“UNCHASTE” GODDESSES, TURBULENT WATERS:
POSTCOLONIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE DIVINE FEMININE
IN SOUTH ASIAN FICTION

by

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University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the presence of the divine feminine in Indic river myths of the Ganga, the Narmada, and the Meenachil as represented in the three novels: Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide, Gita Mehta’s A River Sutra, and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things. It challenges masculinist nationalistic narratives, and identifies itself as a feminist revisionist work by strategically combining Indian debates on religious interpretations with Western phenomenological and psychoanalytical perspectives to open up productive lines of critical enquiry.

I argue that the three postcolonial novelists under survey resurrect the power of the feminine by relocating this power in its manifestation as the turbulent and indomitable force of three river goddesses. In their myths of origin, the goddesses are “unchaste,” uncontainable, and ambiguous. Yet, Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian patriarchy manipulated and coerced women for their political purposes. They denied
female agency in order to promote a brand of nationalism bordering on religious zeal and subjugation through imposed paradigms of chastity. The patriarchy conflated the imaginary chastity of the mother goddess in her multiple manifestations—including but not limited to the River Ganga—with the exalted position forced upon the young Indian widow. Popular art of the colonial period in India dismantled the irrepressible sexual ambiguity of the divine feminine for the Indian population, and reinvented her as a chaste, mother figure (Bharat Mata, or Mother India), desexualized her, and held her up as an iconic, pervasive figurehead of the Motherland. Ironically though, the makeover of the uncontrollable, “chaotic” feminine into this shackled entity during and after the Indian freedom struggle is just the kind of ambiguity that appears in discourses of nation building. By reaffirming the archaic myths of the feminine, Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy dislodge the colonial project and the patriarchal Indian independence movement that sought to “chastise” the divine feminine. I suggest that in these three novels pre-colonial images of the river goddesses—presented in all their ambiguous, multiple, and fluid dimensions—are a challenge to the Indian nationalist project that represents the goddesses one dimensionally as an iconic figure, unifying the geo-body of India and symbolically projecting her as the pure, homogenous Bharat Mata.
To

my parents Dr. Tarun Banerjee and Dr. Anima Banerjee,

and

to my husband Harish,

I dedicate this dissertation.
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One of the great privileges of undertaking this long and felicitous journey is meeting so many wise and compassionate souls on the way. And one of its greatest pleasures is to register the many debts of gratitude I owe.

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Writing about the work of any living author is difficult--especially so when each of the three explored in this project--Amitav Ghosh, Gita Mehta, and Arundhati Roy--is an activist (whether implicit or explicit), and also a Booker prize nominee or awardee. So my debt to them is substantial for the time they indulged me with interviews over the years when I was a literary reviewer in Singapore (long before the dissertation was planned). Pico Iyer’s intellectual mentorship and Meira Chand’s unflagging encouragement were sources of great succour.

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My exceptional parents Professors Tarun and Anima Banerjee instilled an early interest in me about the connectivity of disciplines and bequeathed me a feminist vision. They lived a life of transformability as pragmatic medical specialists and spiritual people. And they always made time for my incessant questions about the ambiguous status of women in Indian culture and never shied away from fielding penetrating questions.

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Finally, this dissertation is as much my journey as it is my partner Harish’s, who lived, breathed and wrestled with the ideas in this dissertation ever since we stood on the thousand lingams on the bed of the Stung Kbal Spean River in Cambodia. He was “self” and “other” in the reading and editing stages of this work. To him I owe the delight of a remarkable journey.
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INTRODUCTION

DROWNING PATRIARCHY:

SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIES OF INDIC RIVER GODDESSES IN

THE HUNGRY TIDE, A RIVER SUTRA, AND THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

In recent years geologists drilling for oil found evidence of a vast resource of water that lay about 2.5 kilometres below the Ganges riverbed. Deep in the racial unconscious of India is the knowledge of a lost river which nurtures the soil of India, is sacred, is the river of creation, of insight. As it flows underground, in the heart of the earth, so it flows within woman. To touch it is not to go back in historical time, it is not a sequential movement, it is to give breath to seed.

--Pupul Jayakar, The Earth Mother: Legends, Ritual Arts, and Goddesses of India.  

It is through women (and not men) that the “purity” of the caste community is ensured and preserved . . . [The] danger of low quality blood entering their caste . . . only exists with women. The male seed they receive should be the best available. . . .

--Nur Yalman in Daughters of Independence.  

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2 Nur Yalman, as told to Joanna Liddle, and Rama Joshi. See Daughters of Independence: Gender, Class, and Caste in India (London: Zed, 1986) 57.
An image from my childhood in newly independent India in the mid-1960s is imprinted in my memory: a dashingly handsome man with a stream of clear blue water flowing out of his cascading shoulder-length hair. This image is from a painting that still hangs in the recess of the west-facing wall in the covered patio of our family home in Calcutta. The courtyard also houses a life-size clay image of Devi\(^3\) in her manifestation as the warrior goddess Durga—the female power in the universe—seated atop a lion, piercing the heart of the buffalo demon, Mahisasura. Siva and his wife Durga faced each other in that sacred space for as long as I can recall. As a child, when I returned home from school, that picture would intrigue me no end, as the saffron afternoon light filtering through the latticed concrete wall caught the cerulean gleam of the stream on the man’s head. In the mango-ripening evenings, when Ganga water would be sprinkled on the patio to cool the flagstones, my mother would tell my brother and I of how Siva offered to soften the descent of the feisty river goddess Ganga to earth so that a fatal drought would be

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\(^3\) The word Devi means the Great Goddess, and has its root in “Dev,” which means divine—as in the Greek deus. The male divine in Sanskrit is deva and the female is devi. The image of the Devi was represented in the form of the warrior goddess Durga, the Great Goddess, worshipped annually for five days and nights in our home in Calcutta. This was the representation of the frequently told tale of her martial encounter with the great buffalo demon, often named Mahisha, hence her name Mahishasura Mardini or the Slayer of the Buffalo demon Mahisha. As Thomas Coburn points out in “The Threefold Vision of the Devi Mahatmya,” in Devi: The Great Goddess: Female Divinity in South Asian Art, ed. Lynne Shaner with Nancy Eickel (Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Mapin and Verlag, 1999) 38-42, this story has been told “in stone and word for roughly two millennia and is probably much older than that, perhaps twice as old, perhaps older still. The earliest sustained written narrative dealing with the Great Goddess is a fifth to sixth century Sanskrit text, the Devi Mahatmya (The glory of the goddess). The text exists in several manuscripts, most of them simple and unadorned, some of them magnificently illustrated or inspiring independent illustrations. Since the introduction of printing into India some two centuries ago, the text, also known as the Durga Saptashati, (Seven hundred [verses] on [or to] Durga), has been printed on several dozen occasions, most of them inexpensive editions for popular use, often with vernacular translation and commentary and simple line drawings or small, coloured, poster-quality graphics. While no written text in a culture as profoundly oral as India’s should be taken as normative, and while the tales of the Great Goddess have been told and retold in many ways and with different emphases, the Devi Mahatmya may reliably be taken as an entry point into the core narrative of the Indian Great Goddess.”
averted. Later, I would discuss the myths with my father, a pragmatic obstetrician, and receive a scientific insight into how the myth of the Ganga might have captured popular imagination. As I read more about the Ganga, who I saw daily in that faded print on the wall, embedded in the ascetic Siva’s flowing hair, she became an icon of feminism in my youth. Over the years I would be amused by Siva’s mischief-making—taking the ferocious Ganga as his consort, an unchaste goddess (because she was a concubine), much to the chagrin of his first wife, Durga (also manifest as Parvati).

Still later, in 1990, while traipsing in ankle-deep water along the bed of the Cambodian Stung Kbal Spean River of a Thousand Lingams or phalluses (representations of the male force of creation in the cosmos) with my partner, I would marvel at the story of an Indic tribe that had travelled over the oceans to be transplanted in another country and anchor yet another ancient civilisation. As I felt under my feet the bumpy lingams—which had been imagined and constructed on the basis of the myth of the Hindu goddess Ganga between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries CE, resting on the capacious yoni or womb, the iconic representation of the divine feminine—I wondered at the way the story had captured the imagination of much of South and Southeast Asia. Imported by seafaring traders, merchants, and Brahmin priests between the sixth and sixteenth

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4 The Ganges, known to Hindus as Ganga, is the aorta of northern India. The Indo-Gangetic Plain has an abiding and strong attraction in geographical, historical, anthropological, archaeological, and religious tracts. Alexander of Macedon (356–323 BCE), who regarded the river as the farthest limit of the Earth, hoped to reach the Ganges and, by continuing East, to return to Europe through the Pillars of Hercules. And though he never reached his destination, it was a river that resided deep in the psyche of the Western world. The Mekong, some cultural theorists have suggested, has a homonymic association with Ma Ganga in Southeast Asia. Virgil, Ovid, and Dante all mention the Ganges in their works, and the river held a unique position in European medieval thought. In a curious blend of scripture and classical geography, Christian church leaders came to regard the Ganges as the Phison, the first river of paradise. Embraced by Saints Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome, this belief was prevalent through the Middle Age. See, Steven G. Darian, The Ganges in Myth and History (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001) 180-182.


6 CE is an abbreviation for Common Era (a dating system which is exactly the same as AD). BCE is Before Common Era (and matches the dating system BC).
centuries, the myth of the Ganga travelled with coherence and continuity. The affinity between the myth of this river goddess and her phenomenological constitution, water--which carries in its very symbolic structure the increasingly supple notions of metamorphosis, change, and becoming--is possibly what allowed for the interventions, interpretations, and negotiated tellings and re-tellings of the mythic story of a goddess. Myth is what Northrop Frye lucidly defines as “a story in which some of the chief characters are gods,” and what anthropologist E.W. Count defines as “a form of literature about gods or demigods.” By its very nature, the oral tradition lends itself to retelling, refashioning, rearranging, and re-envisioning a story, where the medium and the messenger are both in constant flux. The storyteller, who is bound by the inescapable rules of mortality, performs the act of telling a story in a specific location, to a specific community, for a limited amount of time. And the storyteller usually does not tell the story the same way the second time around. And even if they do (it is incumbent upon the storyteller to tell the story exactly in the same way in some traditions), their audience may not be the same. By its inherent character, therefore, a myth is unstable. A given story then evolves into a sacred one that conveys an ultimate reality or way of viewing the world. Robert Atkinson explains that myth, in the classic sense, is really the opposite

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9 One imagines the ancient storytellers of the Indian subcontinent, who were the pioneers of the sacred and secular katha (which at once means “word,” and also the “oral tradition” in ancient Sanskrit and modern Hindi), convening under a banyan tree in the plains of the Ganga, or under the peaks of the snow-clad Himalayas, or the riverine deltas of the Narmada, to consider what they had to work with: day and night, land and rivers, earth and sky. In their brilliant imaginations, it seemed more than possible that these elements and forms of life would have been “translated” first from the chaos of indeterminate dark matter by spiritual intent. I suggest that Indian writers, when they write in English, are informed consciously and subconsciously by this ancient tradition that they carry in their being, and they are alert to the staying power of the creation myths of the storytellers from the times when there was no written script. The contemporary writers know that these tellings would have been embellished by oral transmissions, and then gradually settled into the literate multilingual vernacular cultures over thousands of years. As a result we
of what is thought of in the popular sense. He argues, “Rather than being seen as a falsehood, myth is traditionally accepted as representing what is most true about human life on an inner level, even though outwardly the story may appear unbelievable and subject to change.”¹⁰ Stories, J. Edward Chamberlin maintains, are the “collective allegiance” of a nation, and hold within them “covenants of grace.”¹¹ In his seminal work on the connections between the linguistically dispossessed and their stories of origin, Chamberlin also argues that “central paradox of literature” where “poetic voices that are genuinely different . . . make us newly conscious of what is shared by all.”¹² Such connections highlight the universal power of myth to appeal across cultures.

Abiding visual and oral traditions underpin the myth of the Ganga: the retrieval and deployment of her myth by contemporary postcolonial novelists I will discuss are viscerally connected to her “pictorial presence” (to borrow a term from W.J.T. Mitchell), and to her representations in temples and marketplaces.¹³ Thomas B. Coburn argues that, “To say India is a land of stories also identifies a crucial feature of cultural life in the subcontinent. It is an oral culture rather than a scribal one.” Because hymns to the river goddesses can be heard daily along the banks of the Ganga and the Narmada, this dissertation is closely engaged with living myths. From the beginning of Indian civilisation, Coburn maintains that the basic cultural intuition has been that “words are chiefly an oral phenomenon, rather than a written one. They find their way into human

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hearts and minds more through the ear than through the eye.” He also points out that “Indian culture is also, of course, a matter of seeing.” In addition to what Coburn terms “the aesthetic allure”, the illustrations often tell a story. This “intersection of eye and ear” enhances the experience of the whole and makes the myth come alive.\(^\text{14}\)

The cosmogonic act of creation--the embedded lingam, an iconic representation of Siva’s power, within the female yoni, receptacle for the male economy, and the representation of Devi or Sakti (the female force in the universe)--is suggested in their inextricable mythical, visual, and autochthonous articulation. Goddess Ganga’s image, therefore, is entangled with the Lord Siva’s--literally, of course, she is in his hair; and figuratively too, as the cosmogonic representation signposts, she is manifest as the universal female impulse. She is present in many forms of the Devi, the divine feminine, or the female force in the universe. For the purposes of this study, I will dwell on her aspect as Bharat Mata or Mother India: “Jai Bharat Mata ki Jai,” or “Glory to Bharat Mata” being the rallying cry of the male political leadership during the long years of struggle for India’s independence between the 1850s and the mid-twentieth century.\(^\text{15}\)

Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries CE, the Khmer monarch Suryavarman I, and subsequent Khmer kings, some of who were Hindu and adopted Indic religious and political thought, carved those lingams on the stony river bed. Their descendants resurrected the myth of the river goddess Ganga in a new space. Known for their proclivity for legends and tales, Suryavarman I and his descendants seized upon the alluring and metamorphic river goddess as their divine mascot, and established various tirtha sthana (places of worship)--a crossing from the profane to the sacred--locating the


\(^{15}\) Mitchell, Picture Theory 16.
Ganga as the pathway or “the liquid axis mundi, connecting all spheres of reality to the
divine cosmos.” A Cambodian inscription clearly mentions “Siva with two consorts,
Parvati and Ganga.”

It was on that sweltering day in April 1990, when I first stood on these Saivite lingams, with the Ganga prototype Stung Kbal Spean gurgling between my toes, that my curiosity was aroused by the transformational force of this ambivalent river goddess who occupied a global space over a millennium ago. My search for her aetiology took me back to archives at the National Library in Calcutta, and the Perry-Castaneda Library at the University of Texas at Austin, and led me to some serendipitous journeys through her alluvial plains to the mangrove forests of the Bay of Bengal. This quest introduced me to two other Indic river goddesses--the Narmada and the Meenachil--who are also closely entwined with the myth of Siva. And the search drew me to unearthing how contemporary postcolonial novelists conceptualised these feisty forces of the divine feminine in their narratives. With the publication of Amitav Ghosh’s fascinating novel The Hungry Tide (2004) came my own journey, following in his protagonist Piya’s footsteps, to the Sunderbans. On that eerily calm Boxing Day in December 2004, when the tsunami struck Southeast and South Asia, I felt the power of her undertow suck under the barge as we entered the delta in the Bay of Bengal, where she is known as the Matla, the uninhibited. Even as a peripatetic, curious feminist with a globalised approach, I was intrigued as an Indian about how the myth of the Indic river goddesses had undergone so

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18 Name given to those who worship the Lord Siva.
many transformations since their autochthonous origins. With praxis driving the theory, I began work on this dissertation.\textsuperscript{19}

**RECOVERING, REVEALING, AND REASSESSING THE FEMININE**

This study explores the presence of the divine feminine in the Indic river myths of the Ganga, the Narmada, and the Meenachil as represented in the three novels:\textsuperscript{20} Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra*, and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. The phrase “Unchaste” Goddesses, Turbulent Waters” in the title describes the idea that the Indian political patriarchy desexualised the divine feminine and reconstituted her in the chaste image of Bharat Mata or Mother India, and presented her to the populace as an icon of a nation that was struggling to gain independence. The reconfigured feminine is in opposition to the myths of origins of the river goddesses, which represent them as being sexually ambiguous and highly mobile. The subtitle “Postcolonial Constructions of the Divine Feminine in South Asian Fiction” suggests that this dissertation employs contemporary postcolonial discourse in order to examine the manner in which postcolonial South Asian fiction represents both the divine feminine and the status of women.

The study challenges masculinist nationalistic narratives and identifies itself as a feminist revisionist work. It strategically combines indigenous Indian debates on religious interpretations with Western phenomenological and psychoanalytical


perspectives to open up productive lines of critical enquiry. A descent into the chaos of
the origins of feminine myths is similar to the releasing of the primal female force. Such
an unleashing may resemble subversion and chaos, but it is also a form of renewal
through a repudiation of the static, stagnant forms of patriarchal order. However, it is as
much the diversity in the myths of these river goddesses as the similarities in them that
draw our attention. By no means can there be a claim that their mythologies come under a
pan-Indian banner. On the contrary, the myth of origin of each of these goddesses is
specific to her cultural geography. And though their myths are all tightly sutured to the
phallocentric economy of the Lord of the Universe, Siva, their collateral, their
construction, and their currency are distinctly different.

What significantly problematises the paradoxical issue of subversion in the
construction of the river goddesses is that although “unchaste” in their myths of origin,
their powers of healing are widely respected and revered in Indic culture as well as in
accounts by Eastern and Western travellers. In Ganga, C. Sivaramamurti asserts that
being in proximity of the River Ganga “is a privilege.” Sanskrit rhetoricians have
consistently remarked on gangayam ghosah (pleasant, cool breezes), and saitya parvanadi
(a purifying atmosphere) that characterises the river goddess. The sacrality of the river
goddess is represented in the bas-reliefs of the temples in Mahabalipuram 21 where

21 Arjuna’s Penance or Bhagiratha’s Penace is the name of a massive open air bas-relief dating
from the seventh century CE located in the town of Mahabalipuram, also known as Mammalapuram, sixty
kilometres from present day Chennai in Tamil Nadu. The bas-relief is also known as The Descent of the
Ganga. In one interpretation, a figure in the bas-relief who is standing on one leg is said to be Arjuna, a
hero from the epic Mahabharata performing an austerity, to receive a boon from Siva as an aid in fighting
the Kurukshetra War that is at the centre of the epic Mahabharata. The bas-relief is situated on a rock with a
cleft. Above the cleft was a collecting pool, and at one time water may have flowed along the cleft. Figures
within the cleft are said to represent the river goddess Ganga and Siva. This provides the basis for an
alternative interpretation of the mural. Rather than Arjuna, the figure performing austerities is said to be
King Bhagirath. He is said to have performed austerities so that Ganga might descend to earth and wash
Arjuna’s penance on the banks of the Ganga near Mount Raivataka is well known. Even from afar, the attainment of pure bliss is possible by the correct utterance of her name:

\[
\text{Ganga gangeti yo bruyad yojananam satairapi}
\]

(Those who invoke the goddess and immerse themselves in the Ganga)

\[
\text{Vimuktas sarvapapebhyo visnulokam sa gachhati.}
\]

(Have their sins washed away and enter Lord Visnu’s kingdom).\(^{22}\)

Travellers’ accounts as early as the seventh century have reiterated this often-neglected point. Huen Tsang, who travelled within India for fifteen years, describes the Ganga vividly:

The water of the river is blue, like the ocean, and its waves are wide-rolling as the sea . . . The taste of the water is great and pleasant, and sands of extreme fineness border its course. In the common history of this country, this river is called Fosh Wui, the river of religious merit, which can wash away countless sins. Those who are weary of life, if they end their days in the River Ganga, are borne to heaven and receive happiness. If a man dies and his bones are cast in the river, he cannot fall into an evil way; whilst he is carried by its waters and forgotten by men, his soul is preserved in safety on the other side.\(^{23}\)

In Following the Equator, Mark Twain finds Hindus “practicing” their faith in the regenerative and healing powers of this goddess, and records that:

Those people were not drinking that fearful stuff to assuage thirst but in order to purify their soul and interior of their bodies. According to their creed, the Ganges


water makes everything pure that it touches, instantly and utterly pure. The sewer
water was not an offence to them, the corpse did not revolt them; the sacred water
had touched both, both were now snow pure, and could defile no one. The Hindus
have been laughed at these many generations, but the laughter itself will have to
modify itself a little from now on. How did they find out the water’s secret in
those ancient ages? Had they germ scientists then? We do not know. We only
know they had a civilization long before we emerged from savagery.\textsuperscript{24}

The court historian of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, Abu al Fazl, writing in the sixteenth
century about goddess Ganga’s importance as a river for both Hindus and Muslims, helps
the reader understand this Hindu divinity’s role in the daily life of one of history’s most
powerful Muslim rulers:

His Majesty calls this source of life ‘the water of immortality,’ and has committed
the care of this department to proper persons. He does not drink much but pays
much attention to this matter. Some trustworthy persons are stationed on the
banks of that river, who dispatch the water in sealed jars. When the court was at
the capital Agra and in Fatehpur, the water came from the district of Sorun, but
now that His Majesty is in the Punjab, the water is brought from Hardwar. For the
cooking of food, rain water or the water taken from the Jamna and the Chanab is
used, mixed with a little Ganges water. On journeys and hunting parties His

\textsuperscript{24} Mark Twain, Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World (New York: Ecco,
HarperCollins, 1996) 168. Twain provides a vivid account and speaks of Henkin, a scientist employed by
the British Government in Agra, and how after six hours the cholera germs died (pathologically) every time
when they were immersed in Ganga water.
Majesty, from his predilection for good water, appoints experienced men as water tasters.\textsuperscript{25}

I argue that the three postcolonial novels examined in this dissertation resurrect the power of the feminine by relocating it in its aetiological manifestation as the turbulent and indomitable force of three river goddesses, who in their own myths of origin are “unchaste,” uncontainable, and ambiguous. In each of the goddesses’ mythologies lies buried a phallocentric connection with Siva, Lord of the Universe, creator and destroyer. Often the intractable tension that arises from this bonding (or bondage) of the goddesses to the male, lends to the arousal of a considerable force of resistance from the feminine to seize agency from the cosmic masculine. The impulse to subjugate the feminine, I suggest, emerges from a fear of “feminine flood” that would destabilise the masculinist project to contain and dominate.\textsuperscript{26} Another way to read this postcolonial project is to unpack the strategy of these writers to re-member the pre-colonial myths of origin of the fluid river goddesses.

