

**COSMOPOLITAN DISASTERS:  
FROM BHOPAL TO THE TSUNAMI IN SOUTH ASIAN ANGLOPHONE  
LITERATURE**

by

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This dissertation examines the representational conflict over sites of disaster in the contemporary period of neoliberal globalization. I name these disasters “cosmopolitan” not to assign value but to designate a set of political and representational problems that stem from each event’s position of global prominence.

Interpreting Anglophone literatures of India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, I pair dominant modes of representation with particular disasters: humanitarian representations and the Union Carbide Bhopal gas leak; images of apocalypse that circulated after the 1998 nuclear tests in India and Pakistan; bureaucratic aesthetics and a set of coal mine collapses in 2001; and the wilderness aesthetics of the 2004 tsunami. South Asian disaster writing engages, disrupts, and reworks these dominant modes by redirecting disaster imaginations away from moments of sensational violence towards recurrent forms of structural violence. These narratives challenge the reductive notions of “natural disaster” and “accident” by treating disasters not as moments of rupture but as moments within a longer historical continuum, thus confronting the global media’s routine stigmatization of the Global South as an ahistorical disaster zone, or what I refer to as the disaster exotic.

Moreover, these narratives explore the subtle possibilities of emergent communities of reconstruction, attending to disaster solidarities at the local and transnational levels. Bringing together conversations in trauma and memory studies, ecocriticism and media studies, as well as globalization theory and the sociology of disaster, I contend that South Asian narratives both critique dominant disaster discourses and excavate utopian imaginations from the detritus of the aftermath.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In his memoir of the 2010 Haitian earthquake, *The World is Moving Around Me*, Dany Laferrière pauses in the recent aftermath to speculate on the potential literary production already underway. In his reflections, he gathers together questions on the ethics and politics of representation and the cultural “ownership” of disaster:

Are writers already at work? Will we see a race to write the great earthquake novel or the major essay about reconstruction? And the winner—will it be a Frankétienne or a young, unknown woman novelist? Dalember or a German writer who’d never even heard of Haiti before the event? Don’t forget that the great novel of the Haitian dictatorship (*The Comedians*, 1996) was written by Graham Greene, an Englishman. The earthquake is a planetary event. It belongs to everyone. (139-140)

In this passage, Laferrière figures the earthquake as what I call a “cosmopolitan disaster”: a world disaster, one with transnational affiliations and belongings. In Laferrière’s rendering, the earthquake is a transnational *property*—“it *belongs* to everyone”—an event claimed not only by the elites and imagined newcomers of Haitian literature, but also by Haitian sports players and even the previously uninitiated foreign artists. Organizing the disaster’s disarray into narrative form is a task open to all.

And yet, despite the open stance of this passage, much of Laferrière’s memoir tells us otherwise. Throughout the memoir he rebukes the global media attention paid to Haiti after the

earthquake as partial and reductive; he skewers the extensive foreign aid presence as often ignorant and self-important. With the sudden international media attention and the intervention of NGOs,<sup>1</sup> he predicts foreign aid workers and intellectuals “going to simmer in the old colonial kettle” searching for and boasting of their attendance of “secret” voodoo ceremonies (162-63). He asserts the primacy of local knowledge and experience, defending Haiti’s “secrets” as hard-won and not open for the taking. “If you’re there, the ceremony isn’t secret. Remember the old saying: if someone else knows, it’s not a secret” (163).

Against these external claims to knowledge and representational authority, Laferrière carefully records the earthquake’s meanings within Haitian culture and history, its complex relationship to local and diasporic Haitians, and the way it impacts lived experience on the island. For instance, he observes how the earthquake changes everyday life in Port-au-Prince, redirecting customers from the upscale, covered—and therefore, potentially risky—supermarkets to the neighborhood stores and outdoor markets (148); for Laferrière’s mother, who insists “I’ve seen it all in this country,” the earthquake becomes part of the tattered, yet exceptional history of Haiti (48). The earthquake also sits uncomfortably and complexly in relation to longstanding class and cultural divides in the country. One’s close proximity to the earthquake’s outbreak, Laferrière suggests, grants a problematic aura of authenticity, a kind of disaster-cultural capital that allows diasporic Haitians in Port-au-Prince the ability to “achieve nobility,” while tarnishing “the national luster” of longtime residents who missed the earthquake (151-52). The right to

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<sup>1</sup> Before the earthquake of 2010, estimates about the number of international NGOs operating in Haiti range between 3,000 to 10,000. A major influx of new organizations, funded by the massive donations pledged worldwide, entered the country in the aftermath. Critics have since dubbed the country the “NGO Republic of Haiti.” The appellation refers to the way NGOs create “parallel states” with more wealth and governance capability than the national government, holding decision making power without local democratic accountability (Klarreich and Polman). Per capita, Haiti has the second highest number of NGOs in the world; India, the so-called “NGO capital of the world,” holds the number one position (qtd. in Kudva 233). See Chapter 1 here for my engagement with literary representations of NGOs.

narrate the disaster is also a matter of contestation between generations: the memoir includes the resonant request from the author's young nephew that Laferrière *not* write about it; that the earthquake belongs to the next generation of Haitian writers and artists (49-51). It is here, again, that the memoir signals a struggle over the representational authority over disaster, especially on the catastrophic scale of the 2010 earthquake, which killed over 300,000 people and left over a million people homeless. The struggle over representation signals its impact on the fragmented form of the memoir (a sequence of short vignettes, human portraits, and reflections) and in the speed of its writing and publication (it appeared in French within the same year as the earthquake).

These examples illuminate the tangled thicket of an important question: to whom does a disaster belong? In the structural terms of Louis Althusser, whom does the disaster interpellate, or hail, and in what fashion does it hail them? Does disaster figure its observers as its "owners," its "citizens," its agents of causation? Who lays claim to a disaster, and in whose name do they claim it?

Disasters, as Laferrière's memoir reminds us, are first and foremost local events, with distinct and devastating impacts upon specific places (such as a city, neighborhood, or a single street). Disaster sociologists, like Allen Barton, distinguish between concentrated *community* disasters and broader *regional* disasters in terms of concrete physical impact (qtd. in Kreps 36). Of course, disasters command attention and implication far beyond this immediate sphere of direct impact. This wider radius of implication is a matter of representation and narration. In the contemporary period of global capitalism, transnational media networks, globe-traversing non-governmental organizations, and—most importantly for this project—a growing world market for postcolonial literature, disasters may be broadcast at even larger radiuses and at even faster speeds.

Disasters, especially those occurring within the marginalized Global South, become subject to complex and— as demonstrated in the Laferrière passage—fiercely contested processes of narration. I consider this cultural and political contestation of disaster’s meaning an endemic aspect of its global amplification—or “cosmopolitanization”—beyond its context of origin.

## 1.1 THE DISASTERS OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

What is the relationship between Postcolonial Studies and disaster? In many ways, Postcolonial Studies is a disaster-marked discipline, one framed by the long-term disaster of colonialism (the disruption, or complete eradication of pre-colonial ways of life), and the disaster of anti-colonial nationalist failure (the incomplete, interrupted, or un-attempted economic and cultural restructuring of society). To claim both of these as disasters is to already think of disaster not as a singular event, but as a process. Indeed, disaster and its various synonyms have come to function as terms of compression in texts foundational to Postcolonial Studies, indicating, by way of shorthand, the massive devastation of colonial and racialized violence. For instance, Aimé Cesaire concentrates slavery and European colonization into “disaster” at the outset of *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1947), as the sounds heard “from the other side of disaster” (*de l’autre côté du désastre*) initiate the poem’s imaginative unfolding (1). In her polemical text, *A Small Place* (1988), Jamaica Kincaid alternately figures “disaster” as a term incapable of holding the weight of empire’s brutality. Asserting that the English should be “wearing sackcloth and ashes in token penance of the wrongs committed,” she contends that “no natural disaster imaginable could equal the harm [the British Empire] did” (24). In contexts

tangentially related to Postcolonial Studies, disaster serves a similar function of compression. The methodical mass killings of European Jews by the Nazis have been called *Shoah* (the Hebrew term for catastrophe or calamity) by some historiographers. The same term, catastrophe, *Al-Nakba* in Arabic, has been used to describe the expulsion of Palestinians by the foundation of the Israeli state in 1948. In both cases, mass death and eviction, occurring over differing lengths of time, becomes compressed into single, resonant terms. The disaster of dashed hopes of nationalist transformation has heavily influenced postcolonial Anglophone literary production: consider Neil Lazarus's naming of the shift from the "great expectations" of post-independence to "the mourning after" of the late 1960s onwards in relation to African literature (*Resistance* 1- 26), a periodization similarly mobilized by Pranav Jani in reference to Indian Anglophone literature (7). In his recent work, Lazarus expands this periodization into a global framework, noting the marked turn from "'Third World' self-determination" in the 1950s (*Postcolonial* 4) to a triumphant American-led global capitalism of the 1970s and 1980s (6-9). Lazarus, among other critics, convincingly suggests that this economic and political climate shaped not only Anglophone literary production but also the field of Postcolonial Studies, which "breathed the air of the reassertion of imperial dominance" in its moment of emergence in the American academy (9). The disillusionment with nationalism has clearly influenced the discipline's critical distance from the nation and anticolonial nationalism.

In this study, however, I am most interested in Postcolonial Studies' relationship to disaster in the contemporary period of economic neoliberalism and cultural cosmopolitanism. With global climate change intensifying weather patterns and a growing deregulation of safety standards, both natural and technological disaster affect an increasing number of people. However, while disaster patterns threaten to remake the globe, the populations most vulnerable

to disaster live in the formerly colonized world. How, then, are postcolonial disasters—such as industrial accidents, earthquakes, tsunamis, or cataclysmic acts of political violence—represented in this period of globalization?

This question points to a growing field of inquiry within the discipline of postcolonial literary studies. For instance, in his influential work, *Slow Violence* (2011), Rob Nixon encourages a more temporally expansive reflection on disaster than one preoccupied with sudden and explosive events. Nixon reflects on the challenges of representing “slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes,” such as climate change, radioactive aftereffects of contemporary warfare and increasing levels of toxicity, especially in a way that captures their relatively invisible forms “of incremental and accretive” violence (2). Writers from the Global South form an integral part of Nixon’s study, especially in their nuanced representations of the “environmentalism of the poor,” by which Nixon, building from Ramachandra Guha, means the localized environmental concerns of the world’s most marginalized and economically vulnerable communities (2-5). Anthony Carrigan has similarly addressed the representation of complex and long-term disasters in postcolonial fiction, examining the intertwining of beach erosion and sex tourism in Sri Lanka (“Out of this Great Tragedy”) and the “disabling environments” of nuclear testing in the Pacific Islands (“Postcolonial Disaster” 257). More recently, Carrigan has argued for the mutually productive conjunction of a historically informed Postcolonial Studies with the applied research emphasis of Disaster Studies (“Towards”). Other critics consider the narration of disaster as deeply related to the legitimacy of colonial and post-independence governments. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee extends the purview of disaster inquiry into the nineteenth century, scrutinizing the ideological function of natural disasters to the project of Victorian colonialism (*Natural Disasters* 18). In a similar manner, Mark D. Anderson unpacks the importance of



natural disaster to Rafael Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic; Trujillo's government deployed the devastating 1930 cyclone as evidence of "Dominican history as an enduring disaster to which he was the sole remedy," while simultaneously silencing alternate interpretations of the event (23). Indeed, much of postcolonial ecocriticism, if it does not engage discourses and representations of disaster directly, might be seen as either haunted or galvanized by the threat of environmental catastrophe. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011) foregrounds global climate change and its attendant disasters as an enabling context for contemporary postcolonial ecocriticism—and for American critics to take postcolonial environmental topics seriously (25-26). Together, these critics indicate what might be a growing trend in Postcolonial Studies: an engagement with disaster aesthetics as a way of retrieving obscured colonial histories, and confronting supposedly triumphant political ideologies.

My dissertation contributes to this flourishing area of research by identifying the interventions made by contemporary postcolonial South Asian Anglophone literature within globally circulating disaster imaginations. To better clarify my understanding of the South Asian disaster as cosmopolitan event, I turn now to the discourse of cosmopolitanism and its relationship to South Asian literature.

## **1.2 DISASTROUS COSMOPOLITANISMS AND COSMOPOLITAN DISASTERS**

Intellectual histories of cosmopolitanism typically attribute the term's first usage to the Cynic Diogenes in the fourth century BCE, who declared "I am a citizen of the world" rather than one

of a particular city-state (Ashcroft, et. al. 64). Greek Stoicism popularized and philosophically developed the idea as an ethical ideal of multiple place-based attachments (Kleingeld and Brown). Cosmopolitanism found its modern flowering in the late eighteenth century in Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace* (1795), which lays out an ideal of "world citizenship," an international extension of "hospitality," defined as "the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another one" (20). Kant envisioned a "league of nations," each independent and territorially defined, to facilitate this mobility of the stranger, rather than a solitary world state. In the nineteenth century, the term became identified with the expansion of capitalism, as exemplified in John Stuart Mill's 1848 oft-quoted statement: "capital is becoming more and more cosmopolitan" ("cosmopolitan," def 1). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels also identified the capitalist world-market as producing a "cosmopolitan character to production and consumption" (476), and largely use the term in a critical fashion, identifying the endless rapaciousness and globe-trotting nature of capital. For Marx and Engels, the effects of global capitalism's cosmopolitan character were largely destructive, resulting in the erosion of "local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency" (476), while also generating the byproduct of an increasingly untenable "national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness" (477).<sup>2</sup>

These genealogies are reflected in cosmopolitanism's prominence in cultural theory since the mid-1990s. One might find the Classical Greek emphases in Kwame Anthony Appiah, Kant's discussion of hospitality in Jacques Derrida, and the warnings of Marx and Engels about the concept in Walter Mignolo. Broadly, cosmopolitanism signifies an ethical outlook that surpasses the local; it is a cultural attitude that seeks out and embraces difference beyond one's

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<sup>2</sup> In the same passage, one finds the much-commented upon and ambiguous statement: "from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature" (477).

immediate and familiar context. For instance, Sheldon Pollock et. al. frame cosmopolitanism as an inquiry into “how people have thought and acted beyond the local” (10).

While the term is often theorized as an expansively open orientation to the world, critics like Swati Chattopadhyay contend that cosmopolitanism’s Other is almost always the “provincial”; she notes that while cosmopolitan theorists might validate the local, the provincial typically remains the marker of an irredeemable insularity (70-71). While the content of both terms—the cosmopolitan and the provincial—are open to definition, the binary of cosmopolitanism and provincialism primarily function as markers of value, assigning legitimacy to one cultural formation and backwardness to another. For instance, Margaret Nussbaum’s influential essay, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism” (1994)—written in the midst of the U.S. “Culture Wars” and subsequently anthologized alongside a broad range of respondents in *For Love of Country* (1996)—revived academic discussions of cosmopolitanism while simultaneously positioning nationalism (in the form of a puffed-up patriotism) as cosmopolitanism’s provincial other. Consequently, one strain of cosmopolitan theorizing has been firmly post-nationalist, rejecting the nation as a container of regressive cultural homogeneity and territorialism.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, with its contemporary re-emergence alongside neoliberal globalization and its antagonism to the regulative capacities of the state, cosmopolitanism has been accused of functioning as a cultural collaborator to neoliberal ideology. For instance, Timothy Brennan argues that “globalization bears on cosmopolitanism as structure to idea. It is that purportedly

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, one influential set of scholars declares that: “Modernist nationalisms with their tendency to connect cultures and identities to specific places have become an ever more retrograde ideology” (Pollock, et. al., 3). In many ways, the critical debates over the nation in cosmopolitan theorizing overlap significantly with those in Postcolonial Studies. For a critique of post-nationalist scholarship, especially in relation to discourses of hybridity and the Caribbean, see Puri (*Caribbean Postcolonial* 19-41); see Jani for a critical treatment of post-nationalism in the Indian English novel (31-37).

new material reality to which the new ethos—cosmopolitanism—responds” (*Wars of Position* 208).<sup>4</sup> To untangle cosmopolitanism from its relationship to the contemporary dominance of neoliberalism, I deploy it here not as a marker of value, but as a descriptor of a particular position of global prominence. I follow Brennan, then, in regarding cosmopolitanism as a “fundamentally ambivalent phenomenon,” one that requires not a wholesale endorsement, but a careful evaluative attention to the specific iteration at hand (205). Rather than outlining a notion of disaster cosmopolitanism—a singular or plural ethic generated by the experience of disaster, and simply adding a new iteration to the heap of adjective-modified cosmopolitanisms—I focus on the representational and political problems entailed by any notion of “cosmopolitan disaster.”

By “cosmopolitan disaster,” then, I invoke the process of disaster’s movement from its location of origin to wider networks of transmission, distribution and representation. Mark D. Anderson astutely observes the public narration of disaster as a process, one that reflects and is implicated within “existing social and political power relations,” and holds the potential to reworking those relations (7). For Anderson, “the triumphant version of events” may rise to the level of official canonization and endure within popular memory, but “its language bears the marks of competing, often contradictory interpretations like scars” (7). Such an account helpfully identifies the meaning of disasters as open to debate and contestation, even within their local and national contexts of origins. Anderson, however, does not describe the way disaster narratives circulate outside of their national contexts, or the way this process may differ from the circulation within the boundaries of the nation.

My sense of a disaster’s mobility across time and space is then influenced by Edward Said’s perceptive accounts of “traveling theory.” Said notes that a theory is formulated by a

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<sup>4</sup> For extended critiques, see *At Home in the World* (1997) and *Wars of Position* (2006), 205-232.

theorist within and in response to specific historical conditions (“Traveling Theory” 196, 206); as it moves (or is moved) from its context of origins to new locations and uses, it becomes subject to different limitations and generative possibilities. Between his different accounts in 1982 and 1994, Said highlights this movement as a complex and contradictory one: the theory’s initial context of articulation is often lost, and radical, transformative theories become dulled (204); conversely, in its new application, new and transgressive uses of the theory become possible (“Traveling Theory Reconsidered” 438-9). Disasters, I argue, are broadly subject to the same logic: representations and narratives of disaster events circulate along specific channels, and may carry different cultural meanings and political imports as they travel. Indeed, the extrication of a disaster from its original context may not even bear the scars of competing interpretations. The particular channels and pathways of representation, which help to identify a disaster as “local,” “national,” or “global,” bear critical attention. Terri Tomsy usefully employs Said’s essays on traveling theory as a basis for her examination of the circulation of “traumatic memory,” identifying what she calls a “trauma economy,” or the “economic, cultural, discursive and political structures that guide, enable and ultimately institutionalize the representation, travel and attention to certain traumas.” (53). The notion of a trauma economy draws our attention to the networks of power that enable disasters to rise above their immediate context.<sup>5</sup>

Literature of disaster travels upon these same pathways of distribution; literature (while itself a particular and complex form of disaster representation) relies upon the distribution networks of publishing industries, the reviewing and promotional activities of magazines, universities, and booksellers, as well as interested communities of readers. Critics like Sarah

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander’s provocative essay, “The Social Construction of Moral Universals,” demonstrates this kind of analysis. Alexander analyzes the discursive shifts in representations of Nazi violence, as it shifts from “atrocities” in the post-war period to its later figuration as the “Holocaust.” For Alexander’s argument and a set of responses, see Alexander.

Brouillette and Rashmi Sadana have done important work in charting these mechanics of distribution and promotion in both global and local sites. The critical work of this dissertation, however, does not engage these material dynamics of distribution directly.

Rather, I identify here the recurrent tropes or particular modes of disaster representation related to specific events (imaginings of apocalypse and nuclear weapons, ideas of wilderness and natural disaster) and to dominant institutions and practices of disaster relief (non-governmental humanitarianism, state bureaucracy). As I demonstrate in the individual chapters, these tropes are both specific to the context of particular South Asian disasters and also circulate more broadly. These modes of representation help enable the travel and transmission of disaster beyond its immediate physical radius, and thus contribute to the narrative construction of cosmopolitan disasters.

I identify specific South Asian literary interventions within these modes of disaster representation, each of which reworks tropes and redirects the disaster imagination in various ways. Engaging these tropes of disaster arguably lends the particular Anglophone novel increased traffic on the world literary marketplace and also provides an occasion to intervene within the dominant modes of disaster representation. Thus, postcolonial disaster fiction both participates in and reworks the economic logic of the spectacle. I suggest that these narrative interventions rewrite the sensationalist and presentist forms of representation by which disaster is typically understood, and instead ground destructive events within history and systems of power. This literature also investigates disaster's ability to both destroy and create community. If disaster boasts the ability to force mass groups of survivors together and to command the attention of outsiders, these modes explore alternative ways of imagining community.

What is the specific relationship of cosmopolitanism to South Asian Anglophone literature? As one critic notes, “post-eighties South Asian writing in English has always been tagged ‘cosmopolitan’ writing, ever since Timothy Brennan’s evocation of Rushdie’s literary politics as the ‘boastful cosmopolitanism’ of ‘third world metropolitan elites’” (B. Ghosh, *When Borne Across* 18). Recent monographs (Jani; Srivastava) wrestle with the significance of this label and its application to Indian Anglophone writing, especially to the 1980s group of globally mobile authors and their prize-winning novels. Bishnupriya Ghosh describes the 1980s generation of Indian English writers—Salman Rushdie, Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, and Arundhati Roy—as “cosmopolitical” writers. With this modification of the term cosmopolitan, she contrasts them with an earlier moment of postcolonial cosmopolitanism (one she allies with V.S. Naipaul), in which the artist sought a rootless position of detachment from which to write. Instead, these writers are “cosmopolitical” in belonging to a post-Emergency South Asian Left, whose work “challeng[es] both the forms of nationalism reinforced by global flows and the pernicious globalism surfacing in dispersed local contexts.” She sees these writers as taking on both the amorphous, traveling patterns of “capital flows” and the more localized “violence of nation-states against subaltern groups” (5). I share Ghosh’s analytical focus on the multiple geographical attachments and political targets of these Indian writers. However, I am less concerned with the overall oeuvres of specific writers than with particular modes of disaster writing within the period of neoliberalism. I trace these modes in relation to writing from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. While I draw from this post-Emergency generation (Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy and Upamanyu Chatterjee, in particular), my archive principally concerns writers whose work is unaffiliated with the post-Emergency generation

(Indra Sinha) and the subsequent generation of writers, such as Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and Sanjay Bahadur.

My use of “South Asia” requires a brief explanation. In contrast to much older terms in the subcontinent, such as India, it is a more recent invention. As Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal note, “what South Asia lacks in historical depth, it makes up for in political neutrality” (3). South Asia is a way of naming a region, one with shared histories and cultures, in the attempt to think beyond the specific national boundaries created in the post-independence period. As a regional signifier, the term typically includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and occasionally, Myanmar/Burma. Outside of scholarly discourses, South Asia is employed by certain regional organizations and efforts like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, a collaborative economic and diplomatic effort formally established in 1985. My own use includes India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. At times, these chapters focus specifically on national histories. At others, I examine disasters that implicate multiple South Asian countries (chapter two on Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests; chapter four on India and Sri Lanka). To be clear, this project does not in any way approach a regional inclusiveness that incorporates *all* eight (and more) South Asian countries. However, my exploration of South Asia here does attempt to recognize and develop in a scholarly fashion the lines of thematic overlap. All three countries have experienced neoliberal programs of structural adjustment; notwithstanding the crude characterizations that hail India as a global success story, Pakistan as failed state, and Sri Lanka as in a permanent condition of emergency, all three are the sites of major global disasters since liberalization. Moreover, my use of the regional term, South Asia, is an attempt to identify the intertextuality and cross-reference between Anglophone writers from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. (See, for instance, the various invocations of Michael Ondaatje by



Kamila Shamsie and Nadeem Aslam in their writings and interviews.) These lines of connection will be made apparent within and across the chapters of this dissertation.

### 1.3 DEFINING DISASTER: STAKES AND CONTEXTS

How does one define disaster? Most simply, the Oxford English Dictionary defines disaster as “anything that befalls of ruinous or distressing nature; a sudden or great misfortune, mishap, or misadventure,” thus spanning several degrees of severity, from the unexpected disappointment of “mishap” to the more intense “calamity” (“disaster,” def 1). However, defining disaster is both a scholarly and political act. Definitions of disaster are political in that they assign a certain event a kind of social urgency, resulting in consequent programs of preparation, response and relief, as well as determining responsible agents for a disaster’s emergence. For example, one sociologist notes that “definitions” offered by relief organizations and state laws are typically tautological “programmatic declarations,” specifying the conditions for their intervention, rather than laying out a rigorous conceptual analysis (Dombrowsky 20).

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) offers a more specific definition and more elaborate system of classification. Due to its widespread influence and its representation of larger understandings of disaster, the IFRC’s terminology is worth examining. Since 1993, the IFRC, in conjunction with the Belgian-based Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), publishes an annual *World Disasters Report* in which it defines the term as “a situation or event, which overwhelms local capacity,

necessitating a request to national or international level for external assistance” (Vinck 224).<sup>6</sup> (In other words, for this relief organization, a disaster is an event that requires its assistance.<sup>7</sup>) The *Report* includes a list of the year’s disasters across the globe—a catastrophic “Year in Review”—and further specifies its definitional criteria. The *Report* explains that for an event to gain entrance into its database of disaster, it must involve one or more of the following: the death of at least ten people; affected at least 100 people; a declared state of emergency; a call for international assistance (225). Most interesting about these criteria, despite their morbid calculations, is the *public* nature of disaster: disaster affects groups of people or involves the larger condition of the state. According to the IFRC, the death of a single individual cannot be classified as a disaster; the loss of a single home does not qualify either. While these criteria might then exclude certain forms of loss, they emphasize a public dimension of disaster that separates it essentially from forms of private trauma. This public nature of disaster links very clearly to an understanding of disasters as media events, large-scale occurrences that command attention.

Despite the many illuminations of the *World Disaster Report*, its elaborate classifications also exclude many events from its database—particularly those more easily branded as “political” disasters. The *Report* employs a system of disaster classification that groups disasters into different categories (natural and technological) and sub-categories (biological, geophysical,

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<sup>6</sup> One should note that the *Report* does include information about disaster’s slipperiness, its ability to evade perfect calculation (227-28). The sociologist Greg Kreps offers another set of classifications, suggesting that potential disasters might be called “hazards” (33), and that those crises that are prevented from fulfilling their destructive potential, like Three Mile Island, be called “emergencies” (35). At the risk of over-schematizing and over-classifying, Kreps insists on a judicious use of the term “disaster” in order to retain its ability to designate a “certain class of historical circumstances” (34).

<sup>7</sup> CRED’s website states its humanitarian purpose in explicit terms: “The main objective of the database is to serve the purposes of humanitarian action at national and international levels. It is an initiative aimed to rationalize decision making for disaster preparedness, as well as providing an objective base for vulnerability assessment and priority setting” (*EM-DAT*).

climatological, hydrological, meteorological in the “natural” category; industrial, transport, and miscellaneous in the “technological” category). However, despite the rather expansive list of events, the *Report’s* database explicitly excludes “wars, conflict-related famines, diseases or epidemics” (226), thus separating accidents and “natural” disasters from those events directly or indirectly related to deliberate acts of violence.

In an effort to not separate natural, technological and military disasters, my use of the term considers the disaster as both a moment of *rupture* and a moment of *revelation*. This rather expansive definition encompasses both the IFRC’s natural and technological categories of disaster as well as eruptive moments of violence stemming from war and terrorism. Before proceeding further into the historical materials, I wish to use these two characteristics of disaster to organize a large body of disaster theorizing.

As rupture, the disaster signals a sudden and dramatic break in the existing order of things; it is an event that produces a crisis of meaning in which existing affiliations and solidarities are called into question and new narratives need be created. This form of disaster becomes a marker of periodization, used especially for events that fundamentally alter the nature of everyday life, whether it is in the form of water contamination (as in Bhopal) or in the haunted memories of violation (Partition). For instance, Dany Laferrière marks the moment of the 2010 Haitian earthquake’s outbreak as “the fateful hour that cut Haitian time in two” (24), thus figuring the earthquake as a lacerating event, one severing national time into a disjunctive “before” and “after.”

However, not all disasters are experienced as ruptures. Or, to say it another way, not all disasters produce *crises*, or decisive turning points (“crisis,” def 1). For instance, disasters may be intensifications of recurrent weather patterns in more vulnerable, disaster prone areas, such as

southern California or the flood plains of northeastern India. In these places, disaster might be considered a regular environmental feature, but one that still threatens human safety, stability of homes, and the larger social order. Mike Davis deploys the notion of an “ordinary disaster” rather than a “natural disaster” to these situations to great effect, identifying the recurrent environmental hazards of a specific place without exonerating social culpability for damage and death caused by such events (*Ecology of Fear* 52-53).

While some events may not be felt or reported as extreme catastrophes due to relative levels of expectation, others are *deprived* of their social urgency by modes of representation. For instance, Israeli photography critic Ariella Azoulay examines a form of disaster “in which the injury that befalls populations does not create a dimension of urgency, a chronic disaster that goes on with no end in sight and in which there are no forthcoming plans for mitigating its effects” (51). Azoulay considers this normalized state of disaster as a chronic condition for those without citizenship (Palestinians in the Occupied Territories since 1967) and those with “flawed” or compromised citizenship (Israeli women in relation to their experience of sexual violence) (36-7). According to Azoulay, this chronic condition is made invisible by banal forms of representation:

On a daily basis, the communications media provide detailed information on what is happening in the Occupied Territories. The form of reportage, however, prevents this information from being transformed into ‘emergency claims’ due to the special structure of the *énoncé* [the phrasing or wording] of horror in the global era. The *énoncé* of horror is the textual or visual expression that describes the catastrophe as it occurs. (67)

Azoulay’s point here raises the mode of representation and reminds us that any discussion of disaster is also a discussion of the visibility—and intelligibility—of violence. The question of

representation is critical to the way an event is registered or recognized; the aesthetic or rhetorical mode of representation of disaster bears great impact upon whether or not an event is perceived as worthy of attention as well as what kinds of actions will result from that attention. Therefore, disaster belongs to systems of power relations not only in its material causes and responses, but also in its representation.

As revelation, the disaster is not a radically unique event exploding without provocation or causality, but an exposé of existing, but previously unseen, conditions. In this sense, disaster functions similarly to one definition of “apocalypse,” as a “disclosure” or unveiling (“apocalypse,” def 2). Disaster, in this mode of unveiling, serves a variety of social critics. For Vandana Shiva, groundwater famine in the state of Maharashtra exposes the flawed development project of industrialized water withdrawal (13); for Junot Diaz, the Haitian earthquake of 2010 “first and foremost revealed Haiti,” reminding the Global North of Haiti’s existence and its conditions of extreme poverty,<sup>8</sup> for Karl Marx, an economic crisis resulting from “over-production” reveals the “contradictions and antagonisms” of the capitalist transformation of food into a commodity—the transformation of use-value into exchange-value (443-450). In each instance, disaster is like a shattered window through which the critic peers onto larger issues; it provides a rhetorical occasion to comment on, and critique, larger social systems and processes.

The understanding of disasters as eruptive, momentary events—most clearly embodied in the images of a volcano eruption or the sudden crash of a tsunami wave—drastically impoverishes our understanding of them as related to larger processes of history. One of my contentions in this dissertation is that disasters should not be reductively interpreted as singular

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<sup>8</sup> Within the context of contemporary global capitalism, disaster often reveals the obscured sites of production and conditions of poverty in both postcolonial and metropolitan sites. Consider, for instance, the Rana Plaza disaster in Dhaka, Bangladesh of 2013, which forced consumers in the Global North to confront the horrific labor conditions of their clothing’s production. For an interpretation along these lines, see Prashad.

events, but should be embedded in historical processes and social relations.<sup>9</sup> Perceivable as a singular event, the disaster is easily dismissed as abnormal, aberrant and entirely unrepresentative of larger processes and phenomena. Narrative responses to disaster, then, can stitch these events into larger explanatory stories that establish connections, if not causality. I am interested here in the complex ways that literature embeds disaster within narrative.

#### 1.4 PERIODIZING THE MODERN DISASTER

How does one historicize disaster? While certain disasters may come to emblemize particular periods (the Black Death and the Late Middle Ages, or Chernobyl and the Cold War), perhaps more importantly, different periods may be charted through their manner of interpreting, anticipating, and managing disaster. While this dissertation focuses on South Asian disasters of the neoliberal period, I will historicize the contemporary frameworks of disaster interpretation by turning to the eighteenth century Enlightenment understanding of disaster and the nineteenth century colonial practices of disaster management.

The most common scholarly periodization in disaster interpretation is the split between so-called pre-modern and modern views of disaster. According to this division, pre-modern interpretations view disasters as matters of divine agency, in which divine forces communicate their disfavor and punishment on human action (Kapur 91-119; Anderson 10). Modern

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<sup>9</sup> According to Claude Gilbert, understandings of disaster as a marker and product of social vulnerability began to challenge the “external event” model in the discipline of disaster studies beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s (14).

interpretations, bearing the influence of eighteenth century Enlightenment rationality, situate disasters as the outcomes of natural laws, thus eliminating the element of divine intention.<sup>10</sup>

For some scholars, the Enlightenment's de-sanctification of disaster contributes to its politicization, connecting it to human responsibility in matters of relief and reconstruction. Marie-Hélène Huet identifies a correlation between naturalization and politicization, one that replaces the diminished divine authority with a human sovereign. "As the debate slowly shifted from the divine origin of disaster to their unpredictable unfolding, the responsibility for widespread destruction fell more on humans and less on nature" (9). Scholarship on the 1755 Lisbon disaster tends to confirm this view, identifying the event—the eruption of a massive earthquake in the city center, followed by a tsunami and several days of fire—as "the first modern disaster" (Dynes 34) or "the first disaster of a post-theological age" (Huet 37). Lisbon has earned these critical appellations due to the widespread contestation of religious agency in public discourse (motivated in part by the earthquake's outbreak on All Saints Day, while many were attending church), and the emergence of seismological science afterwards. In other words, Lisbon shifted the terms of debate between scientific and theological interpretations of disaster, pushing theology from its position of hegemony. Moreover, the earthquake prompted a new kind of management plan, as it "was the first to evoke a co-ordinated state emergency response as

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<sup>10</sup> It is important not to affirm colonialist conceptions of a linear, progressive timeline attached to the pre-modern against modern understandings of disaster here. For instance, Anu Kapur contends that "traditional" Indian understandings of disaster actually carried a notion of social change that the ideology of "natural disaster" did not (121). Divine wrath, for instance, might be interpreted as a spur to modify social practices whereas the ideology of natural disaster produces a powerfully status-quo position. It is important, however, to register that the "traditional" religious interpretations of disaster were not apolitical and, to the extent to which they remain in use, they continue to have distinct political valences. Mark D. Anderson similarly reminds us that pre-Colombian indigenous Latin American societies politicized disaster in various ways, as a means towards social reform or to vilify segments of society deemed "contaminated" (10).

well as a forward-looking, comprehensive effort at reconstruction which included attempts to reduce the impact of future disasters” (Dynes 34).

The notion of a “natural disaster” functioned very differently in the context of British colonialism. As a number of scholars point out, the environment of the colonies in the southern hemisphere was constructed by colonial discourse as not only foreign but as inhospitable, dangerous, and even endemically disastrous. Greg Bankoff observes a shift in colonial discourse, which figured the tropics initially as a lush paradise and then, as a disaster zone: “The very exoticness of the landscape was increasingly associated with a more malevolent nature: the scene of unrelenting climate (drought and flood), tempestuous weather (storm and typhoon), violent landscape (earthquake and volcanic eruption) dangerous wildlife [...] and deadly disease (plague and pestilence)” (6-7). Travel writings, and then scientific and medical discourses in the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century began to organize and legitimize this understanding, especially in relation to India (Arnold, *The Tropics* 110-146). This, arguably, is the origin point of the stigmatized South. Emergent from this disastrous construction of South Asia was a notion Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee calls “palliative imperialism”: a self-serving conception of British imperialism as a restorative project, one “undertaken in order to fulfill Europe’s historic mission of rescuing the native inhabitants from their own habitat” (*Natural Disasters* 18). Thus, the naturalization of disaster functioned as a discursive tool of self-legitimization for the European colonial enterprise.

Since Amartya Sen’s influential work, *Poverty and Famines* (1981), and a growth in scholarship from the perspective of political ecology—which considers mass starvation and disease outbreaks not as natural outgrowths of weather patterns but as products of social relations—scholars on colonial disasters increasingly situate these events within conditions of



inequality. Materialist analyses of the actual policies of colonial disaster response, however, still diverge on matters of causality and the state's intention in disaster management. Conservative accounts such as the economist Tirthankar Roy's *Natural Disasters and Indian History* (2012) depict the state as well intentioned in its relief efforts, but unknowledgeable, overly dispersed and under-equipped to adequately respond to disaster (60-70). Roy positions his study against overtly anti-imperial scholarship, arguing that entitlement-based studies neglect geographical and environmental specificity, as well as what he identifies as the progressive arc of colonial disaster response in India, in which the state increases in its environmental knowledge, predictive accuracy, and successful preventative practices.

What remains outside of these conservative accounts is a more systemic engagement with the variety of discursive, environmental, and economic forces that converge in moments of disaster. The most sophisticated colonial disaster historiography situates these events not only in relation to environmental patterns and relief practices, but also to colonialism's structural underdevelopment, its racial hierarchies, and to shifts in economic ideology across the British Empire. Recent famine historiography offers a powerful systemic analysis. On a structural level, colonialism's systemic underdevelopment acted as an exacerbation of disaster: according to historian Ira Klein, British India's advanced transportation network, alongside conditions of insanitation and high exposure—a “peculiar amalgam of modernization and underdevelopment”—facilitated the passage of disease across distance and actually intensified the mortality rate in times of epidemic (qtd. in Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts* 22). In terms of the substantive policies of disaster relief and management, famine historiographers demonstrate that racist prejudices against “backward” populations informed colonial administrative indifference to disaster victims (Nally 57-93; *Late Victorian Holocausts* 37). Indeed, much of

recent historiography views colonial disaster management as a form of crisis manipulation, or a version of what Naomi Klein would later call “disaster capitalism.” As Mike Davis forcefully puts it, examining the relationship between late nineteenth century *El Nino* climatic events and European colonial expansion: “each global drought was the green light for an imperialist landrush” (*Late Victorian* 12). Davis sees this tactic of exploiting drought-engendered social crisis not as a singular moment, but as taking place throughout the period, ranging from Britain in southern Africa to the U.S. in the Philippines (12-13).

Most important in colonial disaster historiography—and most relevant for the contemporary neoliberal period—is the relationship of laissez-faire policies to disaster response. As several famine historiographers note, the nineteenth century British response to famines—most infamously, the Irish Great Famine of 1845-1852 and the Indian Famine of 1876-78—displayed a governmental indifference to disaster, one legitimized by a strict market ideology. Rather than alleviating conditions of starvation through the emergency importation of grain surpluses and the lowering of grain market prices, British colonial administration, in both cases, refused interventionist action on behalf of the starving, insisting instead upon a purported market purism (Nally 12-13; *Late Victorian Holocausts* 31). Geographer David P. Nally situates this rigid commitment to laissez-faire principles as a nineteenth century turn from earlier anti-scarcity actions of the eighteenth century, exhibited in different forms in Europe, China, Nigeria, and India (10). From a world historical perspective, David Arnold suggests that the nineteenth century rise of laissez-faire economic principles marked a drastic change in the state’s “age-old obligation to feed the people and regulate the markets” (109). This historical framing reveals significant overlaps between the late nineteenth century and the contemporary neoliberal disaster landscape. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee avers this relationship, suggesting continuity between

the Victorian era and the present: “Perhaps we both belong to a singular but uneven modernity that is characterized by a permanent, if differentiated, disaster environment” (*Natural Disasters* 28).

To better unpack this relationship, I turn here to theorizations of postcolonial disaster under neoliberalism. In historical terms, scholars commonly define neoliberalism as a re-emergence of liberal economic thought and policy after the mid-twentieth century rise of the welfare state. Neoliberalism is a particular capitalist ideology that favors the privatization of social services in the belief that the natural tendencies of the market will provide the most efficient and effective practices. The 1970s “Chicago Boys” (Milton Friedman and others) of the Chicago School of Economics and Mont Perlin Society are often cited as its architects (Harvey, *Brief History*; Klein). Michel Foucault traces an earlier trajectory of economic thinkers, focusing on Friedrich Hayek in the American context (an oft-cited influence by Milton Friedman) and the German “Ordoliberals,” or Freiburg School, of the 1940s. Theorists disagree on whether or not neoliberalism has a commitment to alleviating (or minimizing) poverty or economic inequality, with some arguing that neoliberalism proffers its market logic as the source of poverty’s “elimination” (*Brief History* 65) while others argue that neoliberalism disavows any social goals, subsuming them to the priority of the market (Foucault 145).

Naomi Klein’s influential book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), outlines a theory of neoliberal disaster management across the globe, ranging from Chile in 1973 to the tsunami of 2004. *The Shock Doctrine* documents instances in which neoliberal policy agendas took advantage of the social uncertainty and urgency, or what Klein calls the “malleable moments” (25), created by disaster in order to implement otherwise unpopular programs of privatization. For Klein, these programs typically exacerbate the damage to the

community in question, displacing long-term residents from disaster zones and privatizing public institutions and resources.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, Klein considers this mode of disaster response—a “sprawling disaster capitalism complex”—a *global* extension of the U.S. national military industrial complex (14, 537). Elaborating, she notes that in the contemporary condition of privatized economies, “global instability does not just benefit a small group of arms dealers; it generates huge profits for the high-tech security sector, for heavy construction, for private health care companies treating wounded soldiers, for the oil and gas sectors—and of course for defense contractors” (537). Essentially, Klein describes an intertwined crisis industry—one primed to profit from the urgency and desperation of people endangered by war or disaster.

