born through magical realism. This consciousness allows colonized people to draw from folk traditions and nature to form a creative response to reframe the difficult reality around them.<sup>629</sup> Wilson Harris, a Guyanese Anglophone magical realist writer, emphasizes the significance of the magical realist interpretation of history: “I believe the

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<sup>626</sup> Dash 60.

<sup>627</sup> Dash 60-61.

<sup>628</sup> Dash 65.

<sup>629</sup> Dash 66.

possibility exists for us to become involved in perspectives of renascence which can bring into play a figurative meaning beyond an apparently real world or prison of history—I believe a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination.”<sup>630</sup> Note the epistemological emphasis of Dash and Harris’s theories of magical realism: for them, protest and history are prisons from which only the imagination, a speculative consciousness may liberate people. Again, I must ask: how transformative is a history that views history and protest as prisons, and that escapes into the fantasy of consciousness? The theoretical discourse on postcolonial magical realism has quietly abandoned its requisites of ontology, political praxis, and historical facticity, slyly moving into mere epistemology.

In any case, undergirding this empowering, imaginative response to colonization is the holistic understanding of the colonized subject. The subject is accepted as a composite of pre-colonial tradition and colonial influence: “the composite of the past is accepted as a legitimate heritage, a cohesive cosmopolitan memory...It is a cultural composite in which no particular contribution is minimized.”<sup>631</sup> This lauding of cultural alchemy draws a strong link between past, present, and future. Thus, magical realism presents a coherent, fluid, imaginative, forward-gazing strategy for the identity-formation of the (post)colonized:

The Time/Space continuum is not compartmentalized but becomes an easy flow of memories, incidents between past present and future, emphasizing the continuity of the civilizing force of history in the [West Indian] psyche. Fragments of the remembered past are blended into an unconscious stream of memories which create a distinct *inner space* and a *new reality in the novel*...an overwhelming sense of belonging, through the fluid dimension of time, to a timeless process which he senses in the allegory of unconscious and figurative meanings that lie behind the visible and concrete. In the archetypal resonances of the legends of the past, in the vibrations from the land itself he becomes a “whole” personality—convinced of his potential as a creature with a past, to transform the future.<sup>632</sup>

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<sup>630</sup> Harris quoted in Dash 66.

<sup>631</sup> Dash 68.

<sup>632</sup> Dash 70.

Hence, we see the political importance of magical realist fiction to the postcolonial consciousness, but not necessarily to a corresponding praxis. While this imaginative response is heavy with politico-cultural weight, as opposed to mere fabulation, it is not at all clear how or whether the imagination has any impact on reality. Everything is deferred to the future in this “politics of the possible.” But is that sufficient? Again, is it enough to create a new inner space, or even a new reality in the novel without actually bearing any concrete relation to the world? Is it not possible that the critical historiography that magical realism performs is mere wishful thinking?

If I have given such a lengthy treatment of the discourse of magical realism, it is for five reasons: 1) Magical realism is usually the common-sensical go-to for enchantment, but, as we have seen, it is quite different from the enchanted realism I have elaborated; 2) I want to show magical realism’s epistemological emphasis, as opposed to enchanted realism’s ontological emphasis on phenomenal reality; 3) I want to show the sly slide from the discourse’s requirement of historical facticity to its critical, suspicious, hostile attitude toward history/ontology/phenomenal reality, unto the point of abandonment; 4) We cannot place Rushdie properly in relation to Indian literary history without grasping his relationship to the international literary history of the magical realist genre and its criticism; 5) Such an international literary history implicates not only Rushdie’s novel, but other postcolonial magical realist, and alternative non-mimetic Anglo-European novels in relation to enchantment.

## MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN: HISTORY AND NARRATIVE

*Midnight's Children's* status as a seminal text in both postcolonial and magical realist discourse derives from its deliberate if vexed treatment of (Indian) history. The novel collapses an historical account of late/post-colonial Indian history into a tall tale about the supernatural, charmed lives of the thousand children born on the eve of India's Independence. His hybridized subject, postcolonial India, is embodied in the narrator, Saleem Sinai. Saleem's narrative voice is distinctively self-conscious, self-questioning, and cosmopolitan, and thus evokes that of the migrant author, Rushdie, himself. Saleem filters sixty-one years of India's colonial and postcolonial history through his family and personal saga, often blurring the line between explicit fantasy and dry reality. This saga takes us from the Kashmiri Mountains of his grandfather's youth, to the Delhi of Saleem's parents' newlywed days, to the Methwold Estates, an English relic in newly postcolonial Bombay where Saleem spends his childhood, across the border to the Pakistan of Saleem's adolescence, into the jungles of Bangladesh where the amnesiac Saleem serves as the professional sniffer of the Pakistani army, to the magician's ghetto of Delhi where Saleem lives with another midnight's child, to Indira Gandhi's sterilizing table in Benares, and finally, to a pickling factory in Bombay, where Saleem preserves food into pickles and history into narrative. Saleem narrates to his commoner lover-caretaker Padma his life-long thwarted attempt to achieve historical centrality in Indian national life, which he regards as the parallel to his own. The corresponding moment of his and India's birth obsesses him, and orients his every action and reaction in his environment. His craving for historical centrality asserts itself most acutely in his attempt to create a political Midnight's Children's Conference in his telepathic mind, in parallel to the Indian National Congress. He also becomes incestuously infatuated with

his singer-sister who is dubbed “the Voice of Pakistan.” This craving is forever obliterated after paranoid Prime Minister Indira Gandhi herself brutalizes Saleem for his historical self-obsession. The bleak ending of the story leaves a humbled and frustrated Saleem near death, struggling against time to finish writing his story, and feeling utterly displaced by the New India.

Saleem’s intricately evolving relationship to different varieties of history is, finally, overshadowed by the novel’s attention-drawing formal relationship to history. Thus, much of the critical discourse on the novel focuses on its metatextual historiography. These metafictional qualities of the novel, critics claim, render it a transformative history. I do not agree: I do not see why mere metafictionality or a critique of history, or even a fantasy of an alternate history (particularly one riddled by a self-conscious narrator-historian who constantly undermines his own account) amounts to transformation of history. Metafictions such as his certainly cast doubt on official history, but they also query the category of history so thoroughly that they undermine their own claims to having transformed it. Who cares if you have transformed it if you do not believe in its ontological value anyway? More to the point: can you really transform a category that you do not believe in, a category whose validity you have thoroughly undercut?

Rushdie’s meta-historiography invites more comparisons to European postmodern novels than it does references to Indian history itself. Generally speaking, critics do not pay much attention to the geographical source and content of the novel—and for good reason. They tend to focus on the novel’s literary affiliations with canonical European novels. Patricia Merivale, for example, draws out the implied connections between Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Grass’s

*The Tin Drum*, two encyclopedic “histories.”<sup>633</sup> Merivale purports that Rushdie’s affiliation with Grass can be traced to a shared experience of migrancy and internationalism—conditions which grant writers the genealogical freedom to choose literary parents: “Saleem’s intertextual relationship to Oskar is a genealogical allegory of Rushdie’s ‘choosing’ of Grass.”<sup>634</sup> Merivale is primarily interested in Rushdie’s transposition of the narrative strategies used by his literary sibling. In keeping with her “meta”-oriented discussion, she is also attuned to metaphorization not only in the novel, but also of the novel. Clement Hawes also pursues an intertextual analysis of the novel, identifying another European forebear to *Midnight’s Children*, namely *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>635</sup> Just as “an ancestor, for Saleem, is something one openly chooses...a usable past,”<sup>636</sup> a literary parent, for Hawes’ Rushdie, is something deliberately chosen and usable. All this parental shopping that these critics ascribe to Rushdie strikes me as bearing the author away from the specificity of India.