The goal of the patriarchy during the Indian freedom struggle, and after, was to deny female agency by imposing paradigms of chastity in order to promote a brand of nationalism that bordered on religious zeal and subjugation. Popular art of the time (as Kajri Jain, Christopher Pinney, and Sumathi Ramaswamy have demonstrated in their evocative studies), and Indian cinema of the early twentieth century (as Jigna Desai has explicated in her compelling work), dismantled the irrepressible sexual ambiguity of the divine feminine for the Indian population, and reinvented her as a chaste mother figure


\textsuperscript{26}Klaus Theweleit, Male Fantasies I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History (Minneapolis, Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1987) 86, 134-8.
(Bharat Mata, Mother India). Ironically, although the patriarchy clamoured for independence from British rule, it denied female agency. The makeover of the uncontrollable, “chaotic” feminine into a shackled, domesticated one during the freedom struggle is just the kind of anomaly that appears in discourses of nation building.27 Certainly, the three novelists have attempted a re-envisioning of the divine feminine by invoking the archetype, or as Laurence Coupe terms it, “the primordially creative image.”28 It is by reaffirming these archaic myths of the feminine that Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy dislodge the project of the colonial authorities and the patriarchal Indian independence movement to “chastise” the divine feminine.

I suggest that in these three novels pre-colonial images of the river goddesses, presented in all their ambiguous, multiple, and fluid dimensions, are a challenge to the Indian nationalist projects that represent the goddesses one dimensionally as an iconic figure, unifying the geo-body of India and symbolically projecting the pure, homogenous Bharat Mata, or Bharat Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity. In these novels, the river goddesses’ multiple manifestations are not elided but given their full play. Resisting the male-centric approaches to nationhood, the works unleash the multiple manifestations of the goddesses, and this liberation of their mobilité and heterogeneity, may be witnessed in the novels’ promotion of cultural and linguistic hybridity, their polyphonic multiplication of speech registers, and literary genres.


I posit that these fictional narratives, in the Eliadean sense of the “hierophanic”
dialectic, catapult the sacred into the profane, and launch their human feminine forces in
the forms of Piya, Rima, and Ammu, as gendered soldiers of resistance against patriarchy
and domination. Mircea Eliades’s idea of the need for humanity to live in the continual
present, and “myth” being synonymous with “eternal return,” coupled with the desire to
be at one with a cosmic beginning in “a continual present,” is the strongest theoretical
anchor for this dissertation. In his luminous chapter “Chaos,” in Myth, Laurence Coupe
draws attention to Eliade’s celebration of hierophany, treating antique narrative
paradigms as if active in the present:

Any form whatever, by the mere fact that it exists as such and endures,
necessarily loses vigour and becomes worn; to recover vigour, it must be
reabsorbed into the formless if only for an instant; it must be restored to the
primordial unity from which it issued; in other words, it must return to the chaos
(on the cosmic plane) to ‘orgy’ (on the social plane), to ‘darkness’ (for seed), to
‘water’ (baptism on the human plane, Atlantis on the plane of history, and so
on). 29

This idea of resurrecting an ancient myth resonates with Owen Barfield’s 30 idea of how
literature awakens “an almost universal consciousness” and characterises the “golden
age” of poetry as “premetaphoric and alive” (as Mariann Sanders Regan terms this
phenomenon). 31 The constant re-launching of an ancient myth into the experiential
cacophony of the present is also addressed in James Hillman’s work on metaphor, where

30 Owen Barfield, Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928) 64.
31 For more on the premetaphoric in the golden age of poetry see, Mariann Sanders Regan, Love Words: The Self and Text in Medieval and Renaissance Poetry (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1982).
he urges readers to stay within the “permanent ambiguity of metaphor,”32 and by Viktor
Shklovsky who claims that through defamiliarisation the literary text, provides the reader
with an “amazing childhood.”33

This study led me to examine four related ideas of subversion which are linked to
mobilité,34 hybridity, and changeability: First, the subversion of patriarchy through the
use of “impure” language, often resurrecting the vernacular, and distinctly employed by
the twins in Roy’s novel in their manipulating the English language to register a rebellion
against authoritarian figures such as their aunt Baby Kochamma and their English teacher
Miss Mitten. In Ghosh’s narrative, a mixture of speech registers, dialect and several
languages are used as tools to resist a homogenisation of the cultural landscape. In
Mehta’s story, the invocation to the river goddess Narmada (presented as a stuti, a song
of praise in the oral tradition), is recited by the Vano tribes as well as by the ascetics,
suggesting a regionalisation and localisation of an esoteric Brahminical tradition

Second, I examine the concept of “heterotopia” in the Foucauldian sense where
sites such as rivers in all three novels in this study are “destabilising spaces”35 because
people, cultural and religious practices, and mythologies that exist in opposition to each
other inhabit those spaces. The idea of heterotopia pervades all three narratives where
often the river is at once a location for life, nourishment and nurture, as well as a danger
zone where Sophie Mol in The God of Small Things, Fokir in The Hungry Tide, and the

33 For more on a return to childhood through poetry see, Viktor Borisovich Shklovskii, Third
34 “La donna è mobile:” The woman is fickle or changeable, the famous line from Verdi’s opera
Rigolletto.
courtesan in *A River Sutra* must die. In *The God of Small Things* the Meenachal\(^{36}\) River is a space for the children Rahel and Estha to enjoy their short-lived childhood, for Ammu and Velutha to fall in love, and *also* the site of danger and death, where Sophie Mol drowns. In *A River Sutra*, the government-run Narmada rest-house overlooking the Narmada River is at the crossroads of sacred and profane journeys, and is a heterotopic space. Visible from the elevated plateau of the rest-house at the bend of the river, sprawls the temple complex of Mahadeo. As the nameless Narrator sits on the terrace of the rest-house, a heterotopic cast of characters walks through the compound such as pilgrims, government officials, scholars, Vano tribal women, Muslim clerics, Hindus ascetics, and petty criminals. In *The Hungry Tide*, Fokir’s boat becomes the heterotopic space where Piya’s GPS (Global Positioning System) meets Fokir’s autochthonous knowledge. The boat is also a space where a diasporic American-educated young Indian woman’s world collides with that of a boatman who takes pride in possessing a wealth of traditional knowledge. Such examples are properly linked to Foucault’s remarks about the heterotopic concept of space that contains within it an idea of oppositional forces, a unique kind of hybridity and heterogeneity:

> . . . I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time . . . Now, despite all the techniques for appropriating space, despite the whole network of knowledge that enables us to delimit or to formalize it, contemporary space is perhaps still not entirely desanctified . . . And perhaps our life is still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable, that our institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down. These are oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for

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\(^{36}\) In her novel, Roy refers to the Meenachil River as the Meenachal.
example between private space and public space, between family space and social
space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and
that of work. All these are still nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred.  
Foucault further claims that Gaston Bachelard’s “monumental work” and the
“descriptions of phenomenologists” have shown that we do not live in a homogeneous
and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with heterogeneities
and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well. The space of our “primary perception,” the
space of our dreams, and that of our passions hold within themselves qualities that seem
intrinsic:

There is a light, ethereal, transparent space, or again a dark, rough, encumbered
space; a space from above, of summits, or on the contrary a space from below of
mud; or again a space that can be flowing like sparkling water, or space that is
fixed, congealed, like stone or crystal. Yet these analyses, while fundamental for
reflection in our time, primarily concern internal space.

Third, I argue that in the representations of alterity the marginalised males are often
envisioned as the “polluters” and the “unchaste,” like the river goddesses. For instance,
Uncle Chacko, the police force of Ayemenem, and Pappachi denounce Velutha and
Ammu in The God of Small Things; the Indian bureaucracy threatens Fokir in The
Hungry Tide; and the wealthy Great Sahib murders little Imrat in A River Sutra.

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37 Michel Foucault, “Des Espace Autres,” Architecture / Mouvement / Continuité, Oct. 1984. This
article was based on a lecture given by Michel Foucault in Mar. 1967. Although not reviewed for
publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released
into the public domain at an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Foucault’s death. Translated from the
French by Jay Miskowiec.


39 Foucault, “Des Espace Autres.”

40 In my explorations of caste and martyrdom I have benefited from the scholarship of Deepika
Bahri, Debjani Ganguly, and Anuradha Dingwaney Needham.
marginalised male is often represented as a martyr in postcolonial fiction. The martyrdom of the lower caste male is a subversion of the patriarchy because in their martyrdom the lower castes are able to continue the struggle on behalf of their caste. The martyrs successfully expose the patriarchy’s anxiety about being challenged by those at the margins.\textsuperscript{41} Debjani Ganguly suggests that because most Indian nationalist leaders and nationalist historians were predominantly upper-caste Hindus, “the image of subcontinental unity was configured in Aryan-Hindu terms with disastrous consequences for Hinduism’s ‘Others’--the Dalits and Muslims.”\textsuperscript{42} Victor Li and L. Chris Fox have shown that there is a dialectical relationship between the concept of martyrdom and the death, dispossession, and disempowerment of the subaltern individual.\textsuperscript{43} In the conceptualisation of the martyr figures as sacrifices to appease the river goddesses there is a strong harking back to Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore’s poem \textit{Debotar Grash}, or \textit{God’s Demand}, recounts the tale of a male infant who must be “offered” to the turbulent river so a boatful of travellers is not sunk in the swirling waters of the Ganga. Hence, the sacrifice of the marginalised male for the larger good is in keeping with the idea of appeasing the goddesses of the rivers.\textsuperscript{44} Amitav Ghosh’s Bengali to English translation of Tagore’s \textit{Khudito Pashan}, or \textit{Hungry Stones}, is widely celebrated. Ghosh has, in interviews, expressed his familiarity with and love for “Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore,”


\textsuperscript{42} Ganguly, \textit{Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds} 80.

\textsuperscript{43} Victor Li, “Necroidealism, or the Subaltern’s Sacrificial Death,” \textit{Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies} 11:3 (2009): 275-292. Also see L. Chris Fox, “A Martyrology of the Abject: Witnessing and Trauma in Arundhati Roy’s \textit{The God of Small Things},” \textit{Ariel} 33:3.4 (2002): 35-60. Both Li’s and Fox’s analyses were very helpful in conceptualising the idea of martyrdom and river goddesses, in Chapters One and Three of this dissertation.

\textsuperscript{44} An exploration of the connection between \textit{The Home and The World} and the representation of women in \textit{The Hungry Tide} forms one of the arguments of Chapter One of this dissertation.
and has acknowledged the powerful influence of Tagore’s most popular novel, *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World).

Fourth, this study raises important questions about the blurring of boundaries and the deployment of hybridity as a strategy of subversion by these writers. It examines the intercontinental connection between Piya and Fokir in *The Hungry Tide*, the inter-caste relationship between Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*; and the interclass relationship between Rima and Nitin Bose, as well as the inter-religious connections between the sacred and profane worlds in the single character of the archaeologist Professor Shankar who also metamorphoses into the ascetic Naga Baba in *A River Sutra*.

This dissertation discusses new and important ways to reconfigure the feminine, and raises several questions. Is transculturation or hybridisation a mutual transformation? Or is it the transculturation or hybridisation of one party occurring at the expense of another--the hybridisation of Piya at Fokir’s expense, to put it bluntly? Isn’t there an absorption or appropriation of a vanishing or vanished pre-modern (both Kusum and her son Fokir die--passing on their knowledge to Nirmal and Piya respectively)? Do we have here an example of the way intuitive knowledge is passed on to a modern subject in the same way that American novelist James Fenimore Cooper’s fictional character, the Mohican chief Chingachgook, passes on his spirit to the frontiersman Natty Bumppo? Is this transculturation or a form of transplantation, where one entity must die so the other’s life might be enhanced? As Ghosh points out: “She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed on her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made

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them one.” To unpack multiplicity, intersectionality, and fluidity is to practice what Homi Bhabha calls “dissemiNation;” to question the borders of the nation’s geo-body, to assume a post-or trans-national stance. But doesn’t this post-or trans-national stance remain in tension with the equal exaltation of the local and the indigenous in Ghosh’s novel? Does the transnational, even in locating itself in the local, not absorb the local into itself in the same way as do the rivers Ganga, Narmada, and Meenachil in their ebbs and flows that constantly blur boundaries of land and water? And does this indeterminate phenomenology of rivers not absorb the surroundings into itself in the same way that:

- the nameless Hindu Narrator absorbs Islamic Sufi philosophy of love for all beings into his Hindu worldview of the Bhakti mystic Chandidas in *A River Sutra*?
- Piya encrypts Fokir, and her GPS system records his indigenous knowledge of the topography and ecology of the Sunderbans in *The Hungry Tide*?
- the high-caste Ammu breaks caste laws, and makes a symbolic “crossing” by selecting Velutha, an untouchable Paravan, as her soulmate in *The God of Small Things*?

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47 Intersectionality suggests that socially and culturally constructed categories of discrimination interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality. “Feminist Intersectionality” emerges from the critiques authored by women of colour in Britain and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s about the homogeneous political discourse in which “all the women are white and all the blacks are men.” See Chapter One where the definition and currency of the word has been attributed to Crenshaw and Shah.

48 Bhakti is derived from the Sanskrit verb root bhaj, which means “to share in,” or “to belong to,” or “worship in.” In its present form it was first mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita*. As a movement, the Bhakti culture, which was devotional in nature and often required a guru, was propagated originally by Southern Indian Saivites (fifth to tenth centuries CE) and Vaisnavites (sixth to ninth centuries CE), and then spread to the rest of India between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries CE.
This dissertation also restores the latent power of the feisty feminine that resides in
the myths of origin of these goddesses, whose pre-colonial genealogy is often punctuated
by sexually explosive behaviour that was mostly neglected or purposefully ignored
during India’s struggle for independence. I argue that the three river goddesses are
represented in their myths as entities who have the power to exercise their own sexual
agency. However, in the hands of the male leadership during the anti-colonial struggle
led by Gandhi, particularly during the twentieth century, this feminine agency was erased
from the representation of the goddesses and their sexuality undermined. As pointed out
by Ramaswamy, Pinney, and Jain in their insightful studies, images of the goddess
during the swaraj (self-rule) movement were conflated with the martial and maternal,
especially in the mass production and distribution of the Bharat Mata calendar images.
Evidence of these images--Lakshmi, Durga, and Kali were some of the most prolific--is
seen in the emergence of an entire industry of pamphleteering that signposted the chastity
of the divine feminine in patriotic songs and written works. The Indian patriarchy
gleefully seized the opportunity to use these images as propaganda to promote a project
that attempted to control the nation by containing the chastity of the woman, ostensibly to
control contagion of the geo-body of the nation. Partha Chatterjee, in his discussion of the
“Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question,” unpacks this idea when he speaks of
how “the new woman . . . was subjected to a new patriarchy.”

I will argue that a paradigmatic shift has occurred in the representation of the river
goddesses by postcolonial authors whose vision of these goddesses takes them back to a

49 Ramaswamy, “Visualising India’s Geo-body: Globes, Maps, Bodyscapes” 151-189.
50 Pinney, Photos of Gods 105-144.
51 See, Jain, Gods in the Bazaar
52 Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories,
pre-colonial past when the sexuality of the divine feminine was neither denied nor reshaped by the discourses of the independence struggle. This dissertation is a sustained examination of the novelists’ employment of these three unstable myths as an attempt to re-envision the vexed and sometimes indeterminate river goddesses as powerful representations of the indomitable, and sometimes unchaste feminine in a politically fraught postcolonial landscape. Bram Dijkstra\textsuperscript{53} and Klaus Theweleit\textsuperscript{54} have both lucidly shown in their discourses how European patriarchy viewed female power with suspicion bordering on fear during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the same timeframe in which this exploration is situated. Female physiological and sexual power was perceived to be synonymous with contagion, chaos, flood, and anarchy. Male anxiety, arising out of this imagined, uncontrollable chaos emerging from women’s sexuality, led to the considerable domination, interpolation, and interference with female sexual agency during the independence struggle in India. This concept finds excellent and appropriate theoretical underpinning in French feminist works, particularly Luce Irigaray’s, that lend support to my claims in this dissertation.\textsuperscript{55}

Irigaray’s suggestion, in her exegesis of Hegel’s account of Antigone, that Antigone represents the “maternal/feminine/fluid” which has been repressed and which must be reclaimed from its merely negative role in Hegel’s phallogocentric metaphysics, is an argument that finds resonance with this project. As Antoinette Stafford’s illuminating study on Irigaray posits, Irigaray “construes woman as enjoying, through her biological nature, a unique relationship to fluids and fluidity--to all that is non-identical,

\textsuperscript{53} Bram Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity, Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 64-75.
\textsuperscript{54} See, Theweleit, Male Fantasies I
Stafford further shows that Irigaray’s emphasis upon the female body therefore permeates her analysis of what it would be to “parler femme,” so that she sees the Hellenic Antigone as the “guardian of the matriarchal blood-tie.” A similar discourse runs through the three river goddesses’ mythologies.

Stafford also shows that Irigaray sees Antigone’s sentence of death as the sacrifice of woman’s “life-blood” in the interest of preserving the integrity of the male community. In A River Sutra I see a strong continuum of Irigaray’s idea when Rima becomes the sacrificial space for Nitin Bose to assert his male economy. Stafford argues that Irigaray’s reinterpretation of Hegel’s discourse on Antigone is a call to “affirm and freely articulate precisely the way she sees Hegel--and all patriarchal, logocentric philosophies--as necessarily suppressing: woman’s deep roots in nature, in unconscious, pre-conceptual being, her difference which, in the figure of Antigone, bravely resists reduction to a mere shadow of masculine self-consciousness.” This discourse finds resonance in the idea of retrieving feminine agency from the aetiologies of the three Indic river goddesses.57

It is this fear of the female to disrupt, dismantle, and dislodge a homogenously constructed and highly stratified “order” of governance and control by the patriarchy, represented by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, which possibly caused the image of the divine feminine to be so severely altered. Indian intellectuals led a concerted movement in the urban areas in the early decades of the twentieth century to inspire the intelligentsia and the laity at a time when Gandhi’s swaraj or self-rule programme was gathering momentum. The creation of the Bharat Mata image by the Bengal school of


57 Luce Irigaray, Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977) 76.
renaissance painter Abanindranath Tagore (a nephew of Rabindranath Tagore) in 1906 gained much popularity, along with singer and songwriter Atul Prasad’s national song “Uthago Bharata Lakshmi,”\(^5^8\) (“Arise Oh Goddess Lakshmi of India”) which became an anthem commemorating Eastern Indian shahids, or martyrs, who were ready to give up their lives for the cause of freedom. The hymn to Bharata Lakshmi does not contain a warrior image of the divine feminine but accentuates a domestic and tame version as a nurturing mother of the nation. This image reflects the nationalist strategy to propagate a contained vision of the nation, conflating the nation with the domesticated, chaste, and obedient woman:

\begin{verbatim}
Uthago Bharata Lakshmi (Awake, O Mother Lakshmi of India)
Utha aaji jagat jano pujya (Arise, O revered Goddess of the worlds)
Dukkho dainya sab nashi (Remover of all sorrow)
Karo durito Bharata lajye (Wipe out our shame)
Chhaaro go chharo shoko saiya (Discard thy garb of mourning)
Karo sojya (Adorn thyself with vestments of glory)
Puno kamala dhana dhanye (And bless this land with wealth and prosperity)
(Chorus) Janani go laho tule bakshe (Great Goddess, cradle us in your bosom)
Santana basho deho tule choky (Wipe our tears with your shawl)
Kandichhe taba charanotale (We lie weeping, O Mother, at your feet)
Trin shoti koti naro nari go (All three hundred million souls)
Kandari n hiko Kamala (There is no one to steer us but you, O Mother)
Dukho lanchhito Bharatavarshe (Through the stormy seas of a floundering nation)
\end{verbatim}

Sankito mora sabo jatri (And the travellers are fearful)
Tabo sagaro kompono darshe (And tremble at the choppy waters)
Tomaro abhayo pada sparshe (Waiting for your guiding touch)
Nabo harshe (Which will bestow upon us bliss)
Puno chalibe tarani shubho lakkhe (And see us safely ashore).