The connection between neoliberalism and militarism is significant because neoliberalism is too often defined as a simple reduction of the state, an encompassing diminution of governmental regulative activities; such a perspective, despite its accuracies, fails to register the fact that neoliberalism does not do away with the state entirely, but involves a restructuring and redirection of its activities. In Foucault’s influential lectures on biopolitics, he contends that neoliberalism differs from nineteenth century classical liberalism in its conception of state involvement in the economy. For Foucault, neoliberalism distinctively “does not ask the state what freedom it will leave to the economy, but asks the economy how its freedom can have a state-creating function and role” (95). For instance, while neoliberalism commonly involves the marketization of economic and social welfare programs, state military budgets in the neoliberal period are often maintained or substantially increased. Indeed, David Harvey has remarked that

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<sup>11</sup> In a brief commentary on Klein’s work, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee notes that capitalism’s exploitations and excesses occur not only after disasters, but accompany and even constitute their conditions of emergence (*Natural Disasters* 10, 22). Indeed, capital acts in anticipation of disasters as well. For a look into the financialization of disasters in the U.S.—including insurance company evasion of “natural disaster” costs, an increasing investment in “reinsurance” (insurance for insurance companies) and an emerging weather futures market for energy companies—see Smith, “Disastrous Accumulation.”

under neoliberalism, the state “functions more clearly now as an ‘executive committee of capitalist class interests’ than at any other time in history” (*Spaces of Global Capitalism* 106). The pairing of welfare privatization and state militarization—an alignment common to many contexts (the U.S., India, Pakistan, the U.K.)—might be seen as a contradictory alliance of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies. However, this uneasy combination might speak to a fundamental contradiction in liberalism. Foucault notes that liberalism, defined by its core values of individual freedoms, has “security” as its other: “the problem of security is the protection of the collective interest against individual interests” (65). David Harvey has suggested that the practice of state militarization functions as an “antidote to the chaos of individual interests,” providing an appearance of security to the anarchic circulation of market exchange (*Brief History* 82-3). Throughout this dissertation, I analyze the depiction of the state in disaster literature, whether it shows up explicitly in the form of government administrators or in the background appearance of the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests.

## 1.5 NEOLIBERAL IMAGINATIONS OF DISASTER

If the nineteenth century notion of the tropics structured the sites of British colonialism as disaster-ridden (and in need of “palliative imperialism”), how have contemporary models of neoliberal globalization conceptualized disaster? How does neoliberalism impact the way disaster (defined in its related anticipatory components of hazard, danger, and risk) is interpreted in contemporary conceptions of the globe in the disciplines of political science, history, or literary studies? Does the phenomenon of disaster disturb or reinforce the divide of metropolitan and periphery sites of the globe? A number of scholars argue that, under neoliberalism,

discourses of disaster replace those of revolution and optimism.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Susan Buck-Morss contends that utopic thinking becomes contained within consumerist fantasies in the post-1989 “end of history” moment (26); in a similar line of argument, Eric Cazdyn argues that while “disaster” and “crisis” have circulated widely in the post-Cold War period, the term “revolution” has almost entirely disappeared (649). While disaster has a widespread currency in the neoliberal present, I argue that it conjures two particular global geographical imaginations: the “scorched earth” and the “disaster exotic.” These geographies form the backdrop to the analysis of my dissertation.

One of the most influential social theorists of disaster and neoliberal globalization is Ulrich Beck.<sup>13</sup> In his book, *Risk Society* (originally published in German in 1986), sociologist Ulrich Beck identifies the late twentieth century as a transitional moment in which global modernity shifts from an industrial society to a risk society (20). If the former is defined by the attempt to fulfill basic needs, the latter is defined by new technological modes of production (or overproduction) that promise to eradicate conditions of scarcity while simultaneously creating technological and environmental risks that threaten the very existence of human civilization. As Beck defines it, risk is “the *anticipation* of catastrophe,” while a catastrophe is the fulfillment of a specific risk (*World at Risk* 9). For Beck, industrial society is characterized by local dangers (“factory-related or occupational hazards” (*Risk Society* 13)); the risk society produces transnational threats (hazards posed by pollution, pesticides, and nuclear power) that cut across national borders and impose a new state of risk awareness and perception.

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<sup>12</sup>As Shalini Puri notes, this common narrative of neoliberalism’s ascendancy can mask vibrant forms of resistance, especially in the Global South (“Introduction” xvii).

<sup>13</sup>David Goldblatt sets Beck within the fields of industrial sociology and risk assessment. Most importantly, because it contextualizes Beck’s world vision in a specific place and time, he locates Beck within the political situation of West Germany, and later, a unified Germany, both confronting the environmental damages and potential hazards of industrialization, especially those of nuclear power (155).

I am most interested here in how Beck generates a vision of the globe using this notion of the risk society. Without discounting the way new hazard-prone technologies distinctly impact ways of life, I wish to focus on the element in his thesis that claims that the new risk society *supplants* the distinctions of a class society. In some ways, Beck notes, the new risk technologies intensify existing inequalities: the wealthy are capable of better preparations and of fleeing sites of disaster; internationally, risk-intensive industries are outsourced to the Global South (43). However, Beck argues that the new risk society overturns the former “‘law’ of the class-specific distribution of risks” in which the impoverished are the most vulnerable to recurrent hazard and to eruptive catastrophe. He raises the idea of a “boomerang effect,” by which risk production in national and international peripheries swoops back to the center (37). His examples, however, are nearly always extensively long-term,<sup>14</sup> and lend themselves to an exaggerated apocalyptic rhetoric that overturns the previously marked social and economic distinctions. In a series of proclamations, Beck claims that, “under the roof of modernization risks, *perpetrator and victim* sooner or later become *identical*” (38). In another influential formulation, Beck declares that “*poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic*” (36, Beck’s emphasis).<sup>15</sup> The metaphorical emphasis and poetic intensity of Beck’s language here falls routinely within the apocalyptic register of the *final*, italicized instance. Even when Beck outlines the international outsourcing of high-risk industries to the Global South, he returns to his notion of the “boomerang effect” and the ultimate leveling of vulnerability. Following an account of the Bhopal disaster, he avers, “in contrast to material poverty, however, the pauperization of the Third World through hazards is contagious for the wealthy. The multiplication of risks causes world society to contract into a

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<sup>14</sup> Industrial agriculture, for instance, increases “the lead content in mothers’ milk and children to rise dramatically in distant cities” and, through its destruction of soil fertility and species extinction, threatens “the natural basis of agricultural production itself” (37-38).

<sup>15</sup> For a direct challenge to this particular slogan, see Bovenkerk.

community of danger” (44). While Beck accounts for the interdependent dynamics of a world market, the rhetoric of calamity itself contracts and compresses the globe into a singular “community of danger,” thus turning attention away from existing forms of vulnerability to risk, especially in the Global South.

Beck’s formulations of risk society have attracted significant criticism as “post-class” declarations. For instance, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe characterize Beck (alongside Anthony Giddens) as a theorist of the post-Soviet ““win-win politics,”” an ideological framework that dissolves the antagonisms of class stratification into societal-wide threats that demand “solutions [...] that favored everybody in society” (xiv-xv). Some have suggested Beck’s work is of interest not for its precise descriptions of a fundamental societal transformation, but as a “polemical” argument for the increasing prominence of risk to contemporary life (Heise 758). The genre of polemic is a productive classification in that it links Beck to a larger discourse of disaster that tends to flatten differing levels of vulnerability in the effort to sound the alarm over the risks of technological industrialization and anthropogenic climate change. From a postcolonial perspective attendant to global inequalities, this point is a critical one, in that this discourse of global risk and disaster is like a photographic negative image of the euphoric “flat world” theorizing of globalization.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, if Thomas Friedman is a “flat world” commentator on globalization by virtue of his disregard for global inequality (*The World is Flat*, 2005), Ulrich

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<sup>16</sup> Beck’s analysis of a “world risk society” underlies his later discussions of cosmopolitanism. (See especially *World Risk Society* (1999) and *World at Risk* (2007 [German] and 2009 [English]) For Beck, the escalating and global nature of technological and environmental risks creates the conditions for what he calls “enforced cosmopolitanization,” namely, the way “global risks activate and connect actors across borders who otherwise don’t want to have anything to do with one another” (*World at Risk* 61). In other words, global threats to humanity create global networks of preparation and resistance *out of necessity*. He calls this risk aversion cosmopolitanism an impure model, and contrasts it with idealistic, elitist or capitalist cosmopolitanisms (61).



Beck might be considered a “scorched earth” theorist of globalization and disaster in his envisioned leveling of inequalities in apocalyptic scenarios.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to the “scorched earth” imagination of disaster, I wish to highlight here an imagination that might be called the “disaster exotic,” or the “stigmatized South.” In terms of fatalities, natural and technological disasters are commonly more severe in the Global South (Vinck). Arising from this severity is a stigma that attributes disaster to racist notions of incompetent postcolonial governance and divorces this disastrousness from historical processes of colonialism, post-independence hierarchies, and the ascendancy of neoliberal economic Structural Adjustment Programs.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, representations of postcolonial disaster may function as a mode of what Graham Huggan has called the “postcolonial exotic.” For Huggan, “exoticism may be understood conventionally as an aestheticizing process through which the cultural other is translated, relayed back through the familiar” (*Postcolonial ix*), and has functioned as a major component in the global marketing of postcolonial literature.

Yet, the sensationalism of postcolonial disaster is distinct from the anthropological exotic (the aura of the pre-modern primitive) or the touristic exotic (the allure of empty beaches or foreign sites of ancient history).<sup>19</sup> I argue that we might observe a *disaster exotic* with a distinct

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that in his later work, Beck distances himself significantly from these claims of risk’s scorching capabilities. “The globality of risk does not, *of course* [my italics] mean a global equality of risk,” he writes. “The opposite is true: the first law of environmental risks is: *pollution follows the poor*” (*World Risk Society* 5). While it is this more economically attuned mode of analysis that has been deployed by a critic like Rob Nixon (274), it is Beck’s earlier work that is cited most often.

<sup>18</sup> For a related literary example, consider the character in *Animal’s People’s* who decries the way disaster obscures history and disfigures a place: “he complained how all these things [the city’s complex past] are forgotten because nowadays when the world hears the name of Khaufpur it thinks only of poison. ‘I curse the day the Kampani came here because its disaster erased our past’” (152).

<sup>19</sup> Disaster aesthetics are not mutually exclusive from tourist desires. As a number of scholars have pointed out, disaster tourism as both an experiential commodity and narrative production is an increasing part of the global tourist economy. For instance, see the proposal for the conversion of the Chinese city of Tangshan into an “Earthquake City,” (Davis, *Ecology* 52), which later became a museum. For an egregiously sensationalist example of tourist writing, see Krissy Nicholson’s travel narrative, *Tsunami and the Single Girl* (2013), which recounts

political valence, in that it affirms prejudices of postcolonial failure as well as notions of metropolitan/peripheral separations.<sup>20</sup> If, according to Stephen Foster, the exotic is “kept at arm’s length rather than taken as one’s own” (qtd. in Huggan *Postcolonial* 14), then representations of postcolonial disaster may confirm catastrophe as a *unique* property—or even a constitutive characteristic—of the “Third World.” Media representations of the African continent have long confirmed this idea, leading to an image of disaster stigmatization. Nasrin Qader notes that the global media landscape is so saturated with catastrophic representations of Africa that “Africa, as a whole, has become our most efficient metaphor for disaster” (5).<sup>21</sup> In other words, the “Third World” signifies not a measure of inequality shaped by colonial dispossession, but an endemic and natural disastrousness. Jerry Herron provides an illuminating demonstration of this disaster exotic when he argues that the description of Detroit as a “Third World city” only serves to dissociate the former industrial capital from the rest of the United States. Herron argues that Detroit’s figuration as a “Third World” American city serves not to unsettle the binaristic divide between center and periphery or to identify a staggering level of inequality in the U.S., but to divorce Detroit from its exemplary status of wider *American* historical trends like suburban migration patterns and severe economic and racial segregation (666-67). In Herron’s reading, the “Third World” naming by a *New York Times* reporter serves only to sensationalize the city’s troubles, thus enhancing the reductive and stigmatized view of both Detroit and the wider Global South.<sup>22</sup>

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Nicholson’s romantic pursuits in various disaster areas as an Oxfam relief worker. For an extended critique of nature writing and war journalism as narratives of disaster tourism, see Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits* (99-132).

<sup>20</sup> If there is a sensationalist aura that emanates from catastrophe—a disaster luster—it should be noted that this inquiry is complicit and benefits from it as well.

<sup>21</sup> This reductive view has prompted creative refutations from Anglophone African writers (Wainaina; Adichie).

<sup>22</sup> For instance, the “failed state” classification often reifies a divide between metropolitan and postcolonial countries. Peter Hitchcock analyzes the deployment of the term “failed state” to describe Somalia’s postcolonial

Is it possible to have a discourse of disaster that attends more carefully to differing levels of global vulnerability, one that is more attuned to the disasters that occur in the everyday life of vulnerable populations than in one final, apocalyptic event that affects the entirety of the human population?<sup>23</sup> Disaster, in calling up landscapes of destruction, perhaps does not lend itself to the most geographically precise field of vision. Indeed, many scholars and commentators observe that disasters typically command only a momentary blip of attention before they are replaced by yet another event of their kind. Geographer Anu Kapur refers to the media's post-disaster attention as an "ephemeral limelight" (4); novelist and essayist Junot Diaz portrays this "fickle attention span" in popular culture terms, figuring the global media's gaze as the malevolent panoptical "Eye of Sauron" ("Apocalypse").

And yet, when they are examined carefully, I argue that disasters lend themselves to a vision of the Global South—the lines of inequality and uneven development that cut across the conceptual geographical divisions of the First World and the Third World. The disaster literature I examine seeks to establish a more complex geography of disaster than that created by the global media. In Indra Sinha's novel, *Animal's People* (2007), the narrator contemplates the parallels between the condition of his city, and imagines a geography of toxic disasters and persistent resistance that bridges the periphery and the center: "Is Khaufpur the only poisoned city? It is not. There are others and each one has its own Zafar [the novel's resistance leader].

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situation. He argues that the term obscures the perseverance of Somali ways of life—trade, travel, cultural production—under conditions of statelessness (748). Furthermore, the disaster exotic connotes practices of militarized disaster management. As Dave Eggers' account of Hurricane Katrina, *Zeitoun* (2009), makes clear, practices of racist policing and accusations of the undeserving poor were heightened by the discourses of "Third World disaster" that circulated in New Orleans in 2005. Consider the forthright statement from a police officer who rationalizes violent or illegal police actions by reference to the disaster exotic: "we thought we were in a third-world country" (303).

<sup>23</sup> Where are the most common settings of the global imagination of disaster? For one example, consider Mike Davis's argument that Los Angeles commands a "reigning status as Doom City" among American metropolises (*Ecology of Fear* 278) and is even "the disaster capital of the universe" (276). See Davis's reading of a stunning archive of narratives about the destruction of Los Angeles (273-355).

There'll be a Zafar in Mexico City and others in Hanoi and Manila and Halabja and here are the Zafars of Minamata and Seveso, of Sao Paulo and Toulouse and I wonder if all those weary bastards are as fucked as I am" (Sinha 296). Here, Sinha lays out a series of sites infamous for chemical calamities—fertilizer factory explosions, contaminated water supplies, and heinous acts of chemical warfare upon civilian populations. Importantly, the series of place names extends to the Global North and South, tracing a shared history of chemical pollution. Sinha's geography of disaster (and resistance, as marked in the Zafar figures) resembles the Global South model of inequality, which marks the presence of industrial production and its consequent form of inequality across the globe.

Theorists of the Global South have contrasted the term with previous demarcations of global inequality and political alignment like the "Third World," a Cold War term that delineated the decolonizing world from the capitalist and socialist countries (Dirlik 13). In contrast, the Global South is figured as a term for a new periodization of inequality and new political alignments created by economic neoliberalism. Alfred J. López figures the term as an articulation of transnational vulnerability in the age of neoliberal globalization; it functions as a way of identifying the vulnerable populations not only in postcolonial countries, but those within the metropolitan centers of the Global North, such as immigrants, minorities and women (5). Most importantly for my purposes is the way that the terrain of the Global South has been theorized in relation to disaster. For instance, López writes that the citizens of the Global South are made visible, or *revealed* in the aftermath of disasters or other crises of globalization: "the Global South [...] is best glimpsed at those moments where globalization as a hegemonic discourse stumbles, where the latter experiences a crisis or setback" (3). In his account, these stumbles include economic crises (of 1997-8), the World Trade Center attacks of 2001, corporate

scandals, and the collapses of infrastructure in Iraq and New Orleans (4). López here employs a visual language: a community revealed briefly—“glimpsed”—in moments of disarray.<sup>24</sup> Thus, like in *Animal’s* invocation of a transnational geography of poisoned cities, the geography of the Global South is one revealed or made visible by moments of disaster. It is not within the purview of *Animal’s People* to explore the complex geographical terrain of chemical linkage, but it suggests a more nuanced conception of global inequality, class, and hazard than the defenses of globalization and the equally flattening proclamations of the “risk society.”

## 1.6 SHIFTING THE FRAME

My exploration of cosmopolitan disasters invokes different frameworks than the current reigning paradigms in literary studies used to analyze catastrophic events. Perhaps the most influential framework of interpreting catastrophic events in literary and cultural studies is that of trauma theory, which rose to a position of prominence in the 1990s. The dominance of trauma is often casually attributed to the publication of several influential texts, most often Cathy Caruth’s influential edited collection, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), and her monograph, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996).<sup>25</sup> Without discounting the influence of any of its innovative literary theorists, a more complex convergence of factors undergird the pervasiveness of trauma analysis in this period. These enabling historical factors included a broad turn in the humanities towards memory studies, trauma theory’s prominent use

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<sup>24</sup> López’s rhetoric of a Global South population *produced* by disaster extends to globalization itself. Writing of vulnerable migrant workers and agricultural laborers across the globe, he insists that “these and others like them are rendered postglobal to the extent that they live, as we all do, in the aftermath of globalization as a master discourse” (7).

<sup>25</sup> Major texts of this period include Felman and Laub, LaCapra, and Tal.

of poststructuralist methods as well as its political emphasis on survivor perspectives; trauma also drew momentum from the official medical inclusion of post-traumatic stress disorder in the 1980 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* after pressure from American veterans of the Vietnam War, and from the analysis of survivor testimony in Holocaust studies.<sup>26</sup> Each of these factors attracted different academic participants in the interdisciplinary inquiry of trauma theory, yet its deepest conceptual roots are in Freudian psychoanalysis. Trauma theory has operated as a critical framework for interpreting the long afterlife of sudden and devastating violence in both personal and collective memory. Methodologically, trauma theory typically considers the event of violation as psychologically shattering and thus irreconcilable to everyday experience; the moment of trauma must be experienced and incorporated into consciousness *belatedly* (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3-4; “Introduction” 4-5). In its classical elaboration, literary trauma theory emphasizes the psychological and temporal excesses of the event that challenge conventional modes of representation. Mobilizing the notion of a traumatic rupture (influenced by Theodor Adorno’s comments on poetry after Auschwitz), trauma theory privileges experimental aesthetics of fragmentation, emphasizing their ability to acutely convey traumatic psychological dislocation in contrast to realist or linear narratives, whose formal coherence purportedly remains unaffected by trauma. Roger Luckhurst points to a collection of aesthetic works—including Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Charlotte Delbo’s Holocaust memoirs and Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*—commonly heralded by trauma analysis as able to “testify to the impossible possibility of an aesthetics of trauma” and to “bear witness to the unrepresentable” (81). Trauma theory alternately sees narrative as a mode of conveying the indeterminacy of meaning (aporia) in the face of trauma (Caruth) or as a means of recovering and “working

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<sup>26</sup> For accounts of the emergence of trauma studies, see Luckhurst and Buelens, Durrant and Eaglestone.

through” the traumatic experience, in the manner of the so-called “talking cure” (Luckhurst 82-83).

In the analysis of catastrophic events, the trauma model offers valuable attention to the long-term psychological ramifications of sudden violence for survivors and perpetrators; it also emphasizes the importance of aesthetics in the expression, commemoration, and mourning of violence, both for individuals and larger collectives. Although the insights of trauma theory have generated significant work in Postcolonial Studies,<sup>27</sup> the applicability of its core assumptions to postcolonial contexts and literature has been increasingly scrutinized.<sup>28</sup> Critics have recently drawn attention to the Eurocentric foundations of trauma theory, noting its origins in studies of the Holocaust and investment in a universal model of human trauma. In response, postcolonial critics have encouraged a greater inclusion of non-western and minority traumas within the purview of trauma theory, especially those systemic and chronic forms of trauma that do not fall within the model of the “single devastating blow” (Craps 49); perhaps more significantly, critics advocate for a cautionary engagement between the fields, suggesting a significant modulation or reconfiguration of its framework when confronted with vernacular forms of grieving and remembering that fall outside the theory’s established norms (Visser 276-79; Craps 48). In aesthetic terms, critics point out that the trauma paradigm’s valorization of the modernist aesthetic of fragmentation ultimately privileges a highbrow canon of literature; trauma studies can thus be “surprisingly prescriptive,” disqualifying non-modernist modes of representation from its consideration without attending to the “cultural contexts in which practices of

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<sup>27</sup> Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), which mobilizes Freudian psychoanalysis to unpack the trauma of colonization, is one such canonical work. More recent studies include Paul Gilroy’s assessment of the breakup of the British empire as a form of traumatic shock; Gilroy considers the lack of public reflection on the atrocities of its imperial past as a form of “postimperial melancholia” (*After Empire* 98).

<sup>28</sup> For explorations of the relationship between Postcolonial Studies and trauma studies see Craps and Buelens, Lloyd, Visser, and Rothberg (*Multidirectional Memory*).

representation and commemoration are produced and enacted” (Bennett and Kennedy 10). However, the relationship between trauma theory and Postcolonial Studies is far from settled, as two recent studies of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan demonstrate. On the one hand, anthropologist Veena Das powerfully disputes the pertinence of the trauma paradigm to the survivors of Partition violence. Das argues that the experience of violation did not lie repressed or unacknowledged for the survivors she worked alongside; instead, those “memories were very much on the surface” and actively impacted the everyday lives of these women (11).<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, Bhaskar Sarkar mobilizes the notion of a belated recognition of a traumatic event—especially in the face of the Indian government’s official under-acknowledgment and diminishment of Partition memory—to great effect in his study of Partition’s latent presence in Hindi and Bengali films. Nevertheless, Sarkar also insists upon a differential approach of trauma to the Indian context, one that accounts for the complex historical relationship of Indian narrative cinema to Partition memory (5, 26-27). The contrast identifies the unresolved and continually adapting relationship between trauma theory and Postcolonial Studies.

Although this analysis benefits from the insights of trauma studies, I do not extensively employ its methodology nor its thematic emphasis on memory. My primary point of departure from trauma theory stems from its focus upon a singular shattering event, one typically without parallel or precedent. In this divergence, I follow Michael Rothberg’s suggestion that trauma is a “necessary but not sufficient” paradigm for analyzing representations of memory and suffering,

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<sup>29</sup> Das offers a productive contention to trauma on the grounds of metaphor. She observes that “notions of ghostly repetitions, spectral presences, and all those tropes that have become sedimented into our ordinary language from trauma theory are often evoked too soon” and at the expense of the way violence coexists and dwells within terrain of the everyday (205). For Das’s study of the afterlife of violence for the survivor and her community, the appropriate metaphor is not the ghost but the strange image of the embedded cephalopod, expressed as “the way that the event attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary” (1). I follow in these earlier critiques of postcolonial trauma, and am committed to Das’s resonant contention that violence must be understood as a saturation of the everyday.



especially with regard to the *recurrent* eruptions of violence within global capitalism and anthropogenic climate change (“Beyond Tancred and Clorinda” xii).

Instead, I intentionally mobilize the term “disaster” with its wide interdisciplinary relations. In terms of disciplinary belonging, “disaster” is common to fields like anthropology, geography, political science, public policy, and sociology, and connotes the social elements of preparation and response.<sup>30</sup> In this way, “disaster” carries very different meanings than the psychological implications of “trauma.” I attend to the registers of these disciplines throughout.

Moreover, in literary studies, if “trauma” invokes a canon of high culture texts, “disaster” typically conjures the lowbrow texts of popular film and pulp fiction. Criticism on these latter disaster narratives contrasts interestingly with trauma analysis.<sup>31</sup> Critics commonly interpret disaster stories as representations (and resolutions) of popular social and political anxieties (Sontag 225; Keane 14). Most interestingly, in my view, disaster criticism routinely makes observations on the way disaster narratives stage questions of community formation and explore human organization during moments of crisis. Maurice Yacowar notes that American disaster films often include “the entire cross section of society” in the cast (320) and stage the dynamics of “class conflict” in the lead up to and aftermath of disaster (321).<sup>32</sup> In this way, popular culture disaster narratives often stage a variation of what Mary Louise Pratt calls a “contact zone” (6), one in which people of different racial, gender, class backgrounds and positions of institutional

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<sup>30</sup> For scholarship that considers the methods of its respective discipline to disaster see Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (Anthropology), Kapur (Geography), De Guttry, Gestri and Venturini (International Law) and Quarantelli (Sociology).

<sup>31</sup> For an exception to this rule, see Luckhurst for a discussion of lowbrow and commercial American trauma narratives (105-111).

<sup>32</sup> Here marks another important point of divergence between trauma and disaster, as they are conceived of in literary and cultural studies. Critics observe that trauma theory can often “assume an unproblematic translation from individual to collective trauma,” which erases important social differences in the relationship to catastrophe (Craps and Buelens 4). Disaster narratives, in their depiction of a wide array of differing social responses to calamity, might avoid this form of reduction and social homogenization.

authority are thrust together and forced to collaborate—or compete—for survival. Pratt’s primary example is the colonial frontier, a space where *routine* interaction takes place between communities of difference, and in which the power relations of colonizer and colonized are readily apparent and constitutive of the social dynamics. Contemporary disaster stories—narrating the sudden emergence of a crisis situation—examine a compressed and urgent form of contact and collaboration, one substantively different from that of the frontier or the borderland. Disaster narratives assign a utopian imperative to the contact between communities of difference: “The material concerns—and our differences—of daily life are supposed to pale in the shadow of death cast off in disaster films” (Yacowar 321). This utopian imperative of survival may be naïve and itself coercive in its particular pressure on minority and underprivileged characters/communities to “forget differences” (as well as their history) and work together; that same utopian imperative may also offer a valuable and liberating social dynamic. The possibilities and limitations found in the exceptional situation forms part of the allure and attraction of the disaster narrative.

I do not mean to overstate the case and attribute an inherently subversive critique of hierarchy to disaster fiction and film. Indeed, as Nick Roddick pronounces, “disaster movies are ‘reactionary culture’ par excellence” (245). For Roddick, writing on American disaster films of the 1970s, the organizing event of the disaster typically brings together a diverse group that is forced to become “self-regulating” in the face of potential destruction (255-6). The reactionary element is found, at least in part, in the reconsolidation of the white male as the authoritative leader of the group, and the subsequent return of social order (256-57). In contrast, Rebecca Solnit’s study of disasters from the history and fiction from the Americas, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, offers one of the most optimistic portrayals of disaster response communities. For Solnit,

disasters provoke not screaming, jealous crowds, but a “reversion to improvised, collaborative, cooperative, and local society” in which the occurrence of Kropotkinian “mutual aid” between people takes place in inadvertently established utopias (10). However, Solnit sets this improvisational—even joyful—social dynamic against the typical filmic depiction of disaster communities, especially those from Hollywood. Disaster narratives, for Solnit, are far more cynical than the actual historical record.

Thus, I invoke this disaster criticism to foreground questions of how communities are organized around disaster events. The literature I study here is not preoccupied with the immediate situation of survival, but with the long aftermaths and long-term communities of reconstruction. The aftermaths of contemporary neoliberal postcolonial disasters, both in South Asia and in other parts of the Global South, are home to a wide array of actors: local survivors, international and domestic non-governmental organizations, disaster capitalists, government relief administrators, and others. In each chapter, I examine a particular element of the contact zone (chapters one and two) or the narrative absence or avoidance of that contact zone (chapter three and four).

My readings of South Asian literature seek to shift the frame of emphases of contemporary writing on disaster in several ways. A constitutive element of contemporary disaster discourse in both popular and academic settings is the throat clearing gesture whereby the writer declares his/her own distaste for the apocalyptic rhetoric of impending doom, yet indulges in it all the same.<sup>33</sup> At some level, this seems unavoidable: the magnitude of disaster in the age of climate change and extensive deregulation perhaps demands an equally severe and

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<sup>33</sup> For example: “While I did not set out to consider religious matters, the language I’ve fallen into using has inevitably led me to a set of concerns that tends to be avoided by those who share my secular sensibilities. Under normal circumstances, I might find other, less volatile terms. But these aren’t normal circumstances” (R. Miller, *Writing at the End of the World* 25).

shattering rhetoric. However, the attempt to live up to this intensity of language often breeds an exceedingly purple prose, one with the tired effect of a Bush-era announcement of an “orange alert.” In other words, such rhetoric likely produces no significant change in awareness or heightened level of care in a period already replete with disaster.<sup>34</sup> The disaster writers studied here are extremely aware of this contemporary problem of writing about disaster. They strive—and have motivated me—to write gravely about disaster but to also stifle the cacophony of the alarm bells so that one might think through these problems of representation and action.

Moreover, I wish to separate myself here from those theoretical and cultural traditions that express a desire for disaster. Within Marxist thought, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe strongly criticize what they call the “rupturist” model of historical change, a vision of history steeped in “the Jacobin imaginary,” which postulates “*one* foundational moment of rupture, and [...] a *unique* space in which the political is constituted” (152). In such so-called rupturist thinking, the task of Marxism is to “accumulate forces around a wholly classist and ‘rupturist’ identity which, when the crisis arrived, would open the way to a new revolutionary initiative” (61). Against the rupturist model of political change, Laclau and Mouffe outline a Gramscian framework, which emphasizes the long, process-based work of *articulating* the links between social groups before, during, and after moments of crisis.

Rupturist modes of thinking can be found in certain parts of the contemporary environmental movement. For instance, in his analysis of “eco-apocalyptic discourses” around the expected end of oil production, Imre Szeman identifies a “‘bad’ utopianism” that forecasts an inevitable disaster and contains a “sense in which disaster is all but welcome” in bringing societal transformation (816-17). Mike Davis similarly indicts the “wishful thinking” of religious

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<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, Nordhaus and Shellenberger for an elaboration of “apocalypse fatigue” in response to alarmist rhetoric on climate change.

evangelists and deep ecologists desirous of a single, encompassing catalyst that will initiate the respective utopia (54-55).

My work similarly resists rupturist modes of thinking. In contrast to the lethargic thinking of political programs that anticipate, desire, and even act on—often times, by *not* acting—the apocalyptic instant and its attendant moment of universal epiphany, this project highlights the everyday work of organizing. Moreover, theoretical claims about rupture are often self-aggrandizing and ahistorical, and obscure the traditions and histories that inform them. Against such claims to radical uniqueness, Timothy Brennan emphasizes the politically rejuvenating potential of continuity, contending, “a political break can be effected as much by historical continuities as by ruptures” (*Borrowed Light* 11). I consider the illumination of South Asian disaster writing as part of the intellectual task of resisting the presentist and rupturist modes of thought and to instead slowly stitch catastrophe into context.

In this dissertation I examine a broad range of disasters. Scholars such as David P. Nally insist upon the importance of thinking through events like famine from a comparative perspective in order to understand common institutional relief practices (xi). I proceed along similar lines in establishing connections between different kinds of disaster, including industrial, military, natural versions. I have endeavored to ground each event in its particular scholarly surroundings and to thus recognize its distinctiveness while also thinking about common responses to disaster. However, to understand the different components of neoliberalism—its dual emphasis on privatization and militarism—these different sorts of events must be thought in relation to one another. From Bhopal to the tsunami, these disasters form a sequence of major flashpoints through which we can make sense of neoliberalism’s complex and contradictory operations in South Asia. Moreover, these events form a pressing force upon the Anglophone

writing of this period—both the “cosmopolitical” literature in global circulation, but also the new nationally circulating body of Indian writing.

In chapter one, I examine the relationship between transnational NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and postcolonial disasters represented in literature. Assembling an archive of NGO-related literature—including humanitarian-authored narratives and NGO-sponsored anthologies of fiction—I argue that while these texts contain a capacity for self-critique typically lacking in the NGO’s campaign materials, they remain mired in a “bureaucratic imagination,” sequestered from their supposed beneficiaries. I identify an increasing pressure on postcolonial fiction to align with narrowly defined NGO missions, or what I call an “NGO-ization of postcolonial literature.” The chapter turns to a range of aesthetic responses to this pressure, focusing in particular upon the advertising and literary work of Indra Sinha around the Bhopal disaster. I identify disaster as an occasion not for the imposition of an NGO agenda, but an opportunity to reimagine the subaltern-humanitarian relationship.

Chapter two examines the different global and national imaginations of both triumph and apocalypse that circulated after the 1998 nuclear tests in India and Pakistan. Focusing in particular on Pakistani fiction, I argue that the aesthetics of smoldering and polysemous scars challenge those reductive imaginations, and reroute thought towards long histories of militarism.

Chapter three challenges the notion that the disaster necessarily commands social urgency and media attention. I consider depictions of obscured disaster within novels about the mundane labors of everyday bureaucratic statecraft. I survey fiction about bureaucracy as an emerging genre of Indian Anglophone writing, one constituted by both literary and “middlebrow” fiction. In particular, I argue that in multiple bureaucratic disaster novels, the catastrophic event is drained of social urgency, and even pre-emptively contained by the

bureaucratic mechanisms of obfuscatory language, routinization, and delay. Drawing from theorizations of indirect and delayed harm, I argue that these novels redirect attention towards the often-unseen violence of bureaucratic practice, thus extending the contemporary critique of bureaucracy *beyond* charges of corruption.

Chapter four pinpoints the tropes of wilderness as a primary mode of representing the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. It then identifies the ways that Sri Lankan writers engage and subvert these tropes; I focus in particular on the aesthetics of the “killing waters,” which immerse the tsunami within the legacies of the civil war.

In this dissertation, there are some disasters whose status as rupturing events is largely uncontested: the 1984 Bhopal disaster, for instance, is routinely registered as “the worst industrial disaster ever” (Cruz) and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami is recognized as “one of the worst natural disasters in recent history” (“Tsunami”). Debate surrounding these major disasters deals not with their disastrous status, but about what meaning can be made from them. Other events treated here (coal mine collapses and the 1998 nuclear tests) are more open to contestation regarding their cosmopolitan or even their disastrous character. The nuclear tests, heralded by Indian and Pakistani governments as remarkable triumphs, are greeted by novelists as catastrophes, signs of a rising or dominant state of militarism. Coal mine collapses, in the novels I examine, are contained disasters, compressed and pushed out of view. It is important, then, at the outset of this project, to indicate the contested political and cultural significance accorded to these disasters. Postcolonial literary and cultural studies provide an adjustable and careful lens to attend to the aesthetic matters of framing and representing disaster in both local and global contexts.

## 2.0 DISASTER SOLIDARITY AND THE “NGO-IZATION” OF POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVE

As its title indicates, Ashok Ferrey’s short story, “Love in the Tsunami,” concerns a romance between two women in Sri Lanka, set soon after the destruction of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Veena, a Sri Lankan volunteer in the reconstruction effort, meets Debs, who “worked for an American NGO which concentrated on the world’s trouble spots.” Her organization “was extremely well-funded and could move man and machinery around the world with incredible speed” (21). The speed of Debs’ movement between different disaster areas (Darfur, Aceh, the southern coast of Sri Lanka) and her numerous romantic attachments forged in those places ultimately spells doom for their romance. As Veena learns of them—and especially of Debs’ wife back in the U.S.—she turns away, understanding her personal “necessity” of living multiple lives, and the aid worker’s “choice” to do so (27). The story is ultimately a study of the partial revelations offered by a brief romantic affair, positioning the disaster zone as a key site of such temporary, passionate relationships. Within this schema, Ferrey depicts Debs as a part of a second wave that follows the tsunami’s wreckage, a “mighty wave of NGOs and newspapermen, well-wishers and ghouls that swirled into the country in the wake of the Boxing Day tsunami” (17).



The origins of this wave of international NGOs,<sup>35</sup> which now comes swirling into the aftermaths of contemporary disaster, can be traced back to the Second World War. Many major Northern NGOs, such as Oxfam International, were originally formed in response to European disasters of World War II, which national governments were either unable or unwilling to address. Subsequently, these NGOs were incorporated into the longer-term 1950s and 60s projects of Third World development and human rights advocacy and gained substantial sources of funding beyond private donations. Brian H. Smith notes that, after proving themselves in the field of disaster relief, international NGOs underwent a substantial funding increase in the 1970s from national governments, multinational corporations, and most significantly, the World Bank (4-6). This funding anchored the NGO's major role in international development and disaster relief, as well as cementing its imbrication (to varying degrees) in the neoliberal diminishment of state power in the 1980s and 90s.

The global proliferation of NGOs, especially their surge in the 1990s "boom decade" (Feher 21), has been greeted with sharply different political receptions. Liberal critics celebrate the NGO's ability to act in areas of "defective governance" (25), and to fulfill the demand for an autonomous civil society, distinct from the state and market (21). More radical left-wing critics fault the NGO's top-down imposition of aid programs, its primary accountability to donors, and a structural marginalization of the voices of its supposed beneficiaries (Harvey 177). The term "NGO-ization," as in the "NGO-ization of grassroots politics" (S. Kamat 152), or the "NGO-ization of resistance" (Roy, *Public Power* 41), has come to designate the professionalization and

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<sup>35</sup> The diversity of what is meant by "NGO" creates a problem of clear and distinct referent; my usage of "NGO" refers particularly to the Northern-based international non-governmental organizations (INGO) that take the Global South as the site and subject of their activities. The nature of these activities varies greatly, from food distribution, to women's health, to environmental protection, to medical care, to human rights advocacy, and to others. I make this distinction to acknowledge that my comments here will not apply to all organizations.

bureaucratization of the aspirations and organizational forms of a more radical politics. Arundhati Roy argues that NGOs—especially those funded by corporate foundations—have led to the compartmentalization of social struggles into “professionalized, special-interest issue[s],” and that foundation “funding has fragmented solidarity in ways that repression never could” (*Capitalism* 37). A central issue of dispute between the liberal and radical left view is the extent to which NGOs use their institutional status to either *embolden* or to *manage* local resistance movements. As Miranda Joseph writes, arguing the latter, NGOs (or in the U.S. vernacular, “nonprofits”) often serve a functional purpose of reconciling radical energies with global capitalism. Using Gramscian terminology, Joseph contends that nonprofits and NGOs “function as a hegemonic apparatus, articulating the desire for community with a desire for capitalism” (73).

In the discourses surrounding and emanating from the international NGO, this “desire for community” is articulated *transnationally*: the international NGO is both a source and subject of cultural productions that construct notions of transnational connectivity from the devastation of disaster zones and human rights abuses. Yet, notwithstanding their drive to forge transnational lines of connection between the North and South, NGO campaigns often collapse into what Kate Nash calls “narcissistic sentimentalism” in their exclusion of critical postcolonial voices, and their tendency to characterize dissenting criticism as embittered “cynicism” (177). In doing so, the NGO perpetuates a monologic notion of solidarity, in which the “suffering other” may speak only in support or in gratitude of the relief effort.

In addition to the NGO’s familiar reports, advertisements, and celebrity-endorsed campaigns, an increasingly important relationship between NGOs and narrative has developed since its proliferation in the 1990s. While significant work has been done on the visual rhetoric

of NGO representations of “distant suffering”<sup>36</sup> (Chouliaraki, Hesford) and on the relationship between literary narratives and human rights law (Cheah, Slaughter), no critic has yet thoroughly addressed the existence of a narrative genre produced by and organized around the activities of NGOs. Nor has there been any sustained attention to the participation in or appropriation of such a genre by postcolonial writers. In attempting to fill this void, I draw two connections between the NGO and narrative. First, I use the term “NGO Narrative” to describe the manifest presence of the aid worker in literary production from the Global North and South. As an increasingly pervasive genre of “writing the disaster,” the NGO narrative typically traffics in the spectacle of suffering (with varying degrees of self-awareness), and draws notions of transnational responsibility and implication from that spectacle. Here, I examine the figure of the aid worker in both Western and postcolonial literary production in the 2000s, and assess the narrative’s capacity for, and limits of, self-critique.

Second, I illuminate an increasing “NGO-ization” of postcolonial narrative, in which postcolonial literature is pressed into the service of the NGO’s mission. To phrase it another way, “NGO-ization” refers to the “donation imperative” that stands behind the literary text, either explicitly (as in the commissioned anthologies I discuss below) or implicitly, as a kind of ameliorative response that suggests itself after the reading of a literary portrayal of political violence or suffering in postcolonial contexts. If we may speak of an “NGO-ization” of resistance, I contend that we may also observe an increasing “NGO-ization” of postcolonial literature. I engage “NGO-ization” in an analysis of story anthologies produced by prominent

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<sup>36</sup> The term “distant suffering” is borrowed from Luc Boltanski. Boltanski uses it to explore the moral obligations and possibilities of action a spectator has to a “distant sufferer,” presented through media and humanitarian representations.

NGOs, to examine the interpretive possibilities foreclosed and generated by the direct pairing of the NGO and narrative fiction.

An illustrative example of both aspects of “NGO-ization” can be found in Binyavanga Wainaina’s biting satirical essay, “How to Write About Africa” (2005), which offers mock-advice to a writer aspiring to write a distinctly “African” story. Wainaina uses the “How To” writing advice form to castigate the litany of stereotypical representations and narrative forms that constitute a contemporary image of Africa. Amongst the familiar figures of “The Starving African” and “The Ancient Wise Man,” Wainaina identifies the NGO as an equally clichéd construction, embodied in the form of the “good-hearted” aid worker. Additionally, Wainaina positions the NGO as a force that shapes the story’s production and reception: the stigmatized images of Africa are mobilized for the extra-textual purpose of procuring aid donations from their readership: “Do not feel queasy about this,” he advises the would-be writer, “you are trying to help them to get aid from the West.” Here, not only does the NGO worker become a part of a familiar set of stereotypical images of Africa, but the narrative itself becomes subsumed into an endorsement of the NGO’s aid activities. Despite the dual reductions that Wainaina identifies in narrative’s interrelation with the NGO, narrative constitutes a key site of contestation between differing notions of transnational solidarity. In contrast to the images or brief advertising appeals that constitute the majority of NGO disaster-productions, narrative (especially in the extended form of the novel) offers an occasion to play out the complex contours of transnational association and alliance that the NGO engages. The bulk of my analysis takes up Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007) as both a productive critique of the NGO narrative’s Eurocentric parameters and as an illustration of an alternative dialogic solidarity between the aid worker and the so-called “distant suffering” Other.