In this same metatextual vein, David W. Price and Aruna Srivastava discuss historiography in the novel. Price argues that Rushdie’s novel is actually a historiography that explores and critiques antiquarian and monumental historical approaches, and ultimately champions a critical historical approach. Saleem, in his marriage of ancient legend and contemporary historiography, becomes less “sterile” and “duplicitous” than the other two types

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<sup>633</sup> Patricia Merivale, “Saleem fathered by Oskar: *Midnight’s Children*, Magic Realism, and the Tin Drum,” *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) 329.

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.* 342.

<sup>635</sup> Clement Hawes, “Leading History by the Nose: The Turn to the Eighteenth Century in *Midnight’s Children*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 39.1 (1993): 147-8.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.* 153.

of historian, typified by Methwold on one hand and Indira Gandhi on the other.<sup>637</sup> Saleem is very aware of his role as a historian: “Saleem presents his history as a performance of narration, as opposed to a representation of events that took place in the past.”<sup>638</sup> Through Saleem’s combination of British and Indian historiography, he becomes a critical historian. Srivastava also sees this European and Indian blending of historiography as elemental to the novel. She discusses Rushdie’s marriage of the imperialists’ chronological, traditional, cause-and-effect view of history and the Indian, mythical, larger-than-life view of history—the latter Srivastava traces to the country’s religious philosophy. These two modes of narration dialectically drive each other throughout the novel. Also in dialectical tension stand the European penchant for linear writing and the Indian love of the circular oral tradition.<sup>639</sup> There are, as I see it, two problems with Srivastava’s (and to some degree, Price’s) Indian versus Western scheme. First, they fail to register the fact that Saleem’s interlocutor Padma, the personification of local, grassroots, traditional India, is driven by her “what-comes-next-ism,” a trait that exasperates a digressive cosmopolitan Saleem and spurs him on to the forward march of the plot—and a trait that is constantly underscored in the novel. In fact, it is Saleem, the more Europeanized character, who seems to love the circular oral tradition, and Padma, our most Indianized character, who has a penchant for “European” linearity. That brings us to the second problem: Srivastava’s cultural binary is far too pat, and simply uncorroborated by the text itself.

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<sup>637</sup> David W. Price, “Salman Rushdie’s ‘Use and Abuse of History’ in ‘Midnight’s Children,’” *ARIEL* 25.2 (1994):101.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

<sup>639</sup> Aruna Srivastava, “‘The Empire Writes Back’: Language and History in ‘Shame’ and ‘Midnight’s Children,’” *ARIEL* 20.4 (1989):74.



The self-commenting ironic voice of the narrator, Saleem, delights in parody, hyperbole, and inversion of norms—the trademarks of international Metropolitan postmodern fiction. The novel’s historical metafictional form creates a space for imagination and the carnivalesque which offsets its bleak content.<sup>640</sup> Michael Gorra explores the novel’s self-conscious, postmodern treatment of history: “the postmodernist knows that escape will prove impossible, and so instead he subjects [the] past to a revisionary ransacking, simultaneously using and abusing the conventions within which he seems condemned to live.”<sup>641</sup> Using “parody, pastiche, and collage,” Rushdie may (or may not) transform history, but with a price: the critical distance “keeps one from being disturbed by the things that happen to his characters.”<sup>642</sup> I will return to this problem of critical distance from characters. For now, what we should glean is the privileging of form over content, by author and critic alike.

Still, to give Rushdie his due, let us analyze the operation of history *within* the novel. Essentially, two forms of history oppose each other in the novel: political, official history and local, mythic, age-old history. This dialectical opposition of two different cultural orientations leads to the bizarre reality so well-suited to magical realism, the novel’s narrative mode. The first type of history ultimately kills Saleem, who so craves historical centrality, while the second type, which he dismisses for a large part of his life, transcends and supersedes him. Rushdie, through his satirizing of Saleem and his undercutting/manipulation of the public history of postcolonial India, sheds light on the untruth of the official record while he, through his rather

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<sup>640</sup> Michael Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997)128-9.

<sup>641</sup> Ibid. 122.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid. 145.

bad-exoticist celebration of local color, magic, and religion, attempts to validate the daily experiences of folk India. Rushdie wants to suggest that the 5,000-year-old cultural history of India prevails over the momentous political events of the last century. In the end, Saleem is punished for his improper prioritization of these two ostensibly mutually exclusive histories. But Rushdie surely short-shrifts the importance of political life to regular Indians, even as he romanticizes and essentializes the (for him, monolithic) ancient history of India. Worse yet, he presumes against the potential for that cultural repository to have an authentic impact on politics.

Another problem with Saleem's critical historiography, or his putative transformation of history, is that his chronicle does not leave us with an accurate or thorough understanding of twentieth-century Indian history. Of course, no chronicle can, but Saleem, in a typically postmodern spirit, seems to take a bullshitter's rather than a liar's approach<sup>643</sup> to his historian's task. Putting so little stock in the truth-value of history, how can Saleem expect us to consider his alternative history valid? Saleem tries to filter all of modern Indian history through his personal history, hardly acknowledging that such a task is inherently impossible. Though Saleem's narrative alludes to many major events in modern Indian history, it conspicuously omits others. As Timothy Brennan notes, for example, "the very staple of a major branch of Indo-English historical fiction, Gandhi's National Movement, is impertinently excised from the narrative outright, which rushes from Amritsar in 1919 to Agra in 1942 without so much as a

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<sup>643</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton UP).

passing comment! Thus, the story of Indian nationalism is erased from the book that documents its sad outcome, and the most dramatic illustration of Rushdie's argument is an absence."<sup>644</sup>

In many ways, Rushdie's text, more than its critical reception, acknowledges its own failure to transform history, for its chief historian, Saleem, self-consciously fails in that task, absurdly so. Saleem's perceived link to national politics grows stronger during his childhood as he construes his insignificant, personal actions to be politically altering. For instance, when he lands in the middle of a Bombay language march, he recites offhand a pun that the crowd adopts; he then considers himself the harbinger of the language riots that ensue, without realizing that those riots are based on ideologies much stronger than his little ditty. Several years later, while in Pakistan, he serves as a lackey to his uncle General Zulfikar, visually demonstrating with silverware the General's planned coup d'état. He traces the subsequent coup to his own "movements performed by pepperpots"; the phrase itself suggests the inanity of such a claim. His delusion of political centrality becomes so exacerbated that he comes to find his longing for Kashmir "becoming, in 1965, the common property of the nation";<sup>645</sup> this borrowed dream results in the Indo-Pakistani War whose purpose, as Saleem sees it, is "nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth."<sup>646</sup> Saleem's exaggerated claims to official history become more and more ludicrous; his very being seems to depend on his public role. Rushdie ridicules him for his historical hubris and his lack of

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<sup>644</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1989) 84.

<sup>645</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Penguin, 1980) 394.

<sup>646</sup> *Ibid.* 403.

efficacy; in doing so, the author seems to invite critics to not take too seriously his own grandiose novelistic attempt to transform history.

Even more significantly, by highlighting the extraordinary non-correspondence between the protagonist's inner and outer worlds, between heroic aspiration and wretchedly delimited sphere of action, Rushdie's novel meets very strictly Lukács' crucial disenchanting condition for the novel form: the incommensurability between the hero's grand aspirations and the constrictive substratum that inhibits him, the divorce between inner and outer worlds that leads to criminality or madness (both of which characterize Saleem at different points). That fact alone settles, for me, the question about the disenchanted status of *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's supernaturalism, which is meant to re-enchant, seems mere superstructure, given the basic disenchantment of the novel.