There was an entire industry working to propagate the clean, sterile image of the feminine, as the male leadership formulated nationalist narratives that would put the burden of a “clean” nation on the shoulders of the female members of the nationalist movement. Rumina Sethi suggests in “The Freight of Culture” that Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s enormously popular novel Anandamath (Temple of Happiness), translated into Marathi, Telegu, and English, “had popularised the battle cry Vande Mataram (Hail to thee, Mother), and become tremendously evocative in the struggle to free the enslaved ‘motherhood,’ a symbol rich with meaning.” 59 Interestingly, Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), the first woman president of the Indian National Congress, was complicit with male leadership and marketed the idea of “the nation as a house,” and “Indians as members of a joint family,” to subtly entrench the same trope of the chaste woman as nation. 60

Art historian Vidya Dehejia argues that in the early part of the twentieth century “the nationalist movement picked up the theme of the goddess earth and transformed her into Mother India . . . This dreamy image, not associated with any specific deity, became the artistic icon for the Indian nation during the struggle for independence.” 61

60 Geraldine Forbes, Women in Colonial India: Essays on Politics, Medicine, and Historiography (New Delhi: Chronicle, 2005) 34.
the challenged lower castes wanted to break through the caste boundaries and were
attracted to a “new” religion--Christianity--where caste was not an obstacle to being
accepted into a more embracing religious culture. Christian missionaries popularised the
veneration of the figure of Virgin Mary, which was inflected with a Hindu style of
devotion as the cult of a chaste and divine feminine was gaining ground. The Brahmo
Samaj, a novel religion consisting of Christian and Hindu spiritual traditions, counted
among its early recruits artists, thinkers, poets, philosophers, and reformers such as
Rabindranath Tagore and Abanindranath Tagore.

The tensions within the patriarchal project and the women’s struggle to break free
from the masculinist corralling of women’s sexual and social rights at the height of the
struggle for Indian independence during the 1930s and 1940s, are well documented. The
Nehru Memorial Museum and Library contains some of the best kept and most neglected
documents that reveal the endeavour by the leaders of the women’s movements of the
time that attempted to subvert the subjugation of women by leaders such as Mahatma
Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. At the Sixteenth Annual Conference of the All India
Women’s Conference (AIWC) held in 1944, Vilasini Devi Shenai argued: “Today our
men are clamouring for political rights at the hands of an alien government. Have they
conceded their wives, their own sisters, their daughters, flesh of their flesh, blood of their
blood, social equity and economic justice?”62 Another women’s rights activist of the time
and a doctor, Muthulakshmi Reddi, blamed male leadership attitudes for the
encouragement of purdah (the veil) among both Muslim and Hindu women, and observed

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62 All India Women’s Conference Report (1944-1945), AIWC, New Delhi.
that men regarded them as “temptresses,” felt “superior to women,” and completely “failed to recognise they had intelligence.”

Gandhi’s ambivalence towards women and untouchables has been the subject of serious scholarly interest even when he was alive. However, much of the material, which was known during his lifetime was classified, distorted, or suppressed. After his death in 1948, during the process of elevating Gandhi into the “Father of the Nation,” his letters and documents were suppressed. Now, sixty-two years later, there is a growing push among scholars and readers to interrogate Gandhi’s double vision when it came to issues regarding women and Dalits. Controversial and audacious, the most current research by historian Jad Adams in *Gandhi: Naked Ambition* that was released in 2010, unveils Gandhi’s bizarre “experiments with sex,” which extended to insisting that his teenaged grandnieces Abha and Manu sleep naked in his bed. It seems his public admonition to

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63 Muthulakshmi Reddi, Reddi Papers, File 11, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
64 See, Jad Adams, *Gandhi: Naked Ambition* (London: Quercus, 2010). Also see, Jad Adams, “The Thrill of the Chaste: The Truth about Gandhi’s Sex Life,” *The Independent* (Books), 7 Apr. 2010. “As he grew older (and following Kasturba’s death) he was to have more women around him and would oblige women to sleep with him who--according to his segregated ashram rules--were forbidden to sleep with their own husbands. Gandhi would have women in his bed, engaging in his “experiments” which seem to have been, from a reading of his letters, an exercise in strip-tease or other non-contact sexual activity. Much explicit material has been destroyed but tantalising remarks in Gandhi’s letters remain such as: “Vina's sleeping with me might be called an accident. All that can be said is that she slept close to me.” One might assume, then, that getting into the spirit of the Gandhian experiment meant something more than just sleeping close to him. It can’t, one imagines, have helped with the “involuntary discharges” which Gandhi complained of experiencing more frequently since his return to India. He had an almost magical belief in the power of semen: “One who conserves his vital fluid acquires unfailing power,” he said. Meanwhile, it seemed that challenging times required greater efforts of spiritual fortitude, and for that, more attractive women were required: Sushila, who in 1947 was 33, was now due to be supplanted in the bed of the 77-year-old Gandhi by a woman almost half her age. While in Bengal to see what comfort he could offer in times of inter-communal violence in the run-up to independence, Gandhi called for his 18-year-old grandniece Manu to join him--and sleep with him. “We both may be killed by the Muslims,” he told her, “and must put our purity to the ultimate test, so that we know that we are offering the purest of sacrifices, and we should now both start sleeping naked.” Such behaviour was no part of the accepted practice of brahmacharya. He, by now, described his reinvented concept of a brahmachari as: “One who never has any lustful intention, who, by constant attendance upon God, has become proof against conscious or unconscious emissions, who is capable of lying naked with naked women, however beautiful, without being in any manner whatsoever sexually excited . . . who is making daily and steady progress towards God and whose every act is done in pursuance of that end and no other.” That is, he could do whatever he wished, so long as there was no apparent “lustful intention.” He had effectively redefined the concept of
the Indian widow to remain “chaste” is linked to his personal fear of his obsession with his own sexual drive. In his review of Adams’ biography, which unearths the seamy side of the patriarch, Indian novelist and editor Khushwant Singh claims:

Many chapters could be written on Gandhi’s relations with women. They were drawn to him like proverbial moths to a flame. Among the notable were Saraladevi Choudhurani, a niece of Tagore’s who was married to a Punjabi. Unlike Kasturba, she was educated and articulate. He called her his “spiritual wife” and at one time toyed with the idea of having a polygamous relationship with her. There was Madeleine Slade (Miraben), daughter of a British admiral, who became his closest companion. There were also Sushila Nayar and his two grandnieces, Abha and Manu. In turns they massaged his limbs and his scalp. He

chastity to fit his personal practices. Thus far, his reasoning was spiritual, but in the maelstrom that was India approaching independence he took it upon himself to see his sex experiments as having national importance: “I hold that true service of the country demands this observance,” he stated. But while he was becoming bolder in his self-righteousness, Gandhi’s behaviour was widely discussed and criticised by family members and leading politicians. Some members of his staff resigned, including two editors of his newspaper who left after refusing to print parts of Gandhi’s sermons dealing with his sleeping arrangements. But Gandhi found a way of regarding the objections as a further reason to continue. “If I don’t let Manu sleep with me, though I regard it as essential that she should,” he announced, “wouldn’t that be a sign of weakness in me?” Eighteen-year-old Abha, the wife of Gandhi’s grandnephew Kanu Gandhi, rejoined Gandhi’s entourage in the run-up to independence in 1947 and by the end of August he was sleeping with both Manu and Abha at the same time. When he was assassinated in January 1948, it was with Manu and Abha by his side. Despite her having been his constant companion in his last years, family members, tellingly, removed Manu from the scene. Gandhi had written to his son: “I have asked her to write about her sharing the bed with me,” but the protectors of his image were eager to eliminate this element of the great leader’s life. Devdas, Gandhi’s son, accompanied Manu to Delhi station where he took the opportunity of instructing her to keep quiet. Questioned in the 1970s, Sushila revealingly placed the elevation of this lifestyle to a brahmacharya experiment was a response to criticism of this behaviour. “Later on, when people started asking questions about his physical contact with women— with Manu, with Abha, with me—the idea of brahmacharya experiments was developed . . . in the early days, there was no question of calling this a brahmacharya experiment.” It seems that Gandhi lived as he wished, and only when challenged did he turn his own preferences into a cosmic system of rewards and benefits. Like many great men, Gandhi made up the rules as he went along. While it was commonly discussed as damaging his reputation when he was alive, Gandhi’s sexual behaviour was ignored for a long time after his death. It is only now that we can piece together information for a rounded picture of Gandhi’s excessive self-belief in the power of his own sexuality. Tragically for him, he was already being sidelined by the politicians at the time of independence. The preservation of his vital fluid did not keep India intact, and it was the power-brokers of the Congress Party who negotiated the terms of India's freedom.”
had them sleep naked by his side, bathed naked with them, gave them enemas when needed. He did not have sex with any of them, but they came in his dreams and he had night emissions. He told everyone about his wet dreams and failure to conquer his libido. Nehru was nauseated by his confessions. His son Devdas protested that they brought shame on the family.65

In Gandhi’s attitude to the Dalits there was a similar approach to “civilise” and “tame” them. Debjani Ganguly points out: “What better example can there be of the ‘civilizing’ thrust of Gandhi’s amelioration programme for the untouchables than an injunction to the Harijan workers to focus on a literal cleansing of their bodies?”66 and refers to Gandhi’s statement in 1932:

Harijan workers should . . . devote all their energy to: (i) promotion of cleanliness and hygiene among the Harijans (ii) improved methods of carrying on what are known as unclean occupations, e.g. scavenging and tanning (iii) giving up carrion and beef if not meat altogether (iv) giving up of intoxicating liquor.67

The primary purpose of this introductory chapter is to provide a trajectory for the entire project and to locate it in the literature that informs its analytical and historical frame. In the course of the discussion I raise questions about the relevance of this work to postcolonial literary criticism and how it gestures towards a multidisciplinary approach to the hierophanic character of the mythology of Indian river goddesses in postcolonial Indian fiction, where the sacred and the profane become simultaneously interchangeable in the manifestation of the divine feminine. I suggest that these myths reside in the

66 Ganguly, Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds 78
collective unconscious of cultures over generations, and they function as an enduring and transformational force for writers, often slipping in and out of the way. G.S. Kirk envisions their effect thus: “Indeed, one of the distinguishing characteristic of myths is their free-ranging and often paradoxical fantasy.”

**MYTHS OF ORIGIN OF GANGA, NARMADA, AND MEENACHIL**

Privileging the autochthonous in the perpetuation of the myths of the river goddesses of India, cultural theorist Pupul Jayakar maintains:

A substratum of female memories of power and energy has existed from the primordial past. Within this stream women were holders and sustainers of heritage. Integral to this was an understanding of the nature of cyclic time, and the rites of passage of seasons entering creation. All transmission of myth, the contacting of energy sources and the initiating the rites of the auspicious, flowed from mother to daughter, through poesy, art, skill, ritual, the unspoken word, or gesture. When asked as to the source of her skill and her visual and aural vocabulary, a woman from the rural areas . . . said: “It is from a parampara, a time without beginning. We hold this knowing in our wombs.”

The myth of the Ganga, thunderous in its origins, is tied inextricably to the cascading hair of Siva. An extravagant Indian King named Sagara had sired 60,000 sons who became a cause for concern. One day, while searching for a sacred horse, the sons disturbed the meditations of a powerful sage, who was furious at the interruption and burned all 60,000 to ash by expending the energies that he had built up during meditation. The souls of the

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69 Jayakar, *The Earth Mother* xiii.
sons had been deprived of the purifying water necessary to release them to their final destination, so they continued to torment King Sagara. When the king died, they haunted his grandson, King Bhagirath. Wishing both to end the suffering of these souls and to get himself some peace, Bhagirath prayed to the goddess Ganga, who at that time flowed only in the heavens, to come down to earth. After a long period of his penance in the Himalayas, Ganga appeared to him as a reward for his devotion and graciously consented to descend to earth. Siva agreed to catch the descending river on his head, thereby absorbing and deflecting its ferocity which would otherwise destroy the earth. The river flowed through his locks, cooled the ashes of the 60,000 dead sons, and released them to their final rest.70

Goddess Narmada’s descent is also initiated by Siva’s intervention. A legend relates that a severe drought gripped the earth.71 The gods and men appealed to Siva for help. Siva began a severe penance along with Parvati. Perspiration flowed from his body in such quantities that it became a river that cascaded down the slopes. It then assumed the form of a woman who propitiated Siva. He blessed her, saying that she would be holy and inexhaustible. Her sprightly movements and sparkling vivacity delighted Siva so much that he called her “Narmada” (“the one who gives pleasure),” and “Reva” (“the one who leaps).” In A River Sutra, Gita Mehta employs the ambiguity of Narmada’s driving impulse to provoke the reader, by asking for a response to the sexuality in her myth:

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Did they [the ascetics] brood on the Narmada as the proof of Shiva’s great penance, or did they imagine her as a beautiful woman dancing towards the Arabian Sea, arousing the lust of ascetics like themselves . . . ?

And again:

Did you know Narmada means a whore in Sanskrit?

The Meenachil (Arundhati Roy calls the river Meenachal), too, has her mythology closely linked to Siva: the name Meenachil comes from Goddess Meenakshi of Madurai, the warrior goddess of the ruling Karthas of Meenachil. Meenakshi became Meenachi and later Meenachil. According to various legends this river starts from the kamandalu (holy water vessel) of the sage Gauna. Hence the River Meenachil is also known as Gauna Nadi (Gauna River). Gauna filled his water vessel with water from the seven holy rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Sindhu, Narmada, Godavari, and Kaveri). A beautiful idol of Lord Subramanya, Lord Siva’s son, was also kept in his vessel. Gauna eagerly waited to see Rama, on his return journey to Ayodhya, after killing Ravana. Rama was accompanied by a large number of devotees so Gauna could not get a glimpse of Rama or his wife Sita. So the angry Gauna threw the water vessel away and the idol of Lord Subramanya came out. The flow of water became a river and thus the present Gauna River was formed. Later, Rama and Sita gave darshan (divine appearance) to Gauna.

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72 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 132-133.
73 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 143-144.
74 Known by 108 names, such as Murugan and Karthikeya, Lord Subramanya is the reigning deity among Tamils and the Thiyyas of Northern Kerala as well as Kannada people. He is central to the ancient Sanskrit text *Skandapurana* and is the deity venerated as the God of War.
75 *The Ramayana* is one of the two great epics of the Indian classical canon (the other is *The Mahabharata*). In *The Ramayana* Sita, the consort of epic hero Rama, who is an incarnation of Visnu, is abducted by Ravana, the demon king of Lanka. On her rescue and return to her husband Rama’s kingdom she is forced to undergo a test of fire by her husband at the persuasion of the male citizenry, which she triumphantly passes. Sita, ironically for our project, is identified with female subversion and success in
Rama advised Gauna to continue his meditation. Gauna then started his journey along the riverbank and began to worship Siva. Finally, he attained release from the cycle of rebirth.

The representation of the feminine in the three texts demonstrates how the patriarchy often commodified female corporeality, and attempted to contain her in narratives and images of the “chaste” domesticated woman as the mother. I argue that Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy, wary of the patriarchal rhetoric employed during India’s struggle for independence that at once worshipped the female body as a “mother” and robbed her of her sexuality, utilise these three river myths to question these narratives of female chastity and containment. Under the tutelage of the male leadership during the independence struggle, images of the Ganga Mata (Mother Ganga) or Bharat Mata were often used to “inspire” and control women, by arousing religious fervour among the masses. The eight-storey Bharat Mata temple at Hardwar, the “holy” city through which the Ganga flows, was built in the 1980s, and according to Vidya Dehejia, is a perfect instance “of the goddess being co-opted into the cause of Hindu nationalism by the organisation known as Vishwa Hindu-Parishad, or World Hindu Council.”

This Mother India temple even has a “troubling sati shrine dedicated to Indian womanhood that includes images of two satis engulfed in flames” The patriarchal leadership resorted to such politically expedient measures in order to gain the support of the Indian masses by recasting the myths in their antiquated forms. Each of the river goddesses’ myths are battling male domination. See Julie Mehta, “The Ramayana in the Arts of Thailand and Cambodia,” Ramayana Revisited, ed. Mandakranta Bose (New York: Oxford UP, 2004) 323.


Dehejia, “Encountering Devi” 28. One of the earliest and largest temples of Bharat Mata (Mother India) was established in 1936 in the town of Varanasi, where a large relief map of Akhanda Bharat (unpartitioned India) is enshrined. By this time, the practice of using a contour map of India to deify Bharat Mata had already gained popularity.

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undergirded in what Grant Williams refers to as a “gendered trajectory of becoming,” which suggests a constantly evolving identity.\textsuperscript{78} I argue that by drawing on the power of the divine feminine, embedded in the powerful and ancient, pre-colonial sacrality of river myths of the Ganga, Narmada, and Meenachil, the novelists salvage an eroded, subjugated identity of women and provide an alternative vision of the feminine. Thus, I posit that these fictional narratives, situated in the fluidity of waterscapes, complement the works of contemporary feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray who also explore the transformational quality of water in its multiple manifestations as a disruptive, subversive, and uncontainable element. These river goddesses are fluid and indomitable, and are neither amenable to being forced into paradigmatic histories or geographies, nor into any phallocentric system of order that manifested itself during the Swaraj or self-rule movement in the fight for an independent India, when the control of women’s chastity was equated with the control of the nation by the male political machinery. In the multiple and ambiguous re-presentations of these river goddesses by these three novelists, the geo-body of the river is conflated with the body of the nation by virtue of its unstable myth of origin.

Hence, the aim of this project is to examine how Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy mobilise the unstable Hindu myths of the river goddesses, inserting them into the vexed and subversive battlefield of post-imperial identity where the feminine is continuously attempting to recover agency from, and find equality with, the male. I aim to show how the transculturation of the oral tradition of river myths--grafting the primordial on to the contemporary--lends itself appropriately to the multitudinous representations of the

divine feminine in the characters of Piya, in *The Hungry Tide*, Rima Bose in *A River Sutra*, and Ammu in *The God of Small Things*.

**RIVERS IN THE IMAGINATION OF GHOSH, MEHTA, AND ROY**

It might be useful to keep in view that each of these writers has a dual career as a social or political activist: Roy is now perceived as an “activist-writer,” spending more time fighting the ruling party’s “ineptitude in governing India” as she puts it, and lending her voice to crucial social causes such as the Maobadi (Maoist) uprising for national equity among the Gond tribes in Eastern India, and collaborating with activist Medha Patkar to support the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Agitation) that aims to prevent the state from constructing a series of 3,200 dams across the Narmada River (flowing through Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat), dams which will wash away the homes of millions of villagers.\(^7^9\) Ghosh is vocal in environmental issues

\(^7^9\)Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good,” *Outlook India*, Apr. 1999. Roy writes: In India over the last ten years the fight against the Sardar Sarovar Dam has come to represent far more than the fight for one river [the Narmada]. This has been its strength as well as its weakness. Some years ago, it became a debate that captured the popular imagination. That’s what raised the stakes and changed the complexion of the battle. From being a fight over the fate of a river valley it began to raise doubts about an entire political system. What is at issue now is the very nature of our democracy. Who owns this land? Who owns its rivers? Its forests? Its fish? These are huge questions. They are being taken hugely seriously by the State. They are being answered in one voice by every institution at its command—the army, the police, the bureaucracy, the courts. And not just answered, but answered unambiguously, in bitter, brutal ways. For the people of the valley, the fact that the stakes were raised to this degree has meant that their most effective weapon—specific facts about specific issues in this specific valley—has been blunted by the debate on the big issues. The basic premise of the argument has been inflated until it has burst into bits that have, over time, bobbed away. Occasionally a disconnected piece of the puzzle floats by—an emotionally charged account of the Government’s callous treatment of displaced people; an outburst at how the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), ‘a handful of activists,’ is holding the nation to ransom; a legal correspondent reporting on the progress of the NBA’s writ petition in the Supreme Court.