To clarify, I use the term “solidarity” here with full awareness that it is a term not typically used in relation to NGO activities. Indeed, if one prominent version of solidarity is to be found in nineteenth and twentieth century labor movements and international socialism, then post-war NGOs clearly occupy a distinctly different political space. Organizations such as Amnesty International, formed during the polarization of the Cold War have assiduously avoided political alignments with capitalism or socialism; organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières take a similar approach of non-alignment, as it commits to providing medical supplies and services to people regardless of their nation’s political affiliations. I use solidarity here, then, to indicate the way these organizations actually participate in a form of long-distance, imagined alliance. David Hollinger contrasts solidarity with communities of descent, suggesting that “solidarity is an experience of willed affiliation” (xi), an expression of agency in which one consciously aligns with others in terms of aspirations or ideals, rather than in terms of categories of belonging. For example, Hollinger encapsulates the distinction with the example: “feminism is a solidarity, but womanhood is not” (xii). How then might NGOs be seen as agents of solidarity? In their appeal for donations, NGOs construct a solidarity on behalf of human rights or the alleviation of certain social ills. Yet, they typically do not hold open the possibility that the supposed beneficiaries have anything to say back to those donors, or the aid workers “in the field” delivering relief projects. In writing of “negotiated solidarity,” I contend that in the narrative encounter with the “suffering other,” we see the declaration of commonality become contested and debated as the subaltern figure intervenes in the prospect of political activity.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> For an illuminating study of negotiated solidarity in the case of Cuban internationalist workers (*internacionalistas*) in Grenada during the Grenada Revolution, see Cotman.

Before proceeding further, I offer a note on the sensitivities and dangers of analyzing NGOs. Some of the most trenchant critiques of NGO discourse and practice reserve a measure of respect towards these organizations: Arundhati Roy concedes that “of course there are NGOs doing valuable work” (*Public Power* 42), and Priyamvada Gopal, while unpacking the colonial overtones of Oxfam’s campaign materials, identifies herself as a “regular Oxfam donor” (97). Sangeeta Kamat, in a book-length evaluation of Indian NGOs, discloses a measure of self-implication, asking “what business did I have in building a critique of grassroots organizations when they represented much that was positive about Indian politics?” (ix). I approach the discussion of NGOs with a similar level of qualification. My goal in evaluating the NGO’s involvement in cultural productions is not to dismiss it as a provocative cultural and political interlocutor. Nor is my goal to vindicate its purported altruism or efficacy in combating global inequalities. Rather, what is most at stake here is how postcolonial writers have engaged the stature of these organizations, which, as Wainaina contends, stand as extra-textual responses to literary portrayals of social ills in the postcolonial nation-state.

## **2.1 REPRESENTATIONS OF THE AID WORKER AND THE BUREAUCRATIC IMAGINATION**

The figure of the Western aid worker (in both fiction and non-fiction) functions as the individualized “in the field” representative of the NGO. She<sup>38</sup> carries out the organization’s relief and development work, and upholds the organization’s principles. In the edited collection

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<sup>38</sup> In fiction, the figure of the humanitarian is almost always gendered female, whose obsessive, and often reckless, humanitarianism threatens to destroy herself and her family. This model stretches from at least Charles Dickens’s philanthropist Mrs. Jellyby (*Bleak House*) to John le Carre’s aid worker Tessa (*The Constant Gardener*).

*Another Day in Paradise* (2003), Carol Bergman and John le Carré convey a set of impressions about international aid workers, casting them as young and idealistic, alternately self-righteous and self-effacing; some “live for the adrenaline rush of the front line,” but all carry out the Sisyphean task “to do whatever they can, again and again, knowing it can never be enough” (“Foreword” 10).

How is such a relentless commitment encoded into narrative form? Teju Cole and Joseph Slaughter have offered brief but caustic responses to this question, arguing that representations of aid workers lend themselves to problematic stories of heroism. In an essay occasioned by the “Kony 2012” campaign by the NGO “Invisible Children,” Cole excoriates what he calls “The White Savior Industrial Complex.” The phrase describes the Western “fantasies of conquest and heroism” set in the Third World that form a substantial part of the fund-raising strategies of NGOs (“White Savior”). In a more sardonic register, Slaughter has suggested that the chivalric romance of *Don Quixote* might serve as the “parodic prototype” of the story of the aid worker, “whose well-intentioned idealism, often coupled with a misunderstanding of local social relations and cultural traditions, exacerbates the problems they intend to rectify” (41). Both critics highlight the cultural disconnect between NGO workers and aid recipients, which propagates colonial notions of valorous heroes on the one hand, and passive victims on the other.

However, a deeper engagement with aid worker narratives reveals that many of these stories lack the authoritative self-confidence of a hero narrative, and instead, act as a genre of introspection and self-criticism. For instance, many of the self-penned aid worker narratives collected in Bergman’s *Another Day in Paradise* reflect a deep ambivalence (or even cynicism) about the efficacy of aid work and their own positions vis-à-vis local populations. Bergman’s collection, which collects short fieldwork accounts from a broad array of writers (ranging widely

in age and specialization) across three categories of work (“Natural Disasters,” “War,” and “Fragile Peace”), contains a common anxious reflection upon the cultural distance from the aid worker and her “host” culture.<sup>39</sup> This reflection ranges from a clipped and dry rendering of a new assignment—“I was asked if I would like to go to Sarajevo. I had to look at a map to figure out where it was. A month later I was there” (Blacque-Belair 103)—to the more agonized denouncement of sustained aid-driven activities—“What are we trying to establish here, in a country [Afghanistan] so alien to us?” (Deerenberg 155). The strategic advantages and disadvantages of their position as impermanent residents in areas of conflict and disaster becomes a major, if only ever partially elaborated, theme in the anthology. Impermanence and cultural distance themselves often lead to a more structural critique: these narratives typically protest the ineffectuality of their labor due to more systemic problems (whether they be structures of international law in war time, or histories of debt linked to a colonial past) that stymie or subvert their efforts. In other words, the systemic critique often conveyed in these accounts cannot simply be reduced to short-term pleas for aid donations or increased food drops.<sup>40</sup>

However, I do not point to such self-criticism to dissolve Cole’s assessment of the Eurocentric insularity that often seems endemic to NGO discourse. Rather, I want to shift the

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<sup>39</sup> A far less represented narrative type is the ambivalent “return home” of the diasporic aid worker, which engages notions of guilt, economic privilege, and historical trauma. This story is represented in Bergman’s anthology in Ngan Thuy Nguyen’s “Grandmother,” and finds a more extended elaboration in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*. For scholarship attending to the ambiguities of Global South-based humanitarianisms, see Amar.

<sup>40</sup> As the aid industry continues to solidify as a fixture of international politics, and as tropes familiar to the aid profession crystallize, we can see the emergence of aid-worker writing of a very different tenor. For instance, the self-published *Disastrous Passions: A Humanitarian Romance Novel* (2013), a romance between French atheist and American Christian aid workers in the aftermath of the 2010 Haitian Earthquake, satirizes a number of clichés about the aid profession. Written by the pseudonym J., the novel is an extension of the same writer’s ironic and playful undermining of humanitarian labor at the website *Stuff Expat Aid Workers Like*.



ground of criticism away from the topic of heroism and towards what we might call the “bureaucratic imagination” in which such NGO narratives are immersed. I borrow the term “bureaucratic imagination” from Krishna Kumar, who uses it to describe an outcome-oriented manner of thinking in Indian government of the 1980s (1413-14); my usage refers to the way aid worker narratives tend to traverse the official halls of administrative and institutional power, rather than the streets on which their beneficiaries (and alternative, community-based responses to disaster) might be found. In other words, the Eurocentric and monologic solidarity of these NGO narratives stems not entirely from their focus on heroes, but also from their immersion in a bureaucratic imagination. Indeed, several contributions to Bergman’s collection might themselves be considered ethnographies of bureaucracy. Consider, for instance, John Sifton’s studious comparison of the relations between different occupation groups after NATO’s invasion of Afghanistan, but (self-admitted) separation from Afghan citizens (“Out of Time”). The bureaucratic focus and separation of NGOs from grassroots citizen groups might be read as a result of the NGO’s assigned task—here, Sifton’s role as a Human Rights Watch monitor of the occupation forces—but NGO fiction bears no such structural excuse for its imaginative limitations.

Notably, this bureaucratic immersion is evident in two prominent fictional aid worker narratives, John le Carré’s *The Constant Gardener* (2001) and Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot: A Love Story* (2001), both of which may be seen as “aid worker murder mysteries.” If detective fiction examines an isolated murder that opens up into a web of related social institutions, these novels stage investigations into the transnational networks and institutions that structure neocolonial conditions, thus functioning in a similar manner to what Christene Matzke and Susanne Muhleisen call “postcolonial postmortems” (8). Each novel begins with the announcement of a

murdered Western aid worker, which initiates an elaborate investigation into different bureaucratic hierarchies of power—governmental and non-governmental, corporate and academic—surrounding the site of aid work.

John le Carré's political thriller *The Constant Gardener* uses the aid worker's death to examine the manipulative, neocolonial relationship of multinational corporations and the British government in 1990s Kenya. Tessa, whose work extends far beyond the ambit of her employment in women's health, is mysteriously killed after her efforts to expose a pharmaceutical corporation's illegal drug tests on a population expecting to be treated for disease. Her death prompts her husband, Justin, a reserved "Old Etonian" and established diplomat, to go underground and continue her investigation (52). While the aid worker functions as a kind of noble martyr in *The Constant Gardener*, the novel presents Tessa more as the exception than the rule: Tessa is distrusted by the British High Commission for exceeding the comfortable relationship of aid NGOs to the seats of power in Kenya; she is also contrasted with the more decadent and careerist aid worker epicenter of Lokichogio. Justin's investigation reveals a trenchant critique of the Western aid industry in Kenya and the larger "Third World," as he discovers an Internet pharmaceutical watchdog group that monitors not only the misconduct of corporations, but also "the inhumanity of self-styled humanitarians who are ripping off the poorest nations" (254). Thus, le Carré's novel reflects many of the earlier critiques of NGO-driven humanitarianism—yet these critiques are set firmly within the confines of the aid industry and the halls of British governmental power. The novel's immersion in a bureaucratic setting neglects Kenyan resistance (whether it be inside or outside of government) to the offending forces of global capitalism, and in this regard replicates and reinforces the Eurocentrism it otherwise so strenuously critiques.

The problem of a reinforced Eurocentrism is not unique to Western narratives about aid workers, as Indian writer Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* demonstrates. Tharoor's epistolary novel retrospectively reconstructs a communal riot within a north Indian village in which an American NGO worker (whose name, Priscilla Hart, clearly denotes good-hearted benevolence) is killed. In a series of newspaper articles, interviews, letters and diary entries, the novel collects statements on the intertwined root causes of the riot and the American's death from numerous institutional sources, including an NGO (which Tharoor dubs "HELP-US"), the police, civil servants, an academic, and others. What remains absent, once again, are the voices of those outside recognized institutions. To an extent, the novel uses the death of the American as an occasion to excavate the history of communal conflict and to also reveal the inequality of international reportage between Americans and Indians in the riot's aftermath. And while *Riot* points out this disparity in the valuing of human life, the text ultimately replicates the unequal attention paid to the death of a single American over dozens of Indians: the novel's implicit criticism of disparity becomes buried under the sheer amount of text devoted to the aid worker's life.

In both novels, then, there is an echo of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which similarly mobilizes a powerful critique of colonialism's operation, but cannot imagine a "non-European world *resisting* imperialism" (Said 30). The collapse into Eurocentrism, whether it manifests in self-congratulatory triumph (as described by Cole) or bureaucratic entanglement (as I have indicated above), routinely fails to narrate a solidarity that is dialogic and mutually influential. While these aid worker narratives (both autobiographical and fictional) problematize the efficacy and hegemony of the NGO as a response to global inequalities, their Eurocentrism

illuminates a larger endemic insularity in NGO discourse: even in these fictional critiques of NGOs, there is a lack of reciprocity between “humanitarian” and “sufferer.”

## 2.2 “NGO-IZATION”: THE NGO AS AUTHOR AND ANTHOLOGIST

I turn here to the direct pairing of literary narrative and international NGO. In its most overt and obvious sense, the “NGO-ization” of narrative refers to the longstanding practice of narrative as a means of self-promotion. Bret Benjamin dubs such NGO-authored narratives “success stories,” an appellation which he applies to *bildungsroman* narratives written by World Bank-funded NGOs (139). For example, he cites a story written by the NGO EcoSandals, which narrates a Kenyan woman’s entrance into economic independence (and life as an internet entrepreneur), facilitated by her work in the NGO’s factory (146). As Benjamin notes, the *bildungsroman*, or “conversion” narrative, is a long-used narrative strategy of self-promotion employed by “humanitarian” organizations (146). This observation is further developed in Kim Greenwell’s study on the use of narrative and visual images “to legitimate and garner support for their endeavors” by nineteenth century missionary organizations (12). For Benjamin, the “success story” confers renewed legitimacy on the involved institutions (both the NGO and the World Bank) in response to 1990s “alterglobalization” critiques (158-9). Narrative here provides an opportunity to deflect criticism and to ensure the continued success of the organization.

My term, “NGO-ization,” however, goes a step further than self-promotional stories, and refers to the pressure on self-consciously *literary* narrative, which threatens to confine the more complex symbolic and political meanings into an endorsement of the NGO’s mission. This risk of “NGO-ization” is apparent in the recent publications of short story volumes by Amnesty

International and Oxfam International, two of the most prominent international NGOs. Both groups have published recent short story anthologies which link literary narrative to the organization's foundational documents or particular categories of humanitarian action.<sup>41</sup> For instance, Amnesty International's anthology, *Freedom* (2009), matches each story to a particular article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); Oxfam's four separate anthologies, collectively titled *Ox-tales* (2009), are organized into four distinct categories of humanitarian action: *Earth* (land rights), *Air* (climate change), *Fire* (arms control), *Water* (water access and sanitation).<sup>42</sup> In these anthologies, most stories were written free of charge and contributed by both prominent popular and critically esteemed writers, ranging from Mark Haddad to Nadine Gordimer, thus courting multiple segments of the international book-buying market. These anthologies also represent a mutual transfer of cultural capital: a bestowing of literary and popular merit on the NGO, and a moral and political commitment on the anthologized writers. Purchasing such an anthology reverses the process caustically described by Wainaina, as the donation occurs not in the epiphanic moment after reading, but before, in the instant of the text's purchase.

Amnesty's anthology bears the most interest here, as its more extensive organizational apparatus clearly stages the dangers of NGO-ized reduction of the literary. Indeed, while the introductory notes to Amnesty's *Freedom* announces the text's literary credentials (as well as its commitment to the empathetic capacities of literature (ix)), many of the stories read as simplified

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<sup>41</sup> In addition to *Freedom*, Amnesty International has published two other artistic works to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, apparently with the intent to cover all age groups: *Free?* (2009), a collection of short fiction aimed at young adults, and *We are all Born Free* (2009), an illustrated book for children. Considering both Oxfam and Amnesty's numerous charity bookshops throughout the UK, these volumes should be seen as a continued involvement in literature and book culture.

<sup>42</sup> The Oxfam anthologies are much more nationally-focused, as each contributing writer is either British-born, or Britain-based. Amnesty's *Freedom*, however, is styled as an anthology of world literature, with work in English and in translation, composed by writers based in Britain and beyond.

demonstrations of particular articles from the UDHR. One story in particular, Marina Lewycka's "Business Philosophy," falls victim to the promotional (and vindictory) impulse, and portrays Amnesty (by name) as exceptional among other more corrupt and duplicitous human rights agencies. However, in the political content of the stories, the anthology exceeds simple self-promotion, and belies the notion that Amnesty is purely a liberal organization—working comfortably within accepted limits of power—with its depiction of alternative forms of political activism and organization. Some stories feature Communist Party activity in Latin America (stories by Ariel Dorfman, Héctor and Aguilar Camín), and Walter Mosley's "The Trial" explores self-organized trials in an African American tenement, held away from the official legal system.

Within this apparatus, Rohinton Mistry's story, "The Scream," offers an exemplary case study in its tense linkage with Amnesty's apparatus. In aesthetic terms, Mistry's story, "The Scream" (among several others in the anthology), superbly bridges the divide between the reigning universalist and particularist aesthetics of the anthology. In the former mode, the stories typically feature an unnamed (or vaguely drawn) set of characters who allegorically illustrate the violation of a categorical human right (James Meek's "The Kind of Neighbor You Used to Have"); in the latter mode, the human rights issue tends to emerge from a problem rooted in more thickly historicized contexts (Joyce Carol Oates's "Tetanus"). "The Scream" lies at a point of tension between the two modes: it begins with an unnamed narrator in an unmarked setting, disturbed by a scream that also floats free from its point of origin. In such a context, the scream might be read as a universalist moral call to attention and action. Yet, here the scream gives rise to a variety of reflections from the narrator: his aging body, his relationship with family, and an agonized internal bout with the moral responsibility placed upon him: "why do I have to listen to

this?" (375). These disjointed musings begin to locate both the narrator and the scream's origins in time and space. Though never announced in explicit terms, the narrator's ruminations offer brief details that identify the scream as emanating from the streets of Bombay, during the 1975 Emergency (a familiar setting for Mistry) under Indira Gandhi. The text then engages in a slow (and somewhat arduous) localizing, one that roots the scream in a context of state violence.

This shift between the registers of universalism and particularism underscores the text's ultimate resistance to reduction and confinement. In *Freedom*, "The Scream" is paired with the 29<sup>th</sup> article of the UDHR, which the story's heading summarizes as "Duty to Others." That pairing threatens to diminish or silence the story's plurality of intertwined themes (aging, familial life, responsibility), and to pose the NGO as solution to the story's moral predicament—one's willingness and capacity to act when everyday life is disrupted by moral provocation.<sup>43</sup> While the pairing certainly emphasizes the moral problematic of the text over other themes, Mistry's story is not easily subsumed to an endorsement of Amnesty's activities, but instead, asserts a curiously *literary* response to the familiar NGO imperative to act (or donate) in the face of suffering.

We see the assertion of this literary response as Mistry's narrator recounts the scream's repetitions over time. The narrator interrupts his description with a series of narrative tangents concerning his peculiar habits and inclinations—anecdotes about his aging body, fears of mice gnawing off his toes, a technique for swatting flying cockroaches out of the air—and his antagonistic personal history with his family, who doubt the very existence of the scream. These

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<sup>43</sup> Unlike many other stories in the anthology, "The Scream" was published previously, and in multiple forms: first in Niven and Schmidt's short story collection, *Enigmas and Arrivals* (1997), and later, in a stand-alone, illustrated edition, *The Scream* (2008). Considering these earlier forms of publications both free of an NGO interpretive framing, Mistry potentially subjects the story to a reductive "NGO-ization" by contributing it to the anthology.

tangents are laced with the narrator's penchant for long, Latinate vocabulary. "I am no exhibitionist," he declares; "this is not a manifestation of logorrhea or wanton sesquipedalianism" (372). Instead, the narrator promises to disclose a significance to these linguistic extravagances, proudly noting that he previously "inculcated the dictionary habit" in his family (374); he happily observes the repetition of the trend, as he notices the reader "reaching for the OED" (374).

We learn, only at the story's end, twin rationales for the meandering narrative: firstly, the sequence of tangents is an attempt at self-distraction from the scream. The narrator confesses that "I am running out of things like mice, cockroaches, chanavalas to occupy my mind, the scream and pain keep displacing them" (38). Secondly, the narrator reveals that his esoteric vocabulary is itself an incitement to judge the trustworthiness of his narration: "you weigh the evidence and form your opinion" (381), he advises. The Latinate words, then, function in a similar manner to the scream itself: they are provocations to action—in this case, the reach for a dictionary—which may also be ignored, but offer a clear course of action in response.

One might read the narrator's vocabulary games as yet another distraction from the urgency of the scream, a kind of extended stalling in the face of nearby, preventable distress. Indeed, the narrator seems to contribute to an accumulating number of problems: at the story's end the scream remains unanswered and "sesquipedalianism" remains undefined. Yet, rather than considering these separate problems, the story prompts thinking about their connections—can interpretive, literary inquiry (the "dictionary habit" for etymology) constitute a moral response to the sound of the scream? How might researching the narrator's vocabulary fulfill one's "Duty to Others"? Answering the scream does not, in this case, simply signify a donation to Amnesty; indeed, nor does the story preclude such an action, but the unresolved nature of the



text leaves open larger possibilities (both political and literary) in response. The enigmatic nature of this ending demands an extended, and even dialogic, engagement with the story, asserting the importance of literary narrative itself as a meditation on the scream.

Amnesty's inclusion of such an ambiguous story in its collection (especially when paired with such a central article as "Duty to Others," which encapsulates much of Amnesty's moral appeal) demonstrates an embrace of a literary response to suffering. The example of Mistry's "The Scream," then, suggests that "NGO-ization" is not a *necessary* product of the pairing of literary narrative with an NGO; narrative can, and in this case, does, exceed the NGO's narrow mission. "The Scream," especially in its pairing with the Amnesty apparatus highlights a kind of dialogic interaction between text and reader (the call for intense listening and the research response), which might be extrapolated to the top-down, unidirectional relationship between NGOs and disaster victims. The dialogism hinted at in Mistry's short story becomes an explicit and central feature of Sinha's *Animal's People*.

### 2.3 *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE: REVISING THE NGO NARRATIVE*

Indra Sinha's work—both as an influential craftsman of advertising on behalf of "distant sufferers" and as a novelist whose writing critically engages these same depictions—offers an important intervention in this context of NGO narratives. Before Sinha's turn as a writer of experimental memoir, *The Cybergypsies* (1999), or the novels *The Death of Mr. Love* (2002) and *Animal's People*, he worked as a copywriter in Britain for both commercial and humanitarian advertising. Curiously, literary criticism on *Animal's People* mentions Sinha's advertising work

in passing, but does not examine it in depth. There are important overlaps and divergences I will flesh out here that are especially relevant to the topic of NGO-ization.

Sinha is routinely heralded as an important and influential figure within the British advertising community: he was voted “one of the top ten British copywriters of all time” by his fellow copywriters (British Council). Sinha’s name adorns advertising reviews and instruction guides in both the UK and India, adding authority and—especially due to his work in human rights advocacy—an aura of conscience to these publications. He has written a foreword to *The Last Word*, a book about Indian advertisers and their work (Sinha, “The Last Word”); brief interviews with him are included in the guidebook, *Cutting Edge Advertising: How to Create the World’s Best Print for Brands in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2004). Casual Internet searches reveal a number of blogs and personal websites praising his work.

Sinha’s advertising fame is largely tied to a sequence of advertisements he crafted on behalf of Amnesty International in the late 1980s into the mid 1990s. While many conventional histories of the human rights organization exclude Sinha and the advertising campaigns from their accounts of the organization’s rise to international renown, those attuned to the fundraising dynamics of advocacy organizations cite him glowingly as instrumental to popularizing Amnesty International and inspiring new donors and members for the organization. The British Showcase of Fundraising Innovation and Inspiration (SOFII) website writes with high praise of his work in fundraising, and has compiled a selected archive of Sinha’s advertising work for Amnesty International, from approximately the late 1980s through the 1990s (“Amnesty International UK”). According to Amnesty’s fundraising director during this period (1989-1996), Sinha’s initial ad prompted unprecedented levels of donations—immediately surpassing the cost of publication space—and later, his work triggered a sea change within the organization: “The

adverts provoked huge internal debate, moving Amnesty from being basically a research agency sending mild letters to offending governments to one campaigning forcefully on human rights” (Baguley).

Based on the examples collected by SOFII, Sinha’s advertising style is characterized by distinct patterns, involving startling juxtapositions of image and text alongside demanding appeals to pathos. Sinha, working alongside art director Neil Godfrey, typically pairs a stark image of people in vulnerable, compromised positions (men with hands held high at gunpoint or a mother lying facedown, holding her child) with a sharp, incendiary headline. Most of the ad is dominated by text, offering context for the violation at hand, and typically ends with an accusatory charge to the reader to donate or to become a member of Amnesty International. For instance, one ad, with the title quote, “Should we give up?” covers a range of Amnesty’s actions in its text, interspersed between images of those on whose behalf the organization advocates. While despairing in tone, citing the numerous failures of human rights action, the ad ends with a direct confrontational appeal to the reader: “Think twice before saying to us ‘No, don’t give up.’ You cannot ask us to continue, yet do nothing yourself to help” (“Amnesty International U.K.”). Another ad, recounting the chemical weapons attacks under Saddam Hussein’s Iraq against its Kurdish population, concludes with a similar charge, this time implicating the leaders of the U.K. and U.S. alongside the reader in their inaction: “You, Margaret Thatcher, did nothing effective. You, George Bush, did nothing effective. You—yes you—reading this advertisement, did nothing effective” (“Amnesty International U.K.”). While conveying fury and breaking the protocols of politeness, the ads engage in a problematic politics of representation. Sinha’s advertising strategy, which invokes guilt and shame and apportions responsibility equally between national leader and the reader of the morning paper, resonates with what media critic

Lilie Chouliaraki has labeled the “shock effect” appeal. Such a rhetorical strategy establishes a “social relationship anchored on the colonial gaze and premised on maximal distance between spectator and suffering other,” due to the “contrast between the bare life of these sufferers and the civility of healthy bodies in the West” (110-111).<sup>44</sup>

Sinha’s literary work and his later advertising work deviate from these supine, passive representations of suffering. In *The Cybergypsies*, a strange, experimental and semi-fictionalized-memoir of the early days of the Internet (spanning roughly the same period as his humanitarian advertising work, the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s), Sinha figures his work for Amnesty International and the Bhopal Medical Appeal as a life-preserver in the dark ocean of Internet addiction and self-abandonment. Working on behalf of “distant sufferers” grants Sinha/the narrator release from a virtual reality prison. The formally experimental narrative attempts to replicate the layered, multimodal experience of the Internet—recreating computer code, chat room interactions overlaid with the narrator’s simultaneous phone conversations, and even the textual disarray of a crashed hard drive. This dizzying mixture of text is contrasted with the supposed clarity of humanitarian advertising work and its transfer of money and medical treatment to disaster survivors and victims of political persecution. In the text’s examination of reality and simulated reality, the narrative concludes with an award ceremony in London for advertisements created to benefit a free clinic in Bhopal. There, Sinha depicts Satinath Sarangi, an activist “who lived in a slum, thanking the champagne drinkers at the Grosvenor House” (392), as the ultimate form of a twisted reality. In recounting his advocacy work, Sinha’s narrator

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<sup>44</sup>As Chouliaraki contends, a more substantial and dialogic form of solidarity cannot be constructed simply by reversing the portrayal of the sufferer to what she calls “positive image” appeals. Chouliaraki argues “such positive emotions tie action to a view of development as a gift, which glosses over asymmetries of power and runs the risk of denying the need for action on the grounds that it may be unnecessary, or even unreal” (115).

describes his confrontational style with both the conviction of a newfound epiphany and with the irony of retrospective distancing:

Now begins a new period in my life. We have a cause to fight. For the first time in my advertising career something I am doing is important. I compose Amnesty's ad about the cyanide attack on Halabja in a white flame of anger: 'You Margaret Thatcher, you George Bush and you reading this—yes, you—you did nothing to help.' I write this in the study one dark evening and read it to Eve. She says, 'You can't say that. It sounds hysterical.' But it has to be said. (165)

The white flame of anger is tangible here and in the available advertisements, but the inclusion of Eve's critique establishes a critical distance between creator and the past advertising work. Indeed, in *Animal's People*, a clear continuation of his work on the 1984 Bhopal disaster, Sinha drastically modifies not only the representation of disaster victim but also the terms of address between viewer and viewed.

Sinha's novel takes up the context of the Bhopal disaster, a key convergence of local experience and transnational representation. The Bhopal disaster took place at midnight on December 3, 1984.<sup>45</sup> The American Union Carbide Corporation's pesticide factory, established on the outskirts of the city, suffered a tremendous gas leak, releasing "forty tons of toxic gas into the atmosphere" (Fortun xiii). While debate exists over the exact numbers, many accounts identify 7,000 dead in the immediate aftermath, with approximately half a million exposed to toxic gas (Hanna 494). While the gas spread across the city and affecting rich and poor alike, those in the informal settlements (*bastis*) around the factory were exposed first, proving once

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<sup>45</sup> For a compressed, but authoritative account of the disaster, including the factory's relationship to the Green Revolution and the resulting legal battles and survivor activism in the long aftermath, see Hanna. For an account from the perspective of workers in Union Carbide's factory see Chouhan.

again that the poor are hit hardest by industrial disasters. In the intervening three decades, another 15,000 have perished from gas-related illness and 100,000 people suffer from chronic illness (494). Longer-term effects, like birth defects in children born after the disaster, and contaminated water, are also part of what many call Bhopal's "second disaster." Moreover, legal difficulties have plagued the disaster's affected, resulting in a meager out-of-court settlement between Union Carbide and the Indian Supreme Court in 1989 and an absence of criminal prosecutions for Union Carbide's former CEO, Warren Anderson, or the Indian officials implicated in the disaster.

As this brief recitation substantiates, Bhopal is first and foremost a local disaster. Yet, due to the large number of dead, the combined human and environmental damage, the numerous legal evasions, and the involvement of an American corporation, the disaster has attracted extensive international attention, not only from news media but also NGOs like Greenpeace and Amnesty International. Commenting on the intertwining of different actors involved in Bhopal advocacy, Bridget Hanna insists "Bhopal is both an international issue and a local one, and as such, the relationship between the Bhopalis and these international advocacy groups is mutually beneficial and also inherently fraught with the problems of translation, differing priorities, and issues of representation" (512). Debates over representation and translation have arguably impacted some of the recent outsider narratives of the disaster. American narratives about Bhopal, especially those with global circulation, have begun to problematize their deployment of the disaster. For instance, in *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009), the satirical alter-globalization activists use Bhopal as an example within their larger critique of global capitalism. After successfully impersonating a Dow Chemical spokesman on *BBC World* and promising to take full responsibility for the disaster—including costs for medical care and research on gas

effects—the film depicts the duo’s recognition of their own emotional manipulation of the disaster survivors. The film subsequently narrates the Yes Men’s journey to Bhopal to apologize to the survivors and explain their actions in an attempt to be accountable to them. American Van Maximilian Carlson’s documentary, while including prominent critics of corporate globalization such as Noam Chomsky, attempts to follow through on its title, *Bhopali* (2011), by highlighting survivor voices and the disaster’s long-term community damage. Notably, the film does not include the director as investigative protagonist nor an overarching narration.

Sinha’s *Animal’s People* advances the survivor concerns of these American representations by offering a complex portrait of a disaster survivor. Set in Khaufpur, a fictionalized Bhopal, the novel is narrated by the eponymous Animal, a young man whose body is deformed by the Union Carbide gas leak and subsequently must walk on all fours. In his narration, Animal is at times aggressively sharp-tongued, at others confessional, and humorously ribald throughout. Sinha alternates between different rhetorical registers, denouncing the pitying humanitarian gaze, but also defying the expectation of an “authentic,” truth-telling subaltern voice.

Existing criticism on *Animal’s People* has principally focused on the novel’s depiction of environmental damage in its portrayal of human-animal liminality (Mukherjee, “Postcolonial Environments”), the “slow violence” of gas poisoning (Nixon), and its use of crime fiction tropes to invoke a notion of “eco-crime” (Carrigan “Justice”). So far, little attention has been paid to the novel’s engagement with the discourses and narratives of humanitarianism.<sup>46</sup> For instance, in Rob Nixon’s assessment of the novel’s narrative voice, he argues that the novel might be considered as an (environmental) picaresque, based on Animal’s skeptical orientation to

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<sup>46</sup> For a notable exception, see Rickel. Rickel interprets the novel as a posthumanist parody of a “literary humanitarianism” that positions “the narrator as one who testifies and the reader as witness to testimony” (88).

organized politics of any form. Nixon contends that “Animal, like most picaros, is not expressly political; he positions himself at an angle to Khaufpur’s environmental justice movement and for much of the novel is more troubled by his tenacious virginity than by the toxic tenacity of his environment” (57). While the mode of the picaresque does help to categorize Animal’s bawdy sexuality and the novel’s other comic emphases, Nixon’s assessment bypasses the novel’s key formal conceit as *recorded* testimony; Animal is given a tape recorder and a set of audiotapes by an Australian journalist, who promises to “achieve big things” by publishing Animal’s story abroad (Sinha 3). The convention of a mediated narration, recorded between a Western journalist and a subaltern narrator, I argue, invokes the testimonio genre, most famously associated with *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1982).<sup>47</sup> I highlight the testimonio aspect of the novel not to overturn Nixon’s conclusions about the novel’s depiction of neoliberalism’s “slow violence,” but to aim the novel’s critique at another aspect of neoliberalism: namely, the presence of NGOs in India, and their contentious engagement with the state and grassroots activism. And while the testimonial is not the dominant narrative mode of the novel (the narrative bleeds into the magical real, the surreal, the picaresque, and more as it proceeds), I argue that it functions as the primary *framing* conceit of the work, and provides much of the novel’s initial dramatic urgency and Animal’s rhetorical power. It is important to connect the novel to this tradition, because it allows

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<sup>47</sup> The testimonio is principally known as a Latin American genre of writing, but there is a substantial amount of recent work on the use of the *testimonio* in Indian writing. Several scholars, including Pramod K. Nayar and Sharmila Rege, have made the case that Dalit autobiographies should be interpreted as *testimonios*, due to their ability to “speak for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the ‘official forgetting’ of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance” (Rege, 13). Patricia Connolly writes of the innovative use of a “polyvocal” testimonio, by the Sangtin Writers women’s group, a form that topples the assumed “primary” relationship “between reader and text,” and replaces it with the dialogue that occurs between the narratives of women within the text (51). Connolly notes that this recent work on Indian testimonio “necessarily complicate[s] understandings of testimonio as mere cultural imports—troubling any easy understanding of ‘original’ and ‘copy’—by illustrating how Indian women have been ‘doing’ testimonio without calling it as such, or in fact ever hearing the term” (43).



us to understand Animal's political jadedness as a fatigue with the established means of recompense for the gas-leak victims, rather than an apoliticism un-rooted in experience.

According to John Beverley, one of the central concerns of the testimonio is the establishment of explicit power relations between (subaltern) narrator and (metropolitan) reader. In addition to other defining features—the social urgency of the text, the metonymic relationship of the narrator to a collective, and a lack of cynicism about the potential for social change—which distinguish it from the picaresque, Beverley argues that the testimonio “suggests as an appropriate ethical and political response more the possibility of solidarity than of charity” (31). In line with Beverley's assessment, I argue that the use of testimonio narration in the novel's opening chapters similarly demands the necessity of solidarity—but also negotiates the limits and contours of that alliance.

In this recorded speech, Animal responds to the journalist's promises of “big things” by forcefully contesting the spectacle-based allure of Khaufpur and the very conditions of storytelling established by the humanitarian, journalistic gaze: “Like vultures are you jarnaliss.<sup>48</sup> Somewhere a bad thing happens, tears like rain in the wind, and look, here you come drawn by the smell of blood. You have turned us Khaufpuris into storytellers, but always of the same story” (Sinha 5). At the outset of the novel, Animal establishes his awareness of the conventions by which he is typically represented as well as a form of journalism that offers him neither material assistance nor consolation. Moreover, he condemns the moral and political enterprise of humanitarian disaster reportage, marking it as carnivorously self-interested and profit-motivated. For the spectacle-hungry journalist, then, Animal's disfigured body amidst the ruins of the chemical factory is a prize find. Animal narrates the journalist's discovery of his body in the

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<sup>48</sup> Sinha alters the spelling of some words to indicate their foreignness within Animal's vocabulary. For example, journalist is rendered “jarnaliss,” and the Union Carbide Company becomes the “Kampani.”

explicit terms of consumption: “With what greed you looked about this place. I could feel your hunger. You’d devour everything” (4).

As Animal reverses the terms of the gaze, consumption becomes regurgitation. The journalist’s promise of access to a mass public audience is de-familiarized and transformed into an image of disgust that parallels the spectacle of Animal’s body. When the journalist promises “thousands of other people are looking through his eyes,” Animal sees a grotesque image of “your eyes full of eyes. Thousands staring at me through the holes in your head” (7). The supposed benevolence of the disaster-journalist is subverted and subjected to its own logic of grotesque excess.

Animal continues by taking explicit control of the spectacle-obsessed vision as he makes a direct address to the reader-as-masses, whom he dubs, collectively, “Eyes”: “I am talking to the eyes that are reading these words” (12). As “Eyes,” Animal’s imagined reader is one (still) obsessed with the visual spectacle, yet also limited in vision, with access to only a partial range of sight. The eyes are like carrion eaters, in the way they move from image to image: “what I say becomes a picture and the eyes settle on it like flies,” (13) Animal announces. Similar to Chouliaraki, who notes that humanitarian representations of suffering and destitution typically engage in the imagery and logic of the spectacle (110-11), Animal acknowledges the continued allure that attracts those eyes to his story. Most important, however, is the way Animal configures the reader’s field of vision as *partial*: these “Eyes” are not all seeing, but radically compromised by their own geographical situation as distant viewers. The Eyes’/reader’s access to information is controlled, very explicitly, by what Animal chooses to disclose or withhold. For instance, as he narrates the events of the gas leak, Animal concludes: “the eyes are watching people breathing mist. Stupid eyes [...] they don’t know what happens next. They know only

what I tell them” (Sinha 13). The eyes are separated from Khaufpur by time and space, by historical and geographical ignorance; distance, which normally passivizes a subject like Animal, here imbues his narration with power and authority.

Thus, in the opening address of these first chapters, we find something very different from a grateful appreciation of salvation, expected by the pitying humanitarian gaze. Instead, the novel stages a speaking back from the subaltern narrator against the circumstances of his own narration. Animal asks not for assistance, but issues explicit directions to the journalist (and the reader), which establish the conditions of solidarity’s *possibility*: “my job is to talk, yours is to listen. So now listen” (14). Sinha’s performance of the subaltern voice thus refuses both the pitying humanitarian gaze and the forms of narrative that arise from that gaze. In setting this critique in the novel’s introductory chapters, Sinha foregrounds the novel’s resistance to the pressures of the “NGO-ization” of postcolonial narrative. As we shall see, this is not a blanket rejection of the humanitarian project, but part of the novel’s conception of a negotiated solidarity.

While not immediately apparent, the foreign journalist’s origins have special relevance for the novel. Criticism of *Animal’s People* typically regards the unnamed journalist as a stand-in for a Western media appetite for disaster reportage (Rickel), but this foreign reporter does not hail from the U.S., the U.K., or other central sites of the Global North, but comes to India from Australia (3). The Australian point of origin has important resonances for the novel’s politics of international toxicity. After receiving the journalist’s cigarette lighter as payment for telling his story, Animal notices an image of a cannon and English letters spelling “PHUOC TUY” on one side and concludes, “I guess that’s your name” (10). Animal’s renaming of the journalist links

the otherwise-unidentified man to Phuoc Tuy's geographical referent: a province in South Vietnam occupied by the Australian military during the Vietnam War.

The backdrop of the Vietnam War is important for the novel in several ways. Vietnam, of course, is the site where the U.S. and its allies sprayed the infamous chemical herbicide Agent Orange used to defoliate vegetation in order to prevent the North Vietnamese from using foliage for guerilla tactics. The herbicide is also responsible for long-term toxic devastation on both humans (including Vietnamese, American and other veterans as well as civilians) and the environment (water and food). As such, the use of Agent Orange is a case with important toxic and legal parallels for the chemical leak in Bhopal (Schuck 14). Sinha points to the interrelated toxic history in the novel via a book called "VETERANS AND AGENT ORANGE," which sits on a bookshelf in a clinic (137). Outside of the text, the poisonous histories of Bhopal and Vietnam became eerily intertwined when Dow Chemical, a contributing creator (alongside the Monsanto Corporation) and manufacturer of Agent Orange, purchased Union Carbide in 2001.<sup>49</sup> Phuoc Tuy is especially relevant within this history because it was heavily sprayed with Agent Orange during the war, and many returning Australian veterans suffered from chemical exposure or fathered children with birth defects (Wilcox 59-78).

The parallel toxic history—gestured towards by the inclusion of this military-issued cigarette lighter—implies that the novel's "Jarnalis" is not a faceless international reporter, but raises questions about his particular investment in the story of Khaufpur/Bhopal. The journalist's possession of the cigarette lighter implies at least two options: the journalist may have been part of the Australian occupation of Vietnam, and suffers himself from the effects of exposure, or has a child with birth defects; alternately, he might be a journalist researching chemical exposures

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<sup>49</sup> Since the novel's publication, another eerie overlap has occurred, with reports emerging that Australian military scientists tested Agent Orange in Australia between 1964-1966 before its military use in Vietnam. See McMahon.

similar to those that occurred in Phuoc Tuy. As I have argued above, the journalist functions for Animal as a representative of a sensationalist disaster gaze. However, at a second level, with either one of these plausible identities, this unnamed character belongs to the same long-term toxic constituency as Animal. His presence in Bhopal and the arranged terms of recording Animal's narration verbatim serve then as a form of negotiated solidarity.

## **2.4 THE ARRIVAL OF THE AID WORKER AND NEGOTIATED ALLIANCES**

What the novel announces in Animal's opening monologue unfolds dialogically between Animal and the newly arrived humanitarian doctor, Elli Barber. In an interview, Sinha describes the inclusion of Elli in purely mercenary terms: "I decided to put in an American doctor, a woman, on the grounds that if we wanted to get any Hollywood money we'd have to have an American in it" ("Vild Med Ord"). Sinha's jokingly cynical remark about the presence of an American humanitarian in his novel reveals (or performs) a skepticism about the importance or interest in narrating those experiences and perspectives. And while the inclusion of this character may have a particular monetary incentive, Elli's entrance into the text allows Sinha to productively interrogate the international NGO's cultural assumptions.