#### ON RUSHDIE'S MAGIC

Saleem's first crucial orientation away from the public sphere occurs when circumstances throw him into a more sensual, local awareness: his nose is drained of its magical telepathic powers that have allowed him to confer with other members of the Midnight's Children's Conference. Divorced from his fruitless attempts to organize his 581 gifted peers into a pseudo-political organization, he comes into the new skill of his unclogged nose: an olfactory prowess that allows him to perceive the subtlest of smells, including the imperceptible scents of hidden emotions. His nasal gift evolves from entirely magical to oversensory; telepathy completely transcends normal reality while sensory hyper-sensitivity is merely a heightened version of a normal capacity. Consequently, the more magical capacity links him to the hybridized,

postcolonial world of politics. When he loses that capacity, he turns toward the local, more putatively monocultural, and instinctual realms. Thus, Rushdie uses magical realism against himself, in a sense; as he pushes Saleem toward a more autochthonous orientation, he becomes less magical realist. This is significant, for it de-magics the very realm he means to posit as the nonmimetic alternate reality to officialdom. Interestingly though, and perhaps unwittingly, this contradictory move aligns him with Bankim, Tagore, and Rushdie in the sense that the lived, religious, down-to-earth India proves to be eminently concerned with the phenomenal world, which it finds replete with enchantment, if not quite the hyperbolic magic Rushdie and his critics would like to ascribe to it.

Expelled from the abstract, urbanized realm of politics, Saleem now comes viscerally in touch with the simultaneous magic and down-to-earthery of the “real” subcontinent. His nose leads him to Tai Bibi, the 512-year-old whore whose glandular talent for recreating specific scents in her body matches Saleem’s olfactory one. Thus, Tai Bibi initiates Saleem into the occult history of the subcontinent: “alone with this impossible mythological old harridan, he began to describe odours with all the perspicacity of his miraculous nose, and Tai Bibi began to imitate his descriptions, leaving him aghast as by trial-and-error she succeeded in reproducing the body odours of his mother his aunts...”<sup>647</sup> So, Saleem moves from supernatural non-mimetic representation to hyper-enchanted mimetic representation, such as his description of odors that correspond to an enchanted and value-laden phenomenal reality.

As Saleem moves out of adolescence, he comes to learn that the truth is hardly ever represented by official history. Ostracized by and disillusioned with politics, he turns to the

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<sup>647</sup> Ibid. 381.

other subcontinental history—the 5,000-year-old history of cultural traditions, religion, local color, and magic—that is archived in fantastical people like Tai Bibi. Rushdie seems to suggest that this type of customary, immediate, lived history is far more relevant to masses of Indians, like Padma, who feel more attached to premodern, local traditions than evanescent, removed bureaucratic politics. Throughout the novel, Padma acts as a necessary counterweight to Saleem’s often-unchecked politicizing tendencies. Her musculature keeps his narration on track: “When she’s bored, I can detect in her fibres the ripples of uninterest; when she’s unconvinced, there is a tic which gets going in her cheek.”<sup>648</sup> Her “down-to-earthery, and her paradoxical superstition, her contradictory love of the fabulous”<sup>649</sup> gradually infuse Saleem himself so that his very narration takes on a quality evocative of the Indian oral tradition. For instance, to engage his interlocutor, Saleem recontextualizes Pakistani political history as the backdrop of a fairy tale about Nawab (Prince) Mutasim the Handsome’s romantic pursuit of Jamila Singer, the bewitching chanteuse.

India’s very geography lends itself to such tales; as Saleem claims, “what grows best in the heat [is]...fantasy.”<sup>650</sup> Thus, India, much before its nationhood, has been fueled by a cultural repository of the fabulous. The very inception of the nation-state is yet another myth to add to the repository:

The city was poised, with a new myth glinting in the corners of its eyes. August in Bombay: a month of festivals, the month of Krishna’s birthday and Coconut Day; and this year...a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history...was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a

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<sup>648</sup> Ibid. 325.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid. 39.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid. 199.

mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy...India, the new myth—a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable...<sup>651</sup>

Saleem's role as mirror of the nation necessitates his participation not only in this particular myth, but also in the long history of India's mythology. Saleem, in his early life, mistakes his representative role as a political one; isolated in the Anglophilic world of the Methwold Estate, Saleem is not yet acquainted with the power and duration of the tradition of magic and faith ubiquitous in India. Saleem's upper-class mother Amina Sinai, "a doctor's daughter entering a world older than syringes and hospitals,"<sup>652</sup> finds "history [spoken] through the lips"<sup>653</sup> of Ramram Seth, in the form of a cryptic, fabulous, yet astonishingly accurate fortune of her expected child; years later, that very child, grown (and beaten) into manhood, joins the magicians' ghetto of Delhi's Friday Mosque where he finally becomes a part of the long-standing history of the occult.

Rushdie would seem to suggest that for the majority of Indians, the two hundred year colonial legacy and the infantile New India cannot compete with the expansiveness and endurance of India's ancient legacy. Amina Sinai, trapped amongst the preserved relics of the departing colonist Methwold, asserts, "this is still India, and people like Ramram Seth know what they know."<sup>654</sup> Saleem also concedes to the magical powers of folk India when Picture Singh, through his intimidating snake-charming, reduces a Congress Party volunteer to a

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<sup>651</sup> Ibid. 130.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid. 99.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid. 115.

quivering mess: “Saleem Sinai learned that Picture Singh and the magicians were people whose hold on reality was absolute; they gripped it so powerfully that they could bend it every which way in the service of their arts, but they never forgot what it was.”<sup>655</sup> The scenario distills the dynamic struggle between burgeoning political life and timeless local tradition: “I [Saleem] remain half-convinced that in that time of accelerated events and diseased hours the past of India rose up to confound her present; the new-born, secular state was being given an awesome reminder of its fabulous antiquity, in which democracy and votes for women were irrelevant.”<sup>656</sup> To the Padmas, Picture Singhs, Mary Pereiras of India, “fabulous antiquity” bears far more relevance than the quaky movements of the infantile, post-Independence government. When Aadam Sinai, the hybrid child of Shiva, Parvati, and Saleem, speaks his first word, “Abracadabra,” he would seem to speak for the next generation of India who will pledge their allegiance to ancient, robust, native magic, rather than sterile, Western-imported politics.

Unfortunately for this would-be-triumphalist take on Indian folk magic, Aadam’s magic will have to contend with the disenchanting India of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency and the new recalcitrantly amnesiac, neo-liberal India represented by a grotesque inversion of Saleem’s defaulted Midnight’s Children Conference. The new MCC<sup>657</sup> is the Midnite Confidential Club, a lightless, Western-style den of sin full of jet-setting businessmen and blind sexy waitresses. Aadam Sinai, “the child of a time which damaged reality so badly that nobody ever managed to

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<sup>655</sup> Ibid. 475-6

<sup>656</sup> Ibid. 294.

<sup>657</sup> MCC is an acronym with a rich genealogy: from the touring English cricket team, to Saleem’s childhood gang the Metro Cub Club, to Midnight’s Children Conference, and finally to the Midnite Confidential Club. The generally trajectory here is clear: from British colonial, to nascent and innocent potential of young India, to Nehruvian politics, to neo-liberal disenchantment.



put it together again”<sup>658</sup> is born with enormous Ganesha-like ears that “must have heard the shootings in Bihar and the screams of lathi-charged dock-workers in Bombay...a child who heard too much, and as a result never spoke, rendered dumb by a surfeit of sound.”<sup>659</sup> This is hardly an uplifting picture of magic. Moreover, as Saleem points out, “Abracadabra” is not even an Indian word; Aadam is already, as a baby, estranged from Indian folk magic.