Though there has been a fair amount of writing on the subject, most of it is for a ‘special interest’ readership. News reports tend to be about isolated aspects of the project. Government documents are classified as ‘Secret.’ I think it’s fair to say that public perception of the issue is pretty crude and is divided crudely, into two categories:

On the one hand, it is seen as a war between modern, rational, progressive forces of ‘Development’ versus a sort of neo-Luddite impulse—an irrational, emotional ‘Anti-Development’ resistance, fuelled by an arcadian, pre-industrial dream. On the other, as a Nehru vs Gandhi contest. This
surrounding the Sunderbans, the riverine delta of the Ganga, and invests time and energy in preventing tourism from ruining the delicate ecological balance in the wetlands.\footnote{Amitav Ghosh, “Crocodile in the Swamplands,” \textit{Outlook India}, 18 Oct. 2004. Ghosh writes passionately about not allowing any tourist resorts being built in the Sunderbans: . . . The Sahara Parivar’s project would turn large stretches of this very forest, soaked in the blood of evicted refugees, into a playground for the affluent . . . The floating hotel and its satellite structures will also disgorge a large quantity of sewage and waste into the surrounding waters. This refuse will include grease, oil and detergents. The increased level of pollution is certain to have an impact on the crabs and fish that live in these waters. Very high levels of mercury have already been detected in the fish that is brought to Calcutta’s markets. A sharp increase in pollution could have a potentially devastating effect on the food supply of the entire region.} And with her close links to the Indian political leadership and her social conscience, Gita Mehta is politically affiliated to many of the issues that beleaguer India (her father was chief minister of the state of Orissa, a position now held by her brother, Naveen), and Mehta participates frequently in national debates.\footnote{Gita Mehta, Author’s interview, Apr. 2004. In a conversation with Julie Mehta, Gita Mehta said: “Women are \textit{satis} [those who immolate themselves--often at the insistence of male family members--on the funeral pyre of the husband], and women are goddesses in India. The ambivalent status of women is what is at once most challenging and intriguing for a contemporary writer. As a woman who feels strongly about how India is portrayed in post-Independence India, I am very actively invested in these representations.”}

My work therefore examines the material and symbolic contestations around rivers, especially in relation to the construction of identities based on nation, gender, lifts the whole sorry business out of the bog of deceit, lies, false promises, and increasingly successful propaganda (which is what it’s really about) and confers on it a false legitimacy. It makes out that both sides have the Greater Good of the Nation in mind--but merely disagree about the means by which to achieve it.

The Nehru vs Gandhi argument pushes this very contemporary issue back into an old bottle. Nehru and Gandhi were generous men. Their paradigms for development are based on assumptions of inherent morality. Nehru’s on the paternal, protective morality of the Soviet-style Centralised State. Gandhi's on the nurturing, maternal morality of romanticised village Republics. Both would work perfectly, if only we were better human beings. If only we all wore khadi and suppressed our base urges--sex, shopping, dodging spinning lessons, and being unkind to the less fortunate. Fifty years down the line, it’s safe to say that we haven’t made the grade. We haven’t even come close. We need an updated insurance plan against our own basic natures.

It’s possible that as a nation we’ve exhausted our quota of heroes for this century, but while we wait for shiny new ones to come along, we have to limit the damage. We have to support our small heroes. (Of these we have many. Many.) We have to fight specific wars in specific ways. Who knows, perhaps that’s what the twenty first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there’s a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Could it be? Could it \textit{possibly} be? It sounds finger-licking good to me.

I was drawn to the valley because I sensed that the fight for the Narmada had entered a newer, sadder phase. I went because writers are drawn to stories the way vultures are drawn to kills. My motive was not compassion. It was sheer greed. I was right. I found a story there.

And what a story it is.
caste, and class. As rivers shape human civilisation and societies reconfigure and alter rivers, landscapes and lives are conflated. My project investigates this reciprocal relationship through its consideration of the environmental, symbolic, and political turbulence around rivers in the Indian postcolonial landscape. It interrogates riverine spaces as contested property, disputed and scarce resources, and cultural networks which were and continue to be the lifeblood of civilisations, arteries of commerce and trade, powerful symbols of connections as well as cataclysmic clashes, the stuff of popular cultural production as in the visual, cinematic, and performative arts, as the essence of life and always manifested as the feminine power of sustenance in the universe. I explore the iterations of three powerful Indian river myths: the goddess Ganga contained in Siva’s cascading locks, breathing life into a parched landscape; the goddess Narmada, Siva’s unmarried daughter and beguilingly beautiful seductress, whose name suggests both the chaste and the unchaste;\(^82\) and the goddess Meenachil, a warrior deity named after Meenakshi, also Siva’s consort. All three myths cradle within them the duality of rivers—rivers, in their many ancient anthropomorphic manifestations as crocodiles, fish, \textit{apsaras} (celestial nymphs), or serpents, are at once the source of life, and the force of devastation.\(^83\) As I traverse postcolonial India, I examine fictional works that draw on these three pivotal myths of rivers through which the authors bring into juxtaposition the ancient vanishing world of untamed nature and the postmodern, increasingly aggressive world of high-technology.

\(^82\) Narmada, according to Gita Mehta, also means “whore” in Sanskrit: \textit{A River Sutra}, 143-144.\(^83\) Pratapaditya Pal, \textit{A Collecting Odyssey: Indian, Himalayan, and Southeast Asian Art from the James and Marilynn Alsdorf Collection} (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997) 162. Water sprites were born of the samudra manthan (churning of the ocean) myth. \textit{Ap} means water in Sanskrit.
GLOBAL REPRESENTATIONS OF RIVERS

Rivers are often at the front and centre of the imagination of many writers. There is a global literary tradition of incorporating rivers into works of fiction: T. S. Eliot in “The Wasteland” brings together the riverscapes of the “tarred” Thames and the dry riverbed of the Ganga, and in “Dry Salvages” he invokes the river “within us;” Joseph Conrad in The Heart of Darkness begins with a leisurely journey down the Thames, and then recounts a terrifying trip up the Congo; Ngugi wa Thiong’o in A River Between narrates the touching tale of two rival communities, Kameno and Makuyu, which face each other and are separated only by the “divine” Honia River; R.K. Narayan in The Man-Eater of Malgudi endows the River Ganga a dual identity: she is both a secular and sacred space for the central character Narayan’s daily ritual of bathing in her waters; V.S. Naipaul in A Bend in the River explores the dislocated life of Salim, who sets up home in a town on the bend of a river; Margaret Laurence speaks eloquently of a river running forward and backwards in The Diviners; Lorna Goodison breezes freely between registers of the conversational and sublime, like a river which is a reiterative image in her poetry. Her mother poems, as I refer to them, are of particular significance to this project because they yoke together humour and reality and a certain dignity for the spirit undergirded in images of water and journeys. Goodison makes extremely powerful references to the river that speak to the role of the sacrality of water images in the riverscapes of the Ganga and the Narmada in South Asian fiction. This is especially evident in Goodison’s poem about laying her mother’s body to rest in a green dress, and another describing the dream of her washing the deceased body of her mother in the sacred waters. Goodison’s memorable and mythical narrative of her family, From Harvey
River, mirrors the crystalline quality of the water from that river in her sparkling prose. Heraclitus tells us that: “You can never walk into the same river twice,” and Robert Kroetsch in his first novel But We are Exiles embarks on a voyage down the Mackenzie River. In another novel, Badlands, Kroetsch follows an archeological team down the Red Deer River into the badlands of Alberta. The Canadian poet F.R. Scott writing in the late-1920s and early-1930s, in “Old Song” narrates:

    far voices
    and fretting leaves
    this music the
    hillside gives
    but in the deep
    Laurentian river
    an elemental
    song forever
    a quiet calling
    with no mind
    out of long aeons
    when dust was
    blind and ice hid sound
    only a moving
    with no note
    granite lips
    a stone throat.
Eli Mandel, another Canadian writer, imagines the river as a metaphor. His poem, “Birthmark” tracks his birthplace on the Souris River:

I carry the souris
on my brow
the river
in my head
the valley
of my dreams
still echoes
with her cry.

A feminist representative of the Indian diaspora in Canada, Proma Tagore, often uses water as a metaphor for an evolving female identity and the force of the poetic imagination. As an hyphenated South Asian-Canadian poet, she writes about “the poetics and politics of queer South Asian bodies and desires as these have been reconfigured in the diaspora.” In resistance to the homogenising tendencies of both dominant heteronormative forms of South Asian nationalism, she shows how deeply the postcolonial feminine psyche is represented in rivers. Her aquatic metaphors thus invoke the deliverance that women writers in a decolonising world seek through their journeys as a way to challenge patriarchy:

why not just flow,
through deep and heavenly waters, an oceanic reverie.
do not swim but become the sea, become
smooth silk sand, or carpets of velvet algae,
green and silk and slippery, carpeting solid rock.

whether the teeth of hard crusted barnacles,

overcupped by the tender rubber skin of sea anemones,

sucking me in, undulating, making my ears and spine quiver.

or varieties of seaweed: plump and hollow, a woman’s belly;

faded yellow ropes, leaves wide and thick, sheathed in indigo beauty,

wrapped, tangled, entangled in the ocean’s mystery.

waves lapping, slapping against skin, against shore, like tongues

swapping stories, song, between each other.

why follow?

why not just flow,

and be grateful for the gift of simply being able to see

things not as they appear, but as they are.84

FEMINISM UNDAMMED

There are two equally valid and opposite perspectives in my study of the three works by Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy: first, rivers represented as mythic icons of cultural memory and spiritual origins, symbolising sexual empowerment; and second, rivers as metaphors for the chaste feminine, where woman is manipulated and desexualized by patriarchy by representing her as mother because controlling the womb is a way to control feminine power. The overarching issues that inform this dissertation are the formation of postcolonial cultural identity with specific reference to the myths of the

three river goddesses of India, and the paradox faced by women in a modern, changing India, where they stand at the crossroads of opportunity and oppression as well as deliverance and loss.

In Chapter One of this dissertation I show how *The Hungry Tide*, constructed upon the legend of the Hindu river goddess Ganga’s descent and her containment by Siva, is deployed by anthropologist-novelist Ghosh to address the inevitable crosscurrents that arise when an oral tradition based on intuition, myth, and multiple deities meets a written tradition based on materialism, modernity, and science. I use Homi Bhabha, Sumathi Ramaswamy, David Hardiman and Luce Irigaray to examine the vexing issues of hybridity when an intuitive culture meets a high-tech one.

In Chapter Two, I ponder the complex nexus between the ancient-spiritual and the contemporary-secular in *A River Sutra*. Focusing on the creator-destroyer male deity Siva, and the serpent image in the Hindu myths of creation that abound in classical Sanskrit texts, and by superimposing Western theorists such as Klaus Theweleit and Luce Irigaray on the Indic mythos, I examine the ambiguous textualization of the River Narmada as a virgin and a prostitute in Gita Mehta’s work. In my exploration of *A River Sutra* I attempt to uncover the ritual practices of an oral, tribal tradition that affirms feminine agency.

In Chapter Three, I see through the muddy waters of the Meenachil where patriarchy is submerged by the contaminating force of caste and language. I find Victor Li, Chelva Kanaganayakam, L. Chris Fox, and Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch’ien’s work useful in my interrogation of the cultural politics that Roy engages in.\(^{85}\) Here, I inspect the

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figure of Ammu in *The God of Small Things* and how this unstable victim of patriarchy takes on the problematic bodyscape of the River Meenachil. In tracking the evolution of the feminine, I show how the language Roy uses to address the issues of environment in her novel is factored into her project to subvert the overwhelming power of the social and political patriarchy, and corporate greed.\(^{86}\) I detect in Roy’s political activism against the project to dam the River Narmada, and her support for Save the Narmada Campaign, the same impulse that drove her to describe in her novel the injustices meted out by the ruling patriarchy to a *Paravan* such as Velutha.

In the Conclusion, I consider how the feminine in the form of water acts as a discursive continuum, displaying a diversity of voices, making the fabric of this study multi-textured, reflecting a bricolage, a vast matrix of inherited cultural forms made up of language, symbol, parable, myth, ritual, belief, and behaviour. Finally, I show the deployment of a paradigm shift in finding a postcolonial identity after Indian independence in 1947. The new identity has empowered novelists and activists to uphold the ancient rights of peoples to their sacred beliefs and practices, and celebrate these rights as a tool of empowerment. It has also facilitated the resurrection of the divine feminine in contemporary works of fiction through conflating the sacred and the profane.

The term Devi possesses a complex etymology and a nuanced semantic history since her identity is closely sutured to her sexual agency. Meaning goddess in Sanskrit and Hindi, Devi symbolises supreme power in the universe and the embodiment of the female energy of Siva, having both beneficent and malevolent forms or aspects. Art historian Vidya Dehejia’s valuable insights into the way the divine feminine has been

regarded or received with ambivalence by the Hindu Brahminic tradition is helpful in comprehending the connection between patriarchy and the assertion of feminine rights.

Since feminine agency is the fulcrum on which the central argument of this dissertation turns, it is useful to employ Dehejia’s epigraphic and archival research to anchor the reinterpretation of the goddess. Evidence provided by Dehejia of feminine sexuality in pre-colonial shrines constructed to honour the Devi strongly supports the fact that Indic culture celebrated the goddess during the same period. First, Dehejia points out that at Guwahati, in northeastern India, the divine feminine is Devi Kamakhya who is closely associated with water: her iconic representation is a sheet of rock with a cleft filled with water. “The cleft in the rock is said to represent the yoni, or genitalia, of the goddess and one of the most important festivals in Guwahati is associated with the menstruation of the goddess.”

When the water in the cleft changes colour (scientifically explained as occasional emissions of iron oxide in the water), thousands of devotees flock to the shrine from the surrounding hills and dip their fingers in the “holy water.” Those who have the financial means offer animal sacrifices in the form of a goat or even a buffalo.

Dehejia’s second example is even more nuanced because she narrates the ritual worship of the Devi (in the manifestation of goddess Bhagavati) at a temple in Chengannur in Kerala, along the Malabar coast, where the goddess also “menstruates,” and the stain on her petticoat is celebrated. “On the fourth day, to the accompaniment of much fanfare, the image is carried to the river for a ritual purificatory bath . . . Her cotton petticoat is eagerly sought after by devotees . . . ”

87 Dehejia, “Encountering Devi” 27.
88 Dehejia, “Encountering Devi” 27.
Giri is one of many who had purchased this auspicious garment. The myth of the Devi recounts how the goddess’s womb fell at this site and became a pitha, a sacred place of worship. Dehejia’s account echoes the same association of feminine power that stems from “feminine flood,” in the form of menstrual flow, as suggested by Klaus Theweleit. Dehejia’s argument about how “female contagion” caused anxiety among male leadership in Indian culture is clear enough, and brings us back to the thoughts of Nur Yalman at the beginning of this chapter:

The ambivalence about the goddess was extended to human women, particularly in the realm of their sexuality. Female vulnerability to ritual pollution, through sexual intercourse was deeply feared in a society that placed great emphasis on caste barriers. Woman, as prakriti (nature), represented the field that could be polluted; purusha (the cosmic male counterpart) was the “knower” of the field whose seed was vulnerable to pollution. With this ancient argument in place, double standards were firmly established; hence too the emphasis on channeling women’s sexuality through marriage and thus maintaining caste purity. Furthermore, the creation of the goddess in Indic imagination is complex and ambiguous. The story goes that the male gods created the Devi in order to control the asuras or demons because the male deities were unable to strategize in battle to defeat the asuras who terrorized heaven and earth. Ironically, it is the male tejas or fiery anger that “created” the feminine divine:

That matchless splendour, born from the bodies of all the gods,

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89 Theweleit, Male Fantasies I 86, 134-8
90 Nur Yalman, as told to Joanna Liddle, and Rama Joshi, “Gender and Hierarchy” 57
91 Dehejia, “Encountering Devi” 34.
Came together in a single place, pervading all the worlds with its luster, and it became a woman.\textsuperscript{92}

Even more complex is how each of the male gods contributed to the structuring of this new cosmic entity. There is a palpable tension between the patriarchy being impotent in its effort to control the presence of evil in the universe, and its resorting to create a female force that successfully asserts herself and brings about a just and civil cosmic order.

From Shiva’s splendour her mouth was produced

Her tresses from that of Yama, her arms from the splendour of Vishnu . . .

Her eyes were the splendour of the two twilights, and her ears that of the wind . . .

Krishna gave her a discus, pulling it forth from his own discus.

Varuna gave her a conch. Agni a spear . . .

The ocean gave her radiant lotus,

While the Himalaya gave her a lion to ride upon and various jewels.\textsuperscript{93}

This dissertation--certainly inspired by that childhood image of the Ganga flowing out of the cascading hair of Siva that spurred me on through the many journeys to the riverscapes of India, both geographical and literary--is constructed at the centre of this vexed battlefield of the myth of creation of the divine feminine. And despite the concerted and continuous efforts to circumscribe and limit the force of the feminine, it appears that by her very essence--of fluidity, mobility, and transformability--she prevails in multitudinous manifestations, and is at her most powerful as the river goddesses. Her resurrection as the spirit of freedom-- in the works of the postcolonial writers Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy--revalidates her power as the pervasive presence of the divine feminine


\textsuperscript{93} Coburn, \textit{Encountering the Goddess} 2.13, 17, 19-20, 28.
in a quickly evolving nation. The representations in these three works also reinstall her through her aetiology, empower her with limitless possibilities and, most significant of all, redefine the status of the Indian woman of the twenty-first century in a globalising planet.
In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga’s descent from the heavens would have split the earth had the Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for instance an immense rope of water . . . the islands are the trailing threads . . . In the language of the place, such a confluence is spoken of as a mohona, a strangely seductive word, wrapped in layers of beguilement. There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge . . . some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsula; at other times it throws up new shelves where there were none.

--Ghosh, The Hungry Tide.¹

In the history of civilisations, it appears for the most part that art imitates life. However, as the recent Asian tsunami of 2004 has shown, life does occasionally imitate art. In an unprecedented and somewhat uncanny manner, Amitav Ghosh’s novel The Hungry Tide (2004) appears to have predicted the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, which brushes shoulders with the mass of water in the Bay of Bengal, where the setting for Ghosh’s

novel is located. In the literary history of postcolonial South Asian Literature, this narrative is destined to acquire significance because it predicted a phenomenon that impacted close to two million lives, and in the process seamlessly blurred the lines between the mythical and the real. Life and art, in one swift smudge, became united in a hybrid dance. Not many stories of our time can lay claim to such immeasurable, though arguably accidental, clairvoyance.

This chapter ponders how translation, transmutation, and transformation, as manifestations of hybridity, are the driving forces that fuel Ghosh’s project to re-(a) dress the divine myth of the river goddess Ganga in The Hungry Tide. In this way, Ghosh performs an act of revision that resurfaces strategically throughout the novel. At a memorable moment in the narrative translator Kanai, who speaks six languages, quotes a line from Rainer Maria Rilke’s Duino Elegies, “Life is lived in transformation,” which encapsulates the core message of The Hungry Tide. Our attention is called to the act of translation where the translation of genres, the translation of experience into word, the translation of untranslatable emotions, the untranslatability because of lack of linguistic skills—all form the frame of the narratives by Fokir, a native speaker of a Bengali dialect, and Piya, a Western-educated, English speaking diasporic ethnic Bengali who has lost all memory of her mother tongue. Thus, Ghosh posits the rhetorical question: “How do you lose a word? Does it vanish into your memory, like an old toy in a cupboard, and lie hidden in the cobwebs and dust?”

And at several points in the course of the narrative the issue of translation is raised, as shown in the following examples:

Speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being . .

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2 Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 93.
This was the only animal that forgave you for being so little at ease in your translated world . . .³

When the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen, unheard . . .⁴

Or Kanai, the translator remembering that:

. . . he too had concentrated his mind this way . . . but the vistas he had been looking at lay deep within the interior of other languages . . . And he remembered too, the obstacles, the frustrations, the sense that he would never be able to bend his mouth around those words . . . it was pure desire that had quickened his mind then and he could feel the thrill even now--except that now that desire was incarnated in the woman who was standing before him, in the bow, a language made flesh.⁵

Even when the word “translation” or any of its Indian language equivalents such as anuvad, tarjuma, bhashantar, or vivartanam are not evoked to describe the activity, the concepts of heteroglossia, intertextuality,⁶ and the plurality of peoples and cultures within the subcontinent have been dominant forces that have driven and are still driving South Asian, and particularly Indian, writing in English. The linguistic and cultural colonisation of India by Britain was an epistemic violation, and since Macaulay’s momentous Education Minute of 1835, “English” has become a vexed and bloody battleground of national struggle and re-appropriation. Ironically, Ghosh himself is a translated man:

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³ Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 328.
⁴ Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 258.
⁵ Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 269.
⁶ Heteroglossia is a diversity of voices, styles of discourse, or points of view in a literary work, especially a novel. Intertextuality is the complex interrelationship between a text and other texts taken as basic to the creation or interpretation of the text.
educated in Delhi, Oxford, and Egypt, Ghosh speaks Arabic, Bengali, English, and Hindi, and lives in New York and Goa. His translated persona also puts him in the centre of the vernacular debate in India, led by such regional writers as the late Harivansh Rai Bachchan, Mahasweta Devi, and Javed Akhtar. These indigenous authors who are voluble in their discourses of resistance in their regional bhasha, or tongue, have argued that theirs is not a level playing field. They refer to these translated men and women as diasporic English writers who receive large advances, are published widely in the West, and view them as “flavours of the times,” often perceiving them to be the “spoilt brats” of the post-Empire. Bachchan, who taught English at Allahabad University and received his doctorate in English Literature from Cambridge, yet wrote poetry in Hindi and Urdu, has criticised the Indian English-educated elites for neglecting the regional languages and only using them for “giving orders to servants.” In this way, the English-educated elites have debased the indigenous languages. These elites hanker for the glamour of being “accepted” by the “upper class literati, whom I would call the glitterati,” Bachchan has said. But the inherent complexity in this debate stems from the reality that English is also the location for negotiating between cultures and is seen to be a potentially powerful space between tradition and modernity in a globalising world. English enables the diasporic, “translated” writer like Ghosh not only to share his experiences with far-flung inhabitants by means of a shared tongue, but ironically also to communicate with fellow citizens within India, who might share only one of twenty-two official languages. 