Sinha's professed cynicism about the character is perhaps reflected in Elli's lack of institutional origins. Indeed, Ellis is connected to neither the United Nations, nor a private organization, but acts entirely on her own ethical and financial volition. While this institutional independence seems to identify her as an individual philanthropist, her characterization and the values she espouses clearly link her to humanitarian aid organizations. Elli is an American liberal

(she cites an opposition to the Gulf War (223) as a transformative moment in her political consciousness), but finds her ideals compromised later in life as her lawyer ex-husband joins the legal team of the American “Kampani.” Elli’s motivations to establish the free clinic in Khaufpur thus blend the intimately personal and the distantly political: she endeavors to make up for her husband’s actions, to escape middle-class drudgery, and to rekindle her commitment to past political ideals. In this way, Elli is not an adventurous humanitarian, but a *bored* one: “I hate injustice, I felt moved, I had the skills, [and had] nothing better to do with my life” (154). Moreover, Sinha grounds Elli’s childhood desire for doctoral training in a consumption of humanitarian narratives. In explaining her decision to become a doctor to Animal, she recounts a story “about a doctor who had gone to Africa [who] worked among pygmy women who gave birth to the planet’s tiniest babies” (202). Such sentimental and (geographically vague) stories constitute Elli’s “ignorant goodwill”<sup>50</sup> towards Khaufpur—which becomes challenged by the fierce resistance to her offer of help (Spivak 416).<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to the savior plots of the NGO narrative, which imagine passive suffering, Elli arrives to find a well-organized local activist network, composed of, and working on behalf of the victims of the gas-leak. Fueled by the “power of nothing” (54),<sup>52</sup> the loose but extensive network has ears and eyes all over Khaufpur in order to maintain pressure upon the American “Kampani” to pay recompense. Over the course of the novel, the group of Khaufpuri activists employ a variety of tactics: holding meetings, boycotts, public demonstrations, and, more

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<sup>50</sup> As Spivak acknowledges, the phrase is from William Butler Yeats’s “Easter, 1916.”

<sup>51</sup> My reading of Elli as a representative of humanitarianism diverges from other critical accounts of the text, which locate her as a representative of “tendentious Kampani science” (Nixon 60) and the “femme fatale” of noir crime fiction (Carrigan, “Justice” 162). This difference in interpretation signals the numerous discursive fronts (scientific, criminal) on which *Animal’s People* engages the chemical disaster.

<sup>52</sup> Zafar, the leader of the activist community, expounds upon his “new theory”: “yes, we have nothing, and this makes us strong. Not just strong, but invincible. Having nothing, we can never be defeated” (54).

intensively in the novel's final chapters, hunger strikes and violent confrontations with the police. It is important to see Sinha's portrayal of Khaufpur as deeply connected to the material reality of Bhopal. For instance, the novel's activist leader Zafar mirrors the red-turbaned Satinath Sarangi, and the crowd chanting "with our brooms, we will beat the Kampani, we will sweep them out from Khaufpur" (311), echoes the campaign slogan "jhadoo maro Dow ko (hit Dow with a broom)" (Hanna 512). In depicting a range of activist tactics and connecting the novel to the material arena of self-organized advocacy, Sinha establishes that Khaufpur is not a helpless community, awaiting rescue from an outside presence, but an active force working on its own behalf. Moreover, Sinha's novel asserts the presence of unfunded grassroots organizations as a response to disaster, but avoids romanticizing these organizations by representing their hierarchical tensions and internal disputes.

When she arrives in this milieu, Elli is greeted not as a savior, but with immense distrust from the activist organization; because the physical presence of the Kampani is largely absent from the text, Elli bears the burden of representing America. Elli is viewed as a likely ally of the Kampani responsible for the gas leak and its subsequent evasive efforts to avoid paying recompense to the victims. Reflected in this distrust is a particular suspicion of humanitarianism as entwined with the multinational corporation: the community's distrust is not an irrational fear, but an astute observation that identifies the interrelation of aid and relief efforts with the "development" practices that initially created the conditions for chemical factory disaster.

For the novel's mid-section, Sinha depicts Elli's efforts to gain the trust of the community. Sent to retrieve information about Elli's intentions and activities, Animal engages with her in several long conversations in which Elli's idealistic humanism is interrogated, as are any notions of an easy alliance with the Khaufpuris. Animal, for instance, demands payment

from Elli for showing her around the slums, insisting that, while they may be friends, they are “not equal friends” (175). These interactions prove to be consciousness-raising for Elli, functioning almost as lessons on the historical reasons for her rejection, the limits of her solidarity with the long-suffering Khaufpuris, and the burdens of her national identity as an American in Khaufpur.

Importantly, their interactions are not unidirectional, in which Animal simply plays the role of teacher and Elli of student. Instead, Sinha stages an unevenly mutual pedagogical impact between the two. There are moments in which Elli’s sometimes naïve, and sometimes *un*-jaded questioning *re-sensitizes* Animal, allowing him to once again register indignation and anger towards the conditions of his community. As the two visit Khaufpur’s slums, they discuss the impoverished conditions of Khaufpuri homes. While Animal is cynical and jaded about the potential to end the community’s destitution, Elli reacts to the slums with incredulity and shock: “seriously, this whole district looks like it was flung up by an earthquake” (106). Elli’s comments cause a similar devastating impact upon Animal’s perspective:

On hearing Elli speak this one word, *earthquake*, something weird and painful happens in my head. Up to that moment this was Paradise Alley, the heart of the Nutcracker, a place I’d known all my life. When Elli says *earthquake* suddenly I’m seeing it as she does.  
(106)

For Animal, Elli’s word “earthquake” casts the neighborhood in terms of natural disaster, rendering the *extent* of destitution in terms that briefly overturn the normalized manner in which Animal views the neighborhood. “Truly I see how poor and disgusting are our lives,” Animal concludes (106). Elli does not provoke an epiphany concerning the conditions of Khaufpur—Animal is quite conscious of the destitute nature of his surroundings—but ruptures, like an



earthquake, the register in which Animal perceives these conditions. Elli's incredulity, shaped by a level of privilege and political access that conditions her capacity to envision change, is articulated with a force that allows Animal to tap into the transformative side of naivety: indignation. This alteration in perspective allows Animal to recover an indignation about these conditions, thus shaping his own political involvement for the rest of the novel. Moreover, this moment enables Animal's recognition of Elli's commitment to the Khaufpur, facilitating the stability of her alliance with Khaufpuris. The novel enacts an alternative reciprocal exchange between Animal ("sufferer") and Elli ("humanitarian") that alters and exceeds the typical narrative interactions between these figures.

## 2.5 COMMUNITY IMMERSION AND INCORPORATION

Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000), itself an NGO narrative, brilliantly satirizes the grandiose and clichéd cinematic finale of many stories of Western goodwill: "the American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him" (285). In Ondaatje's rendering, not only does the story end with the Westerner's departure (or escape), but the means of the story's recording accompanies the journey, further emphasizing the temporary commitments of Western humanitarianism.

Yet *Animal's People* avoids heroic rescue or embittered departure, and instead closes the novel with a marriage between Elli and Somraj, the former "Voice of Khaufpur" (33). Elaine Hoffman Baruch suggests that the marriage plot often serves as a "feminine bildungsroman" in which marriage grants the heroine education, self-development and a "high level of consciousness" (335). In this case, Elli undergoes an education process, in which her own

ahistorical and non-materialist values are confronted and revised by Animal and his fellow Khaufpuris. Her marriage to Somraj, then, signals both a successful education, and, as Joseph Slaughter terms it, an “incorporation” into a new community (23).

Thus, in its conception of solidarity—the relation between grassroots activists and the aid worker—the novel insists not upon incommensurability between communities of difference, but on a negotiated immersion, and an eventual incorporation into the community. Such a resolution resonates with Neil Lazarus’s argument that postcolonial criticism should explore not “radical alterity” but “deep-seated affinity and community, across and athwart the social division of labor” (149). In Elli’s evolving relationship to Animal, and the novel’s marriage plot resolution, Sinha foregrounds a hard-won example of alliance that goes well beyond the thin and temporary relations conceived of in most NGO narratives.

One might criticize the novel for too easily reconciling the cultural and class divides raised so ferociously in Animal’s opening address, as marriage here might suggest a complete surmounting of barriers. Yet, while Elli is finally welcomed into Khaufpur, her incorporation does not, by any means, resolve the crisis of recognition and recompense to the city’s disaster-affected community; instead, it figures the aid worker as a supplement to an existing and continuing struggle. The American presence does not rescue, but at the most, rejuvenates. Animal’s closing narration figures Elli’s impact among the larger political stakes in Khaufpur, “everything the same, yet everything changed” (Sinha 364). *Animal’s People* is also unique among the texts examined here in its fulfillment of the romance between Northern and Southern characters in marriage. In *The Constant Gardener*, romance between white (Tessa) and black (Arnold) aid workers is a matter of sensationalist speculation around Tessa’s death, but is ultimately proven to be a rumor; in *Riot*, the romance is an illicit (and stiffly written) affair

between the married Indian Civil Servant and young American humanitarian, which remains secret after her death.

The novel thus imagines a substantive relation between the foreign aid worker and the local subaltern (and the wider activist community), which does not resolve neatly, nor does it end in an anguished inability to confront the cruelties of neo-colonialism. “Negotiated solidarity” then, may seem a mild term for the intensively collaborative politics illustrated in *Animal’s People*. However, if “negotiation” describes not the bureaucratic dealings of the NGO, but the sustained and reciprocal engagement between subjects, the term may designate a far more relational form of thinking. On these terms then, *Animal’s People* represents a powerful rejoinder to the Eurocentric NGO narrative, and offers an alternative conception of transnational solidarity in the disaster zone.

## **2.6 “PLEASE DON’T JUST TURN THE PAGE”**

Sinha’s work on Bhopal advocacy began in the early 1990s, when he was approached by Satinath Sarangi to write for the Bhopal Medical Appeal (BMA), a British charity attempting to raise funds for free clinics in Bhopal to provide medical care for those living with the effects of the disaster. Sinha’s work has been credited as a great influence in assisting the organization in establishing and maintaining two free clinics in Bhopal, the Sambhavna Clinic and the Chingari Rehabilitation Center (Moss). After formally ending his career as an advertising writer in 1995 to write books, Sinha has since returned to create advertisements for the BMA. A sequence of Sinha-authored advertisements was published in British newspapers between 2012-2013,

reminding the British public of the continued violence of the disaster and requesting funds to assist the work of the Sambhavna free clinic in Bhopal.<sup>53</sup> For the most part, these ads display a significantly different representational style of “distant sufferers.” The full-page advertisements retain the fierce urgency and clarity of the above-mentioned advertisements, and they employ Sinha’s earlier mode of joining photographs with long blocks of text (called “long copy” in advertising circles).

However, rather than the shock-oriented images of supine and vulnerable bodies, the ads mobilize a range of faces from survivors: in one, an old man gazes with an expectant, probing stare; another displays a child smirking mischievously. The ads are essentially compressed short stories; they link individual tales of disease, debt, disability, and other ailments to the ameliorative work of the Sambhavna clinic. Together, they assert the severity of Bhopal’s long disaster, while also pluralizing the range of responses to the disaster from the survivors themselves.

Moreover, the accusation of indifference has primarily shifted from reader to corporation, positioning the reader as potential ally to the Bhopali survivors. Mentioning Barack Obama’s threat to “kick BP’s [British Petroleum’s] ass,” the ad asks, “Will someone please kick Carbide’s ass?” Even the ad with the most extended implication of its reader has shifted its tone:

If you are reading this, you are one of a very few—most people won’t have read a word of this appeal. This makes you special, a bright hope to families who have much need of friends like you [...] will you join us in our work? Of all the things you can do the

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<sup>53</sup> For the most recent collection of Sinha’s advertisements, see “Bhopal Medical Appeal.”

quickest is to make a donation, but whatever you do, please don't just turn the page.  
("Bhopal Medical Appeal")<sup>54</sup>

The ad's second person address is supple and nuanced. It offers a word of congratulations, singling out the reader as unique in according the ad his/her attention; the reader is then invited to donate, and this donation is phrased as *one of many* ways ("the quickest") in which the reader can assist the organization. The ad thus shrugs off a reductive "NGO-ization" of the Bhopal disaster, in which the problem's ethical complications are *resolved* through the donation.<sup>55</sup> Most powerfully, the advertisement appeals for the reader's patience, directed towards the material object of the page. It appeals for an extended period of contemplation, of pausing to read and to re-read the stories collected in the advertisement. It is, above all, an appeal for time spent with these stories.

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<sup>54</sup> According to an email from Sinha posted on the SOFII site, this has been one of the most financially successful ads in the BMA's fundraising campaign ("Who Says").

<sup>55</sup> For instance, see SOFII's web slogan: "Donate now, make a difference, feel great!"

### 3.0 SMOLDERING AND SCARS: ALTERNATIVE IMAGINATIONS OF SOUTH ASIAN NUCLEAR DISASTER

In May of 1998, India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons and publicly announced the results. While some contemporary media reports reacted with surprise and dismay, the tests were not without warning. Rather, they emerged from well-established state nuclear programs, and were the results of years of extensive research, investment, and international collaboration.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, India had conducted an initial test of nuclear weapons in 1974. Indeed, the memory of this previous test was not lost on the Pakistani government: after India tested a total of five weapons on May 11 and 13, 1998, Pakistan went on to test six weapons between May 28 and 30.<sup>57</sup> A year later, with the advent of the Kargil war in 1999 at the Kashmir “Line of Control,” serious anxieties circulated about the potential for the military use of nuclear weapons.

Within the international furor that greeted the aftermath of these explosions, both states employed images and physical replicas of the nuclear missiles as part of their iconography of celebratory commemoration. Most distinctively, the particular local sites of each nuclear test became marked features of their public memorialization. India’s nuclear weapons were tested in

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<sup>56</sup> For detailed studies of the military, scientific, and political histories of the creation of each national nuclear program, see Khan (*Eating Grass*) and Abraham (*Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb*).

<sup>57</sup> Some historians identify no special significance to the equivalent total of bombs tested (Khan, *Eating Grass* 279), despite Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s public statement (delivered after the first round of tests) that Pakistan had “settled the score” with India (282). Mohsin Hamid parodies the sports match connotations of this numerical equivalence (*Moth Smoke* 139).

the Pokhran desert in Rajasthan; subsequently, a group of Hindu nationalists sought out samples of the radioactive sand as keepsakes of the national triumph (Khan, *Eating Grass* 269).<sup>58</sup> These nationalists were eventually dissuaded from their dangerous act of celebration (460-61), but their attempt illuminates one of the more localized forms of Indian nuclear commemoration. Pakistan's nuclear tests were attached to a far more spectacular set of images. The Pakistani tests took place underground, beneath the granite mountains of the Chagai Hills in Baluchistan, and were announced with the infamous claim that the color of the mountain had been transformed: its darkness had been eroded, changed into a flashing white. In the midst of the varying modes of international competition in May 1998—the Indian Bharatiya Janata Party government's attempt to join the elite “nuclear club,” and the Pakistani government's effort to strategically match India—the Pakistani intellectual Eqbal Ahmad suggested that the spectacular aesthetics of Pakistan's tests had displaced the defining image of nuclear warfare: “I saw on television a picture more awesome than the familiar mushroom cloud of nuclear explosion. The mountain had turned white” (543). Whether or not the scorched mountain actually eclipsed the mushroom cloud in international imaginations of nuclear weapons, the Pakistani state quickly seized upon the image. The newly whitened mountains soon became part of the state's distinctive icons of commemoration, as a number of fiberglass replicas were constructed in public parks in Islamabad, Karachi and other Pakistani cities.

The nuclear tests of 1998 form a significant part of the late twentieth century context of South Asian “cosmopolitan” disasters. Indeed, discourses around nuclear weapons routinely invoke the categories of the global *and* the national, the triumphant and the apocalyptic. What is

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<sup>58</sup> For an analysis of the invocations of Hinduism in nuclear discourses, ranging from J. Robert Oppenheimer's famous 1945 quotation of the Bhagavad-Gita to the Indian military's naming of specific missiles in 1998, see Aravamudan (142-183).

commonly left out, I suggest, is an attention to the specifically local spaces affected by nuclear weapons. In this chapter I will identify a range of related Pakistani Anglophone nuclear aesthetics, each of which navigates the troublesome territory of representing the nuclear tests within the nuclear discourses that circulate in South Asia as well as globally. Before attending to this task, I will consider the ways nuclear explosions and nuclear technology been attached to discourses of cosmopolitanism and disaster.

As the chapter's opening examples illustrate, one finds a convergence of local, national, and global discourses and icons in both the celebration and critique of the South Asian 1998 nuclear tests. To be sure, the convergence of such varying spatial registers after 1998 is not unique to the nuclear discourses of South Asia. Indeed, the invention of nuclear weapons and the pursuit of vast nuclear arsenals during the Cold War led to several different forms of contradictory cosmopolitan consciousness. Most obviously, in the threatened scenario of "mutually assured destruction," nuclear weapons generated what might be understood as an apocalyptic cosmopolitanism—one that conceived of the globe as an eminently eradicable entity.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Paul Edwards has named the American and Soviet nuclear industrial complexes of global satellite surveillance systems and intercontinental ballistic missiles a "closed world" system, one that sought out global knowledge in the effort to accelerate the speed and enhance the reach of nuclear warfare (cited in Masco, 8).<sup>60</sup> Military nuclear technologies, in their ability to observe, map, and obliterate life upon the globe, can then be

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<sup>59</sup> Frank Kermode famously registered his opposition to the notion of a unique or distinctive eschatological consciousness during the Cold War. "It would be childish to argue" he suggested, "in a discussion of how people behave under eschatological threat, that nuclear bombs are more real and make one experience more authentic crisis-feelings than armies in the sky" (95).

<sup>60</sup> For an extended cultural history on the figure of the globe within Euro-American scientific and imperial histories, see Cosgrove. For more on militarized aerial perspectives, see Robbins, *Feeling Global*.



identified within longstanding forms of what Walter Mignolo has called “managerial global designs” (“Many Faces” 741).

Yet, as the anthropologist Joseph Masco astutely observes, the Cold War quest for nuclear supremacy required a contradictory and unstable foundation of militarized nationalism. Masco notes that the build-up of nuclear arsenals necessitated nationalist support, but this nationalist sentiment was itself threatened by the “everyday possibility of the ultimate national absence” in the event of nuclear war (8). This contradiction is key, I suggest, because it points to the way different spatial registers—the local, the national or the global—are made to *disappear* from certain nuclear imaginations. For instance, Itty Abraham observes that the notion of “national” nuclear energy and weapons programs is largely a fabrication, supported by self-serving state narratives and by scholars operating within parochial national frameworks. Rather, nuclear technology has largely been the result of international collaboration, either between scientists from different national origins or through state-supported funding (“Ambivalence” 56-58). Conversely, Elizabeth DeLoughrey examines the global environmental knowledges made possible by the technological nuclear arms race—extraterrestrial images of the Earth, ozone depletion, climate change science—while noting that the military histories behind these technologies have largely been obscured. DeLoughrey argues that the famous planetary photograph of the Earth, *The Blue Marble*, taken in 1972, should be considered “not necessarily a *global* image but an *American image of the globe*,” thus signaling its immersion in the militarized technologies of surveillance and global imaging, rather than the position of a neutral planetary observer (“Satellite Planetarity” 263).

In this chapter I am interested in the convergence and contestation between different valences of the global, national and local in the cultural practices that emerge around the late

twentieth century South Asian testing of nuclear weapons. To ground our discussion of specifically South Asian nuclear cultures, I turn now to the knotted histories of nuclear technology in India and Pakistan.

### **3.1 SOUTH ASIAN TRAJECTORIES OF NUCLEAR NATIONALISM**

As Itty Abraham argues, the 1998 tests are too often seen as inaugural uses of nuclear technology on the subcontinent and should instead be viewed within the much longer history of state nuclear energy programs in both countries (“Ambivalence” 51). While the particular arc of nuclearization differs in India and Pakistan, nuclear technology was endorsed in both countries soon after independence (1948 in India, 1954 in Pakistan) and became linked to postcolonial projects of nationalist modernization, self-reliance, and the embrace of science. By the end of the twentieth century, then, both countries came to acquire what Zia Mian calls a “nuclear estate,” composed of “nuclear power plants, nuclear weapons, and nuclear science and technology research and development” (36).

The adoption of nuclear energy and weapons programs in both countries reveals interesting cases of entangled national and transnational symbols and rhetorics. Indeed, scholars working on the historical trajectory of nuclear technology in India and Pakistan routinely note the complex process required to assimilate nuclear weapons into each country’s dominant national narratives. As nuclear technology became weaponized later in each country’s history—in 1960s India, in 1970s Pakistan (Abraham, “Ambivalence” 51)—a variety of legitimizing discourses arose in state and popular forums. In India, nuclear weapons were subjected to the legitimizing discourses of anti-colonialism—the hypocrisy of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and

the “nuclear club” (Frey 203)—and sanctified through symbols of religious consecration (Kaur 152). Most strikingly, some Indian nuclear discourses attempted to reconcile the deterrent theory of nuclear weapons with Gandhian *ahimsa*, rendering deterrence a form of *active* non-violence (153). In the 1990s national security discourses, propagated by strategic experts, became dominant and identified nuclearized China and an aggressive Pakistan as threats (Abraham, “Introduction” 9). Most critically for this shift in discourse, Abraham argues, is the severe limitation of debate to “those deemed competent to speak credibly of national security” (11).

In Pakistan, historians note the nuclear program’s deep and complex links to the United States, especially to the American Atoms for Peace program of the 1950s. Atoms for Peace provided funding and training to Pakistani scientists, and effectively sponsored the creation of Pakistan’s civilian nuclear energy program in 1954, while also dissuading the government from creating or testing a nuclear weapon (Mian 35). Thus, despite Pakistan’s intermittent history of military rule, the nuclear program was part of civilian administration in its inception. Its subsequent weaponization in the 1970s played a functional role in easing “political and existential insecurities” caused by the Bangladesh War of 1971 (Abraham, “Introduction” 6) and in addressing political crises in the 1990s (Dadi 185). I sketch these brief nuclear genealogies to demonstrate the intertwining of transnational and national discourses around nuclear technology, and to demonstrate technology’s changing relationship to the state.

Thus, while the 1998 tests are part of a much longer historical development, they do mark the historical emergence in South Asia of the militarized legitimizing ideological formation of “nuclear nationalism” (36). The term refers to a state ideology, one that consecrates the successful testing and possession of nuclear weapons as emblems of modernizing progress and international prestige. Nuclear nationalism is expressed culturally, through the practices of

annual celebrations, public monuments, and icons of heroic commemoration. Thus, like any other ideology, it is open to contestation—particularly within the arenas of organized politics and cultural production.

The formation of a strident nuclear nationalism provoked a variety of oppositional discourses from South Asian scholars and activists. Some scholars attempted to undermine the nuclear program as a distinctly *national* accomplishment by recovering and narrating the transnational research collaborations and the importations of nuclear technology into South Asia that led to each nuclear test (Abraham, “Ambivalence” 49-65). Critics routinely point out that the claims made by strategic experts and government officials about a national consensus on the legitimacy and necessity of the program are drastically overstated. Public opinion polls, especially those that incorporate the perspectives of marginalized communities, routinely undercut elite claims to national agreement on nuclear issues (Nizamani). According to one poll in India, 56% of the country had not even heard of the tests (Abraham, “Introduction” 14). Numerous peace activists offered statements of regional solidarity between the two countries (Kothari and Mian), while others registered concerns over nuclear radiation at the local test sites themselves (Patwardhan).

While these modes of political and cultural opposition display an impassioned creativity and rhetorical power, I wish to highlight a mounting critique of the limited temporal and spatial imagination of anti-nuclear movements—both in South Asia and globally. For instance, political scientist Srirupa Roy contends that nuclear opposition in India has been overly preoccupied with images of mass death and devastation, or what she calls an “apocalyptic imaginary.”<sup>61</sup> According

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<sup>61</sup> The apocalyptic imagination is perhaps best exemplified by Arundhati Roy’s breathless rendering of the possible catastrophic devastation raised by the nuclear tests in “The End of Imagination.” Notably, Roy rejects the charge of “Doomsday Prophet hyperbole” (“The End of Imagination” 97).

to Roy, while these shocking images mobilize a gripping “politics of horror,” they ultimately fail to articulate a “politics of anger” around the state’s undemocratic and secretive investment in the development of nuclear weapons, as well as the long-standing inequalities and injustices left unaddressed or aggravated by the nuclear weapons program (“Politics of Death” 114-118). Haider Nizamani echoes this critique in the Pakistani context, identifying a misplaced emphasis in Pakistan on “the dangers involved in the deliberate or accidental use of nuclear weapons” which “have not struck a chord with the ordinary populace” (148). Both scholars fault apocalyptic imagery for its inability to activate widespread political opposition; instead, they call for a different politics of relation, in which the openly nuclear-armed states are vibrantly linked to other specific sites of political struggle and mobilization, and are thus more vigorously opposed.

Indeed, oppositional discourses to the bomb have commonly emphasized the apocalyptic dimensions of nuclear warfare, mobilizing “globalizing narratives of ‘one world’ against nuclearization” (DeLoughrey, “Satellite Planetarity” 266). The cosmopolitan rhetoric of these opposition groups can erase the particular local concerns of communities adjacent to nuclear test sites and research facilities (Masco 227-228). Thus, if liberal cosmopolitanism has been critiqued for its implicit un-rootedness, or its “view from nowhere” (Calhoun 532) we might think of the apocalyptic cosmopolitanism of some anti-nuclear movements—especially those dealing in the images of geographically interchangeable nuclear wastelands—as a view *from nowhere of nowhere*.

In their effort to redirect the critique of nuclear weapons towards more localized and specific sites of contest, Roy and Nizamani are part of what might be seen as a turn towards

everyday life in the scholarship on the cultural impact of nuclear weapons arsenals.<sup>62</sup> In the American context, Joseph Masco has suggested that to focus upon the locally lived impacts of nuclear technologies “is to fundamentally rewrite the history of the nuclear age”; according to Masco, the imaginative impasse of nuclear war as both “unthinkable” and an obsessive fantasy ultimately distracts from the everyday human realities of living alongside sites of nuclear tests, uranium mining, and “hypersecurity” programs (4). While Masco is primarily concerned with the U.S., I argue that his claim applies to a globally circulating nuclear apocalyptic imagination, one that similarly erases the sites of everyday life and local struggle.

As I will demonstrate below, Pakistani Anglophone narratives invest heavily in a localized imagination of the nuclear tests. In doing so, they invoke other localized imaginations of nuclear disaster. While nuclear weapons might be conventionally associated with the apocalyptic imagination of “mutually assured destruction”—or what Frances Ferguson called the “nuclear sublime”—the use of nuclear weapons has had a significant (if often lesser-examined) impact on the more spatially and temporally bound concept of disaster.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the nuclear bomb’s ground zero of Hiroshima—now the site of the Hiroshima Peace Park—functions as a kind of geographically and architecturally *specific* framework for imagining and understanding

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<sup>62</sup> See Masco, Gilbert (“Indigeneity”), and Carrigan (“Postcolonial Disaster”).

<sup>63</sup> The American nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki have had a powerful and distinctive impact upon the twentieth century study of disaster. In the U.S., the nuclear bomb has distinctively shaped the formation of disaster management studies. Sociologist Greg Kreps remarks that disaster research in the social sciences may be “dated to the strategic bombing surveys of World War II, which included studies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (35). American disaster studies in the 1950s and 1960s emerges from federal Cold War research funding in which the U.S. government financed research on human reactions to natural disaster in the effort to better understand reactions to possible air raids or nuclear attacks (Gilbert 12; Kreps 35). As Kreps puts it, “the funding rationale was as follows: peacetime disasters include many physical impacts that are comparable to nuclear weapons effects. These events can therefore serve as natural laboratories for observing how individuals and communities cope with conditions of acute stress” (35). In other words, U.S. disaster studies have been incorporated into military systems of knowledge production since the Cold War. While disaster studies has been critiqued for its reductive model of disaster as a “discrete event” (Carrigan, “Towards”), I suggest that in contrast to the apocalyptic imagination, “disaster” (even in its reductive form) offers a more historically specific and geographically located notion of the event.

disaster aftermaths. Consider Amitav Ghosh's rendering of the post-2004 tsunami landscape of Malacca (a town on Car Nicobar island) as a kind of palimpsest of disaster, in which Hiroshima provides the underlying visual layer. As Ghosh surveys the immediate wreckage, he suggests that, "if not for the tree trunks and the waving palms, the first visual analogy to suggest itself would have been Hiroshima after the bomb: the resemblance lay not just in the destruction but also in the discernible directionality of the blast" ("Town by the Sea" 22). For Ghosh, Hiroshima offers not a universal apocalyptic model of a flat wasteland, but a distinctive visual landscape of destruction, one characterized by the arc of the bomb and by the remnants of the city's architecture. The bomb's detritus functions not as a universal template for all disasters, but is specifically recalled by a particular visual aftermath. I invoke this example to consider the ways that one might think of more specific histories and localized settings when one contemplates the nuclear.

I turn here to examine the way the nuclear tests—and the resulting nuclear-armed South Asian states—have appeared in Anglophone literature. Literary narratives are significant in this context due to their deep engagement with, and rewriting of, the national narratives that circulated around the nuclear tests. I treat the response of Indian writers briefly here, and place special emphasis upon Pakistani representations, due to what I identify as their distinctive poetics of nuclear representation. I argue that post-1998 Pakistani Anglophone literary texts, while firmly detached from the ideological formation of nuclear nationalism, respond to rhetoric of nuclear triumph in a distinctly non-apocalyptic—or even *anti-apocalyptic*—mode. These novels and a poem leave aside the images of mushroom clouds and mass devastation that are most commonly drawn from the storehouse of the "apocalyptic imaginary." Instead, these literary

works interrogate nuclear nationalism through an attention to small-scale, localized images and motifs, especially through nuclear nationalism's icons of commemoration.

Moreover, as an alternate nuclear iconography to the state's monumental icons, Pakistani writings of the nuclear tests engage what I call an aesthetics of *smoldering*. I emphasize the word "smolder" here because of its associations with a "slow combustion" and a gradual, prolonged burning without a visible flame ("smolder," def 1). This articulation of smoldering has something in common with Rob Nixon's notion of a "slow violence" whose effects are felt incrementally over time, rather than in the explosive instant (Nixon, *Slow Violence*). I suggest that smoldering is an apt term here because it points to the way Pakistani nuclear aesthetics turn away from both the nuclear spectacle (whether triumphant or apocalyptic) and the stigmatizing images of Pakistan as a rogue or failing state. In contrast, a smoldering aesthetic grounds the nuclear tests within a durational context of violence and militarized national policy that includes three separate periods of military rule. Moreover, this smoldering aesthetic is one that is especially shaped by national Pakistani politics, as well as localized settings of Pakistani nuclear icons. I suggest that the nuclear tests are depicted as an intensification of a previous condition: the tests are a new draft of smoke, an increase in temperature. As I will demonstrate here, Pakistani writers subvert the icons of the mushroom cloud or the competing national icon of the white mountain, and instead emphasize the small-scale images of wafting smoke and atomic burn scars upon the body. To consider the tests as part of a smoldering, or slowly combusting, national context thus formulates a critical response to the tests without affirming the globally circulating stigmatizing discourses.



### 3.2 WHITE HILLS AND SMOKE SIGNALS: SOUTH ASIAN NUCLEAR IMAGINATIONS

How then are the 1998 nuclear tests and the phenomenon of nuclear nationalism represented in Anglophone fiction, a form of cultural production with cache and mobility upon the international market? How does the Anglophone novel deal in the aesthetics of nuclear warfare? The May 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan prompted urgent journalistic pieces from prominent “cosmopolitical” Indian writers, among them Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh. While the essays are works of nonfiction, they bear scrutiny here for their reflections on the relationship between nuclear weapons and the capacities of the imagination. Roy’s polemical essay “The End of Imagination” communicates an imaginative exasperation and exhaustion with the threat of nuclear war signaled suddenly by the tests. For Roy, the Indian government’s test of the bomb signals the end of a political imagination, forged in the anti-colonial struggle, that might be directed towards the poor, literacy, and land reform; the tests also spur, as Roy explains here, the bewildering of her own creative imagination, which underlies her use of an explicitly non-fictional response.<sup>64</sup> She contends, in a mode of resignation: “There’s nothing new or original left to be said about nuclear weapons. There can be nothing more humiliating for a writer of fiction to have to do than restate a case that has, over the years, already been made by other

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<sup>64</sup> In 1998, Roy was known principally as a prize-winning novelist. Since the publication of this essay, exaggerated claims have suggested that the essay marks the end of Roy’s career as a writer of fiction. (To the contrary, there have been reports for years about Roy’s progress on a much-anticipated second novel.) Instead, I suggest that it would be more accurate to say that the essay indicates the *beginning* of Roy’s decade-plus turn to non-fiction writing. On the *urgency* of non-fiction and the polemic in the face of social and political crises, see Roy’s comments in “War Talk” and “Come September” in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002). In a resonant passage, Roy declares her essayistic writing as a matter of necessity: “the last question every visiting journalist always asks me is: Are you writing another book? That question mocks me. Another book? Right *now*? This talk of nuclear war displays such contempt for music, art, literature, and everything else that defines civilization. So what kind of book should I write?” (“War Talk” 268).

people in other parts of the world, and made passionately, eloquently, and knowledgeably” (94). And yet, she undertakes this task, producing familiar images of an apocalyptic nuclear aftermath, and breathlessly condemning the prevailing justifications of the bomb.

In “Countdown,” Amitav Ghosh turns to journalistic techniques—interviewing academics, party leaders, and anti-nuclear activists on both sides of the border. While his conclusions are as piercing as Roy’s, Ghosh diverges from her in his subdued tone and style, displayed most notably in his critical view of the apocalyptic imagination commonly associated with nuclear warfare. The concluding pages of the essay dispense with what he calls “nuclear romanticism,” as Ghosh remarks that nuclear war will not initiate the end of the world, but a new age of disease, forced migration, and severe inequality—a future all the more horrifying (99).

While the major Indian Anglophone writers have yet to produce a novel explicitly engaged with an aggressively nuclearized state, an openly nuclear-armed South Asia forms the backdrop for some of the new generation of Indian commercial fiction writers. For instance, Sami Ahmad Khan’s political thriller, *Red Jihad: Battle for South Asia* (2012), centers on a sensationalist plot in which Indian Maoists and Pakistani “jihadists” unite to overthrow a new diplomatic relationship between India and Pakistan. The goal of this unlikely alliance between left and right is to capture and use an inter-continental ballistic missile called *Pralay* (dissolution or disaster) that carries nuclear warheads. A nuclearized South Asia also shapes Samit Basu’s more light-hearted and inventive science fiction/superhero novel, *Turbulence* (2012). *Turbulence* opens with an aborted Indian superhero attack on a Pakistani nuclear research facility. The novel’s archetypal flying hero aims to secretly disable the Pakistani nuclear arsenal, but is dissuaded by the suggestion that such an action will only aggravate further conflict. His telekinetic colleague shrinks the potential nuclear conflagration into an analogy of acne-warfare:

“You know what things are like. If a pimple explodes unexpectedly in Islamabad, the Pakistani government says an Indian hand squeezed it. We do the same. You want to give them actual evidence of an attack on a nuclear site? You’ll go down in history as a prize moron” (13). While these popular novels deserve extended analyses in relation to both nuclear cultures and the larger body of commercial genre fiction in English,<sup>65</sup> it is not farfetched to suggest that the nuclear tests (along with recent political violence of terrorism in the years afterwards) have provided an enabling condition for the growth of such super-sized genre fiction as political thrillers and superhero stories.

In post-1998 Pakistani Anglophone writing, we find a far more extensive—and more distinctive—engagement with the nuclear tests. While Pakistani Anglophone writing has a long history,<sup>66</sup> Anglophone literary production has both increased and received unprecedented attention from international press and critics at the turn of the twenty-first century. At the forefront of this new Pakistani wave are writers such as Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid, Mohammed Hanif, Uzma Aslam Khan, Daniyal Mueenuddin, and Kamila Shamsie, among others, most of whom were born in Pakistan between the mid 1960s and the early 1970s, and who came of age under the authoritarian regime of General Zia-ul-haq.<sup>67</sup> Kamila Shamsie has cautioned against the language of overstatement in relation to her peers: “There has been much

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<sup>65</sup> Consider, for instance, Khan’s contention that his *Red Jihad* constitutes a more serious alternative to the popular works of Chetan Bhagat. “I did not want to write a campus romance or a novel pertaining to the angst of another IIT-IIM graduate. [...] I wanted a topic that was much more sinister, and much more in need of addressing” (Srivastava, “Red Jihad”).

<sup>66</sup> For a collection representing a pre-1947 trajectory of Pakistani English literature, see Shamsie (*Dragonfly*), which begins its literary lineage with the poetry of Shahid Suhrawardy and the fiction of Ahmed Ali. For a scholarly overview of Pakistani English literature, with some attention to its relationship to literatures in other Pakistani languages and to “Third World literatures” more broadly, see Rahman. Rahman routinely disparages Pakistani English literature for its aesthetic quality and political quietism but offers no convincing explanation for these factors.

<sup>67</sup> Scholarly accounts of this emergence of overtly politicized writers identify the way the conditions of national “censorship and suppression of creative expression” under Zia-ul-haq led to a fiction “pervaded with a particular political edge” (qtd. in Afzal-Khan and Anwar 21).

talk in the last few years about a ‘boom’ in Pakistani English-language writing. The ‘boom’ is somewhat exaggerated—even the most engaged readers in Pakistan would be hard-pressed to name more than a dozen writers from Pakistan writing English-language novels—most readers probably couldn’t do better than naming six or eight” (Storytellers). Nevertheless, this particular constellation of writers has been heralded by popular media reports in news dailies like *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*; publications like the *Granta* special issue on Pakistan in 2010 have since formalized the links between these writers and established their connection to a new global interest in Pakistan in the “War on Terror” period. The international emergence and popularity of this new body of writing is largely coterminous with the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the resulting War on Terror, and their relationship to those events is difficult to disentangle.

Journalistic commentaries typically frame this body of Pakistani English writing in two ways: as arriving belatedly in the wake of 1980s Indian English writing and emerging from the ruins of a failing state. Appellations like “Midnight’s Other Children” (Chotiner) and “Moonlight’s Children” (Dalrymple) at one level identify the shared histories and cultures of the subcontinent, yet at another level affirm the myopic notion of Pakistani writing as a derivative offshoot of an Indian parent—or, even more misleadingly, *the* parent of Indian English fiction, Salman Rushdie. Stylistically, Amit Chaudhuri more accurately suggests that these novelists and short story writers eschew Rushdie’s epic bombast for the fine-tuned artistry of “the miniaturist’s impulse” (3). The markers of militarism are even more common in framings of this new flourish in literary production. Pankaj Mishra positions contemporary Pakistani English literature as writing from a “minefield,” referring to the country’s intermittent but long history of authoritarian rule, religious fundamentalism, and political violence (“Pakistan’s Writers”). One

screeching line from *The Guardian* manages to merge both belatedness and failed state status: “Pakistani novelists writing in English—long overshadowed by literary giants from neighboring India—are now winning attention and acclaim as their country sinks into violence and chaos” (Shah). What does it mean, then, to emphasize the nuclear tests within this heated landscape of representations of Pakistan? According to Mishra, a “Western fear of nuclear-armed Pakistan” is a supporting factor in “what makes their [Pakistani writers’] fictions internationally prominent” (“Pakistan’s Writers”). Do the tests then reinforce a vision of Pakistan as a “hotspot” or as a rogue state rife with terrorist activity?

The geopolitical framing of military and political disaster presents a vexed situation for the writing and interpretation of Pakistani Anglophone literature. For instance, Aamer Hussein, an influential English writer of fiction (typically of a less overt political nature than many of the “New Pakistani” writers), contends that using 9/11 as the dominant interpretive frame for Pakistani literature inevitably distorts and marginalizes the diverse field of writing. Hussein argues against the implicit idea that “Pakistani literature was made valid only by September 11,” and suggests that much Pakistani writing since the New York terror attacks “fulfills an interest that Western readers have in this supposed hotspot” (Gharraie). The nature of that interest—whether voyeuristic, leering, or naïve—is left unspecified by Hussein, but the clear implication is that matters of intended audience and a dominant publishing imperative since 2001 have significantly changed the shape of Pakistani literary production. Hussein’s notion of a “hotspot” framing might be considered a version of what I have earlier called the “disaster exotic,” in which sites of disaster in the Global South are constructed as fundamentally Other and the histories of mutual economic, political, and cultural implication between North and South are obscured.

While 9/11 and the ensuing global War on Terror function as enabling conditions for the new popularity of Pakistani fiction (as well as disabling conditions for other kinds of literary production), some Pakistani writers have phrased this global environment differently than Hussein. Several of these writers have introduced post-9/11 writing as a matter of urgency, and identified 9/11 as a point of narrative contestation. In a phrase uttered at the 2009 Jaipur Literary Festival, Nadeem Aslam has described the urgency of writing about Pakistan in the present moment as akin to “writing very fast with a quill whose other end is on fire” (Gopalkrishnan). In an interview Aslam claims 9/11 as a broad scale expansion of embattled Pakistani reality: “After 9/11 happened [...] many writers in Britain and America said that they felt their work was meaningless because it was so disconnected from the event. I felt that I had been writing about 9/11 all my life” (Mishra, “Pakistan’s Writers”). Kamila Shamsie has similarly engaged with the geopolitical literary framings of 9/11 in interviews and essays. In one such interview, she insists that her novel *Burnt Shadows* be recognized not as a “9/11 novel” but as a “War on Terror” novel, thus reorienting narrative attention from the actions of individual hijackers to “the consequences of the decisions made by various governments (including those of the U.S. and Pakistan)” (Filgate). Moreover, in “The Storytellers of Empire,” Shamsie engages 9/11 as a moment to sharply criticize the cultural insularity of contemporary American literature. In a powerful contrast between the reach of American military technology and literary imagination, Shamsie declares: “your drones come to our lands, but your novelists won’t” (“Storytellers”). Therefore, “9/11” becomes a category of contestation for both Aslam and Shamsie, a manner of seizing and challenging formulations of the disaster exotic.