Likewise, Picture Singh’s magic, his hold on reality, his anti-authoritarian community of squatters, and his Communism will not be enough to withstand the disenchanted State. If Communism stands about as much of a chance as the magicians’ slum does against the State’s steamrollers, then another grassroots radical party meets with a similar fate. In 1942, an “optimism epidemic” had spread across India when “The Hummingbird” Mian Abdullah, himself born in Picture Singh’s Magicians’ ghetto, formed the Free Islam Convocation, a loose conglomeration of Muslim splinter groups that opposed the dogmatism, elitism, vested interests, and Partition Scheme of the British-toady Muslim League. “Agrarian movements, urban labourers’ syndicates, religious divines, and regional groupings” came together under the Hummingbird’s marquee.<sup>660</sup> Nadir Khan, his poetic secretary and soon-to-be Marxist, finds in the Sinai basement refuge from British governmental assailants; there, he and Saleem’s mother fall in love and marry. Symbolically, the dream of a cross-class, religious-secular, grassroots Muslim alternative movement was thus forced underground. Further, because Khan proves to be impotent, the novel emphasizes the fact that the egalitarian vision of India did not come to pass.

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<sup>658</sup> Ibid. 500.

<sup>659</sup> Ibid. 501.

<sup>660</sup> Ibid. 48.

Amina, later married off to a failed businessman (representative of neoliberal India), must resort to clandestine phone calls to the banished incognito Nadir and masturbation sessions in her bathroom until her secret pleasure is interrupted by her son's discovery of her "treachery" simultaneous with his discovery of his nasal telepathy. So, it is only because of her submerged, thwarted desire for her *impotent* egalitarian love-object that Saleem comes into the telepathic power that establishes his own version of Nehruvian Congress. That is to say, the abortion of radical politics allows for the birth of Westphalian politics. That both are associated with magic evacuates the magic of specific political force. In short, Rushdie's magic, because so indiscriminately assigned, cannot be enlisted exclusively on the side of radicalism or resistance against the State. Moreover, these forces of resistance are finally defeated by disenchanted post-Westphalian statism.

The same dynamic plays out in the struggle between disenchanted ideologies of modernization and the two other forces of autochthonous India that Rushdie equates with magic: religion and custom.<sup>661</sup> Both compete against the new emphasis on political machinations and scientific modernization, would seem to "win," but finally lose. When Dr. Narlikar launches his scientifically advanced tetrapod scheme, it gets co-opted and subsequently aborted by the masses. A group of beggars begins performing puja to a tetrapod that was intended as an emblem of India's technological future: "technological miracle had been transformed into Shiva-

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<sup>661</sup> I would not object to Rushdie's placing under the rubric of enchantment both magic and religion. As I explain in the introduction, enchantment, as I am expansively defining it, has a tri-partite meaning that certainly includes both magic and religion. However, there is something naïve about actually seeing them as perfectly exchangeable. Keith Thomas's wonderful study, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, elaborates the trajectory from magic to religion to science, with residues of each prior system carried into the superceding system that is overtly hostile to it. (See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971.) Given the deliberate distance religion sought to take from magic, presumably it would, to a religious person, be something of an insult to call his religion magic.

lingam; Doctor Narlikar, the opponent of fertility, was driven wild at this vision, in which it seemed to him that all the old dark priapic forces of ancient, procreative India had been unleashed upon the beauty of sterile twentieth-century concrete.”<sup>662</sup> In an upset in the match between technology and religion, the Indians demonstrate the imperviousness of the older tradition. India’s postcolonial history is, in relation to Hindu cosmic time, almost insignificant. Saleem urges us to

Think of this: history, in my version, entered a new phase on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947—but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga...a mere 432,000 years...the fourth phase of the present Maha-Yuga cycle which is, in total, ten times as long; an when you consider that it takes a thousand Maha-Yugas to make just one Day of Brahma, you’ll see what I mean about proportion.<sup>663</sup>

The procreative, cyclical, macrocosmic emphasis of Hinduism minimizes the temporal significance of politics.

However, though religion may win in the temporal scheme, it loses in other more significant respects. (More troubling is the suggestion that antiquity confers the utmost validity, for this is the very logic of the Hindu fundamentalists whose chauvinist exclusivist claim to India is based on Hindu anteriority on the subcontinent.) Again, because of Rushdie’s indiscriminate assignation of religion, it, like magic, takes on all kinds of savory and unsavory casts. For example, the Ravana gang, a Hindu faction committed to exploiting and undermining Muslim businesses, invokes the name of a many-headed demon of Hindu mythology for intimidation value. Even Indira Gandhi, the highest official in the government, invokes religion to control the body politic: “the Widow...was not only Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be Devi, the

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<sup>662</sup> Ibid. 209.

<sup>663</sup> Ibid. 233.

Mother-goddess in her most terrible aspect, possessor of the shakti of the gods.”<sup>664</sup> In fact, disenchanted politics, including sectarianism, often exploits religion in order to advance its secular, disenchanted agendas, as we have already seen in the case of Sandip in *The Home and The World*. But while Tagore takes care to distinguish between authentic enchantment and disenchantment’s instrumental abuse of it, Rushdie, in his compulsion toward proportion (i.e., the desire to have religion and magic come out on top in terms of sheer volume), does not. His superficial and monolithic understanding of indigenous religion—the vaunted 5,000 year old ancient Hindu mythology—precludes the sort of differentiations that the more religiously-inclined and culturally competent writers, such as Bankim, Tagore, and even Forster, make.

One must ask: when disenchanted politics co-opts religion/magic, such that the latter seems to permeate everything, which is cannibalizing which? Rushdie would like to suggest that it is religion that prevails over politics, but his plot poses a contradiction. At first glance it would seem that Saleem’s cohort, the ancillary objects of the Prime Minister-Devi’s wrath, finally takes on not political but religious implications. Though Indira Gandhi thinks she has eliminated the threat of the midnight’s children by testectomizing and hysterectomizing them, her sterilization plan is thwarted, ironically, by her most intimate political ally because she fails to contend with his religious powers; Shiva, aptly named after the incomparably powerful, procreative, and destructive god, has already lain his potent seed all over India. Saleem revels in the fact that

Shiva, destroyer of the midnight’s children, had also fulfilled the other role lurking in his name, the function of Shiva-lingam, of Shiva-the-procreator, so that at this very moment, in the boudoirs and hovels of the nation, a new generation of children, begotten by midnight’s darkest child, was being raised towards the future. Every Widow manages to forget something important.<sup>665</sup>

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<sup>664</sup> Ibid. 522.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid. 525.

Shiva's spawn, willful and morose, embody the Kali Yuga of darkness; this next generation might well fulfill its role in the course of religious prophecy, dismissing the worldly politico-historical obligations placed upon them by Saleem's Independence generation. However, one might read disenchantment in lieu of Kali Yuga: the next generation is alternately associated by Saleem with the disenchanting ideologies of the New India in which he no longer has a place. Certainly, Aadam Sinai, the second-generation midnight's spawn of Shiva's that becomes Saleem's adopted son, does not show much promise in terms of resisting the neo-liberal India.

Moreover, even in the more promising era immediately following Independence, hard-dying religion and custom take many different casts, among which Rushdie does not discriminate. Divesting faith from hollow Nehruvian politics, "the people were seized by atavistic longings, and forgetting the new myth of freedom reverted to their old ways, their old regionalist loyalties and prejudices."<sup>666</sup> This atavism hardly seems cause for celebration. Like the traditionally chauvinist Indians at large, Saleem's fellow midnight's children ignore his pleas for a co-operative, democratic union:

Children, however magical, are not immune to their parents; and as the prejudices and world-views of adults began to take over their minds, I found children from Maharashtra loathing Gujaratis, and fair-skinned northerners reviling Dravidian "blackies"...The rich children turned up their noses at being in such lowly company; Brahmins began to feel uneasy at permitting even their thoughts to touch the thoughts of untouchables...

Local traditions die hard, but that does not mean they should. Moreover, Saleem and Rushdie, too, in a different way—a metatextual preference for myth and a blind faith in claims of the historical anteriority of Hindu India—seem afflicted with their own atavism.

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<sup>666</sup> Ibid. 294.