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7 I find Roland Barthes’ theory of inherent intertextuality useful in explicating my argument about Ghosh as an author “participating” in The Hungry Tide as a “translated” man, able to empathise with his character Piya’s situation. According to Barthes: “The author participates in the novel (he is omnipresent in it) with almost no language of his own. The language of the novel is a system of languages that linguistically, mutually, and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to analyse it as a singular, unitary language.” To his thesis I would add that in the specific case of South Asian writing in
“English is,” as Meenakshi Mukherjee in *The Perishable Empire* so lucidly states, “the common language for Indians.”

My intent in this chapter is to confront the multiplicity of hybridities—the translations and transformations—that frequently occur simultaneously in Ghosh’s narrative, and interrogate their deployment as a strategy by the author to first, decentre and destabilise any construct of a homogenous postcolonial nation; second, to sabotage polarity; and finally, to prevent any one kind of knowledge from being accorded “most favoured” status. Ultimately, I argue that hybridity is a tool skillfully utilised by Ghosh to force a conversation between oppositional forces. While redefining and repossessing lost ground for the Fokirs *and* the Piyas of a globalising world, where neither can exist
without the support of the other, the close engagement with transformability in this novel celebrates the inherent diversity and fractiousness of India. In this strange and eclectic suitcase of hybridity that is represented in *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh packs in his trust and and hope in human progress. I borrow from his diasporic colleagues Sonita Sarkar’s and Esha Niyogi De’s words to locate Ghosh’s impulse to privilege hybridity over homogeneity, where his impetus . . . emerges from the author’s own alliances across the imposed divides of race, gender and culture, and through our many debates about our subjects and ourselves. As teachers, researchers and activists who have forged emotional and intellectual links to South and Southeast Asia, we write about times and territories we inhabit and visit. We live in different parts of those regions, North America and Western Europe; we participate in globalizing South and Southeast Asian countries by transporting their images within and beyond their borders. Since we work in and across institutions like the academy and (neo) liberal state, our sense of being and belonging is affected by local understandings of gendered and racialized categories of spaces and times . . . We negotiate and contest . . . homogenous spaces that dominant political agendas supplant for the multiple material-symbolic places that we inhabit…

This chapter also examines Ghosh’s significant contribution as a writer of the postcolonial-postmodern period in bringing about spiritual globalisation by melding the vanishing world of untamed nature with the gratuitously aggressive world of high technology. Focusing on how the material and the mythical collide constantly in the

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estuaries of the Indian side of the Bay of Bengal, and eventually coalesce to form an invincible partnership--this chapter examines the tensions between the dual journeys, internal and external, of three characters: a young, American cetologist (researcher of marine animals) of Indian extraction Piyali Roy (shortened to Piya), a suave Indian businessman and translator Kanai Dutt, and the indigenous, unlettered, fisherman Fokir. The narrative also forges a link between the events in the unpredictable natural world of tides, man eaters and the jungles of Morichjhapi in the Sunderbans (“the beautiful forest”), with the deeply moving spiritual ties the three characters experience in their imagination when they traverse this mutating mass of borderless land and water.  

Training his sights on the legend of the Goddess Ganga’s descent and the accompanying image of jowar and bhata--the flow tide and the ebb tide--that are controlled by Chandra, the Moon God, Ghosh addresses the inevitable crosscurrents that arise when an intuitive, mythical, and oral tradition with its many gods and goddesses (including the reigning forest deities such as Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli, who protect fishermen and honey gatherers from man-eating tigers and crocodiles) meets a modern, materialist, rationalist, scientific, written one. This novel celebrates the presence of myth as a powerful tool that can connect not only the past with the present, but also the world of fast-disappearing animism with the world of faceless technology and an obsolete language (the Bangal dialect, spoken by the indigenous inhabitants of the Sunderbans such as Fokir) with a global lingua franca (English, spoken by Piya)--allowing us an

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10 Invoked by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children* (New York: Knopf, 1981) as “the dream forest” and “a green wall,” “where history had hardly ever found a way in,” the Sunderbans is the largest delta in the world, formed by three great rivers emptying into the Bay of Bengal: the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna. It is intersected by tributaries, creeks, channels, and shifting islands. The largest mangrove forest in the world, the Sunderbans, is the habitat of man-eating tigers and crocodiles and species of snakes and crabs and birds found nowhere else. Its forest has a reputation for eeriness and most of it is reputed never to have had permanent human occupation. Cyclones and tidal waves periodically rise out of the Bay of Bengal and devastate it.
experience to read across borders of times, genres, literary traditions, and spaces. While not a completely ‘free’ agent, the subaltern\textsuperscript{11} Fokir is shown as exercising enough agency to counter certain hegemonies (represented by the corrupt poachers in the guise of officers in the Forest Department) and he employs an alternative ‘structure of power’ based on his traditional indigenous knowledge of the river—a power that ultimately saves the life of the sophisticated and highly educated Piya, who has no knowledge of how to battle the elements and is unable to survive without her comfortable hi-tech gizmos. Her energy bars, Global Positioning System (GPS) and bottled water are all markers of corporate globalisation, and are eventually unable to cope with the elemental force of nature and her turbulence in the phenomenology of water. Significantly, the novel serves as a bridge connecting other more inflexible “truths” which on a daily, politicised basis are mere binary opposites, such as Islam and Hinduism in a highly polarised postcolonial India. By attempting to dig out a common, sacred space in the practice of animistic worship, shared by both Hindus and Muslims, Ghosh continues in his anthropological quest to find a common thread among differing cultures. Organised through three central figures, the deceptively simple plot revolves around Piya, a scientist who comes from

\textsuperscript{11} This dissertation uses the term subaltern on Ranajit Guha’s terms; however, recounting the history of the word is crucial especially in the postcolonial historical context of The Hungry Tide. Subaltern: OED current meaning: of inferior or subordinate status, quality or importance. Origin: Latin, subalternus. First use: French subalterne from fifteenth century Spanish subalterno. Samuel Johnson in 1755 mentions “subaltem.” Literary examples: 1814, Scott in Waverley: “He had been employed as a subaltern agent and spy”; 1726, Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels: “They have a subalterne court paid to them by persons of the best rank.” Current use in the Subaltern Studies Dictionary: “As in the transformation of the word from meaning subaltern officer in the army to a native dominated by an imperial ruler, to mean those groups in society who are subjected to the hegemony of the ruling class, “whose voices are seldom if ever heard.” Further honed in meaning by the Subaltern Studies (ed. Ranajit Guha, 1982: vii) “as a general attribute to subordination in South Asian Society, in terms of caste, class, age gender, and language….,” the word has actually become a trope for “resistance to elite domination.” The term subaltern is also attributed to Antonio Gramsci’s essay “On the Margins of History,” and is used by the Subaltern Studies scholars to identify a mode of historical practice that seeks to recover an indigenous culture which it assumes to be unaffected by colonialism. This contentious claim is most clearly made in Ranajit Guha’s Introduction to the first of the Subaltern Studies volumes (1982).
Seattle (where her parents went from India) to Calcutta to visit relatives who can help her study orcaellas–river dolphins–in the Sunderbans. Although of Bengali extraction, she is an alien in India, no longer speaks Bangla, although she did as a child; her hair is cropped short and she carries a backpack. Through her, Ghosh cautiously coaxes open the sensitive issue of expatriate Indian “identity.” Piya’s simultaneous Indianness and foreignness make it harder for people to assess her, but also make it easier for them to exploit her indeterminacy in the social scheme of things. She is at once fascinated by Fokir’s spontaneity, intuitive knowledge base and quick intelligence, and has no difficulty communicating without a common language and develops a deep and powerful bond with him, which has the promise of a future. However, Piya’s hopes are thwarted by the tidal wave that consumes Fokir as he bestows the gift of life to her instead. Piya is then left picking up the pieces with Kanai: as Piya says in the last lines of The Hungry Tide: “. . . it’ll be good to have him [Kanai] home.”

This chapter also attempts to rethink the constitution of the Indian postcolonial nation-state, not as a homogenous and unanimous one as most nationalist discourse represents it, but rather as a splintered, multifaceted, diverse, heterogenous entity that is constantly changing shape. Through a close examination of the contrapuntal forces that punctuate Ghosh’s narrative, I intend to offer a broader view of how several postcolonial novelists represent India as “unified through diversity.” Here, I interrogate how Ghosh’s adept employment of translations and polyphonic discourses--involving the mixing and crossing of tradition and modernity, and the oral and the written--becomes seductive and surreal in invoking images of the Ganga whose own multiple

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12 Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 399.
manifestations are often muddied and oppositional to one another. I argue that Ghosh employs changeability to resurrect a pre-colonial image of the River Ganga, to present her in all her polarities and duplicitous impulses as a Vedic goddess, as resistance to the nationalist project of representing her as a manifestation of Bharat Mata, or as Bharat Lakshmi, the pure, homogenous, unpolluted geo-body of India which was promoted during the colonial period and during the independence movement from the early 1880s to the 1940s in visual and popular culture, as well as in the speeches of the leaders of the swadeshi and swatantra (self-governance) movements. The Vedic and Puranic\textsuperscript{14} representations of the divine feminine, as in the Devi Mahatmya\textsuperscript{15} and Skandapurana,\textsuperscript{16} show her in multiple rupas or forms, one of which is that of the warrior goddess. The nationalistic representation, on the other hand, opposes this pluralistic approach, and depicts the goddess as a one-dimensional mother figure in order to ensure that she conforms to a homogenous image of chastity and subservience to patriarchy. My exploration of the complex images of the divine feminine in The Hungry Tide is underpinned by the myths of the Hindu canon that relate the exploits of the Devi Mahisasuramardini (the Great Goddess who slayed the buffalo demon) as recorded in the foundational Hindu text, Devi Mahatmya.

\textsuperscript{14} The Vedas (in Sanskrit véda means knowledge) are a large body of texts originating in ancient India. Composed in Vedic Sanskrit, the texts constitute the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. They were supposed to have been written between 1500-100 BCE. According to Hindu tradition, the Vedas are “not of human agency,” are supposed to have been directly revealed, and thus are called gruti (what is heard). See, Gavin Flood, ed, The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2003); and Jon R Stone, ed, The Essential Max Müller: On Language, Mythology, and Religion (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

\textsuperscript{15} “The Glory of the Great Goddess,” is an integral section of the Markandeya Purana, 300-600 CE, with songs in praise of the goddess.

\textsuperscript{16} Puranas are literary texts written in Sanskrit verse, whose composition dates from the fourth century BCE to about 1,000 CE, post-Vedas. The word Purana means “old.” The Skandapurana is one of the eighteen Puranas, and is christened after the God Skanda who is also venerated in Southern India as Muruga and Kartikeya.
I posit that hybridity in its many forms is primarily an oppositional force to colonial, nationalist, and hegemonic forces in Ghosh’s novel. There is multiplicity in the voices and speech registers and various genres Ghosh employs in this novel to tell the story: in the secret, in-between spaces of words where memory and identity reside like Siamese twins, as in the untranslatable word gamchha; in the verbal abuse that explodes from Kanai when he fears that Fokir might steal Piya’s affection; through the differing registers of speech between the “master” and “servant” such as Kanai and Fokir; in the remarkable melding of genres that constantly undergo entrances and exits from Nirmal’s journal entries, in Fokir’s recitation of the oral mantras to the jungle gods, his songs to the Ganga, in Rilke’s poetry that is scattered throughout the telling; in conversations between the characters; in the travelogue meticulously maintained, and the scientific data preserved by Piya; in the mélange of languages used throughout the narrative, and in the powerful voice of the Narrator. Ghosh’s invocation of the divine feminine is also multitudinous and diverse: in a hyphenated, hybridised Hindu-Islamic folk tradition, she is Bon Bibi, the goddess of the forests; in the creation of the cosmopolitan displaced immigrant, and diasporic fallen-between-the-cracks scientist she is Piya; in the highly unstable, changeable riverscape of the river she is Ganga; in the poverty-stricken, though formidable mother figure, she is Kusum, Fokir’s mother. The scholar Ashis Nandy corroborates that South Asian goddesses have several persona, and often have a syncretic religious history that borders on folk cult, as in the goddess Bon Bibi in Ghosh’s novel. The title bibi has its roots in Arabic and is a term that conveys respect for a woman of honour:
Some folk tales presume Olaichandi who presided over cholera for instance, to be a thinly disguised incarnation of Kali. Her Islamic edition was Olaibibi. Often, in a village or a town, if Olaibibi was seen as more potent, the Hindus also went to her, and vice versa. Exactly as many Muslims in Dhaka go to the Dakshineshwari temple [one of the most popular shrines to goddess Kali in Calcutta] for specific forms of protection or blessings. Dakshineshwari, some believe, still protects people from serious accidents and few among them want to take the risk of testing the truth of this--not even in an Islamic society.\textsuperscript{17}

**HIGH TIDE OF THE MYTH**

But it is the myth of the Ganga that undergirds *The Hungry Tide*, teasing the reader through a journey of discovery with her ambiguous, chimerical presence. This is no normative, tranquil, one dimensional face of the divine feminine, but a highly conflicted one: as the “other” wife of Siva (Parvati being his primary consort and the source of sakti, or the female force in the universe), forever a willing captive in his hair, Ganga is a powerful goddess with a subliminal sexuality embedded in her myth of phallocentric containment; as the nurturing Ma Ganga, the water goddess, whose bodyscape nourishes all life forms in her depths--the mythical makara (crocodile), fish, serpents, and the orcaella--she is a symbol of nurturing motherhood; as Matla she is literally a “drunken” and careless hussy, often ferocious, frenzied and vengeful, killing indiscriminately in the wake of storms and tidal waves she herself conjures.\textsuperscript{18} Ganga’s


\textsuperscript{18} “Matla” is a derivative of “matal” which is a Bengali word for an alcoholic, signifying a certain recklessness and risqué attitude that comes from being under the influence of alcohol.
hybrid, multidimensional character is defined by her problematic relationship with Siva. The most dramatic expression of this relationship concerns the birth of Siva’s son, Karttikeya:

When Siva spills his semen it is so powerfully hot that it cannot be contained even by Agni [the god of fire] himself. After passing through a series of containers, none of which is able to contain it for long, the semen falls into the Ganges and is cooled over there. Within the cooling womb of Mother Ganges the semen takes on embryonic form, and the war god Karttikeya is duly born.\textsuperscript{19}

In the iconic representation of Siva, as the male phallus or lingam, there is always a presence of Ganga: in temples and places of worship, water from the Ganga (symbolic of the river goddess’s body) is liberally sprinkled by devotees of Siva on the lingam in an act of penance to appease the fires of his tapasya (energies released from intense meditation). In the deconstruction of this Hindu myth, feminist scholarship provides an interesting series of windows to view the “female imaginary,”\textsuperscript{20} by virtue of its alignment with feminist theory. First, a kind of hysterical mimesis, to borrow a term from Luce Irigaray, ensues here--only in \textit{this} story of Ganga, unlike Lucrece, in the \textit{Rape of Lucrece}, the river goddess becomes the \textit{willing} repository of male economy, and actively connects Siva, the ascetic Lord of Creation and Destruction, with the earthly world of humans. Second, there is a doppelganger here: just as Siva contains Ganga in his hair, Ganga becomes the repository of Siva’s creative powers by receiving his semen, which represents “all five elements of creation--earth (\textit{kshiti}), water (\textit{ap}), fire (\textit{tej}), air (\textit{marut}), space (\textit{bom}),” in the Vedic written and oral traditions. Read with the “mutuall elements”

\textsuperscript{19} Kinsley, \textit{Hindu Goddesses} 195.
\textsuperscript{20} Luce Irigaray, \textit{This Sex Which is Not One}, trans. Catherine Porter with Caroline Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1985) 30.
that John Donne, had written so passionately about, and a subject Irigaray herself has
devoted a life’s work to, the goddess of waters, the River Ganga, may be seen to be the
very metaphor for feminine alterity that Irigaray expounds on so persuasively in many of
her works: “A metaphor must remain a passageway, without resolution of the difference
between the terms of its reference.”

Challenging us to rethink the feminine principle in the imaginary construct of the Ganga, Irigaray’s reading dislodges the position of the subjugated woman from the political discourse popularised by the male Indian nationalists, centred on heterosexual subjectification. And it catapults the river goddess to a category which is not either/or, but both. Ganga, in her extra-sexuality, straddles the role of the male and the female—as being a receptacle for Siva’s semen and feminine economy that floods Siva’s corporeal body. This persistent transitional capability signals the departure of the chaste goddess, and ushers in an unsettled, restless goddess who refuses to be domesticated or colonised. Therefore, Ganga herself is the hybrid narrative and counter-narrative.

Ganga’s problematic identity, as gleaned from written and oral traditions of worship, as the chaste virgin, cleanser of all sins, and the seductive, unstable, heavenly beauty whom Siva embraces in his cascading locks, is a well exploited icon in Indian art and architecture. It is also an abiding and familiar presence in popular culture, including the bazaar images of Siva in calendars, as represented in a recent book by Kajri Jain on visual representations of the divine in India. I have yet to see an image of Siva (with or

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22 See, Luce Irigaray and Premodern Culture: Thresholds of History, ed. Theresa Krier and Elizabeth Harvey. This outstanding collection of essays clarifies several rich and complex aspects of Irigaray’s arguments regarding women and representations of the feminine, especially in images of water. They are particularly helpful in their exploration of the poets that were writing Bhakti and Sufi poetry in seventeenth century India, akin to the English metaphysical poets like John Donne, during the same time.
without his itinerant family, and wife Parvati) that does not include Ganga trapped willingly within his flowing hair, or bursting forth in a torrent out of his locks with mischievous abandon. Ghosh’s sexually potent description of the river goddess in the opening pages of *The Hungry Tide* employs powerful erotic images of desire and anxiety that are present in the following phrases: “the braid comes undone,” “the ragged fringe of her sari . . . half-wetted by the sea,” “many layers of beguilement,” “the water tears away,” “this strange parturition, midwived by the moon,” and, finally, Rilke’s verse: “we who have always thought of joy / as *rising* . . . feel the emotion / that almost amazes us / when a happy thing *falls*.”23 [italics mine].

This might have been the generic depiction of the goddess Ganga as concubine of Siva from any image of Ganga in the plastic arts from several centuries past. For instance, the story of the discomfiture of Parvati, on witnessing Ganga’s descent into her husband’s hair, is clearly illustrated in a panel depicting Gangadhara (the one who holds the Ganga). This panel is located in the eleventh century Siva temple at Gangaikondacholapuram built by the Chola emperor, Raja Rajendra Chola, who brought the Ganga to his kingdom (present day Tamil Nadu), or as some scholars claim the Chola who defeated the Ganga--a pun which indicates the River Ganga and the Ganga dynasty that ruled Bengal and Orissa. The scholar C. Sivaramamurti has shown that the Siva temple at Gangaikondacholapuram “depicts Siva appeasing Parvati who is vexed with him and consequently turns her face away, distressed at the prospect of a co-wife (competitor) in Ganga, who has settled on the locks of Siva.”24 Sivaramamurti further points out that there is a painting in the Lepakshi temple in Andhra Pradesh that

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24 Sivaramamurti, *Ganga* 44.
graphically renders this theme. It is the fourth century Sanskrit poet Kalidasa, though, who gives the greatest colour to this domestic quarrel in Siva’s household in the vivid picture he presents:"

\[ \text{tasmad gaccher anukanakhalam sailarjavatirnam} \]
\[ \text{jahnoh kanyam sagaratanayasvargasopanapanktim} \]
\[ \text{gaurivakrabhrukutiracananam ya vihasyeva phenais} \]
\[ \text{sambhoh kesagraham akarod indulagnormihasta} \]

--Meghaduta\(^25\)

[Ganga clutched at Siva’s locks with her wavy hands, laughing through her waters, as Parvati flushed with anger with thunderous eyebrows, and Siva, wearing the sickle-moon, raised his hand in blessing].