Much of the existing scholarship has examined twenty-first century Pakistani Anglophone fiction in terms of its engagement with the global War on Terror (Singh, “Insurgent

Metaphors”) or in relation to migrancy and September 11<sup>th</sup> (Cilano, *Contemporary Pakistani Fiction*). The context of nuclear weapons, the depiction of the tests, and the icons of nuclear nationalism, however, have not received sustained critical focus. Analyzing the nuclear aesthetics of these works illuminates a localized imagination, one that engages the nuclear tests in a distinctive style. I argue that Pakistani Anglophone depictions of the nuclear tests deal neither in the triumphant mode of nuclear nationalism nor in the apocalyptic mode of sensationalism. Instead, what we find is either a specific engagement with the localized *icons* of nuclear nationalism or what I call a poetics of smoldering. In particular, two Pakistani Anglophone texts demystify nuclear nationalism by interrogating the iconography of the nuclear test site at the Chagai Hills.

Shaheen Rafi Khan’s poem “Chagai: The White Peak,” occasioned by the tests and published in the anti-nuclear anthology *Out of the Nuclear Shadow*, addresses the Pakistani state’s nuclear monuments by ventriloquizing the perspective of the mountain itself. While the poem paints a romanticized pre-1998 past of the Chagai Hills (one that covers over the long history of political conflict in the province of Baluchistan), Khan thoroughly unpacks—and empties—the symbolism of the mountain-turned-nuclear-monument. The poem works in a series of contrasts: the mountain’s natural radiance (“my shades of ochre, red and brown / blazed sharply in the morning sun”) disappears in its post-nuclear bleaching (469); similarly, its position as “a haven” (469) to both human and animal is lost as the mountain becomes isolated after the tests. The narrative of Edenic Fall is substantially nuanced, and more lyrically rendered, as the poem shifts into a rumination on the mountain’s conversion into a symbol of nuclear commemoration: “With my misshapen form they adorn, / The portals of their sad, grey towns” (470). Nuclear nationalism is here depicted as depending upon an aesthetics of inflation, one

whose icons of grandiosity (the mountains and missiles) are undercut by the stark economic realities (“their sad, grey towns”) they seek to beautify or even obscure. The poem’s final stanza reflects on the mountain’s contradictory condition as both a pervasive icon and isolated physical landmark: “No! Men don’t come to me now, I go to them, / Infecting them with my poison; A corrosion spreading sickness and disease” (470). Before its closing note of nuclear destruction, the stanza develops the notion of Pakistani militarism as a “poison” akin to the radiation pervading the mountain. Indeed, the prevailing force of the poem is not the recourse to the “oblivion,” but the sacrifice of a natural monument to the nuclear triumphalism that Rob Nixon has called a “monumental modernity”: the “spectacular, televisable, soaring feats of world-class engineering” (151).

Nadeem Aslam’s *The Blind Man’s Garden* (2013) similarly interrogates the monumental icons of nuclear nationalism. Set primarily in Pakistan just after the American-led invasion of Afghanistan, *The Blind Man’s Garden* could easily be recognized as a post-9/11 novel, as it depicts the impact of the NATO-invasion of Afghanistan upon western Pakistan. However, within this landscape of conflict, Aslam briefly registers the presence of a nuclear monument as a prominent public feature in a small Pakistani town. Aslam creates a small tableau of the nuclear monument adjacent to an instrument of bellicose religious propaganda: a van, equipped with an amplified microphone, broadcasts militant speech about destroying Pakistan’s national adversaries, and pauses next to a public monument to the tests, a “giant fiberglass replica of the mountain under which Pakistan’s nuclear bomb was tested” (201). Aslam here alludes to the reproductions of the nuclear test site, the Chagai Hills, in numerous locations across the country. In accordance with the national mythos surrounding the bomb (that the mountains glowed white from the force of the bomb blasts), the novel describes a mechanized brightness emanating from



within the monument: “one moment it is dead and grey but then suddenly, like a fever rising from its very core, a glow spreads on the slopes and it swells and brightens until its radiance rivals the moon” (202). However, Aslam subverts the grandiose monument as the light, intended to hauntingly illuminate Pakistan’s military might, actually outlines the silhouettes of beggar children who take shelter in the hills’ hollow insides at night (202). Nuclear bravado, then, is revealed as emptiness populated by the impoverished. Both Khan and Aslam express their critiques of Pakistani nuclear nationalism not through the transnationally recognized symbol of the mushroom cloud, but through an entrenched contestation over the meaning of a national symbol. In doing so, they join an existing national dispute over these icons of commemoration, which includes acts of public debate and even the arson of a monument in Karachi in 2004 (Dadi 190-91).

In Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke* (2000), the earliest novel-length Pakistani Anglophone treatment of the nuclear tests, we find a similar yet also more extensive critical reframing of disaster and nuclear nationalism. The novel represents the tests in a variety of ways—as object of state commemoration, as subject of everyday conversation, and as part of a smoldering landscape. These various forms of representation are critically bound within a noir-style narrative, a framing that reorients attention from the apocalyptic explosion to the localized socio-economic impact of the tests.

Set in Lahore during the summer of the 1998 nuclear tests, the novel narrates the downfall of Daru, a precarious middle class banker who loses his job due to a verbal dispute with a landlord client; he subsequently falls into debt, a love affair with his best friend’s wife, drug addiction, and violent crime. As this brief plot overview suggests, the novel employs a variety of noir conventions: long scenes of driving on empty roads; a drug-filled underworld; an

atmosphere of cynicism, thick with shadows and smoke; and a morally compromised male protagonist pulled into a downward spiral, exemplifying a doomed masculinity that Jans B. Wager calls the *homme fatal* (4). According to crime fiction critic Claire Gorrara, the *noir* genre is distinctive among other crime narratives for highlighting the “social milieu in which the investigation takes place” and positioning “its detective figure in the midst of things, searching to understand a sequence of events which often result in unsatisfactory or provisional conclusions” (quoted in Herbeck, 65-66). In *Moth Smoke*, the conventions of investigation are split between Daru and the reader. The novel’s primary plotline is a third person narration of Daru’s search for work and diversionary play, both of which compel him into Lahore’s dark underbelly. A secondary narrative is an alternating set of conflicting character testimonies at Daru’s murder trial; these testimonies are constructed in a second-person address to the reader, thus explicitly identifying the reader as both detective and judge, saddled with determining Daru’s guilt.<sup>68</sup>

Critics have noted Hamid’s deployment of noir conventions in *Moth Smoke* (Elia 77), but have not considered the novel in relation to the subgenre or cycle of films known as “nuclear noir.” This generic classification is significant, I suggest, because it identifies the novel’s nuclear aesthetics as a variation upon a longer tradition of nuclear representations. The term “nuclear noir” has been used to describe a number of classic Hollywood films. Most famous among them is Robert Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), in which the private eye’s investigations uncover a box containing a nuclear device. As a genre, the nuclear noir has typically been read as an American Cold War reflection of “an increasingly suspicious attitude toward science; the lethal

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<sup>68</sup> Hamid also employs a frame narrative through which the events of the novel are allegorized to South Asia’s Mughal history. The frame narrative is one of the novel’s more obvious conventions; here I attend to the more subtle poetics of smoldering.

effects of secrecy; the fragmentation of identity; the substitution of violence and greed for human intimacy” (Osteen 88).

The portraits of U.S. and Pakistani national malaise are similar. *Moth Smoke* portrays the tests against a backdrop of increasing economic stratification, a general cultural alienation of Pakistan’s youthful middle class, and a bleak anticipation of the future. However, while the opening of the mysterious box in *Kiss Me Deadly* leads to a culminating apocalyptic conflagration, the nuclear detonation occurs in the midst of *Moth Smoke*’s narrative arc. Hamid’s use of noir atmospherics—shadows, smoke and moral uncertainty—emphasizes a condition of precariousness at the outset. Hamid then positions the nuclear tests as an exacerbation of an existing landscape of severe inequality and disorder: the tests are part of a milieu rather than its cathartic or tragic destruction. Hamid’s modification to the nuclear noir redirects the meaning of the nuclear tests from the metaphorical to the material. Thus, for Hamid, the bombs’ blast radius extends to frozen foreign currency accounts, diminished employment, and worried conversation about the rising price of food and gasoline, as U.S. economic sanctions are imposed upon Pakistan as punishment for its nuclear insurgency.

In its representation of nuclear commemoration, the novel both gives nuclear nationalism its due and undercuts its allure in a variety of ways. The novel depicts two parallel collective celebrations around Pakistan’s entrance into the nuclear club: the public “parades, marches, and speeches” of an Islamic “fundo convention” (139), and the exclusive—and ironic—“Armageddon parties” of Lahore’s youthful upper class (122). While these celebrations of the nuclear tests are very different in style, together the two groups constitute much of the tests’ actual base of support (Nizamani 146-47). Daru himself becomes briefly enmeshed in these celebrations. When the news of the successful Pakistani tests at the Chagai Hills reaches the

otherwise disaffected Daru, he unexpectedly discovers in himself “a strange excitement, the posture-correcting force of pride” (121). In this upright stance, reminiscent of a soldier standing at attention, Hamid isolates the Pakistani government’s intended impact of the nuclear tests: the militarized ideological formation of nuclear nationalism. While Daru’s nuclear pleasure is private and momentary, Hamid depicts nuclear nationalism not as something easily dismissed, but as a crucial element of national triumph against a history of depleted pride.

However, most of the novel is devoted to a comic undercutting of the grandiosity of the nuclear state. In one scene, Daru discusses the tests with a group of rickshaw depot workers over lunch. These minor characters are defined only in relation to a distinguishing feature. Here, Hamid highlights the instability of transforming the tests into a national triumph:

‘They did it under a mountain,’ explains sweaty nose. ‘The mountain trembled like an earthquake. Dust flew into the sky. And the rock turned dark red, like the color of blood.’

How would you know?’ asks Sindhi cap. ‘You only have a black-and-white television.’

‘But it’s a very good one. You can almost see colors.’

‘Bloody fool. It’s black-and-white.’

‘No, but you can sometimes tell what the real colors are. I swear.’ (133)

Hamid here emphasizes the immediate interpretive openness of the tests. “Sweaty nose” is impressed by the cinematic *event* of the nuclear tests, but (mis) perceives their color as “dark

red” via his cheaper and older technology.<sup>69</sup> This misperception recalls a larger visual indeterminacy around the spectacle of nuclear weapons explosions. U.S. nuclear scientists initially regarded the visual image of a nuclear explosion as a “rose” rather than a “mushroom cloud”; other reports identified the explosion as a “geyser,” “great funnel,” “cauliflower” and “parasol,” yet the mushroom cloud emerged as the dominant name for the nuclear detonation (Rosenthal 86). Hamid here grounds the interpretive indeterminacy of the tests—did the mountains become white or red?—within a context of uneven development, setting the incongruity of the state’s modern nuclear technology alongside an auto-rickshaw mechanic’s outdated television screen.

“Sweaty nose” continues with his admiration: “the blast was fantastic [...] the shaking, the dust. It was too good” (133). Yet, nuclear pride quickly becomes undercut by a reminder of the precarious material conditions created by economic sanctions—one punctuated by bodily humor: “Murad Badshah farts loudly. ‘There. Shaking. Dust. Was that too good as well? [...] My bad one won’t double the price of petrol. It won’t send tomatoes to a hundred rupees a kilo. But our bloody nuclear fart will’” (133). The novel thus undercuts nuclear nationalism with a variety of techniques, from an attention to the sanctions to the carnivalesque analogy to the body.

Most significantly, however, is the novel’s alternative nuclear aesthetics of smoldering: namely, the way nuclear commemoration and economic decline are linked in the pervasive symbol of *smoke*. References to small ignitions, fires, and fumes are replete throughout the novel. Cigarettes fume constantly during Daru’s conversations, and his bedside table bears a “constellation of burn marks” from snuffing them out (91). This pervasive feature extends outside of Daru’s home as well, as smoke drifts off of composting piles of street garbage, “like

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<sup>69</sup> The perception of the color red here may also be related to reports of a *beige* cloud of dust that surrounded the mountain after the test (Khan, *Eating Grass* 281).

steam from the cooled crust of lava” (216). Hamid’s smoke-filled Lahore thus situates the nuclear tests within a noir atmosphere—emphasizing the slow combustions of a long militarized nation.

This durational burning is not only a feature of the novel’s atmospherics but appears in two of the text’s central metaphors. In one passage, Daru and an undercover journalist, Mumtaz, read aloud an article (illuminated by a hissing cigarette lighter) written by an aged leftist professor of economics, comically named “Julius Superb.” The economics professor is like so many other contemporary depictions of leftist postcolonial intellectuals—defanged, withered, incapable—one now considered a “fuddy-duddy” or even “harmless” or “irrelevant” compared to the right wing religious populists in Pakistan (32). Yet, Hamid assigns this character a central place in the novel’s imagery of smoldering. In the article, the professor ponders the figure of the mythical phoenix in a clear form of national allegory. Importantly, the aged professor traces his *father’s* thoughts on the bird (thus adding a multigenerational application to the metaphor), wondering whether the phoenix is redeemed or depleted by its rebirth after erupting into flame. Most interesting, however, is the professor’s alternative to these familiar options of renewal or sacrifice: the professor’s father “would ask, was the fire a manifestation of entropy, slowly sapping the life-energy of the phoenix over the eons, a little death in a life that could know no beginning and no end but which could nonetheless be subject to an ever-decreasing magnitude?” (31). Applied to the context of everyday life, the professor wonders if “the fires in our lives, the traumas” might “simply amplif[y] what we already were, in the end making the strong stronger, the weak weaker, and the dangerous deadly” (31-32). The alternative image here is paradoxical: a degenerative withering that is also a kind of stasis. Read as a kind of national allegory for Pakistan and the nuclear tests, the figure of the ever-burning, ever-shrinking—yet never dying—

phoenix wraps the nuclear tests within a context of long-term violence and the crackdown on political leftists. The long-term application of this metaphor is emphasized here by the multigenerational readership (the young Daru and Mumtaz reading a professor quoting his father). The nuclear tests then become part of the fuming landscape, a continuous and contagious smoldering.

The most evocative and condensed of these images of flame is the titular figure of the burning moth. In one scene, Daru observes a moth circling a candle flame, which then enters the fire and “ignites like a ball of hair, curling into an oily puff with a hiss” (138-39). The moth’s death is rendered a minor event, having only a momentary effect on the fire, as the “candle flame flickers and dims for a moment, then burns as bright as before” (139). As Daru’s servant Manucci reminds him, the moth is a common feature of Urdu love poetry (138). Here, however, Hamid revitalizes what might be a cliché-ridden motif—the moth irresistibly drawn to the flame—by focusing on the ghostly remnant of smoke that trails the moth’s death. The smoke functions as an ethereal cautionary remainder, an allegory of inevitable destruction for Daru’s personal lusts and desires, as well as for the nation’s nuclear ambitions. Thus, while most of the text is focused on the economic damage of the nuclear tests—caused both by state money diverted towards nuclear weapons and foreign economic sanctions—the image of mass destruction is wrought small. Through the aesthetics of smoldering, the novel achieves a distinctive form of nuclear *diminishment*: Hamid does not trivialize the consequences of the nuclear tests, but reduces and reframes its aesthetic figuration to wrest it away from both the triumphalist and apocalyptic discourses around the event.

In a reading of Mohsin Hamid’s three novels, Ulka Anjaria notes that the War on Terror’s “global discourse around Pakistan has become so powerful that it has all but taken over

representations of that nation, making it almost impossible to represent Pakistan outside of it” (“A True Lahori”). Anjaria convincingly argues that Hamid gradually abandons specified place for abstract space in his oeuvre, as the detailed urban descriptions of Lahore in *Moth Smoke* give way to the undifferentiated features of an interchangeable Asian country in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013). As I have noted above in discussions of the nuclear sublime, nuclear explosions certainly do not demand a local idiom of representation; rather, this is a distinctive aesthetic choice on the part of Hamid, one with a particular set of politics that follow from it. How then does the Pakistani Anglophone nuclear aesthetic change in the context of the War on Terror? By way of an answer, I turn to the work of Kamila Shamsie.

### 3.3 *BURNT SHADOWS: THE NUCLEAR IMAGINATION IN THE WAR ON TERROR*

Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* (2009) veers away from the domestic national focus of the above texts, and instead, depicts nuclear *disaster* in a uniquely comparative global framework. The nuclear tests appear briefly in her earlier work: Shamsie’s *Broken Verses* (2005) contains a passing reference to the popular commemoration around the nuclear tests of 1998. The novel’s narrator, absent-mindedly driving in Karachi, finds her thoughts interrupted by a bus with “replica nuclear missiles attached to its roof at jaunty angles” (*Broken Verses* 69).<sup>70</sup> This brief sideswipe with a roving nuclear nationalism becomes a head-on collision in *Burnt Shadows*. While critical discussions of the novel—as well as Shamsie’s public comments—tend to

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<sup>70</sup> For a brief discussion of militarist paintings on Pakistani motor vehicles, see Elias (181-183). For an extended analysis of popular Pakistani memorialization of the tests, see Dadi.



foreground the work's relationship to 9/11 and the War on Terror, I wish to emphasize the nuclear tests as the original framing event of the novel. Indeed, Shamsie has noted in interviews how *Burnt Shadows* was at first conceived of as a response to South Asian nuclearization. She recalls, "I had intended to write a novel that centered on a part-Pakistani, part-Japanese character living through India and Pakistan's nuclear tests and beyond" (Singh, "Legacy of Violence" 157). Shamsie's descriptions of her writing process note that the nuclear issue became "background hum rather than central chatter" (Hanif, "Postergirl"), particularly against the backdrop of U.S. framings of 9/11 as "Ground Zero," as well as what she calls a "hardening" of attitudes between the countries of her travels—the U.S., U.K., and Pakistan—during this time period (Singh, "Legacy" 158). What we see in this account is that the topic of the nuclear tests seems to *give way* or to recede to an interest in international conflict within the War on Terror.

Like Hamid, Shamsie maintains a localized depiction of nuclear devastation, but shifts her attention from the situated place of a single city to the individual body of a Japanese survivor of the atomic attacks of 1945. Moreover, Shamsie develops a comparative aesthetic, based in the experiences of the nuclear attacks, that cuts across the global context of World War, decolonization, the Cold War, and the War on Terror. In what follows, I will illuminate the poetics and politics of this aesthetic, and the way it confronts militarism in multiple forms across the landscape of the twentieth century.

### 3.4 BIRDS OF COMPARISON AND THE DISCOURSE OF NECESSITY

*Burnt Shadows* is a historical novel and family drama of immense sweep. The novel traces the intertwined lives of two families (the Tanaka-Ashrafs and the Weiss-Burtons) across five different countries, whose friendship both strides and stumbles across the rocky terrain of the twentieth century. Shamsie introduces the novel with a brief prologue in Guantanamo Bay, which anchors the narrative's otherwise linear historical path in the contemporary concerns of the global War on Terror. The novel is then divided into four distinct sections, each set amidst major moments of political change and violence: the atomic bombing of Nagasaki in 1945; the 1947 Indian/Pakistani Partition in Delhi; 1980s Karachi under General Zia ul-Haq as the Afghan-Soviet war rages on Pakistan's Western border; and the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks in both New York City and Afghanistan. In this trajectory, the novel is in part a narrative retelling of the twentieth century's latter half, demonstrating a continuity through the disturbing conclusion of World War II, decolonization, the Cold War's hot zones, and the global War on Terror. This sequential retelling might be seen as a corrective to the prominent post-9/11 narrative of American amnesia, one propagated by the U.S. State Department, prominent media outlets, and reinforced by depictions of 9/11 in American fiction.<sup>71</sup> While the narrative is not solely focused upon American interventions (the Delhi section is devoid of American characters entirely), the retelling of the attack on Nagasaki, U.S. spies in Karachi and the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan provides a sketch of catastrophic violence and covert manipulations that constitute

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<sup>71</sup> On *Burnt Shadows* as rejoinder to U.S. amnesia, see Singh, "Insurgent Metaphors"; on U.S. fiction's reinforcement of American cultural insularity after 9/11, see Shamsie, "Storytellers of Empire."

the period of American global hegemony some scholars have described as the “American Century.”<sup>72</sup>

Here, *Burnt Shadows* may be seen alongside other recent Pakistani novels, including Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and *The Blind Man’s Garden* (2013), or Mohammed Hanif’s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), which reconstruct this obscured history of the military alliance between the U.S., Pakistan, and Islamic fundamentalist forces against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Yet, the novel diverges from these texts in its structuring feature of comparison. The text draws implied comparisons between these contexts: set distinctly apart from one another, the four sections of the novel might be seen as a set of uneven mirrors facing one another, illuminating repetitions between distinct historical moments. The novel depicts each site of mass violence as accompanied (or enabled) by a top-down imposition of a militarized monoculturalism: Japan’s domestic wartime suspicions are reflected across time in Pakistan’s authoritarian distrust of religious difference; India’s strengthening communal divisions against the backdrop of Islamic ruins finds an eerie echo in the U.S.’s xenophobia under the “looming emptiness” of the fallen Twin Towers (Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows* 254). Thus, rather than dealing in notions of national innocence, all nations here are “indicted as perpetrators of violence and injustice” (Singh, “Insurgent Metaphors” 34).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> On the use of this term as an overt framing of American global interests in the 1940s, see Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (50).

<sup>73</sup> While the novel highlights the violence done in the name of the nation-state, I argue that the novel’s critical emphasis is not a “post-nationalist” one, but a critique of forms of militarism. Militarism, as Neloufer de Mel defines it, differs from militarization—the unconcealed process of the military’s increasing control over civilian institutions—and is instead a pervasive ideology that “mediates aggressive, hyper-masculinist, militant solutions to conflict” (*Militarizing* 12). Defined as an ideology, we may locate the presence of militarism not simply in the structure of the nation-state, but in the novel’s depictions of various transnational organizations of various size or location, not simply in the structure of the nation-state. The mujahedeen, the American Central Intelligence Agency, and the private military company, for instance, can again be considered purveyors of Walter Mignolo’s characterization of cosmopolitanism as “managerial global designs” (“Many Faces” 741). Thus, rather than

The novel's primary point of comparison is the memorialization of the bomb at these different historical moments, carried out through the fluctuating form and meanings of atomic scars. The novel's anchoring figure is Hiroko Tanaka, a *hibakusha*, or survivor of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, who moves across the novel's damaged terrain in a series of migrations initiated by the "momentum of a bomb blast" (*Burnt Shadows* 227). In the bomb's explosion, Hiroko not only loses her fiancé (Konrad, an Anglo-German migrant to Japan), her immediate family, and her home, but also suffers the inscription of the bomb's violence upon her body. As the bomb explodes over Nagasaki, the three black cranes stitched onto the back of Hiroko's white kimono absorb the heat of the blast, and the birds are fused into her skin, becoming "neither flesh nor silk but both" (26). Numerous commentators on atomic violence have noted the atomic bomb's perverse photographic self-documentation, its violent imprinting of "remnants of light" into bodies, architecture, and earth (DeLoughrey, "Radiation" 484; Lippit *Atomic Light*). Here, Shamsie shows this photographic function at work, but its result is Hiroko's bodily fusion with a heavily laden symbol.

These scars, an instance of what Akira Mizuta Lippit calls "the trope of atomic disfigurement," become dead zones on Hiroko's back, incapable of registering feeling, yet, they register multiple levels of significance related to the bombing of Nagasaki (*Atomic Light* 117-18).<sup>74</sup> Within the symbolic resonances of the novel, the scars are a physical embodiment of the

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nationalism itself as the root cause of this violence, the novel instead identifies a rigid form of militarized monoculturalism, at work in both nationalisms and transnationalisms.

<sup>74</sup> Lippit suggests that one of the defining features of the atomic bomb is its paradoxical spectacular visibility (the initial moment of sudden mass destruction) and spectral invisibility (as radiation leaked into survivors) (*Atomic Light* 86). The symbol of the bird scars is caught between these poles of scale and visibility, as Shamsie evades both the colossal mushroom cloud and the a-visibility of the atomic bomb's violence, instead privileging the intensely personal (and guarded) symbol of violation—the bird scars. Unlike those *hibakusha* whose bodies are noticeably disfigured, Hiroko's scarring is easily hidden; the concealment of her scars (and thus her reputation as a *hibakusha*) resonates with the dominant American memorialization of the bomb that, by identifying it as necessary and legitimate, effectively obscures and disavows its violence.

phantom presence of the dead, and the burdens of her survivor's guilt: "some days she could feel the dead on her back, pressing down beneath her shoulder blades with demands she could make no sense of but knew she was failing to meet" (*Burnt Shadows* 50). Intertextually, the significance of the scars multiplies, as the image of the crane references a prominent icon of Japanese memorialization around the bomb.<sup>75</sup> These scars, then, affix themselves, and Hiroko, unalterably and unforgettably to the violence of Nagasaki's destruction.

And yet, they quickly become a marker of the event's marginalization within global memory, as Hiroko becomes faced with two social discourses associated with the bomb and *diminution*. The first is what Hiroko describes as "the fear of reduction," or the simplification—and stigmatization—of her identity to the status of bomb-survivor (*hibakusha*) in post-war Japan (*Burnt Shadows* 50). The second is the discourse of tragic historical necessity around the bomb. In Tokyo, Hiroko first encounters an explanation of the atom bomb's use as a compulsory component of the American war strategy: Hiroko recounts an unnamed American soldier, who admits "the bomb was a terrible thing, but it had to be done to save American lives" (63). Shamsie highlights the official American discourse of necessity, mobilized by both President Harry Truman and other government officials directly after the bombing.<sup>76</sup> This justification, spoken by an American soldier to a Japanese survivor, highlights a casually phrased yet heavily militarized conception of national identity, one which justifies an instance of mass killing through an implicit cost-benefit analysis—the exchange of Japanese lives for Americans.

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<sup>75</sup> Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park displays a statue of a young girl, Sadako Sasaki, poisoned with leukemia after the bomb attack. Before her death, Sasaki sought to relieve her disease by crafting one thousand paper origami cranes. The crane forms an integral part in the memorial, and has since been taken up as a symbol of peace and opposition to nuclear weapons. For an account of Sasaki and the tradition of the paper cranes, see Nasu.

<sup>76</sup> The atomic bomb's "necessity" is the subject of an intense historiographical dispute. The argument of necessity, made by Truman and endorsed by initial American historiography, was challenged by the "revisionist" position that the bomb was used not as a means of "saving American lives" but as an opening move in Cold War diplomacy with the USSR. For leading examples of the revisionist position, see Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy* (1965) and *The Decision* (1995). For a historiographical rebuttal of revisionist argument, see Maddox.

The novel's historical setting of Nagasaki, as opposed to the more widely represented site of Hiroshima, further emphasizes the bomb as a marginalized and silenced disaster. As the second site of atomic bombing, Nagasaki carries a symbolic catastrophic *excess*, occurring three days after the horrors unleashed in Hiroshima, leaving Hiroko to mournfully question its necessity: "Why a *second* nuclear bomb?" (100, my emphasis). Rather than emphasize the second bombing's cruel excess, prominent discourses around the bombing have often subordinated Nagasaki to Hiroshima's "primal scene of atomic warfare" (Lippit, "Photographing Nagasaki" 25). Thus, as a temporally secondary disaster, Nagasaki has been rendered subordinate to, and *elided* within, the historical memory of Hiroshima. In terms of diminishment, then, Hamid's aesthetic of diminishment challenges the apocalyptic and triumphant dimensions of his text's nuclear present, while Shamsie's emphasis on the diminishment of Nagasaki retrieves the forgotten nuclear past.

Throughout the novel, Shamsie raises questions about the comparability between events and contexts of extreme historical devastation and mass killing. Indeed these questions reprise—and arguably advance—some of the discussions of comparison and incommensurability underway in memory, Holocaust, and postcolonial studies. In memory studies, the notion of incommensurability functions alternately as a claim to public recognition of a historical wrong, or as an assertion of radical exceptionalism and incomparability, especially in the case of the Nazi Holocaust, or *Shoah*.<sup>77</sup> In the Historians' Debate (*Historikerstreit*) of the late 1980s, German revisionist historians framed comparability (in this case, a similarity bordering on equivalence) between the Nazi Holocaust and the Soviet gulag as a means of evading historical

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<sup>77</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the place of comparison in postcolonial studies, see Melas. Importantly, in Melas's conception, incommensurability names not an unbridgeable divide, but rather, a marker of difference that forestalls efforts to affirm exact equivalencies (31-37).

guilt by transferring the original blame onto Soviet Russia, thus diminishing the horror of German atrocities (LaCapra, *Representing* 50). Initial claims of the Holocaust's uniqueness, then, functioned as a means of attaining recognition and subverting German quietude around the catastrophe, though later assertions of exceptionalism positioned and reinforced the Holocaust as a master trauma, prevailing over and above all other experiences of mass rupture and dislocation (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 7-9). The Historians' Debate and the trajectory of the Holocaust's memorialization demonstrate that just as comparability can be a strategy of obfuscation, incommensurability may function as a claim to power.

More recent scholarship on the Holocaust displays a decided turn away from exceptionalism, and instead, carefully charts generative relations between the Holocaust and other mass catastrophes, such as the "lost generation" of Australian Aborigines (Gigliotti) and African writings of mass killings (Eaglestone, "Holocaust Testimony"). In one prominent example, *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), a work that spans postcolonial, memory, and Holocaust studies, Michael Rothberg theorizes comparison between the historical experiences of violent mass rupture in the Holocaust and European colonization. Rothberg argues against what he calls "competitive memory"—those doctrines of exceptionalism, that in effect declare an event *incomparable*, as well as those comparisons which *rank* experiences of collective disaster in measures of severity, as in, for instance, the number of dead. Against competitive memory, Rothberg poses a notion of comparison that he calls "multidirectional memory," which conceives of each collective experience as *singular*, yet unexceptional—a form of comparison that does not equate experiences, but identifies their "partial overlaps" (29). Rothberg's set of terms helps to preserve difference between units and to also emphasize a mutual influence between units being compared—suggesting a potential space of transformation that does not leave the component

pieces unchanged, where, as another critic puts it: “after the comparison, each actor goes back to her corner to pursue business as usual” (Radhakrishnan 470). How then might Rothberg’s emphasis on a transformational, multidirectional notion of comparison function in response to the Pakistani nuclear tests and the context of the global War on Terror? As I argue here, Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* stages a multidirectional comparison between historical disasters, illuminating an aspirational cosmopolitanism from the aftermath, while also exposing and critiquing various forms of everyday militarism across national contexts.<sup>78</sup>

As the novel moves past the immediate post-war history Shamsie explores the comparative logic at work in the discourse of necessity and the marginalized memory of Nagasaki. In attempting to counter Nagasaki’s marginalization, Hiroko turns to the historical record and confronts her experience as a meager statistic in comparison to the larger tragedy of the Second World War. “My stories seemed so small,” she remarks, “so tiny a fragment in the big picture. Even Nagasaki—seventy-five thousand dead; it’s just a fraction of the seventy-two million who died in the war. A tiny fraction. Just over .001 per cent. Why all this fuss about .001 per cent?” (*Burnt Shadows* 299). The bombing’s discourse of necessity depends upon, in Michael Rothberg’s terms, a *competitive* statistical comparison, in which the severity of one experience is devalued and undermined in favor of another experience, ultimately producing no restructuring of imagined social relations. Indeed, the statistical comparison also functions as a mechanism of what Natalie Melas refers to as “catastrophic miniaturization,” in which an experience of trauma is abruptly and devastatingly reduced by an act of comparison (173).

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<sup>78</sup> In her recent work on “Imperial Ghosting,” Anne McClintock traces the “disobliging revenants” conjured in post-9/11 official U.S. discourses (822). Among these ghostly traces, McClintock examines the way U.S. governmental invocations of 9/11 as Pearl Harbor and Ground Zero (meant to establish American innocence in the face of an unprovoked attack) latently retrieve the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (822-24). Once again, Shamsie’s novel differs from the projects of critics like McClintock and Dower in her multidirectional approach to the Japanese nuclear disaster, one that confronts both the U.S. and Pakistan.



Shamsie stages an encounter here between Hiroko and the notion that Nagasaki must be claimed through a different mechanism of relation. In the following scenes of comparison, Shamsie offers the mobile figure of bird scars, one that refuses to assert itself in numerical terms against such discourses of minimization; instead, this figure reappears in moments of historical disaster as a cautionary symbol against forms of militarism, both overt and covert.

### 3.5 THE KAMIKAZE AND MUJAHEDDEEN: SELF-SACRIFICIAL MILITARISMS

In the Pakistan section of the novel, we see signs of General Zia's program of Islamization, and markers of the Afghan war: the refugees and suspected CIA agents in the city of Karachi. Amidst these historical developments, the bird scars drift into Hiroko's dreams. At this point in the novel, Hiroko's seventeen-year-old son, Raza, has been rejected by his teenage love interest due to a rumor that he is a deformed "bomb-marked mongrel" (*Burnt Shadows* 194). Fleeing this reputation, Raza runs away from home to an Afghan refugee camp just outside Karachi, an area in which he is recognized (due to his mixed-race features and multi-lingual talents) and welcomed as a fellow displaced ethnically Hazara Afghan, especially by Abdullah, a young man of similar age. Meanwhile, Hiroko's fears about her missing son enter her dreams, and the dark birds become a figure of comparison between the militarized contexts of 1945 Japan and 1982 Afghanistan.

In her dream, Raza was speaking to an Afghan boy but the boy, although an Afghan boy, was also her ex-student, Joseph, the kamikaze pilot. "Maybe I won't join the Air Force," Joseph, who was also the Afghan boy, said. Raza sneered. "Scared, little boy?" Joseph

stood up taller, unfurling his black wings, and when he opened his mouth desiccated cherry blossom cascaded out, blanketing the dry soil of Afghanistan. (228)

The dream combines Joseph, a former student of Hiroko's, and an Afghan boy, establishing clear parallels between them: both young, newly anointed and reluctant, both transformed into self-sacrificial warriors. Shamsie's technique of combination here differs from the familiar postcolonial trope of the palimpsest—in which multiple layers of text or images are visible, while overlaid upon one another—and instead resembles the composite: a unity of elements in which the separate parts remain visible (“Joseph, who was also the Afghan boy.”)<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the composite is a more fitting concept for the creative act of comparison, in which two units are intentionally brought together, while the palimpsest describes an historical process of accretion. As the brief dream continues, it twists into a nightmare, positioning Hiroko's son as provocateur, goading on the figure's aggression; in response, the composite kamikaze-mujahedeen issues what we might read as a warning, as it takes on the black wings of the burnt cranes—the novel's symbol of disaster—and becomes a kind of angel of death.<sup>80</sup>

The wings render both figures monstrous, undermining notions of glorious self-sacrifice, and the composite figure breathes out another layered set of images: desiccated cherry blossom onto the Afghan soil. Within the novel, the cherry blossoms recall not the trauma of Nagasaki, but the act of protest by Hiroko's father against a culture of reverent military commemoration, in which he sets fire to a cherry blossom garland commemorating the death of a fifteen-year old kamikaze pilot (*Burnt Shadows* 13). This final merging retrieves not a scene of mass devastation but a protest against the stultifying culture of militarism that sanctifies self-sacrifice—a culture

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<sup>79</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as “a material made from two or more physically different constituents each of which largely retains its original structure and identity” (“composite” 2b).

<sup>80</sup> For an extended examination of the relationship between kamikaze pilots and radical Muslim fighters see Dower, 294-298.

common to the kamikaze pilot and to what Eqbal Ahmad has called the “Kalashnikov culture” of 1980s Pakistan (Shamsie, *Offence* 53). Thus, the comparison provoked by the birds does not have to do with the particularity of nuclear disaster—its radius of annihilation or radiation—but the militaristic milieu in which that disaster takes place.

### 3.6 NEW YORK AND NAGASAKI: SECURITY AND DISASTER

The birds reappear in the novel’s final section, set in a post-9/11 New York City, where they link the security-driven militarism of the U.S. to the discourse of necessity surrounding the bombing of Nagasaki.<sup>81</sup> In this section of the novel, old debts across family lines are repaid as Raza requests his mother to help Abdullah, an undocumented Afghan immigrant, across the U.S.-Canadian border. Hiroko enlists Kim, Konrad’s grandniece, to complete the task. As a structural engineer preoccupied with fears of collapse and desires for stability—“she’d always wanted to know how to keep things from falling, from breaking apart” (270)—Kim reflects an uneasy post-9/11 American consciousness, one that seeks the restoration of a perceived absolute security. This enduringly unfulfilled desire overshadows Kim’s agreement to the task; soon after ferrying Abdullah across the border, Kim succumbs to a xenophobic distrust of Abdullah and notifies the authorities.

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<sup>81</sup> Other cultural responses to 9/11 similarly invoke the atomic bombing of Japan in relation to the assault on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. John Berger, for instance, identifies a number of similarities between the attacks—both were surprises, cruel innovations of technology, and “planned as announcements.” In between these disasters he finds a period of American global dominance, in which the United States was “invulnerab[le] on its home ground” (50). For an extended comparison between these sites of conflict see Dower.

When Kim returns to New York, Hiroko confronts her on comparative grounds, identifying the action as a betrayal not only to her personal trust, but also to the memory of Nagasaki:

‘You have to put them in a little corner of the big picture. In the big picture of the Second World War, what was seventy-five thousand more Japanese dead? Acceptable, that’s what it was. In the big picture of threats to America, what is one Afghan? Expendable. Maybe he’s guilty, maybe not. Why risk it? [...] because of you, I understand for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb.’ (370)

Hiroko’s denunciation establishes a parallel between the supplementary excess of Nagasaki’s destruction and Kim’s security-fueled labeling of Abdullah as a potential terrorist threat. Here we see a reversal of the terms of the statistical ranking and its minimization of Nagasaki, as Hiroko’s act of comparison places Nagasaki not in competitive relation with another monumental trauma—like the holocaust or the slave trade—but in relation to a numerically smaller violation. While differing tremendously in this numerical severity, Hiroko’s act of comparison identifies a similar logic at work in both heinous acts: a risk calculation that weighs the security of the self above all else. This relation demonstrates that, while not overtly militarized, Kim’s security calculation has behind it an equally corrosive and damaging logic of conflict resolution.

The force of Hiroko’s comparison is emphasized by the final appearance of novel’s poetic figure of relation: the birds. “The silence that followed was the silence of intimates who find themselves strangers. The dark birds were between them, their burnt feathers everywhere” (370). The memory of Nagasaki, revived by this comparison, lives vividly in this moment, as Hiroko’s scars, either hidden or appearing only in dreams up to this point, figuratively move from Hiroko’s back and fill the room, requiring silence, demanding recognition. Yet, in this final

appearance, the birds do not solely represent the singular loss of life in Nagasaki, but reprise the discourse of necessity, and its militaristic identitarian logic.

After Hiroko has transformed the room into a comparative space, she turns away from the room—and the destructive insularity of post-9/11 America —“and walked slowly over to the window. Outside, at least, the world went on” (370). The novel’s final gaze grounds the cosmopolitan viewpoint—the aspirational attempt to *envision* the world as an open space of motion and possibility—from the position of a *belated* comparison between disasters, an act of relation that arrives too late to forestall violence and abuse. The novel’s cosmopolitanism, grounded in the comparative scars of Nagasaki’s disaster, demands a practice of comparison that identifies the repetition of Nagasaki’s underlying structures and enabling conditions of emergence.

In a passage on confronting complicity in historical atrocities, Dominick LaCapra suggests that “a reckoning with the past in keeping with democratic values requires the ability—or at least the attempt—to read scars and to affirm only what deserves affirmation as one turns the lamp of critical reflection on oneself and one’s own” (*Representing the Holocaust* 66). LaCapra’s suggestion that to “read scars,” one must combine both delicate care for the injury with a demanding inquiry into self-implication, is one that resonates remarkably for the comparative project in *Burnt Shadows*. Shamsie’s comparisons help think through scales and across forms of militarism, from the level of the Pakistani nuclear state to the Kalashnikov-bearing mujahedeen, or the amnesiac American hegemon to the suspicious individual perpetrator. Examining the interrelationships between these groups begins to untangle the ways these militarisms strengthen and reinforce one another. Through its poetic figure of comparison, *Burnt Shadows* implicates its own transnational audience in both anticipated and ongoing

disasters, forcing readers to confront the ideologies of militarism reflected in those historical scars.

Through their emphases on the localized, lived realities of the 1998 tests and the comparative memory of Nagasaki, the novels of Hamid and Shamsie offer significant spatial and temporal interventions into the contemporary imaginations of nuclear disaster. These texts refuse the apocalyptic imagination, and in doing so, also challenge the disfigurements of Pakistan posed by the disaster exotic. The potentials and pitfalls of anti-apocalyptic disaster representation are taken to their extreme in the dilatory aesthetics of bureaucratic disasters.

#### 4.0 CRISIS CONTAINED: THE POETICS OF BUREAUCRATIC DISASTER

In an essay on the twenty-first century phenomenon of the Indian literary festival, Amitava Kumar reflects on the sudden proliferation of these events across the country, noting their dizzying pace and glitzy celebrity. He recounts a visit to the 2002 International Festival of Indian Literature in Rajasthan, “the first Kumbh Mela of literary gatherings, the mother-of-all literary fests” before the annual Jaipur Literature Festival began in 2006 (“Indian Litfest”). Along the way, Kumar makes a brief aside about the figure of the bureaucrat novelist, a figure that seems oddly out of place alongside the international literary heavyweights and commercial favorites who comprise the contemporary “glitterati” at these media events. Ironically, Kumar observes: “The diplomat who headed the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, our official host at Neemrana, was a nice sort but treated us like schoolchildren. A rash of Indian bureaucrats are now authors. It doesn’t bode well, in my opinion. Our host wasn’t a closeted writer, thank God, and was merely satisfied to regard the whole lot of us as delinquents” (“Indian Litfest”). For Kumar, the bureaucrat novelist is a fleeting specter, and the administrator here instead occupies the more familiar role of the condescending chaperone. Yet in this chapter, I will consider that foreboding rash of bureaucrat novelists as producing a body of writing that shadows the new English commercial fiction in India.<sup>82</sup> I contend here that Indian bureaucracy fiction offers an important administrative and poetic meditation on neoliberalism’s impact upon the Indian state.