Rushdie wants to suggest that Saleem, after being repeatedly abused by official history and divesting from the realm of democratic politics, learns the value of Indian folkways. Eighteen years after beseeching the *Midnight's Children* to design for themselves a political purpose, Saleem finally, while in Indira Gandhi's terrorizing custody, apologizes: "Politics, children: at the best of times a bad dirty business. We should have avoided it, I should never have dreamed of purpose, I am coming to the conclusion that privacy, the small individual lives of men, are preferable to all this inflated macrocosmic activity."<sup>667</sup>

I want to draw out two implications from Saleem's apology. First, Saleem allows "politics" to be entirely hijacked by disenchantment. Politics, in its most radical form—of the sort that Bilgrami associates with enchantment, Romanticism, and Gandhianism—offer an alternative to both chauvinism and statism. Perhaps if Saleem had been able to cultivate a radically enchanted politics among the Children, they would have been rid of their traditional prejudices. Saleem's apology seems a bit misdirected. His apology ought not to be about messing with politics, but about his inability to mobilize the Children into an alternative political platform; instead, by merely replicating the Nehruvian model, his political vision goes bankrupt just as quickly as its model.

Second, Saleem's disparagement of his "inflated macrocosmic activity" invites a critique of not only his, but Rushdie's own hyperbolic narrative attempt to create an epic, all-encompassing history of modern India. Saleem's turn to narrative after his abdication of politics hardly cures him of his historical hubris; it is merely displaced to another register.

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<sup>667</sup> Ibid. 518.

Every pickle-jar...contains therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time! I, however, have pickled chapters. Tonight, by screwing the lid firmly on to a jar bearing the legend *Special Formula No. 30: "Abracadabra,"* I reach the end of my long-winded autobiography; in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories...hidden languages of what-must-be-pickled, its humours and messages and emotion...dreams, ideas...One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history.<sup>668</sup>

Still, he conflates his autobiography with the biography of the nation. But now, because of the disenchantment that has set into India, he is reduced to "chutnifying" history according to his dreams. The dream of egalitarianism and syncretism (his hybrid Muslim-Hindu upbringing, the cosmopolitan Bombay of his youth) no longer have the potential to be actualized in the real India. Chutnified, their only preservation lies in narrative, in the arts of imagination freed from the "prison-house of history."

Yet the chutnification of history could well be infeasible, for two reasons. First, Saleem's closing salvo appears to be desperately wishful thinking, a last-ditch rationalization from a historically ineffectual figure. When form compensates for the loss of enchantment in the world, we have the Lukácsian situation: the novel form providing a synthetic totality and meaning when both have been lost in the world. Second, Rushdie dangerously conflates history with fantasia and myth. If he wants us, as it seems he does, to consider his novel in the Hindu Puranic epic tradition—a Purana of modern India—then can he simultaneously make claims to history? History and myth are of two different cuts of cloth, and trouble lurks where the two are slyly conflated, as they have been by the BJP and other Hindu fundamentalist groups. Surely both history and myth pertain to a culture's past, but the registers in which they claim legitimacy, their aims, their methods, and their audiences are different. Rushdie's and his critics' mistake is the conflation of these two different modes of relating to the past. Rushdie's sprawling narrative

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<sup>668</sup> Ibid. 548-50.

whose plot and topoi restage the Hindu epics may be considered myth or even a sort of epic, but it cannot be at the same time considered history, let alone transformative history. His mistake extends to his treatment of subaltern history. If he were to make a compelling case for unofficial versus official history, then he would cast the former as history, not myth. By casting subaltern history merely in terms of myth, he defangs it politically and denies its ontological status and its engaged struggle with hegemonic history. Generally speaking, what Saleem's closing commentary on his narrative indicates is his wrongheaded notion that history is comprised merely of memories, dreams, and ideas—properly the realm of myth. He flees into the praxis-free arena of fantasy because he has not been able to contend with history proper. Despite his confusion of nomenclature, history is quite patently the enemy in this and presumably other magical realist texts that would describe it as a “prison house.” To be clear, it is not really unofficial history, but myth and local color that Rushdie wants to preserve. Finally, a minor point: while it might be argued that each version of history is driven by the historian's own particular dreams of the future, the metaphor of pickling suggests not futurity, but stasis. Pickles never grow cold, they never perish, but they also are never fresh. They are the culinary equivalent of mummification which patently evokes not life, but death, not future, but past. So, even his fantasy of transformation chooses the wrong metaphor.

I hope I have shown the text's gradual divestment from enchantment *IN THE WORLD* to enchantment in the imagination/narrative only. This shift marks not only a drastic reduction of the scope of enchantment, but also an irreconcilable divorce between consciousness and reality (a divorce fundamental to the disenchanting novel), between narrative and history, and between form and content.



## ONTOLOGY VERSUS EPISTEMOLOGY

The body is the ground zero of ontology: its facticity, its physical presence in the world, its presence in history cannot be denied. This is why the body makes an excellent limit case for our investigation of Rushdie's relationship to ontology and epistemology. If we take the physical body as the metaphor and locus of the body politic, then we must attend to the constant and far-reaching brutalizing and ultimate disintegration of bodies in *Midnight's Children*. Further, we must register the impotence of the bodies of two of the great visionaries of the text: Nadir Khan and Saleem. Critic Jean M. Kane reads the relationship between body and narration as competitive in a novel in which a sexually impotent man is textually potent. His thwarted sexual impulse, she claims, parallels his frustrated longing for national unity, political coherence.<sup>669</sup> On the other hand, his imaginative impulse is unchecked. In the end, the latter impulse overcomes the former. Kane argues that imagination and aesthetics thereby transcend sexual desire and romantic nationalism, both of which ultimately destroy the body and historical subjecthood. Saleem, Kane claims, is left with no sexual or political aspirations, but he is armed with a solid imagination; his aesthetics can resist history by transcending it.<sup>670</sup> Kane grafts Saleem's privileging of imaginative aesthetics over politics onto Rushdie, the migrant writer: "the negotiation of embodiment [operates] as the scene of metropolitan guilt and migrant longing. Saleem's impotence acts as an immunizing agent against India itself, registering not

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<sup>669</sup> Jean Kane, "The Migrant Intellectual and the Body of History: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," *Contemporary Literature* 71.1 (1996): 111.

<sup>670</sup> *Ibid.* 114.

only the author's sense of political inefficacy but also his need for distance from the intimate embrace of the incorporative nation."<sup>671</sup> By arguing that an international sensibility beats out the body and Indian nationalism, Kane casts herself within the dominant school of criticism that perceives Rushdie as a cosmopolitan champion.

For Rushdie, the human body—and by extension, the body politic—cannot effectively recycle and perpetuate the allegedly transformative autochthonous material because it cannot withstand the force and immediacy of official history. However, narrative can. In the text, physical bodies—like their analogue, the body politic—fail as vessels of ancient, diverse India because they are destroyed either by internal fragmentation or external pulverization. I will focus on the former, for it bears on pluralism, a cornerstone claimed simultaneously by the enchanted worldview, Nehruvianism, and magical realism.

Bodily fragmentation is a tradition in Saleem's family. Aadam Sinai's splits between faith and faithlessness, East and West, Hindu and Muslim sympathies rend his body: "I saw the cracks in his eyes...my grandfather's skin had begun to split and flake and peel...and his teeth began to drop...the disease which was nibbling at his bones, so that finally his skeleton disintegrated into powder."<sup>672</sup> Just as conflicting systems and irreconcilable beliefs take their toll on Aadam Aziz's body, the diversity of Indian life ultimately destroys his grandson's body.

Saleem's own historical inheritance is multiple: his fathers are Ahmed Sinai, Methwold, and Wee Willie Winkie, while his mothers are Amina, Vanita, and Mary.<sup>673</sup> He also inherits

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<sup>671</sup> Ibid. 114.

<sup>672</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 330.