Thus in her speech-less, though intense bonding with Fokir, the unmarried and “unrestrained” Piya may be seen to play Ganga’s role to Moyna’s jealous Parvati, with Fokir as the ecologically aware, attractively sculpted, new-age, caring and canny Siva. For Fokir, the shoreline--from where he launches his boat on to the waters of the Ganga delta--is not just a geographical space but also a phenomenological site of femininity that makes possible the relationship he has with Piya on the water. This is also the point where the River Ganga meets the ocean, and where Fokir meets and shares a common space with Piya, interacting with her on many levels, beyond language, not unlike the third space carved out by Adrienne Greene, the African American artist, in Homi Bhabha’s study The Location of Culture. Piya and Fokir interact with great ease on

Fokir’s boat, which is free of cultural norms of behaviour that would be expected from them. Piya does not “perform” as the upper-class woman who may not forge a relationship with an unschooled, lower-class boatman.\textsuperscript{26} Besides their bonding, the conversations between Piya and Moyna at different points in the narrative are always on terra firma and reflect a very different mood, marked by tension that is palpable. Tension finally gives way to fluidity between them when Piya comes forward to ensure a trust fund in Fokir’s name is established through her efforts. Piya’s closeness to Tutul--Moyna, and Fokir’s son--is tolerated at first by Moyna, but after Fokir’s death is accepted with a certain pragmatism that resembles truce between Parvati and Ganga that is extant in rare but specific representations in art. An example is the very interesting representation of Ganga in a sculpture from Bangladesh, where she is seen flanking Siva in his form as Nataraja, or the Lord of Dance, on his vehicle, the celestial bull Nandi. On one side of Siva is Ganga, standing on her vehicle, the crocodile-like creature makara, and on the other is Parvati, riding her vehicle, the lion simha--both consorts fanning their lord with the camara or cow hair fan. Sivaramamurti draws attention to this particular image from Bangladesh, which echoes Cambodian representations of Ganga, where she is clearly sculpted as Siva’s other wife.\textsuperscript{27} Ghosh has effectively used the boat as an intermediate space where oppositional forces come together in almost all his novels. In \textit{A Circle of Reason} the boat Mariamma is a space where Alu, the Professor, Zindi, a brothel keeper, and a motley crew bring their life experiences; in \textit{Sea of Poppies} the ship Ibis is a bazaar

\textsuperscript{26} Homi K. Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture} (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 5. Bhabha speaks of the stairway as the “liminal space” which offers immense possibilities for a conversation: “This is a place in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white.”

\textsuperscript{27} Sivaramamurti, \textit{Ganga} 50.
of disparate elements: a rajah, an opium addict, lascars, untouchables, a French woman, a sati survivor, a mulatto, and a human cargo of oddballs enact their lives in the circumscribed area.

INDIAN LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF THE CHASTE FEMININE

During colonial rule, driven by nationalistic zeal, and a sense of duty and sacrifice to the motherland, popular Bengali language writers such as Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee attempted to resurrect the image of the chaste, divine feminine. As Lise McKean points out at the outset of her illuminating essay on Hindu patriarchy and the position of Indian women: “The identity of the patriarchal Indian nation-state and its citizenry has been . . . expressed in terms of devotion to the goddess Bharat Mata.” She further crystallises the views of scholars such as Partha Chatterjee,28 Kumkum Sangari, and Sudesh Vaid,29 in the following comment:

Under colonial rule, the emergent Hindu patriarchy’s differentiation of social space into public and private spheres required a new vision of the ideal woman. The ideal woman should be a wife and a mother. She should be as frugal and fastidious in her housekeeping as she is devout and knowledgeable about religious traditions. She should be sweetly subordinate to her husband yet sufficiently educated and informed to provide satisfying companionship. The welfare of her family and particularly of her husband depended upon her spiritual powers, which were earned through the performance of rituals, scrupulous chastity and incessant

self-sacrifice. This ideal image attributed to virtuous wives and mothers the capacity to inspire their husbands and sons to become heroic nationalists.\textsuperscript{30} In \textit{The Home and the World}, Rabindranath Tagore employs the myth of the \textit{Mahisasuramardini}, or the Great Goddess, the female principle in the universe, Sakti, found in the \textit{Devi Mahatmya}. This “chaste image” demonstrates the rising tide of political expediency shown by the patriarchy, including Mahatma Gandhi, who aimed to exalt the position of women in the freedom struggle. In the myth of the Devi or Great Goddess, when the male gods seem to have exhausted strategies to fight the \textit{asuras} or demons, as a last resort the male gods confer and decide to contribute their strengths to “create” a new energy. So, Indra, Siva, Visnu and other male gods create a new force to demolish the demons, especially the buffalo demon Mahishasura. What emerges from the energies of male divinity is Sakti, or Devi, the female Goddess. She engages in a long and bloody battle and kills Mahishasura. In Tagore’s rendition of this myth, Bimala is the “Goddess” who is cajoled for cooption to the “other side” by an unprincipled, self-seeking “demon,” Sandip. The reversal of the sacred is apparent when Sandip in his final attempt to corrupt Bimala flatters her and praises her in the image of the goddess:

\begin{quote}
Have I not told you that in you I visualise the Shakti of our country . . . no one can give up his life for a map--if I die fighting it will not be on the dust of some map-made land but on a lovingly spread skirt . . . like the earthen red saree you wore the other day, with the broad, blood-red border. Can I ever forget it, Queen Bee,
\end{quote}

\begin{footnote}
\end{footnote}
my vision of the Motherland? Such are the visions that give vigour to life, joy to death, for us revolutionaries.31

So says the armed Sandip to the married Bimala, Nikhilesh’s wife, even as he attempts to seduce her into his arms, and into his revolutionary Bande Mataram Party, slowly but surely eroding a blissful marriage. By transforming her into the figure of the Motherland and Sakti, the Great Goddess, Sandip has conflated the sacred and the secular. Sumit Sarkar and Stanley Wolpert have noted that revolutionaries of the swadeshi or revolutionary parties in India, particularly in Bengal, dedicated their lives to the service of the Goddesses Kali or Durga, even while carrying guns and bombs.32 As Sumathi Ramaswamy has noted, the sacred Mother India or Bharat Mata image was first incorporated into the map of India in 1909 to advertise the new Tamil magazine Vijaya, and was also visible in Intiya, a fiery and very popular Tamil nationalist newspaper. These newspapers carried popular artistic impressions of shahids or martyrs who were young revolutionaries like Sandip, offering the goddess India (who was represented within the map of the motherland), either their heads, and other dismembered bodily parts, or their whole bodies.33 In Tagore’s novel, the map becomes a crucial secular trope because it is the map of India that bestows Bharat Mata her status, and vice versa—a territorial goddess presiding over the geobody of India.34 Abanindranath Tagore, a leading light of the Bengal school of renaissance in the early years of the twentieth century, had a similar image in mind (when he painted the Bharat Mata) as Rabindranath

33 Ramaswamy, “Visualizing India’s Geo-Body: Globes, Maps, Bodyscapes” 238.
Tagore’s character Bimala in *The Home and the World*. The result was an armed goddess that became the icon for the fight for independence with songs and national ditties composed around her. As Dipesh Chakrabarty relates in *Provincializing Europe*, there were many manifestations of the mythical goddess that were adopted by different sections of the Indian population, depending which attributes “spoke” to their secular identity or drove their cause. Thus, the peasants’ goddess in Bengal was Lakshmi, who brought grain and prosperity, and the farmers and agriculturalists in the Punjab and Uttar Pradesh revered Dharti, the Earth Goddess, once again appropriating divinity into their daily lives. In the case of the revolutionaries such as Sandip, however, the border crossing between woman and nation (as in the image of the Bharat Mata) was neither easy nor clear cut. As feminist Islamic scholar Afsaneh Najmabadi observes: “To love, and possess, to protect and defend, to fight and die” for the motherland is the nationalist patriarchal project. This same impulse spurred the Hindu nationalist project and problematised the sacrality of the divine feminine.

The Tagore blueprint of the image of the divine that glorified and valorised the Indian woman in the national imaginaire serves as a template for many literary works. Diasporic and regional writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Mahasweta Devi are exhibiting through their works a new postcolonial desire to challenge the patriarchal construct of the divine feminine and portray her instead as a mistreated “living goddess.” This is an attempt to talk back to a political orthodoxy in which politicians simultaneously emphasised the emancipation of women as one of the major election

35 First serialised in a Calcutta journal in 1914, and published as a book the following year.
issues, playing the gender card before polling day in their election speeches, and at once
turning a blind eye to the rapes and violence against women. The celebrated firebrand
Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi has turned the masculinist construction of the Indian
woman on its head. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and turned into an
international icon, Mahasweta Devi has re-membered Tagore’s Bimala and re-created her
in her unforgettable story “Douloti,” not as an upper class, privileged woman with all the
attributes of virtue and wealth, available to a “goddess,” but as a dying prostitute.\textsuperscript{38} In
this story, Douloti, the daughter of a bonded labourer turns to prostitution to pay her
debts and the debts of her family. Towards the end, her body racked with disease, the
homeless Douloti lies down unaccommodated and uninvited to die on a map of India,
drawn by Mohan, the respectable schoolteacher, to celebrate India’s Independence Day
on the 15\textsuperscript{th} of August. Mahasweta Devi poses a question to the politicians of India, as she
does to all her readers, who are the privileged, educated class:

Filling the entire Indian peninsula, from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies
\textit{bonded} labour, spread-eagled, \textit{kamiya-whore} Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse,
putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated
lungs. Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in India
for people of India, like Mohan, for planting the standard of the independence
flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India.\textsuperscript{39}

Alluding to the penile visuality of peninsular India, and the phallocentric act of invasive
penetration with a standard by Mohan, a male schoolteacher, on female geographical

\textsuperscript{38} Mahasweta Devi, “Douloti the Bountiful,” \textit{Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi},
\textsuperscript{39} Mahasweta Devi, “Douloti the Bountiful” 93.
flesh, there is a strong suggestion of asserting agency through knowledge. Sumathi Ramaswamy perceptively points out that in Douloti’s dying gesture Mahasweta Devi’s narrative mocks a century of popular visual practice in which the female physiology has been employed to transcreate the disenchanted nation-space into an enchanting national bodyscape. I argue that in the hands of Indian nationalists between the 1880s and 1940s—the period that marks the height of the Indian independence struggle—female sacred corporeality was a political propaganda tool that was used to subjugate the mother figure by aligning her closely with the divine feminine in the visual images that saturated the public arena of the marketplace. In the bazaar, in government offices, in shops, in village collectives, in schools and other “open” spaces, the only form in which the divine feminine was presented was through gendered corporeal representation. There was no place for the conceptualisation of female divinity in an unembodied form. She was always contained by a strong mother image, and was simultaneously “elevated” to motherhood or a male paradigm of “normativity” (which would disqualify her from any other representation of the feminine). This “foreclosure of the woman to any passionate attachment” confers upon her a certain subjugation and “otherness,” which Judith Butler explores in *The Psychic Life of Power*. By invoking the aetiology of rivers as the divine feminine in their fictional works, postcolonial writers such as Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy attempt a re-envisioning of the sterile, censored representation of the feminine constructed by nationalist patriarchs. The nationalist portrayals and the phallocentric metaphorisations of the feminine are transformed in the fiction of these novelists who attempt a reconfiguration of the feminine, providing her the sexual agency she is

identified with in her myths of origin. Between the postcolonial revisionist writer Ghosh and the French feminist scholars, I find an “intersectionality,” especially in Irigaray’s exposition of Plotinus’ Sixth Tractate of the Enneads, “The Impassivity of the Unembodied” (which she entitles “Une Mère de Glace” in Speculum of the Other Woman).\(^\text{42}\) The title deploys the French homonyms mer (sea) and mère (mother), as well as glace which could mean both ice and mirror. The title therefore has embedded in its very nomenclature an oxymoron: the fluidity of water and the immovability of ice. Mère, crucially, represents the fluid feminine, and registers its transformability from water to ice, and vice versa.

The hybridity encrypted in the transformative potential of water to become ice, and for ice, in turn, to serve as a mirror for self-reflection, gains currency when read against the waterscapes of the Ganga in The Hungry Tide. It is this transmutability, transformability, and translatability of water that allows Piya and Fokir a translatable space to connect. Bhabha’s theory of liminal space is useful to interrogate Irigaray’s “Une Mère de Glace”: “This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.”\(^\text{43}\)

Running parallel to the postcolonial discourse on the Indian patriarchy is the vision of the Lacanian thesis that “in the phallic order of patriarchal culture and its theory, woman is unrepresentable except as representation.” In an intriguing essay, “Gynephobia and Culture Change,” Harry Berger, Jr. nudges us in the direction of Lacanian scholar Teresa de Lauretis who, having paraphrased Lacan, goes on to suggest

\(^{42}\) Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman 168.

\(^{43}\) Bhabha, The Location of Culture 5.
that a discourse that represents woman as unrepresentable—in or by its own terms constitutes her unrepresentability as an effect of representation—“therefore constitutes an excess beyond representation as part of representation.” What de Lauretis suggests in this unrepresentable representation of women, in Lacan’s argument, is: “not . . . a movement . . . from the space of a representation . . . to the space outside the representation, the space outside discourse, which would be then be thought of as ‘real’ . . . or again, from the symbolic space constructed by the sex-gender system to a reality external to it,” but rather “a movement back and forth between the representation of gender (in its male-centred frame of reference) and what the representation leaves out or, more pointedly, makes unrepresentable.” This is exactly how I perceive the symbol of the nationalist construct of the female geo-body of Bharat Mata, which is determined by phallocratism and becomes a site for the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body. This, in Judith Butler’s “performative” terms, would be “the displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender identity onto a psychological core . . . [thereby precluding] an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the ineffable interiority of its sex or its true identity.”

A case in point is David Hardiman’s account of how Mahatma Gandhi’s followers circulated the political message, adeptly using the Devi image in a subtle and novel

44 Harry Berger, Jr, “Gynephobia and Culture Change,” Luce Irigaray and Premodern Culture 144-145.
manner, in far-flung and scattered rural pockets of Gujarat. The state records of 9 November 1922 show the adivasis, the so-called original inhabitants or aboriginal peoples, who lived on the eastern borders of the Surat district of the Bombay Presidency, gathered in a field near a village called Khanpur. They had collected to listen to Devi Salabai, a “new” goddess, who spoke through women mediums from their group, who were in a state of trance and appeared to read from red cloths they held in their hands, warning the assembled people against drinking liquor and eating flesh of any kind, and admonishing them to maintain chastity and cleanliness. In December, as the movement spread in leaps and bounds, new commands from the Devi included wearing only khadi cloth and attending only nationalist schools. Hardiman writes: “Rumours were heard that spiders were writing Gandhi’s name in the cobwebs. It was said that Gandhi had fled from jail and could be seen sitting in a well side by side with Salabai, spinning his charkha.” Hardiman concludes: “Through an act of faith, people must have fancied that they could see an image of Gandhi next to an actual reflection of the wheel. The idea would have been strengthened through the common folk belief in the magical power of wells.” In a groundbreaking study of the cosmopolitics that inform the globalisation of the indigene, Kwame Anthony Appiah has recently described a strategy that uses indigenous superstitions and beliefs to introduce a “foreign” idea, which is then “localised” for easier absorption and assimilation, as in the case of the villagers “seeing” Gandhi and Devi in an imaginative realm. The catalyst in Appiah’s study is boiling water, which becomes the location for collapsing the boundaries of ethnic knowledge and

science. In order to prevent Ghanaians from getting stomach disorders, it was necessary to persuade them to boil water before drinking. The only way they would believe the “truth” of this scientific process was if they could relate the science to a familiar arena of experience: superstition and animism which were their registers for understanding the world. As one smart missionary found out, by making the indigene believe that the boiling released the evil spirits from the water through the bubbles that burst at the surface, he could persuade the Ghanaians to boil the water before drinking it. It was all a question of finding common ground between science and politics, on the one hand, and animism and faith, on the other. This anecdote from Appiah connects cultural hybridity to political opportunism and may be used to explicate the male Indian nationalist project to domicile the feminine within a cultural geography that was driven by political opportunism. My argument about the representation of woman as Devi Salabai, by political agents, this time for the unlettered millions of India, who had no access to literary texts by Rabindranath Tagore or Sarat Chandra Chatterjee or any other writers, is supported by Partha Chatterjee’s assertion of just such a collapsing of boundaries between religion and politics in a hybrid border-crossing:

The ideology which shaped and gave meaning to the various collective acts of peasantry was fundamentally religious. The very nature of peasant consciousness, the apparently consistent unification of an entire set of beliefs about nature and about men in the collective and active mind of a peasantry, is religious. Religion to such a community provides an ontology, an epistemology as well as a practical code of ethics, including political ethics. When this community acts politically,

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the symbolic meaning of particular acts--their signification--must be found in
religious terms. The fault-line between the Indian nationalist politician and the postcolonial writer
becomes evident through two letters written in 1924, by the “Father of the Nation,” also
the leader of India’s freedom movement, Mahatma Gandhi, who tailored the Hindu
widow in the nationalist image of the Bharatiya nari as the chaste, Indian woman,
epitome of virtue, devoid of sexuality and niskama (bereft of desire). In the first letter,
Gandhi’s admonition to the Hindu widow seems to be a patriarchal innovation of a theme
set in an ancient dharmasastra (religious law and code of conduct) Manusmriti, which
states that “no second husband for chaste women is ever advised”: na dvitiyasca
saddhvinam kyacid bhartopadisyate. Gandhi’s statement in the first letter to the
newspaper Navjivan Patrika in 1924 reads:

The attempt to end the practice of widowhood is injurious to religion. Marriage is
a sacrament. Love can marry only once. A widow deserves to be looked upon by
reverence. The sight of a pure widow is a good omen. Hindu families regarding
child widows . . . is that they should think out a plan to keep the minds and bodies
of the widows occupied and pure and keep them from temptation.

Finally, his advice to widows: “Look upon your widowhood as sacred and live a life
worthy of it. There are many instances of such widows in Hindu society.” In the second
letter in 1924, published in Navjivan Patrika, Gandhi reiterates:

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52 I refer to two letters written by Gandhi in 1924, published in the newspaper Navjivan Patrika, now in the collection of the National Gandhi Museum & Library, Rajghat, New Delhi.
God created nothing finer than a Hindu widow. Self-control has been carried by Hinduism to the greatest heights, and in a widow’s life it reaches perfection. A great many widows do not even look on their suffering as suffering. They find happiness in their self-denial. This is not an undesirable state. On the contrary it is good. I regard the widow’s life as an ornament to Hinduism.\(^{53}\)

It is significant that in attempting to contain the Hindu nari (woman) Gandhi and the nationalist patriarchy would turn to, of all dharmasutras, the Manusmrti, when the Baudhayana Dharmasutra (500-200 BCE) or the Parasarasmrti (100-500 CE), both of which are just as highly regarded, support the act of widow remarriage so wholeheartedly, as Krishna Datta has shown from primary Hindu texts:\(^{54}\)

If a woman whose husband dies after offering ceremony and homa (fire sacrifice), remains a virgin, as also a woman who comes back to her husband after going away with another--such a woman deserves the performance of fresh marriage rites behooving a punarbh\(u\) [a remarried woman; the term appears in the Atharvaveda for the first time].

--Baudhayana Dharmasutra iv.i.18.

and

In (case of) the disappearance or death or renunciation or impotence or lost caste-status of her husband: in these five predicaments, a woman is allowed to take another husband.

--Parasarasmrti iv.28.

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\(^{53}\) Gandhi’s letters in Navjivan Patrika, 1924.

It is useful to turn to Kajri Jain whose study of the commodification of the highly popular calendar art form in India alerts us to how institutionalised religion and political opportunism work unabashedly and with remarkable success when they deploy the visual image for the trumped up agendas of nationalist politics. The national independence model of the Bharat Mata and generic Devi images, redolent with the heady patriotic fervour of the still beating hearts of the slaughtered Bhagat Singhs and other martyrs at their feet, have undergone a sea change in the hands of postcolonial writers such as Roy, Mehta, and Ghosh. In the context of this dissertation, it is crucial to recognise the resistance that these novelists offer to thwart the patriarchal representations of the homogenous and holy nationalist discourse. The novelists also raise serious questions about recasting women in the pre-colonial model of a fluid, transformative, and powerful divinity, as the metamorphic, uncontainable River Goddesses Ganga, Narmada, and the Meenachil. In creating narratives that retrieve and even seize agency from the patriarchal hegemony, these writers are attempting to re-form the image of the divine feminine into an indomitable vision and voice of resistance. And if viewed as a tool for political agitation these images, they are re-creating through their fiction, might become powerful agencies for change. As Kajri Jain suggests:

Images are not powerful in themselves. It is we--iconolaters and iconoclasts, devotees and secularists alike--who make them powerful through what we do with them and what we say about them. But the plural “we” here is critical, for to the extent that this power unfolds in a trans-subjective arena it is not fully controllable by individual subjects, whether at the point of “production” or of “reception”: to create images is to play with magic, with fire. In this sense the
gallery, the catalogue, and the lecture hall can be seen as controlled environments—laboratories if you will, in which to experiment with these volatile forces. But, as the inferno rages outside, impossible to douse by reason alone, another choice presents itself to those willing to take the risk . . . to get out there and fight fire with fire, black magic with white . . . .