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<sup>82</sup> For an overview of this commercial fiction, see Suman Gupta. For a study of its literary antecedents, see Khair.

If the new commercial fiction narrates the allures and anxieties of new commodities and arenas of labor inaugurated by economic liberalization, then bureaucracy fiction registers the continuities in administrative practices as well as the dangers of deregulation.

Alongside the more recognized commercial genres, there is an under-acknowledged parallel body of fiction written both about and by government bureaucrats. These works span a range of styles, literary tastes (middlebrow to highbrow) and publishers (Penguin India, Rupa, IndiaInk, and others). Bureaucracy novels might be seen as forming a middle tier between Indian Anglophone commercial fiction (Chetan Bhagat, Durjoy Datta) and the internationally recognized literary fiction (Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy). Often shorter and focused more tightly around a central set of local concerns than the highly successful “cosmopolitical” fiction (B. Ghosh 5), bureaucracy novels are typically perceived by publishers as more parochial and less attractive to international reading audiences.

Earlier chapters here have traced South Asian responses to the aesthetics of cosmopolitan amplification (the NGO-ization of disaster, the iconography of the mushroom cloud), which broadcast disaster beyond its immediate radius of impact or situate it in “worldly” terms. Bureaucratic writings, however, offer a very different spatialization of disaster. Rather than amplifying or broadcasting disaster, bureaucratic aesthetics are almost always associated with minutiae and, consequently, a shrinking or even *containment* of disaster. Thus, whereas the previous chapters offer critiques of the sensationalist features of disaster representations, this chapter examines the interrelations *between* narratives of singular, eruptive events and less spectacular forms of violence. Indeed, the aesthetics of banal bureaucracy might be seen as perhaps the sharpest turn away from the headline-grabbing disaster. Here I will unpack the historical and aesthetic relationship between bureaucracy and disaster, especially by reference to



theorizations of indirect harm, such as Akhil Gupta's conception of "structural violence." Thinking bureaucracy and disaster together generates the following questions: What literary forms link bureaucracy and disaster? Is there a particular bureaucratic aesthetic of disaster? How does bureaucracy set the conditions for the emergence of further disasters? How might bureaucracy itself be perceived as disastrous?

Numerous critics have noted that disaster narratives often include a reformulation (however brief) of social organization (Roddick; Solnit), but it is certainly *not* the case that narratives of bureaucracy are associated with an outbreak of mass disaster. The typical bureaucracy novel focuses on the details of the everyday and is fixed upon the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities common to a locality. With this in mind, how does disaster function within the bureaucracy novel? How does a bureaucracy novel *use* the disaster as part of its interrogation of the standard practices and structure of bureaucracy?

My focus upon fictions of bureaucracy moves in the direction of examining not simply literature and the nation, but literature and the state. I follow Matthew Hart and Jim Hansen's imperative that criticism must avoid the readily-available and reductive notions that regard the state as an exclusively liberatory or domineering structure, or as an antiquated form of territorialized organization in the globalized present (494). Moreover, to engage a growing body of bureaucracy fiction is to take up what Timothy Brennan, in another context, calls an "organizational imaginary," the problems of representation and inclusivity inherent within a "collective political subject" (148-150). Bureaucracy fiction, in its attention to the written mechanisms of disaster relief and resource distribution, addresses basic questions on the imagination of state organization.

An analysis of the state in its bureaucratic form avoids a simple conflation of nation and state and identifies the state's manifestation in its local, everyday form. I identify bureaucracy as a particular form of organization that has come to *characterize* and become synonymous with the postcolonial Indian state, but is certainly not its essential form. By focusing on a form of organization, its attendant practices, and their representation in works of fiction, I follow Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal's insistence that scholars not "accept the conflation between nation and state" (163) that emerged in both post-independence nationalist discourses and scholarly critiques of those discourses. Rather, I argue here that bureaucratic novels deploy an aesthetics of containment, demonstrating the way disasters are managed and administered by particular bureaucratic practices of writing. Before doing so, I will provide an overview of the bureaucratic state in India and Akhil Gupta's recent, powerful theorization of state violence under neoliberalism.

#### **4.1 HISTORIES OF THE BUREAUCRATIC STATE**

At its core, bureaucracy is a form of hierarchical organization, defined by a concentration of decision-making power at the top of the organization, and an extreme division of labor among its lower tiers. In theory, this form of organization is characterized by a purposeful precision, what Max Weber calls the "rationalization" of government, in which each tier (or bureau) of the hierarchy holds a particular expert knowledge and capacity for action. Weber summarizes the virtues of bureaucracy: "Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs—these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration" (214).

Accordingly, the “expert” knowledge of the particular bureau can only be obtained by specialized training and examination, and is otherwise shrouded in secrecy and lack of transparency both between the bureaus and to those outside of the particular organization.<sup>83</sup>

Weber sees bureaucracy as capable of an impressive efficiency, an “indubitable technical superiority” (224) in decision-making and action that partly accounts for its proliferation across the globe (214).

While bureaucracy as an organizational form predates the modern era—Weber cites its existence in the armies of ancient Egypt and Rome (221)—it is for Weber and other social theorists fundamentally an institution of modernity. The regularity of rational bureaucratic authority challenges the irregularity and arbitrariness of charismatic authority (245-47); “in principle,” he observes, “a system of rationally debatable ‘reasons’ stands behind every act of bureaucratic administration, that is, either subsumption under norms or a weighing of ends and means” (220). Therefore, bureaucracy presents itself as a system through which an individual may proceed through rationally to pursue a desired outcome. Importantly, Weber notes that bureaucracy is increasingly pervasive not only in the civil administration of the nation-state, but in ecclesiastical structures, political parties, the military, and private enterprises (197). While praising its rational efficiency, Weber also registers a severe contradiction between the basic principles of democracy (equal rights and direct rule of the governed) and bureaucracy’s inherent authoritarian characteristics (its strict hierarchy of subordination). For example, Weber argues that as the Catholic Church underwent bureaucratization, local priests became “functionaries of the central authority” (226) and lost autonomy and access to decision-making processes.

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<sup>83</sup> Weber resonantly observes that “the concept of the ‘official secret’ is the specific invention of bureaucracy, and nothing is so fanatically defended by the bureaucracy as this attitude, which cannot be substantially justified beyond those specifically qualified areas” (233).

The contradiction between rational bureaucratic authority and democratic process was perhaps especially blatant in colonial India, as Weber’s “iron cage of rationality” became the “steel frame” of the centralized bureaucracy of the British-established Indian Civil Service. It should be noted that bureaucratic administration in South Asia is not entirely an invention of British rule. Some scholars identify Mughal Emperor Akbar’s *mansabdari* system, which integrated military and civil services into a single hierarchy, as an important long-term influence on bureaucratic governance and extensive documentation practices in South Asia (Sabharwal and Berman 4). Nevertheless, British colonialism extended bureaucratic structures into a form of centralized administration. Recent historiography notes that histories of the British colonial state trace a progressive narrative from the rampant “corruption” of East India Company rule to the “formal and regulated bureaucratic state of the late nineteenth century” (Gould 10).

The Indian Administrative Service (IAS), formed in the immediate years after independence, largely maintained the colonial system of a federal, centralized state structure (Bose and Jalal 171), even retaining over 40 per cent of the same upper administrative personnel (Jalal 18).<sup>84</sup> Continuity between colonial and postcolonial governance is observable in matters of organizational hierarchy down to specific office behaviors, such as the common practice of filing forms in triplicate (Gupta, *Red Tape* 148).<sup>85</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Valabhbhai Patel defended the continuation of the central authority as an effort to consolidate—and enforce—national unity against what he called “provincial susceptibilities” (qtd. in Scott 495).

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<sup>84</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the ways these transitional civil servants narrated the significance of the elite, patriarchal administration for the newly independent nation, see Grewal.

<sup>85</sup> Anthropologist Matthew S. Hull notes that the practice of extensive documentation in colonial South Asian government is anchored in questions of “accountability at a distance”—namely, the suspicions from directors of the British East India Company in London towards their agents abroad (7). Hull suggests that “the centrality of writing in South Asian governance [...] has more to do with the fundamental problematics of the corporation as a social form than has been previously recognized” (7), thus complicating the purported “efficiency” divide between governmental and corporate practices and forms of organization.

The structure of state bureaucracy in India has been the target of much critique since the post-independence period. Sudipta Kaviraj argues that the modernizing Indian bourgeoisie, in the absence of a public embrace of its agenda, “came to rely heavily on ‘state-bureaucratic agency’ for bringing about social transformation (qtd. in Fuller and Harriss 8). Inderpal Grewal summarizes that “the Indian Civil Service after independence became not a central institution of a well-functioning state, but rather a sign of wealth and elite power, and charges of ‘corruption’ were precisely the means through which this power was challenged, albeit from those wanting access to such patriarchy and power” (6).<sup>86</sup>

While a balance of payment crisis and pressure from the International Monetary Fund provided the primary spurs to economic liberalization in 1991, longstanding critiques of intransigent bureaucracy and the so-called “License Raj” (the government permits required for the operation of private business) provided a national rationale for the economic changes. However, the adoption of neoliberal economic reforms did not necessarily diminish the size of the welfare state, avoiding the complete privatization of social services. Akhil Gupta notes that while the post-liberalization Indian government cut back funding for a number of social services, it has since planned or initiated a number of large social welfare programs targeting rural employment, sanitation, and infrastructure under the ambit of central and state governments (292). These new programs demonstrate that the size and scope of government bureaucracy is not necessarily reduced after liberalization. Rather, as is the case in India and other contexts, liberalization often redirects the activities and imperatives of the state, rather than withering it to skeletal form. Political scientist Vanita Shastri affirms this idea, noting that the post-liberalization government’s activities shift instead to different areas of regulation—or

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<sup>86</sup> For an analysis of the evolving concept of “corruption” from the late colonial into the early post-independence period, see Gould.

deregulation—such as telecommunications (Shastri 257). The continuity of bureaucratic government in India reflects the validity of Weber’s point about the self-perpetuating nature of bureaucratic organization, that “once it is fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy” (228).

#### **4.2 ADMINISTERING DISASTER: STRUCTURAL AND SENSATIONAL VIOLENCE**

In the recent scholarship on both disaster and bureaucracy, we see efforts to de-naturalize disasters and to de-rationalize bureaucracy. On the one hand, scholars of disaster work to root the outbreak of disaster within systems of power and conditions of emergence, and to thus deprive it of its accidental or arbitrary appearance. On the other, scholars of bureaucracy argue that the supposedly hyper-rational bureaucracy is rife with haphazard and arbitrary practices that defy its claims to order and calculated action. When seen together, the legitimizing ideologies (the natural and the rational) of both phenomena are undermined, and the relationship between disaster and bureaucracy might be more closely examined.

What does bureaucratic violence look like in neoliberal India? In *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* anthropologist Akhil Gupta offers a powerful treatment of the post-liberalization Indian state as an agent of what he calls “structural violence.” Gupta notes that, historically, structural violence “is a capacious term” that includes both recognition (legal exclusions of social groups) and distribution (the delayed or denied allocation of resources, such as food, clothing, or housing) (20). Gupta leverages the term as a way of interpreting India’s conditions of extreme poverty—specifically, the more than two

million annual deaths in India from hunger and malnutrition (5)—as a form of state violence. Structural violence here refers to forms of suffering and deprivation that lack singular perpetrators and are instead carried out by the routinized legal and administrative procedures of the state (19-20). The structure metaphor is integral to Gupta's usage: the forms of violence at hand are not the result of a single lower-level functionary; rather, they are the result of a combination of actions from different levels of state bureaucracy. According to Gupta, these forms of violence, "enacted through the everyday practices of bureaucracies" (33)—such as the denial of benefits to the illiterate, or pensions to those without official identification—occur on a regular basis and become normalized and incorporated into everyday life. As such, these denials are often invisible in contrast to more explosive, spectacular disasters. The concept of structural violence, as Gupta frames it, helps to make these long-term and routine forms of deprivation intelligible as *violence*, and to thus accord to them the same kind of moral shock and social urgency as a direct act of killing.

Gupta elaborates his theorization of structural violence through a discussion of bureaucratic indifference and arbitrariness. The attitude of bureaucratic indifference to outcomes is produced by the structure of administrative hierarchy, one that justifies itself as rationally organized into specific offices and bureaus. The hierarchy's rational division of labor thus sanctions an individual bureaucrat's indifference to the outcomes of his/her labor. The Nazis' systematized perpetration of genocide most fulfills the latent violence of bureaucratic indifference, according to one dominant interpretation of the Nazis' logic of mass murder. Indeed, Hannah Arendt's famous phrase, the "banality of evil" (252), has come to name the

ability of an average person to carry out “administrative massacres” (288).<sup>87</sup> While systemically sanctioned, bureaucratic indifference is not a determined result, as individual administrators, of course, can actively reject indifference. Therefore, Gupta identifies bureaucratic arbitrariness as a mechanism of violence: The Indian state, he contends, conducts a variety of programs on behalf of marginalized and disadvantaged communities; however, these are “unevenly and erratically” successful, due to haphazard planning and implementation (24). Diverging from the Weberian view of rationalized bureaucracy, he notes that the drive towards “bureaucratic expediency” (the attempt to reach a high quota within a relatively short time frame) ultimately diminishes care for the poor (24).

However, Gupta’s elaboration of structural violence depends upon a distinction between the urgent state response accorded to the violence of natural disasters and the relative indifference to the everyday violence of persistent poverty (4-6). As he succinctly puts it, “if the poor were equated to victims of a natural disaster, the urgency displayed in ameliorating their situation and the scale of intervention employed would be of a completely different magnitude” (6). Scholarly theorizations of less-recognized forms of violence typically make a distinction between the sensational and the unseen, especially pertaining to media attention and state response (Nixon 2-3).<sup>88</sup> As Gupta notes, the major thrust of such a distinction is to identify a

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<sup>87</sup> Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann historicizes the bureaucratic “banality of evil” interpretation of the Holocaust as a rejection of the notion that the Shoah’s perpetrators were a group of maniacal leaders and elite organizations of extermination (32-33). The bureaucratic view, promulgated in the 1960s after Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) and the 1961 Adolf Eichmann trial, implicated the much larger sphere of organized German society and suggested that other contexts of extensive bureaucratization are capable of similar acts of mass murder. The bureaucratic interpretation has since been challenged by a number of perspectives, including those that critique the notion of a centralized, efficient state and instead emphasize the ethical agency of individuals and groups in both routines act of choice and special innovation when faced with orders to carry out atrocities (34). For a recent defense of juridical “intransigence” on the part of lawyers and judges against the encroachments of emergency laws, including the case of Nazi Germany, see Weisberg.

<sup>88</sup> Rob Nixon’s notion of slow violence focuses principally on long-term environmental damage; Gupta’s structural violence focuses on the state in relation to conditions of economic deprivation. For discussions of other lesser-



“lack of urgency” in state response to different kinds of deaths. However, the ways that the mechanisms of structural violence apply to situations of disaster is outside the purview Gupta’s study. I would like to apply his understanding of structural violence to these disastrous moments. Indeed, bureaucratic indifference and arbitrariness may act as both causal and intensifying factors for disasters. Moreover, when bureaucratic mechanisms of normalization are consistently applied to disaster outbreaks, these events often do not actually command the kind of sudden attention that theorists typically accord to them.

Without challenging the overarching distinction between visible and invisible violence, I am interested in exploring the fertile overlapping ground between the two that is encapsulated in a notion of the “bureaucratic disaster.” This term refers to the way the most sensational aspects of disasters emerge from longstanding bureaucratic practices. For instance, Isobel S. Frye uses the term to refer to sensational disasters that result from bureaucratic practices in post-apartheid South Africa (710). For Frye, these are disastrous events that stem from bureaucratic procedures—and a commitment to bureaucratic proceduralism and indifference to outcomes—that directly contradict the social justice leanings of the new South African state. For instance, the essay identifies an outbreak of cholera resulting from bureaucratic insensitivity (administrative ignorance over the consequences of shutting off water after unpaid bills for some of the country’s poorest citizens, 719-20) and a hostage situation over bureaucratic inaction (a government worker taken hostage by a man whose ID book had been extensively delayed, 721-22). Administrative indifference not only spawns disasters but also intensifies others. In the Indian context, we might include the legal dithering between the Indian state and Union Carbide Corporation (and later, Dow Chemical) over responsibility for the Bhopal gas leak—while many

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recognized forms of violence, see the elaborations of “silent violence” on starvation deaths in northern Nigeria (Watts) and on malaria deaths in Tanzania (V. Kamat).

continue to suffer long-term harmful effects—as another kind of bureaucratic disaster. In “The Town by the Sea,” Amitav Ghosh examines the post-2004 tsunami aftermath in the Anadaman and Nicobar Islands and catalogues a number of bureaucratic blunders, including entrenched administrative indifference to the survivors, especially those whose identification documents were destroyed by the flooding (5-11). Thus, rather than assert a categorical distinction between sensational and structural violence, I suggest the two be thought of as interrelated through bureaucratic practices. Most importantly here, I argue that the linkages between sensational and structural violence are depicted in post-liberalization bureaucracy fictions. Before I turn to the specific texts illuminating these connections, I discuss the issue of bureaucratic aesthetics and the novel, examining the ways bureaucracy has been depicted in relation to disaster in British colonial writing and Indian writing.

### **4.3 BUREAUCRATIC STYLE AND THE AESTHETICS OF THE INDIAN STATE**

In Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August* (1988), the local Superintendent of Police remarks to protagonist Agastya Sen that the bureaucratic state is a pervasive institution, one that accompanies the individual in all aspects of life: “In India from washing your arse to dying, an ordinary citizen is up against the Government. [...] You see, Sen, India has had a *tradition* of bureaucracy” (38-39). I contend that the tradition of bureaucratic practice extends to an identifiable literary tradition in twentieth century Indian Anglophone fiction. Chatterjee’s *English, August* has been noted as a distinctive work among the flourishing of Indian English novels in the decade of the 1980s. Considered alongside Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) or Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the novel has been seen as distinctively

engaging the local particularities of small-town Indian life rather than the massive events of national history (like Partition or the Emergency), and as focusing upon a geographically rooted protagonist. Indeed, while Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* concerns a generation born on the inaugural hour of independence, and thus actively "handcuffed to [the] history" of the nation (Rushdie 3), *English, August* details a later generation indifferently affiliated with the bureaucracy of the state.<sup>89</sup>

Since Chatterjee's influential novel, there has been a proliferation of bureaucracy-focused novels and bureaucrat writers. For instance, several subsequent fictional works engage with the figure of the disenchanting and corrupt bureaucrat, including Akhil Sharma's *An Obedient Father* (2000) and Amitabha Bagchi's *The Householder* (2013). Chatterjee also stands as an important figure in the ever-increasing crop of bureaucrat novelists—those civil servants who moonlight as fiction writers.<sup>90</sup> In Hindi, Shrilal Shukla stands as an earlier and pre-eminent writer of bureaucracy, preceding Chatterjee by two decades. Among the English bureaucrat writers is Chatterjee's contemporary, Shashi Tharoor; more recently, the list includes novelists like Sanjay Bahadur, (*The Sound of Water*, 2008), Vipul Mitra (*Pyramid of Virgin Dreams*, 2011), and Bhaskar Ghose (*The Teller of Tales*, 2012). Fiction and non-fiction writer Sudhansu Mohanty has published what might be considered a trilogy: *Babudom* (2004), *Babulog* (2005), and *Babuspeak and Other Stories* (2007). The topic of bureaucracy extends to less obvious examples, like the graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee, in whose works *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*

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<sup>89</sup> The pervasiveness of bureaucracy fiction across the globe arguably substantiates it as a distinct topic or genre of world literature. Consider the range of writers engaged with bureaucracy: the list would include canonical figures such as Dickens, Balzac, and Kafka, and would include postcolonial Algerian writers such as Tahar Djaout, as well as the contemporary bestselling genre of Chinese "officialdom lit" (Lim). Novelists and filmmakers across contexts of decolonization have undertaken parodic critiques of circuitous bureaucratic governance. See especially Ousmane Sembène's *Mandabi* (1968) and *Xala* (1975), as well as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Death of a Bureaucrat* (1966) and *Guantanamo* (1995).

<sup>90</sup> In the Pakistani context, Jamil Ahmad's short story collection, *The Wandering Falcon* (2011), is a recent and esteemed example.

(2007) and *The Harappa Files* (2011) Indian administrators appear as immobile gargoyles perched atop desks, overseeing piles of documents. For literary fiction writer, Anjum Hasan, a looming Indian Administrative Service application test functions as a major plot point in *Lunatic in My Head* (2007), set in 1990s Shillong. Collectively, these stories have found homes at publishers both large and small, including international houses like Penguin India and national houses like Rupa (*Pyramid of Virgin Dreams*) and IndiaInk (*The Sound of Water*). However, the international circulation of bureaucracy fictions remains limited, thus underscoring what continues to be an assumed equivalence between narratives of the state and national readerships.

Among the primary genres of bureaucratic writing—or what Chatterjee terms “the literature of the Welfare State” (*Mammaries* 123)—are the widely recognized forms of registers, statistics, inspections, complaints, etc. However, literary scholars have not addressed the novel as a distinctive and proliferating mode of Indian bureaucratic writing.<sup>91</sup> The appellation of “bureaucrat novelist” might be read as demeaning, as the term “bureaucrat” often “carries a considerable weight of moral commentary—most of it censorious” (Herzfeld 70). However, the promotional materials and dust jackets of these works often emphasize the writer’s civil service credentials (Bahadur; Ghose), implicitly legitimizing the representational authority of the novel. The novel seems an odd form for the bureaucrat, as its interpretive indeterminacy and polyvocality stand in stark contrast to the supposed standardized precision of the forms and registers observed in Gupta’s anthropological account. And yet, it continues to be a form of literary production in English for the bureaucrat. Arguably, the novel grants a level of status and prestige to the administrator and also offers a venue for more exploratory, creative writing than

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<sup>91</sup> Anthropologists certainly have no requirement to reference literary works in their studies, though Akhil Gupta does single out Shrilal Shukla’s *Raag Darbari* (1968) as an exemplary “ethnographic” text on rural bureaucracy (126). Other literary works, such as Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), have inspired recent social science work on bureaucracy. See Warner (2007), Jorgensen (2012), and Munro and Huber (2012).

the one found in forms; most importantly, as I demonstrate below, it provides an avenue for entrenched criticism of state practice.

Critical disregard for these Indian bureaucracy texts likely has to do with a longstanding categorical separation between the mundane, functional writing of administration and the elevated aesthetics and pleasures of literature. Bureaucratic writing practices are usually described as bland, formulaic, repetitive—and therefore *banal*. As Saikat Majumdar suggests, banality is typically associated with literature’s failure—“the failure to produce the new, the original, and, by implication, the engaging” (4)—with the affective result of boredom (4). Condescension towards bureaucratic style regards it as an unquestioning form of realism, one with a tendency towards explanatory excess; such a style records events and situations with an exceptional technical precision, replete with extraneous information, and thus approaching the minutiae of bureaucratic language. Tarring writers with the brush of bureaucratic style has thus served as a clear mode of differentiating and elevating particular aesthetic styles. For instance, Majumdar reminds us that Virginia Woolf’s polemic against what she saw as an excessively mimetic Edwardian realism was expressed by associating this form of realism with the routine chores of bureaucratic writing. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf accuses H.G. Wells of being “a materialist from sheer goodness of heart, taking upon his shoulders the work that ought to have been discharged by Government officials” (qtd. in Majumdar 8-9).<sup>92</sup>

Majumdar writes of how a tradition of “ordinary” postcolonial fiction—pointing to the work of Zoë Wicomb and Amit Chaudhuri—has “been marginalized by the dominant preoccupation with the more grand and spectacular narratives of colonialism, decolonization, and

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<sup>92</sup> For an intriguing discussion of boredom as an affective experience produced by the material inequities and ideologies of late colonialism, see Majumdar (23-27).

postcolonial development that, for instance, have been the subject of Anglophone national allegories from the global South” (28). He continues:

Forms of weariness with the narrative of the spectacle have led these writers [Wicomb and Chaudhuri] not only to produce fiction that is remarkable in its removal from the obvious spheres of struggle and suffering, be they wars, riots, genocide, or other headline-grabbing political upheavals, but also to articulate vocally a theoretical polemic against the enslavement of the novelistic imagination to such spectacles. (36)

Majumdar importantly identifies the way academic critical trends have excluded literature that falls outside of the spectacle, but he insists on too sharp a divide between the spectacular and the ordinary. Indian Anglophone fiction of bureaucracy indeed traces the relationship between the spectacular violence and the routines of everyday life.

A brief detour into Victorian literature and culture reveals a long history of cultural reflections on the bureaucratic governance of disaster events. Victorian literature offers a number of famously insightful—and satirical—literary portrayals of the euphemistic language and redirections of government bureaucracy. D.A. Miller suggests that the Victorian novel, both in its voluminous size and its circulation in the lending library, “establishes a little bureaucracy of its own” (108). Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1852-53) examines the self-sustaining, automated nature of legal bureaucracy through the Chancery Court. The famous chapter, “Containing the Whole Science of Government,” of Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) satirizes the labyrinthine and circuitous pathways of civil administration. There, Dickens depicts the efforts of Mr. Clennam to discover the details of a public debt by visiting the “Circumlocution Office,” known

as “the most important Department under Government.”<sup>93</sup> The chapter depicts the maddening navigation of a bureaucratic labyrinth, as Clennam is shuttled from one building to another, from one office to another, from one administrator to another, as he endeavors to find out the details of Dorrit’s debt.

Most significantly for my purposes, *Little Dorrit* uses these tropes to portray a state inept in the face of disaster. With its circuitous redirections and evasive language, Dickens figures the Department as wholly incapable of acting effectively in the face of emergency and political crisis:

If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match, nobody would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of ungrammatical correspondence, on the part of the Circumlocution Office. (104)

Dickens portrays the speed of the British government as heavily encumbered—even in reaction to an attempted revolution—by the weighty requirements (“half a bushel,” “sacks” and a “family vault full”) of bureaucratic writing (104).

The portrait of legal and civil services as inefficient, lethargic, and self-satisfied changes significantly when the Victorian colonial administrator takes the reins of literary authorship. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee analyzes the figure of the colonial bureaucrat in relation to disaster within the context of Victorian empire, focusing on the fiction of Rudyard Kipling and the writer-administrator Philip Meadows Taylor. In the extraordinary disaster settings of plague and famine, Mukherjee argues, the British administrator becomes a “composite mythic figure made

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<sup>93</sup> For historical contextualization of Dickens’ portrayal of government bureaucracy, see Philpotts.

of administrative efficiency and charismatic leadership” (*Natural Disasters* 99); the bureaucrat thus functions as an agent within the “narrative of palliative imperialism,” as he provides relief to the diseased and starving (117). The colonial ethnographic—and propagandistic—documentary film, *District Officer* (1945), produced and released in a post-war moment of colonial crisis, affirms many of these same self-legitimizing characteristics of the administrator. *District Officer* is an ethnography of bureaucratic subdivisions in Bengal and a justification of organizational rationality in governance. As it traces the urban layout of a Bengali town, it centers upon one unnamed administrator and his upward arc through the administrative hierarchy to the rank of District Officer. The District Officer here has been cleansed of his mythic qualities, and is instead a figure of diligence; the film portrays him as a rational arbitrator of conflict and appeal (coolly working through an array of peasant petitions thrust at him), a man of the people (riding a horse to speak with villagers), and a ceaseless worker (reading files in bed). The daily work of administrative writing and arbitration is set carefully, yet severely, against the threat of disaster. Disaster appears in the narrator’s warning of a potential outbreak of malaria, and in the overflowing river at the end of the film, which calls the District Officer from his bed and out to the affected area. Disaster does not interrupt this depiction of bureaucratic labor. Instead, disaster—particularly its prevention and relief—either haunts or is the implicit object of administrative labor; the specter or outbreak of disaster thus functions as legitimating factors for everyday administrative action. As Colin MacCabe notes, the film excludes mention of the catastrophic famine of 1943 and instead portrays “an efficient and humane administration that would never let another such disaster happen” (“District Officer”).

The context of imperialism clearly changes the way administrators are depicted. Indeed, once we reach the context of postcolonial Indian fiction, the bureaucrat again becomes a figure



of incompetence or intransigence. Within Indian English literature, there are several common scenes and tropes in the depiction of governmental bureaucracy. This bureaucracy writing includes scenes of fevered, anxious waiting, the subtleties of negotiation, and the gatekeeping abilities of even a lower-level bureaucrat. These narrative depictions tend to allegorize a particular condition of the state through the experience of a bureaucrat protagonist. In some Indian Anglophone fictions, the stylistic preoccupation with detail aesthetically reproduces the secrecy and impenetrability of bureaucratic codes and jargon, while in others the excessive minutiae is purposefully mocked.

For instance, V.S. Naipaul's first Indian travelogue, *An Area of Darkness* (1964), offers an early depiction of state bureaucracy and focuses primarily upon delays and prolonged waiting periods. Naipaul opens his travelogue with an episode of a bureaucratic labyrinth in Bombay, in which he recounts his attempt to retrieve a pair of opened liquor bottles, seized upon entry into the city. Naipaul shuttles back and forth between government offices with a mounting number of permits to be obtained; throughout, Naipaul emphasizes his own frenzied activity in contrast to the lethargy and noncompliance of the functionaries he encounters. This episode of waiting is left without a broader comment; while it should be understood as a critique of excessive bureaucratic practice, like many of Naipaul's anecdotes in the book it forms a pattern of failure that implies a larger, civilizational condemnation (1-17).

More recent and more salient stories are those narratives of corruption that have come to define the genre of bureaucracy fiction. These narratives depict the payoffs subtly demanded by low-level functionaries from both corporate contractors and subaltern beneficiaries. Narratives like Amitabha Bagchi's *The Householder* (2012) use these scenes to explore the hierarchies within the state, while Bhaskar Ghose's thinly autobiographical novel, *The Teller of Tales*

(2012), depicts the righteous refusal of bribes to hold up the ideal of the honorable administrator. In these fictions, corruption is increasingly portrayed as unavoidably endemic, reflecting the administrator's frustrations with standards of governance, and the wider public's deep dissatisfaction with—and distrust for—the state. Corruption, as it is commonly depicted in these texts concerns *exchange*: the bureaucrat approves a particular contract or special privilege to a company, solicitor or fellow bureaucrat, and receives a bribe or “kickback” in return; the bureaucrat may also divert money from its intended beneficiary. According to Akhil Gupta, these examples of corruption constitute structural violence, in that the diversion of funds ultimately causes deprivation and harm to the intended recipients (34).<sup>94</sup>

How then might we understand the Indian *bureaucratic disaster* novel within this set of narrative tropes and styles? If boredom is considered a standard—if sometimes inadvertent—feature of bureaucracy fiction, it is perhaps obvious to point out that few of these novels engage directly with catastrophic events. As stated earlier, these subjects would seem to occupy entirely different worlds altogether. However, in my view, their relationship is similar to that between bureaucracy and detective fiction identified by D.A. Miller. Miller suggests that the bureaucratic delays of the legal suit at the center of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852-53) continually defers resolution, thus generating a desire for the interpretive finality offered by the novel's use of the detective story (94-95). The narration of bureaucratic repetition perhaps generates a similar desire for the disaster narrative, with its sudden spectacle and disarray (an event worth *waiting* for) and consequent resolution (perhaps facilitated by the bureaucracy). If bureaucratic

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<sup>94</sup> Importantly, Gupta qualifies that corruption is simply one among numerous forms of structural violence. The qualification resonates with critiques of the Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement that contend that a singular focus on corruption in government is ultimately a superficial analysis. Arundhati Roy argues that the movement threatens to play into the larger neoliberal project of privatization (*Capitalism*, 55). For a more sustained analysis and critique, see S. Kumar.

fiction entails a set of bored (or boring) novelistic conventions, then the spectacular collapse of disaster functions as a captivating interjection into those conventions.

I focus here on two examples of what might be seen as the Indian bureaucratic disaster novel: Sanjay Bahadur's *The Sound of Water* and Upamanyu Chatterjee's *Mammaries of the Welfare State*. While critics point to an element of improvised social organization on the part of *survivors* in response to disaster (Roddick; Solnit), I argue that the Indian bureaucratic-disaster novel focuses primarily upon the *state's* inadequate response to disaster through the narration of a public performance of government aid (Bahadur) and an image of institutional detachment and stasis (Chatterjee). Of the post-liberalization novels I discuss here, Bahadur's novel is overtly and generically a disaster narrative, while Chatterjee treats disaster as a particular phenomenon within its more explicit subject of the welfare state. Importantly, both present bureaucratic entropy as a force that rivals—and even absorbs—the eruptive power of the disaster. Together, these novels demonstrate the way the sensational violence of disasters might be muddled, masked, and contained by the bureaucratic procedures involved in structural violence. These post-liberalization bureaucrat novelists trace the relationship between the sensational violence of the eruptive disaster and structural violence through their depictions of the bureaucratic techniques of obfuscatory language, delay, and routinization.

#### **4.4 THE SOUND OF WATER: DISASTER'S BUREAUCRATIC BURIAL**

Sanjay Bahadur's *The Sound of Water* (2008) is a curious aesthetic melding of the spectacular disaster event with a critical representation of bureaucratic procedure. As the novel's dust jacket states, the work is "loosely based" on an industrial disaster, the 2001 flooding of a coal mine in

Bagdihi, Jharkhand.<sup>95</sup> Bahadur's administrative credentials are affirmed by the novel's authorial biographical note, which asserts that he presided over the 2001 disaster as a Director of the Ministry of Coal. In his stylistic rendering of the disaster and its aftermath, Bahadur alternates between a harsh social realism in the depiction of dangerous mining conditions and an occasionally surrealist lyricism in the portrayal of the floodwaters.<sup>96</sup> Generically, *The Sound of Water* is easily categorized as a disaster narrative: it begins with an ordered situation of mining labor, recounts its disruption by the disastrous flood, and concludes with survival and relief (Roddick 250). Most distinctive about Bahadur's novel is its extended engagement of bureaucratic organization as a primary (non) respondent to destruction. The narration of the aftermath emphasizes not screaming crowds and heroic rescue, but the interconnected organizational structures and their manipulative management of the emergency situation. In its structure, the novel alternates between the narration of the miners' attempts to escape the mineshafts, the angry mobilization of workers on the surface, and the managerial labors of the corrupt union and government leaders to contain and manipulate the crisis. As the mine is cast into watery darkness, the disaster sheds light onto structures of accountability on the surface, and the ways in which officials evade or transfer blame down the hierarchical ladder.

While the novel is concerned principally with a single disaster, Bahadur establishes the event as part of a longer history of mining accidents. In the world of the novel, many families in the town of Kariakhani have been involved in the mining profession for generations, and "had long learnt to accept the ever-looming shadow of death in the mines" (151). Consequently,

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<sup>95</sup> For an account of the coal mine collapse, see Tewary.

<sup>96</sup> *The Sound of Water* might be seen as a middlebrow work, one that courts high literary taste (evidenced by its references to the Rig Veda and T.S. Eliot) but employs the conventions of melodrama (like the thin archetypes of the jealous brother, Madhon, and the over-sexualized, scheming wife, Dolly) to execute its project.

stories of previous mining collapses and memories of fallen family members circulate within the novel (151). The stories vary according to institutional perspective, as miners remember lost family members and engineers recount the attacks suffered by managers in the resulting anger after a collapse. For instance, Raimoti, an elder miner, is the third generation of his family of miners, and his son has perished in a previous mine collapse. These stories highlight the endemic nature of deadly accidents to the work of coal mining. The global history of coal mining is replete with a variety of mining disasters, including explosions (often caused by the ignition of coal dust) and rock falls (crushing miners or blocking exits), both of which further demonstrate a certain unavoidable element of lethal risk to the profession. However, the flood disaster narrated by the novel is presented as among the most preventable, and thus, the most culpable of mining calamities.

The novel's ruminations upon coal and bureaucratic hierarchy are not generalized critiques of authority, but are importantly related to the historical trajectory of India's coal production. In 1971, Indira Gandhi's government nationalized coal production as a crucial component of the nation-building project. Nationalization provided a means to secure continued investment in coal, a resource that supplied fuel for the growing steel industry in the 1960s and 70s; notably, nationalization also contributed positively to workplace safety standards and increased worker pay (Yi-Chong 50).

Yash Chopra's film *Kaala Patthar* (Black Rock, 1979) illuminates this historical context of coal in the 1970s. Like *The Sound of Water*, *Kaala Patthar* also narrates the flooding of a coal mine due to dangerous and avaricious drilling practices, and it alludes to a previous historical event—in this case, the death of 375 people in the 1975 Chasnala mining disaster. However, the historical moments of production are entirely different for each text. *Kaala*

*Pathaar*, released within the same decade as India's nationalization of the coal industry, reflects an optimistic national ethos around that action. In its narrative of disaster, *Kala Patthar* mobilizes the event not only as an opportunity for moral atonement for its chief protagonists (Dwyer 87), but also as evidence of the destructive avarice of private industry. In the film, the ruthlessly greedy private mine owner, Dhanraj Puri, effectively causes the mining disaster as he demands his workers to dig precariously close to a body of water. Some of the film's most dramatic scenes are moral confrontations with Puri over his reckless profit drive, especially one in which Anita, a journalist, praises the nationalized mines in comparison to the horrors of Puri's private mine. After rescue efforts are implemented, the film explicitly expresses its approval for the nationalization project in an epilogue. The film concludes with the lines "dawn of a new era/ and a new beginning" overlaid onto an image of a rising sun, and a shot of miners walking towards the mineshaft in the sunshine.

Bahadur's disaster novel portrays a far bleaker portrait of coal, labor, and government in the late 2000s, with the context of economic liberalization significantly shaping this portrait. After the Indian government accepted a loan from the International Monetary Fund in 1991, the mining industry, Coal India Limited (CIL), received reduced funding from the national government, and was forced to receive its own loan from the World Bank in 2004. It has since been under pressure by the World Bank and the national government to adopt liberalization measures, most notably in allowing private investment and competition in the mining sector (Yi-Chong 52-63).

In *The Sound of Water*, Bahadur identifies neoliberal India as the larger economic and discursive background for the particular mining disaster at hand, and he stages the conflict between nationalization and liberalization of industry in a conversation between a mining

engineer and government minister. Bahadur places the critique of neoliberal management in the voice of Bibhash, an aging and increasingly alienated engineer. In contrast to the mining engineer played by Shashi Kapoor, young, charismatic, and morally driven, Bibhash is middle-aged, separated from his wife and children, and escapes nightly into his alcoholism. Just before the disaster takes place, Bibhash highlights safety concerns to the visiting minister, Atul Karna, citing the national government's "newfound commercial zest," or, in Karna's official language, "profit orientation," as enabling conditions for deadly accidents (31). This scene is strikingly different from its parallel in *Kala Pathaar*, in which Chopra's engineer criticizes the mining plan with moral force and rhetorical grace. In contrast, Bahadur's engineer drunkenly mutters these warnings to his superior at lunch, devoid of rhetorical prowess or an expectation of change. Bibhash's critique unsurprisingly falls on deaf ears, and goes unrepeated by the union leader during the negotiations. Later, Bibhash resignedly sacrifices himself to the water—both to save a miner and to escape what he sees as an intolerable world. Bahadur thus presents a weakened and enervated voice of regulation, one unable to prevent or mitigate disaster.

While the novel concerns a working class labor disaster, its attentions fall primarily upon the labors of the managerial class in taking advantage of the ensuing crisis. In the labor mobilization that follows the mine flood, Bahadur narrates direct collaboration between union and management leadership, both attempting to contain the crisis in order to maintain their grasp of power. In fact, the "negotiations" that follow the disaster primarily concern the individual benefits each *leader* will receive: a job for the brother of Ghosh, the union leader, and a promotion for Pandeyji, the company official. Both leaders regard workers as unintelligent, whose "thoughts are impermanent" (149) and are thus easily controlled. Thus, the novel features fairly clear examples of corruption—the blatant manipulation of rules for personal benefit. These

abuses of power are identified as products of the miners' exclusion from information and power sharing, an exclusion emblemized in the image of a mass of workers standing at the flooded mine's entry, kept outside of the building housing the managers' negotiations. Ultimately, the novel is deeply pessimistic about the capacities of the Indian state, in its present structure, to dispense justice and to modify the disastrous conditions of mining.

In *The Sound of Water*, most bureaucratic activities involve spoken negotiation—the oral report and cozy bargaining between management and the union leader—but writing validates and enacts these discussions. The novel adds new forms of bureaucratic writing to our consideration, namely what we might call bureaucratic plagiarism. Higher-level officials (in the mining corporation, the police force, and the government administration) hardly ever author the reports that bear their name; instead, they merely sign off on, or approve them, after their subordinates have carefully composed the documents (132). In an analysis of plagiarism, ownership, and collaboration in the writing of university administration, Linda S. Bergmann observes that the concept of “hierarchical collaboration”—the practice of writers within different administrative positions working together to craft a document—is fairly common in administrative practice (136), and notes that conventions of intellectual property vary among different discourse communities (153). However, Bahadur highlights the exploitive and larcenous element of this institutional practice of non-attribution, especially in prestige-granting documents (88; 35).

However, *The Sound of Water's* most vivid depictions of administrative writing are in the novel's conclusion; there, the novel emphasizes the bureaucratic burial of the flood disaster through the mechanisms of delay and obfuscatory language. As Atul Karna, the government minister, plans to retire from the “business of government” (165), he reads a draft of a report on what has now been formally dubbed the “Kariakhani disaster” (166). The document is drawn up



as a reply to the intra-governmental inquiries about management culpability for the disaster; in response, the document offers only an unwieldy acronym and a postponement of action, promising to form a “High Powered Multi-Disciplinary Tripartite Technical Committee (HPMDTTC)” which will produce a “detailed report within six months” (167). The humorously overblown name indicates only the committee’s sense of institutional significance; it obscures any precise mission or purpose. The disaster here is subjected to a routine procedure, which promises no substantive changes to safety standards or mining practices; both the formation of a committee and the production of a report months after the disaster’s occurrence are portrayed as mechanisms of delay, which postpone even the *prospect* of action after broader social urgency around the event has expired.<sup>97</sup> As Karna files the report, a classical music composition called the “sound of water” trickles out of his computer speakers, symbolizing both the sanitized sound of the silenced disaster and the ominous tones of further mineshaft floods (168). In effect, Karna’s report buries the mining disaster in paperwork.