<sup>673</sup> Ibid. 149.

hundreds of *Midnight's Children's* voices that cacophonously argue in his head. Saleem's body, with these multiple inheritances, exemplifies *par excellence* a theory of effective history proposed by Michel Foucault in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." He claims that heritage is "the unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath,"<sup>674</sup> and argues that "numerous systems intersect and compete in each of these souls."<sup>675</sup> The body, Foucault aptly asserts, is the site of warring ideologies, the site where a lack of a coherent identity becomes manifest, the site where effective history destroys stable identity: "History becomes 'effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being—as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself"<sup>676</sup>; "the body is the inscribed surface of events...the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration."<sup>677</sup> Applying Foucault's postmodern model to Saleem, we see how India's pluralism, internalized as his biological, putative, and telepathic inheritances, preys on his precarious identity and body. Heterogeneous Saleem, as the hubristic "swallower of lives" and "consumer of multitudes...jostling and shoving,"<sup>678</sup> finally disintegrates because his body cannot viably contain such a plenitude and diversity of Indian life. By analogy, the body politic cannot

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<sup>674</sup> Michael Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 82.

<sup>675</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.* 88.

<sup>677</sup> *Ibid.* 83.

<sup>678</sup> Rushdie quoted in Brennan 116.

contend with pluralism, only narrative can; Indian reality cannot incorporate diversity, only the imagination can.

Saleem's pickled words contain what his pickled body cannot: that is, the diversity of Indian experiences, local color, and religio-mythic traditions. For Rushdie, the narrative body's superlative potential for fluidity privileges it above the human body. The elastic narrative can play with time, just as it can be socially capacious. The sheer length of the novel (552 pages) testifies to Rushdie's urge to represent all; this encyclopedic urge follows in the Joycean tradition of the epic layover for the modern novel. Like Joyce, Rushdie's "elephantiasis of style"<sup>679</sup> derives from a desire for massive social coherence. The narrative steps in for the human body: more fluid and expandable than the human container, the narrative container can achieve the massive social wholeness that Saleem's body cannot. Saleem's sprawling narrative takes us from Kashmir to Amritsar to Agra to Delhi to Bombay to Pakistan to the Sundarbans, to Dacca, and back to Bombay and Delhi. We are privy to an almost endless array of snapshots of India: Tai the ancient boatman on a Kashmiri lake; Indo-Germanic Dr. Aziz inspecting his future wife through a perforated sheet; the Reverend Mother ballooning with tradition; Zafar the bedwetter; Parvati-the-witch's pouty mouth and rope-like pony tail; Picture Singh's snake-charming; Evie-the-bully showing off on her bike; the Brass Monkey setting shoes on fire; Aunt Alia stirring her bitterness into her food; Saleem sniffing the oldest whore in the world; Jamila singing behind another perforated sheet; the "Buddha" in the Sundarbans; Saleem reuniting with midnight's children-cum-adults on the operating tables of the Widow; Saleem, in tandem with Mary, Padma,

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<sup>679</sup> Brennan's term for Rushdie's excessive style.

and Aadam, pickling at the factory. These are just a sampling of the many vivid scenes that, taken together, create a cinemascopic vision of India, not unlike Kipling's *Kim*.

By synthesizing varied time, events, cultural niches, and social voices into the coherence of the narrative (Bakhtinian heteroglossia *par excellence*), Saleem "pickles" a diverse India. Yet, counterimpulses indicate that the narrative is not entirely committed to national cohesion. Undermining Saleem's multifarious efforts at unifying India is his own self-questioning authorial voice that asks us to consider the speciousness of representation. We might suspect, for example, that the narrative itself is a perforated sheet of sorts, wherein individual fragments do not add up to a whole. This synecdochic failure implies that India, divided along so many axes of religion, language, caste, class, and region, cannot possibly smoothed over into one unifying voice. As Timothy Brennan puts it: "[aestheticizing reality] is especially a problem, Rushdie implies, in India, where the population is so great and various that it is easier to grasp it as a panorama than as a collection of individual lives,"<sup>680</sup> the latter being Saleem's ostensible goal as articulated in his apology to his fellow *Midnight's Children*. The prevailing critical view of Rushdie as the cosmopolitan creator of a worldly, rhetorically brilliant narrator tends to focus on how this narrator undercuts his own efforts at unity.

Further, Rushdie's metatextual orientation keeps us estranged from his characters, unaffected by the pain and sorrow they and their brutalized, dying, disintegrating bodies suffer. Rushdie may offer a sampling of Indian characters in his panoramic vision of India, but we never emotionally commit to any of these characters. Constantly escaping into the performative excess of narration, Rushdie erects a textual barrier between the reader and the "Real" India he strives to

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<sup>680</sup> Brennan 115.

represent: “Rushdie’s style distances one from the horrors it describes, making his description of them not only bearable but even enjoyable. It keeps one from being disturbed by the things that happen to his characters.”<sup>681</sup> Another reason for the readers’ emotional distance from the characters may have to do with his tendency toward supernaturalism rather than realism. It is hard to empathize with the outlandish.

Ultimately, Rushdie achieves breadth at the expense of depth. By assigning the narrative the task of containing “Real” India, he, through an array of rhetorical games, constantly moves away from the ontological reality of India. By crafting a vessel that caters to sophisticated European literary tastes (it is hard to imagine the likes of Padma actually reading his novel), Rushdie clearly addresses an international audience. His concrete pleasures are reserved for the reader rather than the characters or their historical templates; the reader delights in his vivid, charming cameos while Saleem remains libidinally unsatiated. This type of orientation aligns Rushdie with a tradition of international postmodern writers who “tend to identify with the reader.”<sup>682</sup> When Rushdie recedes into the role of the (ostensibly international) reader, he grants us egress from the facticity of Indian life. It is offered to us merely for our sensual and exoticist pleasure.

The supernatural presumption of the text—that Indians always have and always will see the world through a supernatural, superstitious, magical lens—is perhaps the most salient of the Orientalist myths that Rushdie perpetuates, even while claiming to be canny about doing so.

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<sup>681</sup> Gorra 145.

<sup>682</sup> Jon Thiem, “The Textualization of the Reader in Magical Realist Fiction,” *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) 241.

Graham Huggan explains Rushdie's hard-to-pin-down relationship to exoticism. *Midnight's Children's* metaphor of consumption "as Rushdie recognizes, is ironically applicable to his own novels, and to Indian literary works in general, as the reified objects of a seemingly inexhaustible will to consumption. Perhaps India itself has been transformed through this general process into a consumable."<sup>683</sup> Huggan analyzes *Midnight's Children's* reception history as follows:

it is probably fair to say that the accolades [*Midnight's Children*] has received have come on the whole from outside India. This should not surprise us. Rushdie, after all, has lived for most of his life away from India, and continues to be seen by many Indians as a purveyor of marketable Euro-American fantasies about Indian and other 'Oriental' cultures. In addition, he has situated himself within a largely mainstream tradition of highly mobile cosmopolitan writers...<sup>684</sup>

For all this, though, Rushdie seems well aware of his compromised position, but that awareness does not alter his reception:

As Hugh Eakin has argued, the assimilation of Rushdie's novel to the Euro-American literary mainstream has had the effect of robbing it of much of its oppositional (anti-imperialist) power; instead, it has been co-opted as a latter-day 'exotic novel,' experimental in design but still part of the familiar fabric of the 'mysterious East.' Rushdie, according to Eakin, is well aware of 'the risk inherent in the canonization of the exotic novel: like travel writing and guide books, it depicts a cultural other that [metropolitan] readers want to believe in and experience, with little regard for its factual basis' (Eakin 1995:5). Historical facts are disregarded, that is, other than those that can be manipulated or reinvented to meet the ideological requirements of the mainstream consumer culture.<sup>685</sup>

Magical realism only exacerbates this problem, Huggan argues. Still, Huggan wants to offer reprieve to Rushdie, so he reads a level of irony into the novel that I imagine is lost on most readers:

Rushdie demonstrates his awareness of the commercial implications of an Orientalism specifically tailored to metropolitan mass-market tastes. Hence the figure of Saleem Sinai, the novel's narrator-protagonist, as an Orientalist merchant, cannily inviting the reader to sample his own, and India's, exotic wares. Snake-charmers, genies, fakirs; elegant saris and crude spittoons—most of the familiar semiotic markers of Orientalism are on display. By emphasizing the status of these items as commodities, Saleem/Rushdie ironically constructs the metropolitan reader as a voyeuristic consumer. Rushdie's parody of the reader-as-

<sup>683</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2001) 59.