My interest in this study (which juxtaposes disparate and divergent fragments of the experiences of Piya, and three men, Fokir, Kanai, and Nirmal) stems directly from the connection I perceive between the hybridity of Piya, and the hybridity that undergirds the identities of the Ganga in Ghosh’s narrative. Furthermore, by signposting this hybridity through intersections, crosscutting boundaries, and shifting centers of power in the narrative, as well as the contiguous references to a “translated world” and the “translated word,” Ghosh offers a goulash of hybridities in different textures and layers. This persistent presence of hybridity irrevocably reasserts the postcolonial self by subverting the colonial project of homogeneity, while talking back to the modalities of power and employing several parallel narratives. The stories of Piya, Fokir, Kanai, and Nirmal are told in disjunctured tellings, and Piya’s and Kanai’s stories occasionally intersect. I suggest that in The Hungry Tide there are no fixed identities in the postcolonial landscape of a modernising and globalising India, but a constant encounter between a set of pluralistic aesthetic and moral values that often inadvertently intersect, and make for the strangest bedfellows and even stranger progeny. On the one hand, as Ghosh explores the connection between hybridities embedded within the blended literary and oral styles and content (he skillfully blends travel writing, letters, autobiography, biography, journal

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entries, Rilke’s poetry, social history, mantras, and a mélange of identities of the divine feminine re-presented in the protagonist-geobody of the Ganga and the forest goddess, Bon Bibi). On the other, he shows a perpetual collision between the modern and the traditional (where the cosmopolitan Piya is the repository of scientific information, and the provincial Fokir is the custodian of indigenous knowledge). Embedded in Ghosh’s text is the theme of ethnic hybridity that interweaves with other themes that are connected to feminist criticism: gender difference and identity, emancipation and liberation, writing the body, cosmopolitanism, and women and technology. The grid lines between representation, identity, and narrative therefore become the site of my exploration of men and women such as Piya and Kanai, who move between two or more cultures and who use their hybrid voices to construct a new aesthetic. Feminist theorists such as Pratibha Parmar, Lisa Lowe, Toni Morrison, Gloria Anzaldua, and Susan Stanford-Friedman have all offered perspectives on how to conceptualise the way multiple differences operate in relation to power dynamics and domination. In this context, Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality,” and most recently Jigna Desai used the term to suggest a method “for understanding the simultaneity of multiple differences in the experience of women of colour.” I deploy the term in this project as does Desai, where the term has since been expanded to “employ many multiple and

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60 Stanford-Friedman, *Mappings* 84-93.
contradictory differences in understanding experiences immersed in uneven power relations, hence focusing not only on understanding oppression but also privilege.” Desai adds: “Thus, intersectionality can be a powerful tool in exploring the production and expression of multiple and shifting differences in relations of privilege and power.” My argument on the importance of hybridisation in negotiating structures of cultural stratification is adequately supported by Amy Brandzel’s view that intersectionality can be used to accentuate “an awareness and attention towards discursive productions of categories from seemingly neutral discourses.” Further Brandzel argues that intersectionality allows “an ability to see discourses, and an ability to see experience not as the only source of knowledge, but as a critical source of particular types of knowledge that can serve as sources of critique . . .” The very location of Ghosh’s narrative--within the waterscapes of the deltaic Sunderbans where the River Ganga meets the Bay of Bengal--is a powerful signifier of the thunderous forces of blending and mixing, and deems virtually impossible any notion of purity, homogeneity, or binaries.

In another twist of historic justice, there is a religious hybridity in the foundation of the most popular hymn to the Ganga. The Ganga Lahari, written by the seventeenth century poet Jagannatha, whose patrons were the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan and his son Dara Shikoh, is addressed to the Ganga, as Mother, the one who will love and claim the child rejected by everyone else. Diana Eck recounts that the poet Jagannatha was ostracised by his Brahmin caste because of his involvement with a Muslim lady at the court of the Mughal emperor. Jagannatha went to Benaras to try and retrieve his position as a Brahmin, but the Brahmin oligarchy would have nothing to do with him. He went

64 Desai, Beyond Bollywood 26.
and sat with his beloved on the top of the fifty-two steps of the Pancaganga Ghat and, with each of the fifty-two verses he composed, the river rose one step. At the conclusion of the hymn, the waters touched the feet of the poet and his beloved, purified them, embraced them, and carried them away.\textsuperscript{66} Ghosh, on his narrative journey, gathers up a wealth of polarities: the underlying ambiguity in the clever and indeterminate selection of the name of Ghosh’s male protagonist, the subaltern-martyr who plays Christ to Piya’s Mary Magdalen--Fokir (who could be Hindu or Muslim)--is not to be missed, and further blurs the borders in this tumultuous telling.

**IN HIS OWN WORDS**

Diasporic writer Ghosh is hybrid himself: he writes in English, and speaks Arabic, English, French, and Bengali. Hybridity is manifest in his own career impulses: trained as an anthropologist, he is now considered a significant force in postcolonial fiction and has recently earned a new label as “environmental activist” and eco-critic, with his social tracts and political effort to save the Sunderbans from being transformed into yet another tourist resort.\textsuperscript{67} In an interview with Homi Bhabha\textsuperscript{68} at the Cha-bar at the Oxford

\textsuperscript{66} Eck, “Ganga: The Goddess Ganges in Hindu Sacred Geography” 149.
\textsuperscript{67} In an article in India’s news and features magazine Outlook on 18 Oct. 2004, just after he published The Hungry Tide, Ghosh resists the building of a tourist resort in the Sunderbans, the location of his novel. Ghosh writes: “Historically, the waters of the Sunderbans were home to great numbers of whales and dolphins. British naturalists of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century reported the area to be “teeming” with marine mammals. Very few of these animals are to be seen in these waters today. Their fate is unknown because there has been no major census or survey. There is limited expertise in this field in India and the Sunderbans being a border region, foreign researchers have not been allowed to conduct surveys for reasons of security. For all we know, the cetacean population of this region has already dwindled catastrophically. It would be nothing less than an outrage if an area that has been closed to zoologists should now be thrown open to tourist developers. These are just a few of the project’s possible ecological consequences: there are sure to be many others. Tourism is the world’s largest industry and it is already one of India’s most important revenue earners. Clearly, every part of the country will have to reach an accommodation with this industry: it would be idle to pretend otherwise. There is no reason why tourists should be excluded from the Sunderbans, so long as their presence causes no harm to the ecology or to the people who live there. But if tourism is to develop here, it should be on the model of other ecologically sensitive areas, such as the Galapagos islands,
Bookstore in downtown Mumbai, Ghosh articulated his concerns about being “hybridised” and “of a mixed heritage”: “English is a default language for me. Bengali is my first language. When I was writing The Hungry Tide, I felt as if I was translating it into English. It was something to do with the tactile feel of Bengali prose.” He adds: “I am uncomfortable writing in English, worrying that it could limit my writing about India,” and raises an important question: “But Bengali dialect is a dialect within a language that is unknown to English, so in what way do I recreate that sense of dialect in speech.”

Besides being omnipresent at multiple points of encounter in the novel, translation is palpable in Ghosh’s other works, especially in The Circle of Reason (1986), and In an Antique Land (1992) where subaltern transnational subjects, temporary labourers, and petty businessmen, who journey back and forth from India to the Middle East, resort to multiple languages, speaking Arabic, Hindi, English, and Bengali to communicate.

In the special context of the Bengali-English dyad he employs in The

where the industry is held to very high standards. The Sunderbans deserve no less and it is the duty of the Government of India and the government of West Bengal to ensure that this unique ecosystem and its inhabitants, animal and human, receive their due. The Sahara Parivar is not the first to conceive of a grandiose plan for this region. In the early 19th century, the British dreamt of creating a port on the Matla river that would replace Calcutta and be a rival to Bombay and Singapore. In 1854, Henry Piddington, a pioneering British meteorologist, wrote an open letter to Lord Dalhousie, begging him to reconsider the project. In his letter, Piddington warned that in the event of a cyclone (a word he had invented), the new port would probably be swept away. Lord Dalhousie, secure on his proconsular throne, paid no attention to this lonely voice: the port was built and took its name from Lord Canning. But Henry Piddington was soon vindicated: Port Canning was swamped by a storm in 1867. It was formally abandoned by the British five years later. Over the last few months, due to the efforts of a small group of concerned people, many letters have been sent to the chief minister of West Bengal asking him to re-examine the Sahara Parivar’s project. It falls to him now, as a democratically elected leader, to show better judgment than did his lordly predecessors in Writers Building.”

See, Homi K. Bhabha’s comments on hybridity in Cultural Encounters: Representing “Otherness,” ed. Elizabeth Hallam and Brian V. Street (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 5. “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities: it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure, the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects.”


Hungry Tide, Ghosh has written: “Although I write in English, my native language is Bengali,” and in his collection of essays, The Imam and the Indian, Ghosh mentions the translation of his work into Bengali and his own translation of Rabindranath Tagore’s short story “The Hungry Stones” from Bengali to English in 1995. It is also significant that Ghosh had announced in an interview in 2004 that he may translate The Hungry Tide into Bengali. Add to this Ghosh’s proverbial “lexical looseness” in his essay Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma (1998) where he refers to translation: “The friend who I had persuaded to come along with me to translate . . . ,” and King Sisowath’s minister “served as his interpreter.” Here transnational and translation are yoked as more than homonyms, suggesting polyphony of linguistic, literary, and cultural expressions that celebrate an assertion of disparity and disjuncture. Homi Bhabha, like Ghosh himself, uses the term “translation” not to describe a transaction between texts and languages but in the etymological sense of being carried across from one place to another. He uses translation metaphorically to describe the condition of the contemporary world, a world in which millions migrate and change their location every day. In such a world, translation is fundamental: As Roland Barthes has explained:

The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture . . . the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them. Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner “thing” he thinks to “translate” is only a ready-formed

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dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely.\footnote{Roland Barthes, \textit{Image-Music-Text}, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977) 146-147.}

In the course of my exploration I also investigate how the “in-between-ness” of Piya as an American-born-outsider-transforming-to-insider is reflected in Ghosh’s presentation of the diasporic Indian who is rootless. I argue that the dissonant, disjointed experiences, and the fragmented memoryscape of Piya are internalised into the imaginary of the author. Ghosh has said in several interviews\footnote{Ghosh often speaks in interviews of the “strange experience” of moving from place to place as a child, along with his father who served as a diplomat in several countries, and about his “multilingual education.” He mentioned these details in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel in Toronto in October 2008 at the launch of his book \textit{Sea of Poppies}. Earlier, in an interview with Julie Mehta in Singapore, in 1997, while discussing \textit{The Circle of Reason}, he spoke of his eventful childhood spent in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India.} that his own uprooting from his ancestral home in Dhaka at the age of seven to Calcutta, and his subsequent journeys overseas, have provided him the experience of a “global soul.”\footnote{Pico Iyer gave this phrase currency in his book \textit{The Global Soul: Jet-Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home} (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), first published in Britain in 2000.} This constant homelessness has thrust him into a world of disjointed and fractured existence that comes from living in several places. This is a common phenomenon among diasporic South Asian writers, and is referred to by Salman Rushdie, Gita Mehta, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Michael Ondaatje and many others in their works. The significance of Ghosh’s subject position of here-and-there is translated into Ghosh’s fictional characters, specifically through Piya in \textit{The Hungry Tide}, and Malum Zikri in \textit{Sea of Poppies}.

Arjun Appadurai’s concept of how memory works in the twenty first century to blur the past dimensions of experience with the present, speaks to Piya’s nomadic, splintered, and displaced condition, which makes her vulnerable. Appadurai explains that:
The past is now not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting, to which recourse can be had as appropriate, depending on the movie to be made, the scene to be enacted, the hostages to be rescued . . . the past is usually another country . . . .

The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together: the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense); the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson’s sense); and the French idea of the imaginary (imaginaire) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations, which is no more and no less real than the collective representations of Emile Durkheim, now mediated through the complex prism of modern media.  

The tension between belonging and not belonging is examined and developed by Ghosh through the elusive and muted language of memory in this novel. Hybridity between the oral and the written surfaces in Piya’s persistent efforts to recall her attempts to communicate with her father, and understand her Indian culture. Her urgent need for the retrieval of a single word, gamchha—a banal object, a faded red wash cloth that doubled as a short sarong her father clung to as a symbol of his Bengaliness—from her lost Bengali lexicon, haunts Piya right through the narrative. “Her father kept only that; like his teeth, hair and nails, he said it was a part of him.” It is in this negotiation between the

visual memory of her father’s *gamchha* that smelt of *him*, and the verbal trigger of the actual word *gamchha*, as enunciated by Fokir, that smells of *Fokir*, and is “his second skin,” that Piya rediscovers her indigenous anchor, both figuratively and literally because it is Fokir’s *gamchha* that saves her from drowning. Piya, therefore, must negotiate between the oral and the written to retrieve her identity, rooted in the recesses of the past, a past that has buried the terrible loss of her mother tongue *and* her biological mother. Her mother, in turn, had resisted exile in California, and valiantly rebelled against being uprooted from her familiar surroundings of her “homeland” Bengal, and her mother tongue Bengali. Elizabeth Boon Hill’s assertion affirms Piya’s multidimensional experience of ferreting out the “lost” word: “The notion that spoken language is the only system that allows humans to convey any and all thought fails to consider the full range of human experience.” Hill argues that speech “may be the most efficient manner of communicating many things but it is noticeably deficient in conveying ideas of a musical, mathematical, or visual nature.”

“Losing a word” seems to indicate a loss of self in many diasporic writers who explore issues of identity and belonging. For instance, Michael Ondaatje’s character Anil Tissera in *Anil’s Ghost* is not unlike Piya: accomplished, professional, orphan, single, diasporic South Asian-American, Anil also struggles to retrieve her own identity even as she unpacks the mystery of Sailor’s identity by searching desperately for roots in her memory for the Tamil language. In his memorable poem “wells ii” Ondaatje speaks about his own sense of dislocation and loss of identity through loss of language that Piya is saddened by:

> The last Sinhala word I lost

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was *vatura*.

The word for water.

Forest water. The water in a kiss. The tears

I gave to my ayah Rosalin on leaving

the first home of my life.  

Furthermore, Australian novelist David Malouf, in the powerful novel *Remembering Babylon* explores how the loss of language plagues the central character of his novel Gemmy Fairley, the white child raised by aboriginals in a colonised Australia, who is forcibly corralled into “being civilized” again, by a white settler family:

> He lost his old language in the new one that came to his lips. . . As for things, nothing he had dealt with had been his own. He had stammered over most of them. Now they slipped away altogether, they dropped out of his life. And with them and the words went whatever thin threads had held them together, and made up the fabric of his world.  

Gemmy, like Piya, who tries to connect the dots of her past with the word *gamchha*, also searches for words in the recesses of memory to connect him to his cultural past as a white child: “It was the words he had to get hold of. It was the words that would recognise him;” and again, “The word flew into his head as fast and clear as the flash and whistle of its breath. *Axe. Axe.* Circles of meaning rippled away from the mark it blazed in the dark of his skull.”

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82 Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* 32.
THE “TRANSLATED MEN”

In Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* he states that “having been born across the world” (and thus being of two cultures) makes immigrants “translated men.” Despite the fact that it is generally believed that something always gets lost in translation Rushdie clings to the notion that something can also be gained in translation. Ghosh, in turn, takes up the baton from the self-professed “mongrel” Rushdie and presents translation as a visceral presence in *The Hungry Tide*, believing that being “translated,” or being a product of two different worlds, gives Piya a unique perspective that would otherwise be impossible to attain. In this game of multiple hybridity, translation becomes the trope for hybridity and is reiterated at least thirty-two times with overwhelming force in *The Hungry Tide*. As Gadda observes: “We therefore think of translation as a part of every system, in turn as an infinite entwining, an inextricable knot or mesh of relations.” He argues that the “summit can be seen from many altitudes; and every system is referable to infinite co-ordinated axes: It presents itself in infinite ways.”

Ghosh’s creation of global soul Piya (she is as inseparable from her GPS as Fokir is from his sixth sense) who having “been born across the world” sees herself as a hybrid of two different nationalities and two cultures, a creature sensitive to the shifting shores

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85 Salman Rushdie echoes the same sentiment in *Shame* (New York: Aventura/Vintage, 1984) 90-91. “I, too, know something of this immigrant business. I am an emigrant from one country (India) and a newcomer in two (England, where I live, and Pakistan, to which my family moved against my will). And I have a theory that the resentments we mohajirs engender have something to do with our conquest of the force of gravity. We have performed the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is to say, we have flown. I am comparing gravity with belonging. Both phenomena observably exist: my feet stay on the ground, and I have never been angrier than on the day my father told me he had sold my childhood home in Bombay. But neither is understood. We know the force of gravity, but not its origins; and to explain why we become attached to our birthplaces we pretend that we are trees and speak of roots. Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths spouting through the soles. Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places.”
of disjunctive transnationalism, diasporic discontent, and even a certain nomadism.

Piya’s character answers valiantly to the charge in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s argument:

The disenfranchised woman of the diaspora--new and old--cannot, then, engage in the critical agency of civil society--citizenship in the most robust sense--to fight the depredations of “global economic citizenship.” This is not to silence her, but rather to desist from guilt-tripping her. For her struggle is for access to the subjectship of civil society of her new state: basic civil rights. Escaping the failure of decolonization at home and abroad, she is not yet so secure in the state of desperate choice or chance as to even conceive of ridding her mind of the burden of transnationality. But perhaps her daughters or granddaughters--whichever generation arrives on the threshold of tertiary education--can.  

Piya, in her transnational hybridity actually asserts a certain power that resides in vulnerability, an openness and a willingness to process knowledge from another (what her scientific colleagues term “more primitive”) school. While the process of identifying one’s values and remembering one’s history is more difficult for those who have moved from one place to another, ultimately, there’s an advantage in seeing things in pieces rather than as a whole. This is evident in Rushdie’s writing; he has a broad perspective that allows him to see things not as if he was Indian or British, but as if he belonged to a third culture: the culture of translated persons. Perhaps, belonging to this third culture bears the negative consequence of not remembering places and events as a whole, as Rushdie admits that his memory is fragmented and the details are, at times, imaginary.

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And, Piya’s fragmented stories (not all of them happy about her estranged parents) such as those inextricably tied to the word gamchha, are based on an incomplete and imagined--instead of complete and actual--reality of the events and places before her family migrated to North America. The conscious awareness of the missing pieces inspires a deeper attention to the details of the remaining fragments, which would make one dig deep until all the layers are uncovered and everything that could be discovered is found. I use the word dig intentionally: to link it to the exercise of an archaeological dig, which is tentative, suggestive, and unstable in its very exercise.

Since The Hungry Tide incorporates both oral and written traditions of mythmaking, including those based in the pre-modern folk cults that amalgamated both Hindu and Islamic elements, it evinces a flexibility of transculturation, grafting the primordial on to the contemporary, lending itself appropriately to an analysis of an alternative vision of established life. In the Sunderbans, Hindus and Muslims worship the same gods, despite belonging to different religions. The goddess of the forests, Bon Bibi, worshipped in almost every village, was probably synonymous with the Hindu Goddess Bonodevi; the former became more acceptable with the advent of Muslim rule in Lower Bengal since the eighteenth century. In the postcolonial context, this work underlines the importance of salvaging a lost tradition of multiple and rich religious heritages, their enormous strength to provide a compass to find new identities among different religious communities in India, and their influence on a new generation of youth who, like Piya, are diasporic Indians and must

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88 Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 247. Ghosh, in his “other” voice as Nirmal, the diary-keeper and narrator in the text, suggests that “the mud banks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else?”--as well as by two very different religions, Hinduism and Islam.
cohabit a highly multiracial and multi-religious world. Thus, at the centre of the narrative is 
the recitation of a unique form of mantra that incorporates the magic of Islam and Hinduism:

Bismillah boliya mukhey dhorinu kalam / poida korilo jini

tamam alam* baro meherban tini bandar upore / taar

chhani keba achhe duniyar upore*90

[In Allah’s name, I begin to pronounce the Word / Of the whole
universe. He is the Begetter the Lord* To all His disciples, He is
full of mercy / Above the created world, who is there but He*]

This mantra, recited by Horen in the heart of the forest, as heard and recorded by Nirmal in
his diary, is in dwipodi poyaar--a twelve-syllable verse that yokes oppositional ideas with a
caesura dividing each line. The closest cousin in the Western canon would be the zeugma, as
used by Alexander Pope. Ghosh worked on this part of the project for a year. He maintains
that the solution came from Sanskrit poetics and differences in regional dialects within
Bengali were suggested by characters speaking in different metres. He maintains that he first
translated the verse without metre, then with the metre, and finally captured them in couplets.

The incantation surprised the schoolteacher Nirmal by its hybrid nature:

I was amazed. I’d thought I was going to a Hindu puja: Imagine my astonishment
on hearing these Arabic invocations! Yet, the rhythm of the recitation was
undoubtedly that of a puja: how often, as a child, had I heard those endless chants,
rolling on and on, in temples as well as in our home?