Bahadur’s epilogue echoes the conclusion of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), in which a colonial official plans an anthropological text, one that will condense and sanitize the violence of the preceding narrative. In the case of *Things Fall Apart*, the District Commissioner plans to include the protagonist Okonkwo in his work of anthropology. Okonkwo’s story, he decides, deserves “not a whole chapter, but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate” (209).

“If it is not in the file, it does not exist,” goes one mantra of the Indian state (qtd. in Gupta 146). Here, the writing of the Kariakhani mine flood renders the disaster a particular kind of existence: as an accident, not as a disaster. In the novel, disaster sheds light upon the declining

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<sup>97</sup> The postponement recalls familiar examples of bureaucratic delay. For instance, Emma Tarlo examines the Municipal Corporation of Delhi and its proposed—and extensively delayed—investigation into the denied land allotments promised to sterilized people during the 1975 Emergency. She calls the continual postponement of the investigation a “bureaucratic effacement” of history and recompense (87-88).

trends in regulation and the corruption endemic within rigid hierarchies. And yet, the disaster's light is only momentary; the event itself is also subject to standard procedure. Disaster is consigned to the dustbin of the office, and the crisis is contained. The epilogue, then, implies a contrast between the official document and novelistic writing, the latter of which can provide a more complete record of the disaster's occurrence as well as its subsequent sanitization by bureaucratic writing practices.

#### **4.5 MAMMARIES OF THE WELFARE STATE: THE ROUTINIZATION OF DISASTER**

If Bahadur's novel depicts a disaster that must be contained, then Upamanyu Chatterjee's bureaucracy fictions depict disasters that rarely, if ever, puncture the narrative morass of bureaucratic aesthetics. Chatterjee's *English, August* and *Mammaries of the Welfare State* both deal with instances of "direct violence," or disaster, but in both cases, these events are evanescent, and fail to overcome the narrative weight of bureaucracy. Chatterjee's *English, August* narrates the mundane daily life of protagonist Agastya Sen after he has been assigned to a post in a sleepy, rural town. Agastya's thick boredom is temporarily interrupted in the novel's final pages by news of violence against a government bureaucrat committed by a group of *adivasi* (tribal) men; Agastya's colleague, scathingly named Mohan Gandhi, has had his arms cut off in reprisal after he sexually assaulted a tribal woman. The politics of *English, August*, especially pertaining to its representation of government's interaction with the tribals, have been the subject of critical dispute. On one hand, for Amitava Kumar, while the novel's humor topples the "hollow pieties of post-independence India," that same humor fails to offer an alternative to

the governmental attitudes it mocks, especially in contrast with Mahasweta Devi, whose writing positions the tribals as agents in their own betterment (“Jane Austen in Meerut, India” 316). On the other hand, Bishnupriya Ghosh argues that the novel’s humor departs when Agastya learns of Gandhi’s mutilation. The scene, Ghosh contends, is “divested of the customary humor of Agastya’s other encounters, and it most clearly raises the question of political responsibility within class asymmetries” (103). Both critics emphasize the mutilation due to its sudden intrusion into the novel’s world of ordinariness. The interpretive disagreements around the act of mutilation here stem from issues of expectation in a narrative style that embraces banality as both a subject of pleasure and a mode of political critique against the state’s priorities. Bede Scott’s narratological analysis of *English, August* clarifies matters by focusing on the text’s aesthetics of boredom, in which the novel is organized around “routine, repetitive procedures and delays” (296). Scott argues that not only does the novel contain a systematic stagnancy produced by bureaucracy within its diegesis, but that the narrative itself slows to a disinterested halt, mirroring “the dilatory drag of bureaucratic procedure” and the IAS’ associated qualities of sloth and interminability (495). Within this dragging narrative, Scott identifies the instance of mutilation violence as a suggestion that “the novel has inadvertently taken the wrong character as its protagonist” (509), and has avoided an event of particularly novelistic interest. Importantly, he notes that the event is rendered in a scant few lines, and then largely forgotten over the following pages, thus substantiating the novel’s privileging of “the iterative over the singulative” (511).

This tension between the violently singular and the blandly routine becomes heightened in *Mammaries of the Welfare State*. Chatterjee’s sequel to *English, August* intensifies and enlarges the scale of that novel’s issues. In its structure, *Mammaries* pivots away from the

individual *bildungsroman* form of *English, August* and adopts an episodic structure in which Agastya is simply a component within the machinery of government, rather than an anchoring protagonist. This structural shift also confirms a broader target—here, the novel aims its comedic and satirical style overtly at the “Welfare State” at large, rather than the local bureaucracy of Madna. The title of the novel, a Punjabi-accented pronunciation of the English word “memories” (285), indicates this broader aim, capturing two core aspects of the welfare state. As “memories,” the title captures the elaborate written documentation that constitutes the state’s memory banks. As “mammaries,” the title irreverently refers to the state’s provisions for underprivileged and oppressed classes. The novel importantly reverses the neoliberal contention that welfare states provide gratuitous assistance to the poor, who then become reliant upon its provisions; the novel attributes most of the mammary-reliance on civil servants, and not the poor. Moreover, *Mammaries* increases the scale of violence and suffering that appeared in its predecessor—violence occurs not merely upon the body of the individual, but upon larger populaces, in the form of fire and disease.

While the novel widens the scope of Chatterjee’s vision, *Mammaries* intensifies the preceding novel’s aesthetics of boredom and its political critique of Indian bureaucracy. If *English, August* tests the limits of readability (Scott 514), *Mammaries* pushes far beyond that limit. Saikat Majumdar asks, “if narrative is driven by the spectacle of the event, how does the banality of eventlessness enable a narrative impulse? Does banality stall narrative, or does it transform it?” (7). Critical opinion on the novel thus far has favored the former option: *Mammaries* has been described by one critic as “a virtually unreadable satire of the welfare state’s bureaucratic machinery” (B. Ghosh 121) and another as a novel with “no plot, indeed no point” beyond a repetitive condemnation of government corruption (Almeida 29). As these

remarks make evident, Chatterjee strengthens his commitment to monotonous and meandering narration: the novel is meticulous in its rendering of bureaucratic writing and speech, bulky in length, and avoids the portrayal of alternatives to the stultifying system of Indian statecraft. Within this stagnating narration, disastrous violence loses much of its eruptive and transformative power. Rather than tearing through, however momentarily, the fabric of everyday life, the disaster is largely *absorbed* by the standard procedures of the bureaucratic state.

Several disaster events emerge through the morass of character sketches, enigmatic encounters, and turgidly comical reflections on the workings of the Welfare State; in particular, we observe a massive fire in a government building (named TFIN—The Future Is Now), and the mysterious “officially-unconfirmed” plague in Madna (53).<sup>98</sup> As with everything in the novel, bureaucracy heavily mediates these instances of spectacular violence and death. The fire, we learn, is an especially bureaucratic disaster: the conflagration is purposefully set by a civil servant in the effort to eliminate a bothersome file, but blazes out of control in a particularly sensational “Vesuvian eruption” (345). The narrator reports that this practice of file burning has a storied history, studded with notable events such as the “Aflatoon Tower blaze of 1973” and the “Millennium Plaza disaster of 1983” (345). Here, however, I wish to focus my analysis on the portrayal of plague, the most critical of the novel’s disasters, which reflects upon the violence of standard bureaucratic practices and priorities.

The outbreak of plague in Madna appears primarily in (bureaucratic) textual form, as we learn of its existence through the written reports of Lina Natesan, a civil servant sent to Madna to investigate accounts of plague deaths. Her reports and memorandums, part of a larger

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<sup>98</sup> Moreover, there is an incident of political violence that occurs in the novel’s penultimate chapter, which echoes the attack in *English, August*. As Bishnupriya Ghosh points out, the tribal outsider, marginalized and abused early on, haunts the novel and reappears as agent of direct violence (121-123).

compendium of bureaucratic writing in the novel, are the most openly oppositional to standard procedures, and reflect the often dead-end attempts at critique within the bureaucracy. Chatterjee routinely identifies Natesan's writing as part of bureaucratic *literature*. Her written complaints—which detail her sexual harassment by her superiors and her lack of institutional support in responding to the plague—are referred to as “novellas,” by the narrator on two separate occasions (82, 105). This affiliation with a literary form is both a caustic reference to their great length and an admiration of their seriousness of purpose—especially in contrast to the self-serving and perfunctory writing of other bureaucrats. For instance, her letters help illuminate the empty promise of what Gupta calls “bureaucratic expediency” in the face of the outbreak: a demonstration of governmental action, with very little substantive accomplishment. Natesan is sent to Madna with no assistants or information, but with the urgent threat of “severest disciplinary action” should she not comply with her new posting (48).

Natesan's oppositional writing thus contrasts sharply with Agastya's ironic use of the same form. Agastya attends to bureaucratic literature with a sardonic appreciation of its absurd pleasures. As a “voracious reader of trash” Agastya turns “with enthusiasm [to] the literature of the Welfare State—handbooks, manuals, statutes, reports, returns, gazettes, minutes, memorandums, documents, correspondence, affidavits, acts, and regulations” (123-24). Using the “*Revised Manual of Office Procedure*” (what he refers to as “his favorite bedtime reading”), Agastya crafts a message to his subordinates in which he instructs them on the most efficient (and micromanaging) uses of paper, including the backsides of which documents are suitable for note writing as well as the proper practices for using and reusing envelopes. In other words, Agastya enacts the rules that generate the paper-flooded images of bureaucrat offices that adorn the covers of scholarly studies, and the pages of Jan Banning's collection of photographs,

*Bureaucrats* (2008). Against the larger absurdities of bureaucratic practice, Agastya can only respond with an ironic embrace of its logic at the most painstakingly minute level.

The plague discussed by Natesan references the actual outbreak of disease in Surat, Gujarat in 1994, an event that prompted 1.5 million people to flee the city. The outbreak of the disease has been attributed to the impoverished conditions of the city's slums, administrative indifference to the poor, as well as two natural disasters—an earthquake and monsoon rains—which increased the city's population of rats and impeded sanitation (Ramanna 542-543). Chatterjee avoids a direct representation of this exceptional occurrence, and instead chooses to render the plague as a recurrent phenomenon. In one of Natesan's reports, she cites Agastya's previous records of plague deaths in Madna, which form part of the town's normalized backdrop of calamity—including natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and gender-based violence. As she writes in one letter: "The plague [...] was endemic there, as much a feature of the region as famine, floods, cholera, typhoid, malaria and female infanticide" (76). The novel's narrator confirms the non-event of the plague deaths, in which they are barely a deviation from normality: "the officially-unconfirmed outbreak of the epidemic [was] neither new nor anything more than a sideshow in the complex life of the nation" (53). Rather than an earth-shattering event that commands immediate attention, the disaster is figured as a periodic outbreak, an expected and routine occurrence.

This information about the plague is communicated through Natesan's writings, and thus we see some ability for writing to record and communicate the errors and transgressions of the state, but these writings can be matched and bested by other forms of bureaucratic writing. Natesan is noted to have "always believed in the power of the written word to move mountains"

(51). Natesan's reports are thus emblematic of the complex agency that Gupta assigns to bureaucratic writing.

*Mammaries* problematizes the possibility for disaster to provide a moment of rupture in the rigid political structure of the "Steel Frame."<sup>99</sup> Indeed, the novel portrays a bureaucracy with a preference for the *postponement* provided by the urgency of a larger crisis: "when faced with a crisis, what all civil servants longed for was a bigger crisis. In the bureaucratic mind, the tensions of a demonstration, for example, were easily resolved by an outbreak of the plague, which in turn could be totally wiped out by the worst calamity of all, the visit of a Prime Minister" (163). While "crisis" often denotes a decisive "turning point" ("crisis," def 3) here the term functions as a constitutive element of bureaucratic delay. Indeed, as the passage comically points out, crisis can describe not only the sudden urgency attached to the provisions required to stem and treat an outbreak of disease, but also the elaborate rituals attached to the visit of the Prime Minister. This sequence of diversionary crises distills the directionless arc of the novel's narrative structure—an episodic and tangentially related sequence of events, none of which are causally linked, yet each requiring sudden attention: this form provides a paradox of *routine urgency*. Indeed, the narrative displays a fascination with the absurdity of minutiae, each rendered with an exacting humor; it is entirely uninterested in the more sweeping movement of narrative propulsion and direction. While *The Sound of Water* may be recognized generically as a variation on the "disaster novel," I argue that *Mammaries* be considered a novel of "disappearing disaster," of disaster incorporated into bureaucratic routines. That is to say, its engagement with eruptive events is almost entirely buried under the weight of narrative tangents.

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<sup>99</sup> The "Steel Frame" refers to the elite civil servants of the Indian Administrative Service. The phrase "steel frame" originates in the colonial period, then referring to the structure of the Indian Civil Service.



Chatterjee's earlier novel, *English, August*, has been critiqued for failing to portray an alternative to the practices it portrays. *Mammaries* follows suit by belittling the anti-plague task force that arises at the novel's conclusion. While not explicitly allying itself to an ideology or form of organization outside of state bureaucracy, *Mammaries* succeeds in illuminating this routine urgency, and directs indignation not at the sudden outbreak of disease, but at the systemic routines of the state.

What, then, does it mean to figure the "disaster" as a phenomenon easily absorbed or contained (or to use the language of eruption, an easily corked volcano) by the state, rather than provoking a moment of intense urgency? For Naomi Klein (and others), disasters produce an open field of urgency that can be narrated or manipulated (25). However, for Bahadur and Chatterjee, disaster is something that is already—or even *pre-emptively*—contained by the bureaucratic structures of the state. We may be reminded here of Weber's comments on the "permanent character of bureaucracy" (228) and his historical view that despite the claims to revolutionary change, "all successful transformations in [nineteenth century] France have amounted to *coups d'état*" (230). Weber speaks to the *continuity* of bureaucratic hierarchy and practice that often underlies purportedly revolutionary changes. Bahadur and Chatterjee's bureaucratic disaster novels serve as a reminder that bureaucracy is a relatively *stable* social order, both during and after a disaster. By redirecting social urgency to state bureaucratic structures, the novels suggest that the lack of transparency and the rigid hierarchies of bureaucracy are part of India's post-liberalization structural disaster. By illuminating the ways bureaucratic practices lend themselves to both the containment and normalization of disaster events, these novels suggest that bureaucratic practices of disaster management also mediate between the categories of the everyday and the exceptional.

## **5.0 THE WILD WAVES: REPRESENTING NATURAL DISASTER IN POST-TSUNAMI LITERATURE**

On December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004, one of the most forceful earthquakes in recorded history took place beneath the floor of the Indian Ocean, off the western coast of Indonesia. The shifting of tectonic plates displaced millions of tons of water, generating a massive tsunami. The tsunami's reach was monolithic. If one measures a disaster's cosmopolitan ambit by its radius of physically affected territories, the tsunami was arguably the most cosmopolitan of those examined here. In total, the tsunami crashed against fifteen different countries in the Indian Ocean region: Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Somalia, Myanmar, Maldives, Malaysia, Tanzania, Seychelles, Bangladesh, South Africa, Yemen, Kenya, and Madagascar. As its waters receded, the tsunami had claimed upwards of 250,000 lives and left approximately 2.5 million people displaced (Klein 487).

The tsunami was a global event in ways both familiar and unfamiliar to the preceding analysis. The event brought the familiar international inhabitants of contemporary neoliberal disaster zones: the journalists, aid workers, disaster capitalists, and others whose presence and narratives structure the site of disaster as a cosmopolitan space. The aftermath attracted a major influx of reporters, especially to the most damaged countries of Indonesia and Sri Lanka, who broadcast images of wreckage across the globe. Consequently, as Sri Lankan literary critic Minoli Salgado observes, "remote towns and villages that were almost unknown outside their

national boundaries became international bywords for disaster as reporters all over the world tried to situate, fix and habilitate the news” (*Writing* 1). Similar to Bhopal in 1984, or the Chagai Hills in 1998, towns such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka were rendered global flashpoints of disaster. Facilitated by this massive global publicity and new online donation platforms, the tsunami became a humanitarian event, gaining, at the time, “the single greatest outpouring of international aid for a single humanitarian crisis” (Hyndman 18). Aid workers from Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other countries arrived within three days, providing emergency food and housing. Before government relief programs and international relief organizations arrived, the event inspired brief forms of cosmopolitan utopianism: numerous accounts identified local and spontaneous efforts of rescue and aid, regardless of ethnic or religious difference; in Sri Lanka, the tsunami prompted a momentary rhetoric of political unity after decades of violence (de Mel, “Between” 240-41; Barker 176-77). The top-down cosmopolitanism of neoliberal ideology and practice was another component of the long aftermath; the tsunami forms part of Naomi Klein’s narrative of “disaster capitalism.” The disaster enabled the implementation of free market-oriented reconstruction programs, for example, the replacement of local fishing communities with new private luxury hotels (490-92).<sup>100</sup> Finally, for the historian Sugata Bose, the tsunami indicated a form of cosmopolitanism more distinctive to the area; it served as a cruel reminder of the latent interregional dynamics of the Indian Ocean Rim: the trade routes, migration paths, and cultural exchanges that were forged in earlier centuries. “The unity of the Indian Ocean world” Bose writes, “had been demonstrated in the most tragic fashion by a great wall of water moving at the speed of a jet aircraft” (2).

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<sup>100</sup> See Gunewardena for an analysis of the Sri Lankan government’s post-tsunami ban on construction within a “100 meter buffer zone,” a policy that prevented the return of low-income, subsistence-based fishing communities to the coast, but gave exemption to luxury hotels.

How has the tsunami's radius of destruction enabled or disabled narrative production in the nearly ten years since its occurrence? What are the emergent genres employed to narrate the tsunami? Due to the holiday arrival of the tsunami (on Boxing Day), the victims included many foreign tourists who were vacationing on the beaches of Thailand and Sri Lanka. Several films have depicted the European tourist experience of the tsunami, including the survival narrative of Juan Antonio Bayona's *The Impossible* (2012) and the psychological sufferings of those who lost lovers and children in Clint Eastwood's *Hereafter* (2010) and Fabrice du Welz's *Vinyan* (2008). Despite this narrative preoccupation with tourist experience, tourists ultimately constituted only 1% of tsunami deaths (cited in Hyndman 18). Unfortunately and predictably, the three films, all set in Thailand, prioritize the minority experience of their sojourning European protagonists above the Thai locals. The representations of Thai survivors in these films range from a kind of noble, yet silent assistance to the reconstitution of the separated European family (*The Impossible*) to an exoticized menace, in which the Thai—and later Burmese—characters carry out the psychological collapse of the grieving European parents (*Vinyan*).

Early comments after the tsunami suggest that its massive scale makes it particularly difficult to encode into narrative form. Delon Weerasinghe, a Sri Lankan playwright and filmmaker, claims that a fictionalized telling of the tsunami is, for him, beyond the realm of possibility: “The tsunami wasn't a story. It was tens of thousands of stories. No novel or play could possibly do justice to that. No single fiction could represent the multiplicity of experiences which this country alone went through, never mind elsewhere” (qtd. in Doughty). Weerasinghe emphasizes the difficulty of an encompassing, mimetic disaster novel, one that strives to tell the *totality* of the experience. In his memoir of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Dany Laferriere similarly describes the difficulties in composing a novel about such a massive disaster. A novel

of the Haitian earthquake, he writes, “would take a kind of power I don’t possess. Besides, nature has already written it. A grandiose novel in the classical style that features a time (4:53 in the afternoon), a place (Haiti), and more than two million characters. You’d have to be Tolstoy to take up a challenge like that” (51). Both statements figure the novel either as a genre capable of or specializing in the depiction of social totality, a genre encompassing the full extent of human experience in catastrophes as colossal as these recent events. This imagined novel, for Weerasinghe and Laferriere, thus presents an impossible demand upon the imagination.<sup>101</sup>

Laferriere’s statement in part clarifies his preference for his chosen form of writing the disaster: the memoir. In contrast to the novel, the memoir implicitly appears as a genre with a weaker demand upon representational inclusiveness. In fact, compared with traditional autobiography, the memoir has been described in literary criticism as a partial genre, one more engaged with pieces and fragments of experience than with the depiction of an entire life (Luckhurst 118). The partial nature of memoir, then, perhaps suggests its prominence as the principal genre of Anglophone writing about the tsunami, at least at this moment. Memoir is the form in which American travelers (Barker), diasporic Sri Lankans (Deraniyagala), CNN journalists (Bindra; Cooper) and international aid workers (Nicholson) have all encoded their experience. Those writers opting for other forms, such as the poets Indran Amirthanayagam and Jean Arasanayagam, privilege autobiographical voices in their portrayals of post-tsunami Sri Lanka. In the face of the imposing geographical and human scale of the tsunami’s destruction, Anglophone literary production has turned towards the scale of the personal. Paradoxically, then, the most grandiose of disasters has produced the most personal of narrative forms.

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<sup>101</sup> The first two books of Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011), might be considered, at least in part, post-tsunami texts. Together, the two novels cover the overlaps and antagonisms between the global imposition of neoliberal ideology and the localized, improvisational interaction between communities of difference, on the nineteenth century Indian Ocean.

Yet, what is most significant for the spatial politics of these works is not necessarily the form of writing, but the particular aesthetic of representing the onrushing waters. As I demonstrate here, the most dominant trope in Anglophone representations is the haunting figure of what I call the “wild wave.” The tsunami is depicted as an eruption of *wilderness*—constructed as a pure force of nature. These post-tsunami texts offer the opportunity to examine an under-represented topic in this dissertation: the notion of a natural or environmental disaster and its relationship to genres of disaster representation. The concept of wilderness is a problematic one, particularly in relation to the concept of the natural disaster. Within the fields of ecocriticism and environmental ethics, the concept of wilderness has undergone extensive critique for its historical obfuscations (Garrard; Curtin). Similarly, political ecologists have critiqued the concept of the “natural disaster” as an ideological tool with a similar obfuscatory effect (Smith, “There’s No Such Thing”; Davis, *Ecology*). Intriguingly, despite the parallels between the two concepts, the relationship between the overlapping aesthetic tropes of wilderness and the ideology of “natural” disaster has not been closely examined. Indeed, the two have much in common: both wilderness and the natural disaster perform similar ideological functions in constructing nature as entirely outside of human influence and agency and obscuring history and inequalities. Moreover, in terms of aesthetics, the two conceptions of the natural world depend upon the narrative tropes of powerless human agency in the face of a purified environmental force.

Here I argue that notions of human agency are often foreclosed by the powerful aesthetic tropes of the awe-inspiring, wild force of disaster that circulated in the aftermath of the tsunami. After highlighting the prominence of wilderness tropes in a set of early post-tsunami textual representations, I turn towards the deployment and re-writing of wilderness in more extended

narrative treatments of the tsunami: Sonali Deraniyagala's survivor memoir, *Wave* (2013), and Minoli Salgado's novel, *A Little Dust on the Eyes* (2014).

While including interpretations of texts from other parts of the Indian Ocean rim, this chapter focuses primarily on Sri Lankan Anglophone literature. My principle of selection here has to do with, firstly, the number of Sri Lankan published tsunami narratives: second only to Indonesia, Sri Lanka bore the worst of the tsunami's material damages, which has resulted in a growing body of narrative production from both resident and diasporic writers. Secondly, I wish to draw a shift in representation within this emerging national body of literature, moving from early representations that figure the wave as an unruly force of nature to an extended example that depicts the tsunami as an event to be understood within Sri Lankan historical narratives. Within this discussion I highlight the ways environment aesthetics enable an event's recognition *as* a cosmopolitan disaster.

## **5.1 "HAS THE WAVE LOST ITS BEAUTY?": WILDERNESS AND NATURAL DISASTER**

Wilderness is arguably one of the most central—and most contested—topics of the discipline of ecocriticism, as well as within twentieth century environmental movements.<sup>102</sup> The notion of wilderness is a particular literary and cultural construction of the natural world, one that figures a natural site as unruly, threatening, and pristinely uncontaminated by human civilization. In the history of literary figurations of nature, ecocritics often distinguish wilderness from the form of

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<sup>102</sup> For the extensive critical debates surrounding the term, see the collections edited by Callicott and Nelson (1998), (2008).

the pastoral. If the pastoral typically designates a picturesque and harmonious unity of humanity and nature, the idea of wilderness constructs nature as a territorial space outside of human civilization, one defined by both threatening dangers and restorative epiphanies. Scholars assign an ancient or even pre-historical trajectory to the concept of wilderness (Oelschlaeger), but typically emphasize its more recent American iteration, found in the nature writings of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold. As William Cronon argues, this U.S. expression of wilderness unites aspects of the sublime (the secularized sacred within nature) with the western frontier imagination (the claim to open, “uncivilized” spaces) into a particularly influential combination (104). This mixture of cultural imaginations allows wilderness to describe spaces of sublime grandeur as well as domesticated tourist sites. More insidiously, the investment in remote and untrodden spaces “erases the social and political history that gives rise to it” (Garrard 71), and lends itself to an effacement of the extermination and displacement of indigenous populations from these American landscapes (Curtin 3).<sup>103</sup>

While ecocritics typically identify the U.S. as wilderness’s point of origin, wilderness values and discourses certainly circulate far outside of this U.S. context. Recent critics examine how the concept of wilderness has traveled and has been figured differently within other national contexts, such as the settler colonies of Canada and Australia (Crane). More recently, the twentieth century implementation of wilderness conservation and preservation projects has had a similar impact of violent displacement as it did in North America. As Ramachandra Guha argues, the 1970s Project Tiger in India demonstrated once again that the sacralizing of large mammals such as tigers and elephants and undisturbed wild spaces leads to “a direct transfer of resources

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<sup>103</sup> For an historical examination of conservationism’s origins in European colonialism outside of North America, see Grove. Grove argues that state policies combating deforestation and land degradation emerged from the rampant exploitation occurring in the tropics (475).



from the poor to the rich,” displacing peasant communities in the effort to set aside land for conservationist and tourist use (“Radical” 235). Guha calls the wilderness-informed preservation effort an attempt to “transplant the American system of national parks onto Indian soil” (235); moreover, he argues that wilderness discourse romanticizes and ultimately obscures environmental ethics from South Asia and China, even as its proponents claim to emerge from them (236-37).<sup>104</sup>

In this period of critical debate on the term wilderness, the concept of the “natural” disaster has undergone similar commentary in the humanities and the social sciences. Materialist humanities scholars argue that the modern idea of a “natural disaster” tends to divorce catastrophe from history, uprooting the event from its relationship to longstanding social inequalities, development programs, and human responsibilities (Davis, *Ecology* 9; Mukherjee, *Natural Disasters* 7-15). For instance, as the geographer Neil Smith puts it in relation to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans: “the supposed ‘naturalness’ of disasters [...] becomes an ideological camouflage for the social (and therefore preventable) dimensions of such disasters, covering for quite specific social interests” (“There’s No Such Thing”). These recent critiques parallel the late 1970s shifts in social science disaster research towards the study of social vulnerability around catastrophes, rather than the inaugurating events (Gilbert, “Studying Disaster” 14-15).

I argue here that the aesthetics of wilderness largely enable the ideological understanding of natural disaster. The literary tropes of wilderness underlie the emphasis on the suddenness and unexpectedness of the tsunami’s landfall in accounts of the disaster. For example, in media

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<sup>104</sup> Since the major critiques of wilderness, there has been an outgrowth in scholarship emphasizing not conservationism, but the convergence of social justice and environmentalism, often categorized by the phrase the “environmentalism of the poor.” See Martínez-Alier, and Guha and Martínez Alier.

discourses the tsunami is often represented as an utterly “natural” event, occurring entirely outside of human control and expectation. The numerous reports of an animal “sixth sense” that purportedly saved the fauna served to emphasize the tsunami’s deep connection with something non-human, and to wrest it from the domain of human anticipation or preparation.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, numerous accounts highlight the foreignness of the word “tsunami” to a majority of Sri Lankans as evidence of the disaster’s fundamental exceptionalism within Sri Lankan history (Barker 161). Indeed, some long-term coastal residents articulate a newfound, post-disaster dread towards the sea. For instance, one Sri Lankan survivor, a hotel owner on the southeastern coast, stresses the sea’s lingering strangeness; despite having worked for years on traveling cargo ships, “he says he will never comprehend the form the sea took as a tsunami” (Jirasinghe 96).

A number of post-tsunami texts attempt to portray this fundamental shock and lack of recognition towards the ocean after the disaster. Post-tsunami texts from very different locations (the southeastern coast of Sri Lanka, the southern tip of the Indian state of Kerala, as well as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands), each with differing languages, literary traditions and particular experiences of the tsunami, provide ecological meditations upon the sea, reflecting on human coexistence with an uneasy and unstable partner after its eruption. Across these texts is what I call the trope of the “wild wave”: the sudden transformation of the otherwise familiar oceanic landscape into a monstrous and overpowering force of destruction. Wilderness tropes are mobilized to express the feelings of unease, betrayal, and trauma for coastal communities in the wake of disaster. For the many writers deploying such imagery, the representations of the wild

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<sup>105</sup> For an example, see Highfield. Yet, there are conflicting accounts and explanations of animal evacuations, as one Sri Lankan biologist claims that animals fled only when the tsunami struck land (Barker 168).

wave offer a way of naming the sea, a constant feature of everyday coastal life, as a sudden perpetrator of violence.<sup>106</sup>

For instance, Indran Amirthanayagam's collection of linked poems, *The Splintered Face* (2008), an expansive account of the tsunami, explores the wreckage left by the tsunami from a variety of narrative perspectives. Amirthanayagam brings together the conductor of the infamously derailed Samudra Devi (the "Queen of the Sea") train,<sup>107</sup> ghosts of the dead, local displaced people, as well as a diasporic Sri Lankan perspective. Throughout these poems, we find the tropes of a familiar feature of Sri Lankan coastal life transformed into horrifying form. In the collection's preface Amirthanayagam recounts the familiar story of animal escape, noting "the wise elephants, the kingfishers and mynahs, snakes, lizards and monkeys [...] knew the earth had turned *wild*" (my emphasis, 11).

Amirthanayagam focuses his portrayal upon the feeling of violation towards the ocean, registering shock at the sudden violence of the waves. For Amirthanayagam, the ocean is figured as "blind, brutal, blood-/ thirsty," but with the qualification that "she is / our mother" (59). In an extended reflection on the same theme in the poem "Green Sea," Amirthanayagam generates a plurality of conceptual frameworks—to the point of admitted excess—in the attempt to make sense of a survivor's experience. Amirthanayagam's speaker attempts to explain the sea's violence with a range of ideas, figuring the sea as familial guardian or a form of religious justice; the reach towards "all other / available terms, / including fate" suggests the inadequacy of each

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<sup>106</sup> Recent scholarship has engaged distinctive Sri Lankan environmental aesthetics. For a study of discourses on a "jungle tide" and "devouring reef" in relation to colonial and postcolonial modernization plans in Sri Lankan Anglophone writing, see Deckard, "Jungle Tide." For an analysis of the way environmental aesthetics are deployed to "naturalize" purist Sinhalese and Buddhist claims to Sri Lankan land, see Jazeel.

<sup>107</sup> The Samudra Devi train ran along a rail line on Sri Lanka's southern coast, and was thrown from the tracks by the tsunami, killing over 1,000 of its passengers. The Samudra Devi story is commonly noted in accounts of the tsunami, and a memorial has since been constructed to the victims.

explanation to the survivor speaker. Explanatory insufficiency is affirmed once more in the final juxtaposition of the close proximity of death (the decimation of a neighbor's family) to the survivor's view of the sea's vibrant color. This melancholic passage declares the inadequacy of each framework, but does not provide an alternative.

Amirthanayagam moves to questions of the tsunami's memorialization, pondering the suitable ways of depicting the water. The poem poses questions about the location and form of a memorial and poignantly asks: "Has the wave lost / its beauty? Is it now / considered obscene?" (19). Here, the poem considers the way the tsunami degraded the aesthetics of the wave after the disaster; the interpretation suggested here, however, confines obscenity to the immediate agent of destruction on December 26, leaving matters of economic and environmental vulnerability to the side.

Bino K. John's novel, *The Last Song of Savio de Souza* (2011), is set on the southern tip of the Indian state of Kerala, and represents the ocean's sudden violation as an anthropomorphized apology. While the tsunami arrives only in the novel's final pages, its impending arrival is announced in the novel's opening sentence (1), heavily borrowing from the famous introductory line of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). The novel's first chapter is strewn with ominous renderings of the nearby waters. John portrays the Indian Ocean as a constant feature of coastal life, one whose comforts will be inevitably warped. Most evocatively, John portrays a typical late afternoon in southern Kerala, with the sound of the muezzin against the backdrop of a sun setting into the "boisterous confluence of the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean" (7). John captures ordinary life on the coast while also presaging the waters—in that "boisterous confluence"—that will eventually erupt against and over the shoreline. When the tsunami finally washes upon the land at the end of

the novel, John renders its violence anthropomorphically, as the regretful betrayal of an old friend: “the Bay of Bengal receded far back as if in remorse” (254). The narrator describes three waves in the tsunami’s “fifteen minutes of cataclysmic upheaval” (261), the first two surprising and then overrunning the coastal population, while the third “with a whistling sound of penitence, [gives] back the lifeless bodies, whatever could be retrieved from the churning brown waters” (261). By depicting the tidal waves as a matter of tragic necessity, John affirms the wholly natural force of the disaster.

Rajesh Shera’s contemplative film *Ocean of an Old Man* (2008) meditates upon the Indian Ocean in a particularly melancholic mode, as it fixates upon a man’s de-familiarized and estranged relationship to the ocean in the days after the tsunami. Set in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the film features a schoolteacher grieving for the loss of his family and the schoolchildren who are missing from his classes. The ocean’s constantly lapping waves form the aural and visual backdrop to the film’s quiet and rather static narrative arc, highlighting the psychological fragility of the protagonist and the ecological vulnerability of the islands. *Ocean* employs a number of close-ups on the schoolteacher (played by actor Tom Alter), emphasizing his haunted and wild blue eyes, themselves a peculiar vestige of the tsunami’s crash; their contrast with the now-calm waters, I suggest, might be seen as a visual expression of the evocative statement from *The Island*, a Sri Lankan English newspaper: “the sea has calmed down and wears an innocent look as if it never committed any crime” (qtd. in Barker, 181).

Together, these texts articulate a poetics that strives to capture a post-tsunami sense of the water for coastal communities, in which the water is made suddenly strange—or wild—by the tsunami’s landfall. In doing so, however, they leave the understanding of the tsunami as a purely *natural* disaster largely intact. If the fascination with wilderness spaces is based upon their

purported essential difference from the settled species of industrial technology, the tropes of the wild are perhaps similarly alluring or effective for representing a form of environmental disaster that appears outside the realm of human experience, an event that cannot be expected or contained. However, despite the material reality of shock directed towards the ocean, it is important to contest the overwhelming dominance of this framing of the disaster, particularly in the way it can obscure other ways of registering the tsunami's significance. Indeed, as Nandini Gunewardena argues, the relationship of coastal fishing communities should not be romanticized in the pastoral mode: subsistence-based fishers "wage a daily battle with the sea in an effort to secure their livelihoods" (69). Furthermore, it is important to note the way uneven development underlies the vulnerability of the Indian Ocean rim to disaster, as the Indian Ocean lacks the earthquake warning system that the more technologically equipped Pacific Ocean region employs to great effect. Seismologists at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center suggest the existence of such a system in 2004 would have saved lives (Barker 199-201). These depictions of a wild wave might be understood as early and urgent reflections upon the tsunami, yet they are limited in their preoccupation with the wave's wildness. Indeed they might be understood as attempts to answer the poet Jean Arasanayagam's questions on the ability of the observer or artist to make meaning from the disaster's disarray: "Who can ascribe emotion to the wave? / Who can interpret its calligraphy? / Who interpret the jagged sculptures of debris?" (43). I turn to a text that both subverts and relies upon the poetics of wilderness in its answers to these same questions.

## 5.2 *WAVE: A SURVIVOR'S WILDERNESS MEMOIR*

Sonali Deraniyagala's memoir of survival and memory, *Wave* (2013), offers a different meditation upon the water. In the emergent literary production on the tsunami, Deraniyagala's memoir is arguably the most internationally prominent Sri Lankan Anglophone account thus far. In addition to its widespread critical acclaim, the book has been awarded the 2014 PEN/Ackerley Prize, a prize granted to memoirs and autobiographies (Travis). Deraniyagala, an economist by training, has also begun to emerge as a significant literary figure in journals and magazines. Since the publication of the memoir, she has reviewed novels for the *New York Times* and has been identified by critics as part of the ever-increasing prominence of South Asians in English language writing (Kumar, "The Banker"). The memoir has established her as an emerging figure on the literary landscape.

Deraniyagala's memoir narrates the rush of the tsunami into her family's hotel in Yala, the Sri Lankan national park and wildlife preserve; Deraniyagala survives, but suffers the devastating loss of her parents, husband, and two children to the wave. Structured by a sequence of dated entries, beginning with the tsunami's arrival in 2004 and concluding in June 2012, the memoir is a harrowing account of familial loss and her subsequent efforts to live *with* their memory. The book is a brief and compressed account of that time period, employing a lucid and exacting prose, one that confronts the immediate brutality of her loss and the long-term psychological toll of absence.

The memoir distinctly breaks from the tropes of trauma writing by not obsessively returning to the portrayal of the event itself; moreover, the book rejects a narrative of emotional catharsis carried out by the act of writing. Grief remains at the end of the memoir, refusing to be triumphantly overcome. More significantly, Deraniyagala refuses to provide an ethnographic

account of Sri Lanka before and after the tsunami to an outside audience; she also rebuffs the tropes of the disaster exotic by eschewing sensationalist or sentimental images of wreckage and suffering in the aftermath. *Wave* thus differs tremendously from the American memoirs of the tsunami aftermath. Adele Barker writes in an ethnographic mode in the effort to bear witness to the losses to the Sri Lanka she knew in her time teaching in the country. Anderson Cooper's account admittedly uses the tsunami as an interchangeable backdrop: "It's the way it always is: find the worst-off place and plunge in head first. It sounds strange, ghoulish, perhaps, but it's the truth" (17); post-tsunami Sri Lanka functions as a professional escape from his personal trauma of familial loss, a more detailed story revealed slowly over the course of the memoir. After his cameraman jokingly refers to the practice of sentimental images in their reports, Cooper opines, defining the practice as a matter of necessity to the job of the CNN reporter (and thus eliding other modes of representation): "As a journalist, no matter how moved you feel, how respectful you are, part of your brain remains focused on how to capture the horror you see, how to package it, present it to others. We're here because children have died. Phil [the cameraman] is just cutting to the chase" (28).

And yet, despite the memoir's narrative content, the first critical reviews of *Wave* did not consider it as part of a wider body of tsunami narratives. Notably, early critical reception has largely eschewed the contexts of Sri Lankan literature, accounts of the tsunami, or broader narrations of historical trauma. Instead, reviews typically identify the book's principal concern as the matter of individual grief, placing the memoir within the genre of the "grief memoir." One critic places the book among "memoirs of grief" (Garner), and another identifies it as "the most exceptional book about grief I've ever read" (Strayed). Reviews of *Wave* in popular British and American periodicals have favorably compared the memoir to Didion's *Year of Magical*



*Thinking* (Beer); the connection is further established in Deraniyagala's citation of Didion as one of her "literary heroes" (Adams). To understand this generic placement, one must consider *Wave* within the wider context of the financial success of both disaster reportage and the ascendancy of the memoir form in the publishing industry. As Roger Luckhurst observes, "the success of the genre of memoir was one of the most notable publishing phenomena of the 1990s" (117); numerous other critics note the memoir's contemporary commercial dominance in the publishing industry. Luckhurst identifies five historical factors that helped to transform memoir writing and catapult it to both academic and commercial literary prominence in the late 1980s into the 1990s. These include: "feminist revisions of autobiography and the particular impact of recovered memory on the memoir form; the AIDS diary; the rise of the illness memoir, christened 'pathography' in the early 1990s; the trend for confessional journalism; the metastasis of celebrity confession across media, from the autobiography focused on revealing 'private' trauma to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*" (120).

The "grief memoir," an increasingly popular literary genre in the U.S. and the U.K., should be seen a recent outgrowth of this commercial rise of the memoir.<sup>108</sup> As one writer puts it, "books by authors who have lost a loved one are becoming so common they're now a classifiable snowflake in the unending blizzard of memoirs" (Morris). The term principally refers to confessional autobiographical accounts, usually written by women, of great personal loss. They differ from Luckhurst's above classifications in that they do not narrate the exceptional historical circumstance, whether it be the Nazi concentration camp of Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947), the brutal Guatemalan state violence in *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1984), or the AIDS epidemic in Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time* (1988). Instead, the grief memoir narrates an

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<sup>108</sup> For other grief memoir examples, see Rieff, Oates, and O'Rourke. For accounts of the rise of the grief memoir, ranging from cautious to hostile, see Morris and Saunders.

ordinary tragedy for the late twentieth and early twenty-first century middle or upper class individual (one who is almost always already a well-established writer): its subject typically concerns the death of family members (spouses, parents, or children) to illness or to sudden accident and the ensuing attempt to make meaning out of that absence. Journalistic accounts of the grief memoir routinely name Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) as the most emblematic and influential text of the genre. Indeed, Didion's memoir is illustrative in the ordinariness of its topic (the sudden death of her husband from a heart attack) and the majority of its subsequent narrative content (a deeply personal account of the first year of his absence). Moreover, Didion's *Year* also contains a representative narrative arc: rather than a concluding experience of catharsis, the memoir records grief's peculiarities and minutiae; in particular, the book is focused on grief's dizzying temporality, in which certain places or events interrupt the present moment and transport Didion back to the past. *The Year of Magical Thinking* is a study of the way lives are intertwined; it functions as a tribute to that intertwinement and a memorial to its conclusion. For the grief memoir, however peculiar the circumstances of death may be, it primarily narrates an otherwise everyday middle-to-upper class life; part of the contemporary genre's horror and allure, I suggest, is that the experiences related in the memoir—the death of family members, for instance—will eventually be replicated in the lives of its readers. Thus, while it offers the allure of voyeurism (especially in the case of Didion's literary celebrity), the grief memoir functions as a kind of preparatory instruction for similar impending experiences of individual loss.