<sup>684</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>685</sup> Ibid. 71.

consumer is reinforced by gastronomic metaphors: people, places and events—the country itself—becomes an edible; Indian history is ‘chutnified’ and preserved for future use (Rushdie 1981: 442).<sup>686</sup>

For all Rushdie’s irony, and Huggan’s appreciation for it, I cannot help thinking that reinforcing metropolitan readerly voyeurism, exoticism, and consumption is hardly beneficial. Moreover, taking the passage above in conjunction with Huggan’s passage about Rushdie’s exilic status, it is unclear whether there exists for Rushdie another India, beyond the glibly exotic one, that Rushdie knows well enough to portray. How much distance is there—ironic or other—between Rushdie and his metropolitan readership?

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<sup>686</sup> Ibid. 72.



## AFTERWORD

Rushdie's choice of supernaturalism over enchanted realism would seem to stem from four reasons. First, it offers exotic color with which he can then, ironically or not, delight his readers and himself. Second, he is not close enough to the Indian ground to render enchanted realism, with its emphasis on the mundane realities of the Indian lifeworld that simultaneously open out onto a cosmology that extends beyond it. In that respect, he does not come even as close to Indian enchantment on the ground as Forster does, and he is far less honest about his inevitable foreign estrangement. Third, his rather puerile and premature rejection of realism as all things bad (i.e., hegemonic, colonial, traditional, bourgeois), leads him to run in the opposite direction—not that postmodernism is, at this point, any less hegemonic or any less bourgeois. Finally, his choice of supernaturalism conveniently dovetails with his postmodern experimental imperative. Both supersede reality proper—the workaday world of the here and now, nature, and naturalism—as if to suggest, to the contrary of our enchanted realists, that normal reality cannot be enchanted. While supernaturalism may be non-mimetic and postmodern experimentalism anti-mimetic, Rushdie's simultaneous embrace of the two justifies precisely the sort of postmodern assimilation of postcolonial magical realist novels that Kumkum Sangari disdains.

What falls through the cracks between a hyperbolic supernaturalism and a postmodern experimentalism is a modestly and modernly enchanted Indian *reality*. In terms of placing him in the cosmopolitan versus postcolonial lines of magical realism—the former favoring epistemology/metafictionality, the latter favoring ontology/historicity—it is safe to say that Rushdie falls much more in the former than the latter. Rushdie's re-enchantment is only at best a second-order re-enchantment. He never directly encounters or enchants Indian reality like

Bankim, Tagore, and even at times Forster do. Further, because Rushdie is estranged from his own characters, even his second-order poaching off their subjectively enchanted epistemology is much more limited than, say, Forster's earnest channeling of Godbole.

Rushdie's magic lacks the matter-of-factness proposed by even the original European progenitors of magical realism; instead, it takes on a hyperbolic, even histrionic quality. Is the supernatural mode the only sort of enchantment available to Indians? Do Indians really see the world in such exaggerated terms as Rushdie presents? Moreover, do we the readers really believe in the supernaturalism of the narrative? Does Rushdie himself believe in it? It is so over-the-top that we may through sheer force of will give ourselves over to this alternate perspective for the duration of the reading experience, but it can hardly alter our permanent epistemological orientation to reality itself—the grand ambition of magical realism. Of course I can only speculate, but it seems to me that by constantly escaping into mere fantasy, form, and narrative, magical realism of Rushdie's cast gives up too quickly on too many things in which we have an unflagging investment: ontological reality, history, and politics. By pinning narrative against all praxis, Rushdie sets himself up for defeat.

Rushdie, with his hostility to realism/mimesis, fails to recognize that for Hindus, supernaturalism is but an extension of enchanted reality and enchanted mimesis. As Diana Eck and Richard Davis and other experts<sup>687</sup> on *darśan* have explained, the supernatural iconography

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<sup>687</sup> To a cultural anthropologist of Indian religion, my renderings of Hindu concepts and tropes might seem naïve. But if so, they would have to address Diana Eck, Wendy Doniger, Jack Hawley, David Kinsley, and Richard Davis, and even Maurice Winternitz, all of whom comprise the most established and respected cadre of scholars on Hinduism, a fact I have confirmed this with senior scholars of Indian religious studies. Eck's book on *darśan*, for example, is considered the prevailing authority, and it is standard reading in any course on Hinduism in the U.S.A. Furthermore, my argument does not require a minute parsing out of minor differences among theories of, say, *darśan* or sound theory; the overarching and basic theory of enchanted mimesis in Hinduism is all that is necessary for my claims about the philosophy of logos in Hinduism.

and mythology is co-extensive with a view of nature as fundamentally animated by divinity. Eight-armed or elephant-trunked deities are not the only manifestations of the divine; after all, there are also the aniconic forms such as the salagrama stones and natural linga, as well as rivers and ponds that are considered divine self-manifestations. Hindus do not make the hard and fast separation between natural and supernatural: enchantment runs through both, both are taken to be real, and the representations of both are therefore taken to be mimetic. Rushdie, like Mukherjee and Pinney, each from his/her different orientation, maintains the Enlightenment split between nature and supernature—a split that simply does not exist for Hindus generally, even for a Bankim who sought valiantly to privilege natural enchantment over supernatural enchantment. Bankim and Tagore, and even Forster, took that approach so as to fit India to a modernity that could be a resource to the country. To take God to be real, in the here and now, is to grant him a more privileged place in the landscape of modernity than Rushdie's supernaturalist insistence does.

There is much to be gained in adhering to the naturalist parameters of realism, as Bankim, Tagore, and Forster valiantly struggled to do: the authority of the real and the plausible can then be extended to divinity, thus pre-empting His banishment to mere epistemology, superstition, fantasy, or other-worldiness. Thus can realism exploit its fictional prerogative to invite even disbelievers into a worldview of faith. Rushdie, taking the easy way out, fails to convince us of the reality of the divinities he invokes; we cannot subscribe to their plausibility any more than we can subscribe to his hypertrophic magic.

Rushdie, a self-professed atheist, has said that his use of magical realism in *Midnight's Children* is an "attempt honestly to describe reality as it is experienced by religious people, for

whom God is not symbol but an everyday fact...[realism] is like a judgment upon, an invalidation of, the religious faith of the characters.”<sup>688</sup> This statement expresses an admirable sentiment, but the sentiment is not borne out by the novel for five reasons. First, Rushdie does not share the faith of his characters, and his formal orientation allows him to keep his distance from it. Second, his subject position is too distant from the ground to really know how religious people experience God. Third, he peremptorily dismisses realism’s capacity to validate the religious faith of characters, a capacity our enchanted realists demonstrate. Fourth, his own metanarrative adaptation of Puranic myth operates entirely on the level of symbol. Fifth, if magical realism presupposes faith in mythic reality (faith on the part of writer, readers, and characters alike), then Rushdie’s postmodern undertow that sheds doubt on Saleem, the purveyor of mythic material, works against the novel’s imperative. If, at points, the writer, reader, ancillary characters, and Saleem himself doubt his reliability as a narrator, the faith necessary to accept the religious/magical reality is lost.