I wish to point out a considerable contraction of scale here: to read Deraniyagala *primarily* within the formation of the grief memoir is to place what is typically rendered an extraordinary disaster within the confines of everyday middle class illness and death. If the grief

memoir is constituted by the ordinary tragic losses of middle class life, how is what is most often recognized as an exceptional event suddenly grouped within the genre of the grief memoir? What particular narrative conventions enable such a generic recognition? This classification extends to critics and writers of great repute: Michael Ondaatje has praised the book (in his comment on the back of the dust jacket) for achieving this very act of compression: “what Sonali Deraniyagala has done, in this beautifully written book, is to similarly give us a portrait of an event and its after-effects that we have never experienced or witnessed.” Similarly, Teju Cole figures the exceptionalism of Deraniyagala’s experience as an *enhancement* of the grief memoir’s pedagogical preparations for the reader’s mourning: “In witnessing something far-fetched, something brought out before us from the distant perimeter of human experience, we are in some way fortified for our own inevitable, if lesser, struggles”; and again: “very few of us will ever experience loss on this scale, but, somehow, her having written about hers is a kind of preemptive consolation for us, too” (“Better Quality”).

How might this categorization of the memoir be understood? Indeed, *Wave* is not an account of the tsunami’s massive radius of damage; instead, it is as an account of Deraniyagala’s grieving experiences, and a loving memorial to her fallen family members, illuminating the peculiarity and intensity of their lives. The book is resolutely focused upon her personal experience of grieving, excluding the wider context of other Sri Lankan fatalities and displacements, or the neoliberal programs of reconstruction. As Sharae Deckard observes, “the narrative remains tautly focused on her individual middle-class expatriate perspective, never opening up to considering the differentiated experiences of other survivors, as if hesitant to testify to any experience beyond her own” (“Calligraphy” 37-38). The absence of sociological, cultural, or geographical context for the tsunami—even later in the book, as the distance from the

event increases—is a curious one considering the author’s background. Such information is absent, despite the fact that Deraniyagala’s published work in economics cautions against the “neoliberal consensus” in the field of economics (“New Trade” 821), and her recent teaching at Columbia University is focused on matters of “Disaster and Development.”

My contention here is that *Wave* achieves this reduction in scale—the rendering of transnational disaster into familial tragedy—through its mobilization of wilderness tropes.<sup>109</sup> When the memoir is not focused upon the interior domestic scenes of family homes and lost daily rituals (the common scenes of the grief memoir), its key scenes are encounters with the wild. In fact, the natural world serves as a kind of binding agent for the memoir, appearing as both backdrop and focus of scenes organized around a familial love of naturalism, exhibited in visits to wildlife preserves and time spent watching television nature programs. To be clear, my argument here is *not* that *Wave* should be saddled with the burden of expansive disaster representation. Rather, I argue that it is through the tropes of wilderness writing (untamed and empty land, the “megafauna” of the ocean, and the venture into the wild and return to civilization) that Deraniyagala is able to achieve the lucidity and clarity of familial focus that enables reviewers to categorize the book within the grief memoir genre.

### 5.3 THE WILDERNESS POETICS OF GRIEF

The use of wilderness tropes in Deraniyagala’s memoir begins with her rendering of the tsunami itself. Six months after the disaster, Deraniyagala includes the wider context for the disaster,

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<sup>109</sup> Significantly, Deraniyagala cites Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard* (1978), a wilderness memoir written after the death of Matthiessen’s wife, as a powerful antidote to the physical pain of her loss (Adams).

identifying the technical explanations for its occurrence, its estimated death toll, and its name: “An earthquake under the sea near Indonesia. The tectonic plates shifted. It’s the biggest natural disaster ever. A tsunami. Until now our killer had for me been nameless. This was the first time I’d ever heard the word” (38). Deraniyagala stands numb in the face of this information. Instead, she insists on rendering the tsunami as an environmental force, one beyond language in order to convey the magnitude of her grief: “They meant nothing, those words, tsunami, tidal wave. Something came for us. I didn’t know what it was then, and I still didn’t. How can something so unknown do this?” (38). The tsunami appears here as an agent outside of categorization, a “something” beyond comprehension. In this way, the tsunami’s mode of expression here belongs to the combination of terror and awe that characterizes portraits of the environmental sublime (Garrard 64-65). The memoir’s title, *Wave*, further illuminates the text’s engagement with the disaster’s singularity, as it distills the tsunami’s trio of waves into a monolithic onrushing force.

Beyond this initial depiction of the tidal waves, it is the setting of Yala national park, the constructed wilderness environment, that most grounds the text’s wilderness poetics. Deraniyagala was vacationing with her family in the Yala national park in southeastern Sri Lanka when the tsunami struck the island. As a diasporic Sri Lankan, her trip to the coastline is not simply a one-off escapist venture (like the tourist survival films described above), but part of a lifelong experience of movement between places that links her immediate family in London with her extended family in Colombo. For Deraniyagala, Yala is the site of “countless family holidays” (194) in both her childhood and adulthood, and is thus infused with familial memory. This difference means that her narrative account is actively engaged with the place around her: as the water carries her on her back, the sight of painted storks in the Yala sky is one she has seen “thousands of times,” and is thus strangely distorted by the sudden onset of disaster (12).

The geographer Tariq Jazeel traces the history of Yala (or Ruhuna National Park, as it officially became named in 1943), focusing on the cultural politics of its natural aesthetics. He notes that, for the nineteenth century British colonial administration, the arid heat and scrub growth of the southeastern coast of the island was considered an unproductive jungle, one whose “unchecked and regressive wildness stood in the way of human progress” (37). To make use of the land and its animal inhabitants, large parts of the area were set aside as a colonial hunting preserve in the late nineteenth century, becoming what Jazeel calls a “regulated space of nature” (38). Later, as its population of animal life was pushed to the brink of extinction, sections of the park were established as wildlife preserves in order to maintain the institution of the hunt (40). Yala thus has a similar problematic history as other conservationist national parks and state-preserved wilderness sites.<sup>110</sup> This history is not present in *Wave*; instead, in Deraniyagala’s portrayal, the preserve signifies as it does to numerous visitors: Yala is home to many family retreats and romantic getaways, and serves as a respite from the clamor and frenzy of urban life.

After the tsunami, Yala is both the scene of Deraniyagala’s disaster and the site of her renewal. At first, Deraniyagala refuses contact with memories of her family, and assiduously avoids any trace of them for fear of recognizing the permanence of their loss. “I shoved away stories of them,” she writes. “Let them, let our life, become as unreal as that wave” (51). In the months afterwards, her disposition changes, and she ravenously searches for every last bit they have left behind. She records her experience in Yala, six months after the tsunami, as a turning point in her grief.

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<sup>110</sup> Yala appears in other Sri Lankan texts in the conventional conservationist sense of wilderness space. For instance, Romesh Gunasekera critically renders a marine biologist’s desires for empty land, based on Yala’s model: “If only we could make the whole coast like Yala. A sea sanctuary, with not a soul there. A real refuge” (171).

It is in *Wave's* depiction of the movement between the urban spaces of Colombo and London to the site of destruction in Yala that we most find the tropes of wilderness writing. As a literary genre, wilderness writing typically narrates a journey from the space of human civilization into the untamed wilds, and back again. For the wilderness traveler, this sojourn in the wild then stimulates an account of spiritual restoration and rejuvenation (Garrard 59-60). Garrard notes a fundamental contradiction in the wilderness narrative: the wildness of the natural space depends upon its distinct separation from humanity, but “the ideal wilderness narrative posits a human subject whose most authentic existence is located precisely there” (71).

For Deraniyagala, the tamed wilderness space of Yala has been disfigured, its idyllic natural aesthetics transformed by the tsunami into a ruined wasteland:

Dust, rubble, shards of glass. This was the hotel. It had been flattened. There were no walls standing, it was as though they'd been sliced off the floors. Only those clay-tiled floors remained, large footprints of rooms, thin corridors stretching out in all directions. Fallen trees were everywhere, the surrounding forest had flown apart. As if there'd been a wildfire, all the trees were charred. A signboard fallen in the dirt said YALA SAFARI BEACH HOTEL. I stumbled about this shattered landscape. I stubbed my toe on this ruin. (70)

Paradoxically, what occurs here is a transformation of the conservationist wilderness into a *hostile* wilderness. Deraniyagala's account soon figures this hazardous wilderness as an emotional mirror: it matches the desolate fury of her grief and thus allows her some respite from it. For instance, she repeatedly visits the scene of disaster, Yala's uninhabited scrub jungle after the tsunami, eager to find an environment that matches her emotional disarray: “Nothing was normal here [in the forest], and that I liked. Here, in this ravaged landscape, I didn't have to

shrink from everyday details that were no longer ours. [...] My surroundings were as deformed as I was. I belonged here” (74). However, the jungle as emotional mirror begins to crack as Deraniyagala observes the regrowth of the forest over time: “Everywhere, on bare ground and between cracks in the floors, tiny pink and white flowers that flourish along the seashore forced their way up. *Mini mal*, or graveyard flowers, they are called. I resented this renewal. How dare you heal” (75). In its wreckage and self-restoration, the wilderness space both reflects and subverts her emotional condition; this paradox of simultaneous wounding and replenishment becomes a provocation for Deraniyagala to remember. She describes the experience: “We loved this wilderness. Now slowly it began pressing into me, enticing me to take notice, stirring me from my stupor, just a little. And here I found the nerve to remember” (75). In Deraniyagala’s rendering, the duality of wilderness allows her entry into her painful familial memories. In the manner of the wilderness narrative arc, the encounter with the wild enables a kind of ecological epiphany, one that may be carried back to human civilization. If the sea functions as wild agent of destruction, the returning jungle inversely functions as a wild agent of healing. Deraniyagala presents a kind of closed circuit, in which her confrontation with the violence of natural disaster occurs in the remote and isolated space of wilderness—both forms of an abstract and pure form of nature.

Deraniyagala records a similar scene of emotional projection—wilderness as a cracking emotional mirror—during an encounter with blue whales, or what some critics refer to as the “charismatic megafauna” of the ocean (Steinwand). In a section on a whale-watching voyage off the Mirissa Coast (the southwest of Sri Lanka), Deraniyagala recounts her observations of an expansive and empty ocean and two blue whales within it. In 2011, the trip is her first venture out into the Indian Ocean after the tsunami. The scene becomes a space of intense reflection on



her familial loss, heightened by both the sublimity of the ocean's scale and her son's knowledge of that scale:

Our boat sits alone in a smoky dark-blue ocean twenty miles from the southern coast of Sri Lanka. There are no other boats in sight, it was some hours ago we last saw land, the sky is bare, no birds. I expand this emptiness, thinking how to the south of us is endless ocean, and then Antarctica. The sea is deep here, it drops two thousand meters to where darkness is complete and some fish have no eyes. Vik knew all about this, the midnight zone. (197-198)

Deraniyagala recalls her family's previous visits to the coast and remorsefully envisions their presence on board the small boat. As the crew catches sight of a blue whale, Deraniyagala is pulled back into the space of memory, into her living room alongside her son's rapt attention while viewing documentary footage of whales. The scene becomes a study in incompatible presence and absence: "I wished the whale ahead of us would disappear. I can't endure whales without Vik" (200). However, Deraniyagala's desire for disappearance becomes a desire for detail, as she becomes overwhelmed with the creature's grandeur and size. Indeed, she might be seen as acting to fulfill her son's halted naturalist inclinations, his dreadfully interrupted desire for knowledge about the whale. Yet the whales keep much in reserve, withholding the completeness of vision Deraniyagala yearns for: "They keep their hugeness hidden, these whales, rarely revealing themselves whole to my eager eyes" (201). In this way, the whales are a metaphor for the partial presence of her family; they stand for a resolution withheld, an unachievable catharsis.

Like the above scrub jungle, the significance of the whales fluctuates between emotional identification and a subversion of that identification. For example, she describes the way the

whale interrupts her projected metaphorical meaning: “I am unclenched and calmed by the beauty of these creatures, by their pureness, and I savor this relief. Then again I look. This is amazing, now a whale shits. A vast crimson slick slowly fades into the blue water, ah, you should see this, Vik. All that krill” (202-03). Deraniyagala oscillates between affirming and subverting the idea of a pure wilderness: the whale is either a luminous, ethereal force, or a corporeal, defecating mammal. This contradictory representation resolves in a provocation to remember—here, in the direct address to her missing son. Therefore, whether as an affirmed or undermined category, “wilderness” spaces function as conduits to familial memory in the memoir; they are necessary to the book’s narration of grief. Like Yala National Park, the whale watching expedition is also a human-constructed experience of wilderness tourism: the ocean expanse is primarily empty of human histories outside of the familial. These wilderness scenes, I contend, enable the memoir to stage its confrontation with the tsunami on the grounds of the natural, as the catastrophic force of the tsunami must be countered or understood through the meditative, tranquil sites of the wild.

Deraniyagala’s memoir is torn between an embrace and a subversion of these contrasting wilderness ideals: wilderness offers a cultural form of expressing the massive extent of her loss, but her sharp eye for detail undercuts a full endorsement or identification with those ideals. Nevertheless, *Wave* remains immersed in these tropes, and ultimately reflects the intertwinement of wilderness constructions of nature and the ideological construction of a depoliticized, purely natural disaster.

Only in a brief moment does the text surge beyond the oceanic wild. Before the whales appear to Deraniyagala’s boat, the *absence* of the megafauna presents a reflection on the ocean as an interconnected historical space:

The men working on the boat tell us they haven't sighted whales in this sea for some days now. Not since the tsunami in Japan, they say, and they wonder if these creatures were disturbed by it. It is five days now since the earthquake and tsunami hit Japan. And I've not been able to keep away from those television images. As much as they horrify me, I want to see the meanness of that black water as it crumples whole cities in its path. So this is what got us, I thought, when I saw waves leaping over seawalls in Japan. This is what I was churning in. I never saw the scale of it then. This same ocean. Staring at me now all blue and innocent. How it turned. (202)

The passage intriguingly presents an interconnected aquatic space, one that asserts the fluidity of the water ("this same ocean") over the geographical and territorial divisions of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Most importantly, however, the passage identifies the water as a space of history: one that identifies tsunamis as an historical experience shared by Sri Lanka and Japan. Moreover, the connection between contexts here is enabled by the knowledge shared by the sailors—the laborers on the ocean who know its rhythms and its absences.

This reflection upon the water as an historical space, populated by laborers and other tsunami events, is ultimately brief, but it suggests an alternate way of representing the post-tsunami waters surrounding Sri Lanka—one that Minoli Salgado's novel, *A Little Dust on the Eyes*, takes up at length.

## 5.4 THE KILLING WATERS

In an essay on tidal wave representations in the first post-tsunami decade of Sri Lankan Anglophone literature, Sharae Deckard observes that the tsunami largely appears within this literary production as a violently exceptional moment:

For the present, the tsunami is most often represented as a temporal and experiential rupture, bearing no relation to lived memory and lacking semiotics through which to apprehend it. Transnational and Sri Lankan media incessantly repeat the factoid that there is no word for ‘tsunami’ in Sinhalese or Tamil. Even if other tidal waves had occurred in the deep time of Sri Lanka’s inhabitation—with recorded instances in the second century BC and in 1883 after Krakatoa’s eruption—the 2004 tsunami was nonetheless widely represented as exceptional, the most devastating ‘natural’ hazard in living memory. (“Calligraphy” 37)

Deckard’s observation here largely applies to Sri Lankan Anglophone texts in the first post-tsunami decade. However, Minoli Salgado’s *A Little Dust on the Eyes*, published soon after the above essay, provides a recent and noteworthy exception in developing a sustained aesthetics of immersion, locating the tsunami as continuous within the nation’s historical and cultural narratives. Published a decade after the disaster, *A Little Dust* gives credence to the idea that the novel is a “relatively ‘slow’ form—both to read and to write” in relation to catastrophe, but consequently bears the ability to depict the event’s long-term effects (Carrigan, “Introduction,” 10). Moreover, Salgado mobilizes the novel form’s ability to represent layered temporalities and character perspectives (and their points of convergence and divergence) in a temporally porous narrative style, integrating the tsunami within longstanding national concerns.

Interestingly, Salgado challenges the wilderness figuration of the disaster not by emphasizing features of political ecology like rising sea levels, demolished coral reef or the economically vulnerable coastal communities. Instead, she emphasizes the cultural inscribing of the tsunami *within* existing national Sri Lankan discourses—namely, the muffled discourses around the civil war. Salgado achieves this narrative immersion by depicting the tsunami as continuous within what I refer to as the tropes of the island’s “killing waters.” The term “killing fields” is often attributed to the Cambodian journalist Dith Pran in reference to the sites of mass execution and burial carried out by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. The phrase was popularized as the title of a 1984 British film about the Cambodian killings (*The Killing Fields*), and has since been applied to numerous sites of government sanctioned mass killings.<sup>111</sup> My phrase here, “killing waters,” attempts to distill the connection Salgado’s novel establishes between the coastal sea and its tributaries as sites of civil war violence and the tsunami’s sudden act of destruction. Salgado depicts the sea—and its many tributaries and lagoons—as longstanding sites of violence, sites continuous with Sri Lanka’s bloody history in the years of the civil war. When the water claims thousands of human lives on December 26, 2004, the novel prompts connections to the country’s violent past; as *Dust* makes clear over the course of its narrative, the water has borne bodies before and after the tsunami. With this connection, Salgado disrupts the depiction of the tsunami as a force of natural wilderness as well as the understanding of disaster as a radical exception within Sri Lankan national history.

While the tsunami is mentioned on the novel’s prefatory first page as an impending event, the bulk of the novel focuses on the return of diasporic Sri Lankan woman, Savi, to her childhood home in the weeks before the tsunami. Savi returns for a cousin’s wedding, and

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<sup>111</sup>For an application of “killing fields” to Sri Lanka, see Callum Macrae’s documentary film, *Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields* (2011) about the brutal final months of the civil conflict.

uncomfortably reunites with old family and lingering memories in the south of Sri Lanka. The novel stages familiar themes within Anglophone Sri Lankan fiction: the anxieties of an immigrant's return to her native land, the rapacious tourist gaze and claims upon the island, as well as the resonant silences left by nearly two decades of conflict in the brief ceasefire period, beginning in 2002.<sup>112</sup>

At the core of the novel is the relationship between two upper class Sinhalese cousins, Savi and Renu Rodrigo: the former was sent away to study in England two years after the outbreak of the civil conflict in 1983, while the latter remained in Sri Lanka. The proximity to the war shapes each woman's life and bears a particular influence upon the writing projects that each pursues. Savi lives apart from Sri Lanka during the decades of civil conflict, connected to the country primarily by memory and the personal letters written to her by her father; she admits that "she had followed the public events" of the civil war, but had done so in a way that kept her private memories intact, translating unmanageable facts into an armor-plated language she'd acquired at university" (44). In the present moment of the novel, Savi is writing a PhD thesis in England on Sinhala myth and nationalism, exploring the mythic origins she argues are deeply connected to the ethnic violence (137-138). This concern with myth is grounded in a childhood fascination with mythic stories, but is also depicted as stemming from her diasporic distance from the country: late in the novel, standing in a local NGO office dedicated to assisting the

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<sup>112</sup> The civil war was a nearly three decades long armed conflict, initiated by anti-Tamil riots in Colombo in 1983, and concluding with the government's defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009. The history of the conflict is rooted in longstanding colonial classifications that reified ethnic categorizations and postcolonial majoritarian policies that elevated the Sinhala as the national language in 1965 and disenfranchised minority Tamils in the north. While the conflict in the north was primarily characterized as a struggle for Tamil sovereignty, in the south the conflict had explicitly Marxist dimensions, as the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) carried out two insurgencies (1971, 1987) against the government. Both arenas of conflict engulfed unarmed citizens, and government sanctioned violence has left thousands of people abducted and disappeared. For a study of Sri Lankan Anglophone fiction and the civil war, see Jayasuriya.

families of the disappeared, Savi notes that her thesis “sounded grand, weighty, far too large for this cramped space,” thus affirming her feelings of “utter irrelevance to events” (133).

Conversely, Renu has lived intimately with the conflict, and can “feel the shards of history embedded in her skin” (76). Renu grows up with a family that carefully maintains their distance from the violence. She learns about the political conflict by piecing together fragments: bits of conversation she overhears outdoors that “made her feel she was connected to people who led invisible lives” (181) and newspaper clippings she assembles in her room, which teach her the instability of language and the role of media in shaping discourse and accountability. This intimate distance—and an experience of implication—prompts her work at a rehabilitation center for families of the disappeared; moreover, it fuels her composition of a manuscript devoted to a young man named Bradley Sirisena, the son of a disappeared labor organizer. Bradley is a kind of subaltern representational challenge for the Renu, one whose knowing silence about the abduction both inspires and defies Renu’s writing.

Encounters with the “killing waters” are incredibly influential for both primary characters. At first mention, Salgado portrays the trope of the killing waters in everyday language, embedded in an apparent malapropism. As Renu recounts the events of her life to Savi during their years apart, she offhandedly uses the expression, “but that’s all blood under the bridge” (92). Savi considers correcting her cousin, but registers the phrase as apt for a time when “only florists and coffin-makers thrived” (92). The interchangeability of blood and water might seem a sensationalist rendering of the war on its own terms, but in the context of the novel’s larger project of representation, here it affirms the water as a history-laden space.

Indeed, the coastal waterscape of Sri Lanka features prominently in the novel, long before the tsunami enters as a narrative event. For Savi, her childhood memories of Sri Lanka are

thoroughly soaked with water. Through this aqueous memory, Salgado emphasizes the coastal geography of the south, where the sight and sound of water are a part of everyday life. As we learn early on in the novel, water is a defining feature of Savi's memory and imagination of Sri Lanka: "her memories of the place were mediated by water. In every image water swelled into view" (42). Bodies of water are so ever-present that their boundaries and classificatory distinctions become indistinguishable in Savi's memory. For instance, as she remembers afternoons she spent on a swing, Savi puzzles over whether or not the sight of water over the horizon was "a river, lagoon or some quiet stretch of sea that she faced" (43). What is apparent instead, is that water is a constant environmental feature of her childhood home, and defines her memory of the place.

After Savi returns to Sri Lanka, Salgado deploys aqueous metaphors to describe the flow of time in the south and Savi's notions of returning to an organic whole: "the days ran together in uneven eddies. It was easy to slip into the arms of this time, to be drawn into belonging by those who lived here, as if her city life were a mere interruption to these days moved by water, between still and moving water, between river and lagoon and the echo of the sea" (83). Savi portrays a situation of re-immersion and acceptance into her former home, a place whose integrity and fullness is reinforced by its apparent ecological unity—the interconnectedness of bodies of water in the southern landscape. As the novel continues, Savi matches her breathing to the movement of water at the coastline, "an old pattern of trying to catch the release of each wave with her breath," which becomes a method of reintegrating herself within the rhythms of coastal life (172).

Later, we learn that Savi's preoccupation with the water is not a matter of romantic idealization—lifting her childhood home into an image of aqueous harmony—but rather an



engagement with the setting of personal loss. When Savi is in England, she is notified of her father's disappearance, and then the recovery of his body from the water. While the coroner declares the death accidental, his political activity in life and the circumstances of his death cast a shadow of doubt. While his exact political activity remains unclear throughout the novel, Savi's father Dominic, a lawyer in the Sri Lankan courts, is known for meeting with family members of the disappeared and is accused of "encouraging" their cases against the government (76). Dominic's death becomes bound within what Savi regards as that "too public" set of events: his body is found by a fisherman at a time when "there were too, too many bodies surfacing" (113). As the novel points out, a body found in the water during the conflict years was readily identifiable as a sign of execution by the military sanctioned death squads (95).<sup>113</sup> Though doubt remains about Dominic, his death is washed within the larger context of political killings; its circumstances symbolically retrieve those many other bodies that lay in the water.

Yet, perhaps most significantly for the novel's alternate figuration of water is Renu's childhood direct encounter with the submerged body of an unknown man. The mystery of the culprit surrounding Dominic's death is contrasted with the mystery of identity for this man. Renu ventures into the lagoon behind her family's home on a small boat, and there discovers the consequences of the war. Her encounter is expressed through the imagery of horror:

She saw the rough shape of it as a disturbance in the leaves. She looked over the side of the boat and saw a part of it lifting to reveal something that had the texture, the color of rubber, though too porous here, too soft, with feathers perhaps. For a moment she thought

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<sup>113</sup> As the novel makes explicit, killings carried out by the leftist insurgents and the government sanctioned death squads each bore a specific "trademark" (95). Salgado identifies bodies burned and left by the roadside as the signature mark of the death squads, but the corpses represented and referenced most vividly here are among those "dumped in the river" and "thrown in the sea" (95). This interest in the submerged corpses demonstrates the novel's larger project of situating the tsunami within existing historical phenomena.

these might be kitchen scraps, but as she put her hand in the water, turning back a dark leaf, she saw a round form turn its face towards her, the eyes rolling round so she was caught in the full sweep of the white gaze as the body rose into definition and an arm came towards her, the arm moving up as if reaching for the boat. Her gaze entered the gash on his temple, the underwater shirt and sarong. (186)

The scene is one of horrific discovery, in which the expectation of domestic refuse is defied by the encounter with the results of domestic warfare. The body, marked with the wound upon its head, is unequivocally a casualty of the death squads.

Renu's reaction is one of fear and retraction. She drops the oar in surprise and then, in a panic to escape, "she struck out and pushed away from the dead man, pushed against the mangled darkness of him, his body the only object that offered enough resistance to push herself free" (186-187). Salgado here stages a literal shoving away, a refusal to bear witness. Yet even then, as Renu pushes against the corpse, her touch gives the body a lingering clarity in her mind: "Her hands were wet against his coldness, her hand reaching out and catching the detail of his face that rippled into definition at her touch, the flailing arm trailing after as she tried to get away, the boat rolling and erratic with broken lilies till it suddenly rose and tipped to one side lifting into grass" (187). The scene ends in upheaval: the boat dumps her back onto solid ground, yet leaves her psychologically unmoored.

By depicting the southern waterscape as bearing the bodies of political killings, Salgado figures the waters as a space of violence and human memory. Moreover, these submerged corpses massively impact each woman's life, reinforcing Savi's physical distance from the country and influencing Renu's decision to act on behalf of the disappeared; Salgado thus

situates the killing waters both as part of the national history of the island and the personal history of individuals.

## 5.5 “A FLUID NARRATIVE”

When the tsunami rushes inland on the morning of December 26, it occurs late in the novel, in the book’s penultimate chapter. There, the tsunami is figured as both an interruption and a continuation of the civil war’s unfinished legacies. The night before the tsunami’s arrival, the Rodrigo family discovers three murders of former military officers in their hotel, all of them carried out as a delayed reprisal by Bradley Sirisena against the abduction and disappearance of his father. Yet, the circumstances of that night are interrupted by the crash of the tsunami. The narrator announces that the mysterious details of that night “would be forgotten, lost in the events of historical time, just as all private memory can be washed away in the instant generation of a collective past” (206). Intriguingly, the first casualty of the tsunami here is the loss of a private sphere; the loss of these small, unresolved stories, is itself portrayed as a repetition within the island’s history of violence. The novel depicts the tidal waves as committing a violence similar to the creation of an exclusionary “collective past,” here a clear reference to the mythic origins propagated by both the Sinhalese and Tamils during the civil war. Thus, as the killing waters surge into the south, Salgado avoids a depiction of a sudden, natural force of the wild, figuring it instead as bound within the history of the island. The tsunami generates a spatial expansion of loss outwards from the private sphere, one that is figured not as an achievement of global “awareness,” but as an growing distance that mirrors the failed reach for another’s grasp: “In just a few hours, tragedy became local, tragedy became global, tragedy became the distance

between hands that failed to touch” (206). In other words, Salgado emphasizes the way the tsunami thwarts the tentative reunions and reconciliations in the brief post-ceasefire years.

Indeed, the tsunami’s impact is then rendered via a change in narrative style that emphasizes the loss of specific voices. The dominant narrative mode of *A Little Dust* is what narratologist Gérard Genette calls focalization, in which the independent narrative voice is altered by the moods of specific characters (189). When the tsunami strikes, this narrative mode is shunted aside; the narrative voice suddenly ascends to an aerial or nonfocalized perspective, rising above the characters to announce technical information on the waves (their magnitude, speed, reach, etc.), and the number of lives claimed. The aerial perspective fixates upon the swell produced by the underwater earthquake. Most significantly for the novel’s treatment of disaster representation, the narrative voice then moves away from the techno-scientific register and renders the swell in narrative terms:

It [the swell] is a fluid narrative whose displaced components gain an unpredictable force as it reaches the end, just as everything transient carries the measure of its own time and energy within itself, just as lines of influence remain indirect and uncertain. On reaching shallow water it is slowed down, the energy of its speed transferred to gaining height and power in a penultimate chapter. A coastal road is wiped out like a gap in the plot. Small disturbances capable of generating such disasters take place unnoticed every day. They are molecular, subatomic, unmeasured, unseen and unheard, like trees that fall in a forest of quiet undiscovered birds. (208-209)

The tsunami is rendered here *as* the unfolding of a story: an unpredictable one, one that gains—or grants itself—grandeur and force in its concluding moments, and whose spectacular nature eliminates its own narrative inconsistencies. The passage, arriving as it does within the novel’s

own penultimate chapter, draws attention to the novel's act of narration, and the use of the tsunami as a form of narrative resolution: several of the novel's major characters are subsequently swallowed by the waves, including Savi, who effectively joins her father in the sea, and Bradley, who disappears after his act of revenge. Most critical, however, is the emphasis on the uncertainty applied to the swell—the ambiguous outcome of the unseen or hidden dynamics beneath the waves. By depicting the tsunami as an unfolding narrative, Salgado focuses on the narrative challenge provided by the tsunami, one that must be understood within the terms of existing cultural frameworks.

Indeed, while much of post-tsunami discourse emphasizes the notion that the tsunami is an exceptional event within Sri Lankan history, Salgado identifies the existing Sri Lankan narratives that incorporated the tsunami into a purist Sinhalese version of history. For instance, the novel includes a childhood scene in which Renu and Savi listen to Josilin, a cook and occasional storyteller, who recounts the story—often attributed to the year 200 B.C.—of when the “anger of the gods [...] caused the sea to rise and take the land” as punishment to the King Kelani Tissa (179). Josilin's tsunami tale narrates the much mythologized tale of the king's daughter, Vihara Maha Devi—“the greatest lady this country has known” (178)—who offers herself as sacrifice in order to halt the flooding waters. Left out of the text, but recognizable to anyone familiar with the story, is that Vihara Maha Devi (given divine reprieve) later becomes mother to Dutugemunu, the warrior-king most famous for overthrowing the Tamil king, Elara, and establishing Sinhalese dominance across the island. The story of Dutugemunu appears in the fifth century Pali text, the Theravada Buddhist *Mahavamsa*, and has been mobilized in the post-independence period on behalf of claims to a purified Sinhala nationalist past (Holt 30). *A Little Dust on the Eyes* hints at the politics of historical reduction in this tsunami narrative, as the

narrator describes the story's comforting effect, confirming to the cousins "the solidity of things [...], for this was a story where evil was punished, of order and justice and heroines and gods. It was the oldest of stories where darkness came swiftly, drawing them close into one body, one story of the past" (179).

Chandani Lokuge's short story, "Sand Bars of Memory," set ten years after the tsunami, also includes the explicitly Sinhalese nationalist telling of 200 B.C. tsunami. Lokuge's story demonstrates how this oft-recited Sinhalese myth became connected to the post-tsunami period of reconstruction and the violent conclusion of the civil conflict. At the decade anniversary of the tsunami, a Sinhalese hotel owner links the mythic story and the new post-civil war political environment: "Five years after the 2004 tsunami, President Mahinda Rajapakse, ended the war. People in the south believe that he is a reincarnated Dutugamunu, Sumith said. We live in a cycle of births and deaths" (16). Salgado and Lokuge demonstrate that a wilderness understanding of the tsunami remains a tenable account of the natural disaster *only* in the immediate aftermath. As the years accumulate, disaster begins to be incorporated into existing exclusionary cultural and political frameworks.

Salgado briefly connects this longstanding Sinhalese tsunami narrative to the post-2004 practices of Sri Lankan state memorialization. Here the tsunami's fluid narrative is converted into a stone memorial. In a concluding section set fifteen months after the tsunami's occurrence, Renu visits two of the official memorials for the victims of the disaster. Here, the novel specifically engages the memorial to the victims of the Samudra Devi train disaster as consecrating not the lives lost in the waves, but the power and authority of the state. Renu writes her interpretation in her notebook:

*There are inscriptions meant for foreigners that stand proud in English letters. This one offends me with its vanity. It commemorates the pride of a president, the ostentation of a minister, and relegates the victims of our tragedy to a blur of anonymity. Anyone reading this would think the president had the power to command the waves to stop. (226)*

Salgado critiques the self-mythologizing activities of the government *after* the disaster, placing them within a larger context of similar actions during the decades of violent conflict. It is also significant that this passage is written in Renu's notebook, which is positioned as an alternative account of Sri Lanka's history during the civil war. The novel concludes with Renu in the aspirational act of writing: "she continues to write, writing the new page in the light of an unseen sun" (228). This act of writing is set against the dominant forms of disaster narration beginning to be set in stone.

Notably, the broad oceanic and international radius of the 2004 tsunami is not taken up in the above texts. We have not yet seen an Anglophone post-tsunami novel that explores Sugata Bose's observation that the tsunami serves as a reminder of the regional dynamics of the Indian Ocean (2), or Françoise Vergès's proposal "to look at the Indian Ocean as an archive" (246).<sup>114</sup> Instead, the "writing on water" (247) produced by the tsunami, at least at this still very early stage, is principally focused on the disaster's local or national ramifications: its impact upon the familial or the national. The absence of oceanic fictions from Sri Lankan writers indicates something else: namely, the existing contest over the meaning of the tsunami *within* the Sri Lankan national sphere, especially in terms of its relationship to the civil war. Indeed, it is not only the international media that pulled the tsunami away from its imbrication within the dynamics of the civil war; as Neloufer de Mel has argued, Sinhalese national media and

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<sup>114</sup> This observation is of course confined to English language materials.

candidates in the 2005 presidential elections also depicted the tsunami as a violent divergence from the status quo in the early days after the event. According to de Mel, such a severing ran against the deep experiential connections established routinely by women survivors of the tsunami and the violence of the civil war which emphasized the commonalities between the sounds of water and bombs, as well as the treatment of refugees by the military (“Between” 240-241). In this milieu of contestation, we can see Salgado’s *A Little Dust* as deeply engaged in the narrative conflict over the way the tsunami is situated within the larger context of Sri Lankan national history. The novel reflects the range of spatial discourses—local, national, transnational—that circulate around and make claims upon the tsunami. While reflective of these different spatial claims upon the disaster (local, national, transnational), the novel clearly signals a change in Anglophone tsunami representations: against the wilderness tropes that often deterritorialize and depoliticize disaster, *A Little Dust* channels the fluid disaster back to Sri Lanka’s difficult historical silences.



## 6.0 EPILOGUE: DISPOSABLE DISASTERS AND LITERATURE'S LONG MEMORY

The writing of this dissertation was continually overshadowed, interrupted, and informed by new disasters.<sup>115</sup> I can vividly recall a few: the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that caused the disaster at Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan; Hurricane Sandy that struck the U.S. east coast in 2012; the 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh. I am aware that the personal memorability of these events is defined by my own positioning: these disasters had immediate bearing upon my geographical placement in the U.S., my national and international networks of friendship and kinship, my chosen research areas, and an understanding of myself within a global economy. There are many other events that have been driven from my memory by new or threatened catastrophe, or were never broadcast as worthy of “cosmopolitan” attention in the global media outlets, or that simply escaped my consideration. During the writing process, I became struck by the dual nature of disasters in contemporary media: they are both centerpieces of twenty-four hour news cycles and also utterly disposable, constantly exchanged for the next iteration.

However, a curious convergence of disaster—both past and potential—found its way into recent headlines. In January of 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Barack Obama jointly announced a deal that decreased liability for U.S. corporate investments in

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<sup>115</sup> Here I am of course using “disaster” in its most conventional sense, as an extraordinary and destructive event.

nuclear power plants in the event of a nuclear disaster. The new nuclear deal was heralded as a victory, ushering in an era of cooperation and partnership between the two countries and a “greening” of India’s energy production, especially in contrast to its high-output coal production.

The 2015 agreement was part of longstanding negotiations between the two countries over international nuclear trade, India’s longstanding refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) since the 1970s, and matters of liability. While an agreement was reached in 2008, allowing India to remain outside of the NPT if the country purchased nuclear technology from U.S. companies, nuclear trade did not take place. Standing in the way was a law passed in the Indian parliament in 2010 called the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act. The law “would hold suppliers, including the designers and builders of reactors, responsible” in the event of a disastrous accident (Mufson). U.S.-affiliated multinational energy corporations, such as General Electric and Westinghouse Electric, have since maligned the law for its deviation from international norms of liability, which typically hold only the operators of the technology accountable (Am. Sharma). Publications like *The Economist* have echoed this criticism, referring to the need for India to legally protect foreign investors from “unreasonable risk of prosecution in case of an accident” (“Barack Obama”).

Yet, India’s distinctive national memory of disaster cut sharply against the neoliberal, flat-world definitions of “reasonable” and “unreasonable” risk. The Union Carbide Corporation disaster in Bhopal haunted the Indian parliamentary debates around nuclear trade with the U.S., especially in relation to the lack of criminal accountability and the meager compensation provided to victims and survivors of the 1984 gas leak. In fact, the initial impetus for the creation of the 2010 Civil Liability law was a stipulation of the 2008 U.S.-India deal, which required that India codify diminished legal accountability for U.S. corporations in the event of an accident (S.

Sharma 117). The 2010 law emerged as a corrective to this stipulation from an unusual coalition of right and left parties (the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Communist Party of India, and the Communist Party of India-Marxist), hastened by the recent tepid verdict of the June 2010 trial for Union Carbide representatives in Bhopal, whose sentences amounted to “only two years’ imprisonment” and “light fines of Rs 100,000 (about US\$2,200)” (119-120). Thus India’s internationally distinctive nuclear liability policy is inflected by the particular memory of the legal consequences of Bhopal.

Bhopal remains a presence in contemporary reports and debates around the 2015 nuclear agreement, still defying entry—at least for now<sup>116</sup>—to the demands of multinational energy corporations and their chief negotiator, the United States. Yet, how long will the Bhopal disaster remain in the national memory? What efforts are required to keep it in the public discourse? In the contemporary moment of media disposability, how long will this memory continue?

The disaster narratives in this dissertation—even those concerning the massive catastrophes of the Indian Ocean tsunami and the Haitian earthquake—often signal similar anxieties about a constantly fleeting memory. For instance, Sri Lankan writer Ramya Chamalie Jirasinghe ponders the cyclical nature of disaster reportage: “in less than two years, the disaster of the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2004 has been overshadowed by the global events that succeeded it. Other catastrophes, natural disasters that caused upheaval and chaos, and wars—old and new—around the world have managed to attract the attention of the international public as well as Sri Lankans who lived outside the areas affected by the tsunami.” With one catastrophe continually displacing another, she wonders how “will the tsunami be remembered five years from now, a

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<sup>116</sup> The actual implementation of the deal remains to be seen. At the time of writing, officials such as the Minister of State for Atomic Energy and Space insisted that the 2010 law would remain unchanged by the announced U.S.-India deal (“No Dilution”).

generation later?” (106-107). Dany Laferrière similarly remarks on the transient illuminations of the international media spotlight. In post-earthquake Haiti, he notes: “we got used to being the planet’s center of attention too quickly. Where are the cameras now? Elsewhere, for there are other nations who have been waiting to warm themselves by that artificial fire” (150).

Samit Basu’s comic superhero novel, *Turbulence*, grounds this ephemerality in the subcontinent. The passage takes place just after a clash of its super powered characters at a cricket stadium:

Aman has been skimming the waves of the internet on his own. The incident at the cricket stadium made headlines, but there were no real revelations. Life in the world outside has moved on, as it does in the subcontinent whenever terrorists, natural disasters and other random calamities strike.

But then the subcontinent has never had any illusions of safety or prosperity; people know that disaster is just a heartbeat away, and simply cannot afford to panic when something terrible happens. They do not have the luxury of worrying about the collapse of their safe world—their world has never been safe, and lives have to be lived and rising petrol prices gawked at. The usual protocol for assaults on cricketers has been followed—Pakistani terrorists have been blamed, the Indian opposition has called the government spineless, Australian cricket officials have cancelled a tour and lots of Facebook groups have been started. (190)

Here disaster is portrayed as recurrent and ultimately unmemorable, and a standardized formula of response—militaristic rhetoric, political bickering, and posturing “slacktivism”—is part of its normal lifecycle. The passage moves between despondence, invective, and satire, blending the registers in a mix of critique and resignation.

While this mournful note is sounded repeatedly, the disaster narratives examined in this dissertation—and the techniques of reading and interpretation suggested by them—can be considered clear interventions against the constant forgetting enabled by the displacement effect of media cycles. My method here has been to closely examine the disaster aesthetics of literary texts, while contextualizing them within the diverse fields of media, literary, and political discourses of postcolonial disaster. In doing so, I have highlighted literary narrative's creative reworking and remaking of these discourses into new ways of understanding the relationship between sudden and structural violence, as well as possibilities for alliance across difference. In its ability to illuminate such ideas, however, we should see literature as a particular, yet unexceptional narrative form. Rather, I suggest that South Asian Anglophone literature can and should be seen alongside survivors, activists, scholars, and many others, in the continual process of narrating and contesting disaster against neoliberalism's disposable past and present.

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