Magical realism has been hailed as the most radical and most enchanted postcolonial genre. But is it? Just as (re-)enchantment must give up its claim on politics and ethics in Rushdie’s magical realism, so too must it give up its claim on realism, and by extension, reality itself. Billing itself as a non-mimetic mode, it presumes against the sort of mimetic enchantment that is possible in the representations of a Bankim, Tagore, or even a Forster. If the world itself is ontologically enchanted, then it CAN be represented realistically; in fact, it MUST be represented realistically. To abjure realism is thus to tacitly suggest that enchantment is not actually IN the world, but merely in “their” epistemology--folklore, superstition, supernatural

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<sup>688</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1981) 376.

projections, however inspiring these may be to the magical realist. By making realism its enemy, and by finding a resource in the supernatural, magical realism implies that the supernatural, however redemptive, is not quite real. As I elaborated in Chapter 1, Hindus, along with Sufis and other Indo-syncretic sects, see a continuity between enchantment in this world and the other world, between the natural and the supernatural worlds; and mimesis runs through it all. Hindus would not consider their representation of exaggerated anthropomorphic forms of the deity to be non-mimetic, as magical realists do. Thus we may conclude that magical realism necessarily subscribes to the disenchanted view of mimesis and mimetic language. A vast chasm separates the writer from the world of the believers he means to depict appreciatively. Rushdie, like most magical realists, considers academic realism the province of European bourgeois hegemony, the colonial worldview, and the usual battery of disenchanted ideologies: capitalism, progress, Enlightenment, scientism, individualism, rationality. This should come as no surprise, since the major theorists of the novel also take for granted that realism corresponds to such. But what I have tried to show in this thesis is that realism can be stretched and put to other purposes, that it can be made to reflect and even effect enchantment. Realism need not be hijacked by disenchantment. Magical realism not only takes the disenchantment of realism to be a foregone conclusion, but actually hastens it.

Have the magical realists given up on realism prematurely? Given the authorizing power of the real, this would seem imprudent. Or is such abandonment the necessary consequence of reality itself having become so thoroughly disenchanted that enchanted realism is no longer viable? If the magical realists held the latter rationale as their imperative for their search for new representational means, it would make sense. But in fact, magical realists insist on the

enchantment of the worlds they represent: the autochthonous worlds whose understanding of reality flies in the face of (the European) empirical sense. I fear that the magical realists' imagination of autochthonous enchantment derives less from contact with the praxis of native lifeways and more from the Metropolitan intellectual's own romantic fantasy of pre-modern folk epistemology; in that sense, his approach to his native land is not unlike that of the very Négritudists that magical realists posit as their foil. Given the exile's romantic tendency to aestheticize and distort the homeland from which he has become estranged, it is no wonder that so many magical realist narratives are so exaggerated. A consequence of this distorted imagination is that exilic magical realists establish a false dichotomy (even as its theorists claim integration) between modern/disenchanting and pre-modern/enchanting, leaving an important vacuum in the middle: namely, modern enchantment—precisely the arena Bankim, Tagore, and even Forster sought to carve out.

#### THE OTHER INDIAN ENCHANTMENT: NARAYAN'S REALISM AND ENCHANTED PROVINCIAL INDIA

That sort of modest modern enchantment continues in the alternate line of post-Independence enchanted novels, epitomized by R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958).<sup>689</sup> This realist line and the provincial India it presents operate at an enormous distance from the magical realist line and the urban cosmopolitan India the latter presents.

Narayan's comic novel presents a trickster turned accidental saint who exploits others' desire for both secular and religious enchantment, suggesting not only that the two registers may

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<sup>689</sup> R.K. Narayan, *The Guide* (New York: Penguin, 1958).

comfortably cohabit everyday India and the novel, but also that the religious subsumes the secular. Such subsuming recalls not only Rushdie's slightly misguided attempt to suggest the same, but also Forster's enchanting of reality at the end of his novel: enchantment takes over the world, drawing into its fold even the formerly disenchanting cynics. In *The Guide*, a straightforward, geographically-circumscribed realist novel by India's foremost chronicler of small-town Indian life, the protagonist Raju first exploits others' desire for secular then religious enchantment. Crucially, the former vocation prepares him for the latter. First a guide for tourists looking for exotic enchantment in his little run-of-the-mill town, Raju produces that enchantment for them, transforming his ordinary into their extraordinary. His main strategy is one of allowing visitors to deceive themselves. Later he, a prisoner fresh out of jail, plays right into the local misapprehension of him as a saint. Raju's comedy depends on this gross ironic conflation of sacred and secular (the profane, even). The novel shuttles temporally between the secular storyline (Raju's career as an accidental tourist guide) and the spiritual one (Raju's career as an accidental spiritual guide), creating striking and funny equivalences between the two registers, and thereby establishing an unexpected continuity between the two. By this continuity (or, more precisely, commensurability), I think Narayan means to show how comfortably the secular and the sacred can cohabit in small-town India, just as it can in the realist novel.

See how easily and significantly the secular can pass into the sacred! While for most of the novel, the joke is on the laity that has misperceived Raju's station (much to his benefit), in the end, the joke is on him, as he is forced to oblige its various wishes as befit a saint. Raju's devotees force him to undergo a rain-inducing fast that in turn inspires his genuine spiritual convergence. That the villagers' tenacious *darśan*—their (mis)taking him for a saint and holding

him to it—can ultimately render the cynic a saint suggests that subjective enchantment has the force to effect objective enchantment. Irony finally melts completely into sincerity, as his enforced fast for the sake of the rains leads him to undergo something of a religious convergence. Thus, epistemology affects ontology; an enchanted worldview makes for an enchanted world. In fact, the one demands the other.

A seminal figure, along with Mulk Raj Anand, Ahmed Ali, and Raja Rao, in the first wave of English writing in English, Narayan—the most famous raconteur of small town India—tells a simple story, narrated in Indian parlour-room storytelling mode. This is a far cry from the grandiose, self-conscious, exilic, post-modern-playful, epic cast of *Midnight's Children*. But Narayan is more effective, in that he conveys a more genuine, ontological, and matter-of-fact sense of enchantment. Ultimately, I wonder if maybe magical realism makes too much ado about enchantment. Narayan shows us just how adequate traditional realism can be for conveying religious enchantment in everyday Indian life. Perhaps it is Rushdie's exilic sensibility that prompts him to create a hyperbolic Hindu epic frame that nonetheless distances us from the enchanted perspective of the believers in the novel; perhaps magical realism itself, as an ostentatiously non-realist sub-genre, cannot suspend our disbelief nearly as successfully as straight realism.

Narayan doubles back to Bankim and Tagore's realist enchantment, albeit with a touch of light irony and an extremely circumscribed sub-national scope—indicative of post-Independence India's reduced ambitions for, yet persistence of, indigenous religiosity. No longer is an enchanted national allegorical novel possible, as it might have been in Bankim's, Tagore's, and even Forster's pre-Independence epoch. After independence, both enchanted novelistic



alternatives are qualified: either a second-order, re-enchanting national allegorical magical realist novel like Rushdie's whose enchantment is compromised in all the ways I have discussed; or, a first-order enchanted realist novel that restricts itself to the reduced sphere of Indian enchantment in provincial pockets. Still, the latter much more than the former seems to succeed in its endeavor to enchant the novel, thus demonstrating that mimetic realism unexpectedly proves more able than non-mimetic modes to convey enchantment.

However, the two fictional lines, like the two post-Independence Indias to which they correspond, remain estranged. I end the dissertation with a genuine question as to whether there the next wave of writing will offer a third way—a viable prospect if our eyes become attuned to the enchanting possibilities of capacious realism itself, an opportunity that was foreclosed perhaps prematurely. Then again, is it possible or even desirable or literarily ethical to present an enchanted realism when the reality to which it corresponds has become thoroughly disenchanted? It seems to me that Rushdie and Narayan, like their predecessors, make a valiant and responsible attempt to enchant the novel in the Indian context, admitting the contingent limitations set on their literary effort by the facts of the increasing disenchantment of India.

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