…the language was not easy to follow--it was a strange variety of Bangla, deeply
interpenetrated by Arabic and Persian. The narrative, however, was familiar to
me: it was the story of how Dukhey was left on the shore of an island to be

devoured by the tiger-demon Dokkhin Rai, and of his rescue by Bon Bibi and
Shah Jongoli.91

The Hungry Tide makes clear its involvement with the sacred in the landscape at every turn.
Its central character is the River Ganga and its pervasive deities are Bon Bibi and Shah
Jongoli, the protectors of the forest and waters. They are central to Ghosh’s project of
showcasing a postcolonial idea of the nation which is accepting, inclusive, and tolerant of
different communities and their faiths. “We came to a clearing and Kusum led the way to the
shrine . . . Here we placed the images of Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli, and then
Kusum lit a few sticks of fragrant dhoop and Fokir fetched some leaves and flowers and laid
them at their feet.”92 At some points in the narrative the landscape is described in sacred
terms, and at other points by the physical. The novel opens to the beauty of the mythic
description:

. . . there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva’s
matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. Once past that point
the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, maybe
thousands, of tangled strands.93

And then, in a more plebian manner, the river and its estuary paints a profane picture:

He remembered the Matla as a vast waterway, one of the most formidable
rivers he had ever seen. But it was low tide now and the river in the distance
was no wider than a narrow ditch, flowing along the centre of a kilometre-
wide bed. The freshly laid silt that bordered the water glistened in the sun
like dunes of melted chocolate. From time to time, bubbles of air rose from

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91 Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 246.
the depths and burst through to the top, leaving rings upon the burnished surface.

How would the boat’s passengers make their way across that vast expanse of billowing mud?⁹⁴

This shifts the markers from the sacred to the mundane sphere. The narrative is haunted by a remarkable tension that appears to arise from a curious mixture of affirmation of faith in the celebration of life and the related activity of living--similar impulses that are evinced by Gita Mehta in her novel *A River Sutra*, and which will be echoed in Chapter Two of this dissertation. Desire, sorrow, passionate intensity, blind faith, disappointment, pain, and love, stand firm on the one hand; and an equally powerful consciousness of renunciation in the reiterated image of Siva in cosmic compassion and sacrifice (stemming from the Hindu concept of *tyaga* or renunciation) are deeply entrenched in the work’s fabric, on the other, with the related associations of realisation, detachment, calmness, and wisdom. The myth of Siva is fused to the secular world of Fokir, who with his yogic physique, detachment from worldly possessions, and faith in nature, echoes the divine in a human existence.

**MULTIPLE IDENTITIES, INSOLENT TONGUES, AND THE TRUTH “DIG”**

In addition to the importance of the conjunction of the material and mythical in Ghosh’s novel, I argue in this chapter that Ghosh’s search for identity is synonymous with a search for a higher “truth.” In my view, any discussion of *The Hungry Tide* must address itself to two simultaneous issues: first, the internal critique of establishing identity for each of his characters who inhabit different worlds (through exploration of the characters’ memory and language); and, second, truth-seeking (which formulates the way each of the three

characters realise their distinct selves and see the sacred connection between themselves and other creatures when the tide turns into a tidal wave and survival is dependent upon divine intervention). Though the two issues might appear to be contradictory, they are in fact complementary. In my reading, the “truth factor” links well to Ghosh’s projections of multiple identities of self in the dual identity-bearing Piya who, as a member of the Indian diaspora, is dispossessed of her language of origin and heritage. I focus my comments on constructing identity and the quest for truth, and how this double quality is catalytic in nature in bringing about the total evolution in each of Ghosh’s characters. To enable devotees to get to the truth, the deities in the Hindu pantheon carry a variety of weaponry—axe, trident, and sword—to hack through ignorance and evil. This is where the iconography of the trident emerges: the triple blades—identity, agency and truth—act synchronously to get to the heart of the Vedanta, the universal philosophy of finding truth within, by cutting through external illusions of the ego and temptation.

My arguments are complemented by the way The Hungry Tide employs language and memory. I posit that Piya’s quest for truth enables her to assimilate and gradually transform herself into a formidable force for spiritual globalisation that bridges the two worlds of written and oral traditions, of Western civilisation and Eastern philosophy, of intuitive cognition and science, and the paradigmatic geographies of the material and the mythical. How does Piya make the transition? And how does Ghosh’s novel reflect philosophical migration and “internationalism” that has become a hallmark of his fiction? How does Piya accommodate acculturation in the totally different environment of a non-English speaking...
ethos at a time when willing and unwilling expatriations and exiles are rare in an unfriendly landscape like the Sunderbans? On one level, in *The Hungry Tide* language emerges as a means of enforcing compliance with, or adherence to, a particular set of rules, socially agreed upon notions, values or norms, and is despotic by nature (as evinced in the bureaucracy and harassment Piya and Fokir suffer at the hands of the Forest Department “guide” who virtually causes her to drown):

Looking up, she saw the guard had taken advantage of her . . . the guard tore the money from his grip and slipped it into his own pocket. Then he gave the boy a parting slap and climbed back into the launch.  

and again:

The abruptness of this summons made Piya’s hackles rise. The man had evidently assumed she had no choice but to follow his orders, that she would put up with whatever demands he chose to make. From the start she had sensed a threat from the guard . . .

On the other hand, language locates the self, love, and freedom in the fluid waterscapes: “Piya’s eyes . . . fell to the currents playing upon the river’s surface: it was as if a hand, hidden in the water’s depths, were writing a message to her in the cursive scripts of ripples, eddies and turbulence, and, “when the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen and unheard.”

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96 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 47.
The blurring of opposites is evident in the familiar postcolonial narrative strategy of glossing, a technique which includes parenthetic translations of individual words. This is one of the most obvious and common authorial intrusions in cross-cultural texts. Authors and their characters use glossing to lend their language some degree of their selves and render it more able to represent their realities. Ghosh uses this tool liberally throughout the narrative, and most effectively in the chapter titled “S’ Daniel”. In this short but important section, and in other sections, Ghosh establishes the importance of dialect and local language to the rest of the narrative: “British sarkar” (Government), “Shobnomoskar” (welcome to all), “kada ar bada” (mud and mangrove),

“bjuwu” (bourgeois),

“bal to re” (tell me),

“Amra kara? Bastuhara” (Who are we? We are the dispossessed),

and “zamindars” (landlords). The more the author employs local speech, the more he calls into question the artifice of narrative, and as he textures the written dialect with the historicity of the rich oral traditions of the Sunderban-Bangali dialect, the pre-colonial past, and the fractured postcolonial present, fuse seamlessly in a single powerful telling. Thus the Bon Bibi folk religion becomes a rich living repository of both written and oral traditions. In Ghosh’s project, Fokir recounts the many touching tales of Dukhey and his rescue from the demon-tiger Dokkhin Rai, by the reigning goddess of the forests, Bon Bibi. One tale leads to another, and the recitation of the verses learnt while he was a child, from Horen, is passed on by word of mouth by Fokir to his son Tutul in an undying tradition of mythmaking.

In The Hungry Tide both the upper and lower classes use different registers of language. This is particularly interesting when the registers become smudged in

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100 Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 51.  
101 Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 52.  
102 Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 117.  
103 Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 254.  
104 Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 264.
unfamiliar spaces such as the island where the educated Kanai is at the mercy of Fokir, who knows the habits of the man-eating tiger. Kanai is uneducated in ecological matters and finds himself at the receiving end when Fokir confronts him with an informal register of language, tui (a disrespectful mode of address by a superior to an inferior), instead of the usual apni (a formal, respectful mode of address by an inferior to a superior). As represented by Fokir and Kanai’s conversation in the forest, the juxtaposition of language registers creates and underlines the tension between neocolonialism and resistance. Oral texts (echoed in Fokir’s songs and Horen’s recitations) and Nirmal’s diary, which recreate a vanishing performative tradition through a written text, reside side by side. Although not limited to cross-cultural texts, such glosses foreground the continual reality of cultural discourse, bringing to the fore the voice of the subjugated and the dispossessed. It was Raja Rao who arguably pioneered glossing most effectively in Kanthapura, and showed how the process can reveal a complex and revealing social structure, and give voice to indigenous people. The device has been adopted since by a range of postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Amit Chaudhuri to give an indigenous identity to the local character, such as Fokir, in the “new” English language texts.

Just as Ghosh employs glossing to represent the challenged identity of those at the fringes in The Hungry Tide, he uses the multi-account perspective to suggest how unconventionally recounted “truth” is. Truth, for instance, is recounted by generational accounts (told by Horen to his son Fokir, and then by Fokir to his son Tutul) and through breaking spatial boundaries when Fokir’s dead mother Kusum appears to Fokir to help

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him at crucial junctures in life. On the issue of truth, Ghosh invokes Rainer Maria Rilke:

“Some simple thing shaped for generation after generation / until it lives in our hands and in our eyes, and it’s ours.”  

It is significant that the poetry that embellishes Ghosh’s fictional account is none other than Rilke’s, which suggests how accounts of the “truth” are like myths--they vary and often contradict each other, depending on whose truth it is, but they ultimately give meaning to the material. Just before the dramatic ending with its description of the destructive tidal wave, Kanai quotes Rilke in a letter to Piya:

> Look, we don’t love like flowers

> with only one season behind us; when we love,

> a sap older than memory rises in our arms. O girl,

> it’s like this: inside us we haven’t loved just some one

> in the future, but a fermenting tribe; not just one

> child, but fathers, cradled inside us like ruins

> of mountains, the dry riverbed

> of former mothers, yes, and all that

> soundless landscape under its clouded

> or clear destiny--girl, all this came before you.

> --From Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, as quoted in *The Hungry Tide*.  

In a very different timbre, but with a meaning that reflects the core of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, Bhabha foregrounds the way in which the nation is predicated upon narration, and the present upon the past:

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The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past. . . .

Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years, but in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words au-delà -- here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth.¹⁰⁹

Ghosh’s construction of coherent narrative(s) from a mass of evidence aims, in historian M.C. Lemon’s words, “to inform the reader” of “what happened.” Lemon suggests that the way a writer-narrator makes choices from available facts and appropriates language to construct narrative rests upon the requirements for coherence and intelligibility, in which prior and subsequent events are cemented together by a “conventionally acceptable contiguity.”¹¹⁰ In The Hungry Tide, however, Lemon’s formula is employed, but with a novel twist: contrary to Lemon’s narrative theory, Ghosh does not adhere to the categorisation of conceptual coherence because the novel’s entire historicity is founded on “verbal fictions.” From the forest guard Mej-da’s manufactured tellings to Fokir and Horen’s songs and recitation of folk poetry and tales, Ghosh constantly deconstructs the truth, and actually discards the concept of a real and knowable past for one in which the narrated past, and its possible meanings, is seen as a purely literary and tropological construction. His project finds an interesting resemblance in Hayden White’s argument of how “there is no fundamental difference between historical and fictional narratives because both are creations

¹⁰⁹ Bhabha. The Location of Culture 1-2.
of ‘tellings’ based in language, which is based on sound.”111 White’s concept of “the fictions of factual representation” find synchronous application in Ghosh’s anthropological work because as White demonstrates, facts do not speak for themselves, but the historian/narrative writer speaks for them, speaks out on their behalf and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole, whose integrity is, in its “representation—a purely discursive one.” White’s argument that the “process of fusing [fragmented] events,” whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the “object of representation” as a “poetic process” fits well into the framework of The Hungry Tide.112 Moreover, this novel seems to suggest that it is the writer’s intention to purposefully ossify the “truth” by exploring and representing it, as it was unearthed in his “compulsive questioning” of the relatives and friends who knew Nirmal and his family several decades ago. As the chapters entitled “Crimes” and “Besieged” reveal, Ghosh’s constant shifting of perspectives among several members of Nilima’s extended “school house” family (Horen, Kusum, Moyna) to get to the unrevealed sources of “facts” in this narrative, actually disables him in locating the essence of “what did actually happen” or “how did all this happen” with the tidal wave washing away every evidence. A cacophony of voices, with a medley of contrapuntal notes, is unleashed in this exercise of a literary “dig.” Like an orchestra of singing skeletons from the past: Nirmal’s voice through his robust diary, Nilima’s good-natured babblings, Horen, Kanai and Piya’s innumerable recounts, blur any hope of articulating the single voice of truth. Ghosh’s use of direct speech further muddies the “truth,” in the following conversation between Nilima and Kanai:

“What story?” Nilima said sharply.

“Don’t you remember? About the viceroy who built this port and Mr Piddington, the man who invented the word ‘cyclone,’ and how he predicted that the Matla would rise to drown Canning?”

“Stop!” Nilima clapped her hands over her ears. “Please don’t talk about it, Kanai . . . I just don’t have the strength to revisit all that.”

Constantly crossed wires continue to aid in Ghosh’s deconstruction of reality. In short, Ghosh seems to adopt the Hayden White matrix of narrative history, where “there is no such thing as one correct way of telling the story and representing the world because language is arbitrary in its relation to the world it speaks about;” and everything can be redescribed. White’s argument about the centrality of the linguistic mode in autobiographical or historical narratives throws some light on Ghosh’s complex use of language. According to White, the peculiar language of discursive prose comes from the effort of the narrator to mediate between alternative modes of emplotment and explanation. Ghosh has employed this technique to aid him in his objective to further texture the narrative with conflicting accounts. At first the author’s well projected testimonies about Nirmal’s death, at the hands of the Marxist “lumpen elements,” appear to preserve collective memory, but in reality they generate a highly contradictory body of tellings—tellings which offer sometimes three and even four versions of the same story, or a multiplicity of dimensions to the single character of Nirmal, which ensconces in them the sound of differing voices. The author seems to be purposely looking for truth in places where he can find many versions of it. So the multifaceted representations of

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113 Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 27.
“truth”—the lapses in what is being said and what is being heard—become an effective tool to emphasise the inauthenticity of both memory and intent. Overlaid with diverse accounts, the reconstruction of a doomed love between Fokir and Piya is finely woven out of a whole orchestra of dissonant sound bytes, with the Ghosh worldview precariously balanced on the constantly shifting unreality of unreliable representations from subjects who are far removed from any vestige of normalcy, in an abnormally challenging landscape. Thus, in Kanai’s accounts, sound is either a “filler” between words or suggests the incoherence that signifies a businessman’s mind; or as a manipulative device in Fokir’s wife Moyna’s earlier accounts of her marital relationship; or a “silent tool” because Fokir is able to articulate and thus able to communicate with Piya only by a remarkable “silence,” spontaneous song, or magic “touch:

. . . so she put her palm on his wrist. “Bon Bibi--Dukehy--Dokkhin Rai. Sing” . . . He hesitated momentarily before yielding to her plea. Tilting back his head, began to chant and suddenly the language and the music were all around her, flowing like a river, and all of it made sense; she understood it all. Although the sound of the voice was Fokir’s, the meaning was Kanai’s, and in the depths of her heart she knew she would always be torn between the one and the other.115

Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth suggests that in fictional retellings such as in Ghosh’s project, “there is only subjectivity. There are only illusions. And every illusion, because it has no permanently objectifying frame, constitutes reality and is totally ‘objective’ for its

duration."\textsuperscript{116} So, while ostensibly employing the discourse of subversion through language, \textit{The Hungry Tide} shades off into history, legend, myth, poetry--ultimately to become a poetics of the imagination; it collates fragmented memories, fractured tellings, lapses, ellipses and silences, interior monologues, dusty, moth-eaten diaries of Nirmal’s journal, and musty handwritten lifescapes from a complex childhood. Again and again persons (or their identities) get lost in \textit{The Hungry Tide}--lost in legend, lost in the unending mangrove swamps of the shoreline of the Meghna River and the Madhukhali Creek, the silence of the rain in the palm fronds--and in each case Ghosh chases after them in order to recover them, to remember them, or to recreate them. While on the level of story Ghosh’s account is concerned primarily with the search for “lost characters” or “lost identities,” on the level of discourse it questions the nature and origin of the self, and explores ways to reflect and represent the self in verbal constructs of a postcolonial languagescape. Ghosh’s characteristic preoccupation with unconventional, disjointed, hybrid modes of oral narratives appears to emanate in part from his training as an anthropologist, his ability to read five languages, and his professed interest in the neglected tales of people’s lives. Presumably in an attempt to go beyond the genre limitations of conventional fiction, Ghosh offers in such a text as \textit{The Hungry Tide} a problematic collage of multifarious textual and graphic sources, genres and points of view, with many versions of the truth, both material and mythical.

The author also interpolates chronological expectations, as past interrupts present and vice-versa throughout, with alternating chapters providing Piya’s and Kanai’s accounts. This is yet another tool for narrative subversion of the linear and thus the

“normative.” So even in its literary mode, *The Hungry Tide* aborts the linear method of storytelling and adopts a multi-perspective, confusing style. Ghosh also makes a bold attempt to juggle different planes of time and place. Nirmal’s notebook, like a giant jigsaw puzzle split in installments in between the alternate glimpses of Kanai’s and Piya’s separate (but converging) trajectories, is written against an embattled and encroaching present. Ghosh undermines a referential narrative by employing a range of destabilising techniques—including multi-voicedness, sonic interference (by blurring the many voices of Moyna, Nilima, and Horen), and the foregrounding of colonial history as narrative through Nirmal’s Marxist diary notes. *The Hungry Tide* constantly strives to capture a sense of belonging, a sense that even though the there-and-then is filtered through the here-and-now, the layers of the past are palpably present. Although Kanai is a man of the world and a linguist and translator and a suave corporate success, he is perplexed by his awareness of himself as he becomes aware of his love for Piya in a letter to her:

Would it be true then to say that I have never been in love before? I had always prided myself on the breadth and comprehensiveness of my experience of the world: I had loved, I once liked to say, in six languages. That seems now like the boast of a time very long past: at Garjontola I learnt how little I know of myself and the world. Suffice it to say then that I have never before known what it was to want to ensure someone’s happiness, even if it should come at the cost of my own.  

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And although Piya has moments of distress--for example when she recognises that she is both self and other as she returns from the forest after the tidal wave--a belief in the recuperative power of myth and the sacred ultimately eases her anxiety:

She recalled the promises she had made to him, in the silence of her heart, and how, in those last moments, with the wind and the rain still raging around them, she had been unable to do anything for him other than to hold a bottle of water to his lips. She remembered how she had tried to find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved--and once again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words.\footnote{Ghosh, The Hungry Tide 393.}

Ghosh has written about the encounter between the worldly outsider like Piya and the peasant Fokir before. In his third book, \textit{In An Antique Land} (1992), he provides a witty and ironic account of the years he spent in an Egyptian village researching his doctorate in anthropology in which the peasant turns out to be a great deal more worldly than expected. Embedded in this wry account is an archival search for the story of a Jewish merchant from Tunisia who lived most of his life in India: the Indian in Egypt, the Tunisian Jew in India. It is an argument about the interpenetrability of cultures. In \textit{The Hungry Tide} the narrative strives to reach a higher plane and the argument is more profound. Ghosh expertly deconstructs the reputation of the Sunderbans as an eerie, nightmare forest, and constructs the grim reality of its hazards, lending a heroic stature to its inhabitants like Fokir who are ready to bestow their lives for the safe passage of a total stranger like Piya. In \textit{The Hungry Tide} Ghosh makes a spirited attempt to weave sacred myth and material science by texturing the narrative with language and silence, and with truth and identity, seen in the unspoken and intense
encounters between the diasporic, English-speaking scientist Piya, and the intuitively gifted, dialect-speaking, indigene Fokir:

What could she, Piya, offer him that would amount to even a small part of what he already had?

They sat unmoving, like animals who had been paralysed by the intensity of their awareness of each other. When their eyes met again it was as if he knew at a glance what she was thinking. He reached for her hand and held it between his, for a moment, and then, without looking in her direction again he moved off to the stern . . . .

The Hungry Tide reiterates how mythology and science, as representations of the ancient and the contemporary, are both organised systems of knowledge based on a close study of the environment, and how both systems are perpetually open and incomplete, always caught in the crosscurrents of the material and the mythical. Ghosh’s narrative ends with a powerful image: the body of Fokir. It is a crucible of the past, and it contains the remnants of various histories in its essence: Fokir’s mother’s and Nirmal’s. His body becomes the site of a liminal space where Piya and Moyna negotiate a consolidated trajectory of shared beginnings: the praxis is the trust fund that Piya is able to muster for Tutul’s education and Moyna’s training, through her worldwide network of friends and colleagues. This denoument gestures towards a kind of local-global intersectionality, a cosmopolitan impulse that Ghosh himself applauds and supports in his own life as an activist-writer. Ghosh’s view, through the eyes of Piya, seems to obliterate the gaps of time and place, and achieves a moment of connection in that space, no matter how tenuous. Although tradition, story, and genealogy remain uncertain, suggestive, hybrid,

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and fluid, they still offer some sense of continuity, heredity, and belonging for Piya. Merging the mythical with the material, collapsing binaries, and constructing coherence and intelligibility in the highly vexed waterscapes of the Ganga, the crosscurrents of hybridity bring a sense of reconfigured identity for Piya. Cultural collisions turn to cultural collations, within Piya’s decentred diasporic self, a self that is familiar to those who inhabit an increasingly borderless, globalising planet--unstable and translated.
CHAPTER TWO

SACRED IN THE PROFANE:

THE PARADOX OF “HER HOLINESS” AND “WHORE”

IN A RIVER SUTRA

The stream took on the form of a woman--a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl . . .

--Gita Mehta, A River Sutra.

From Shiva’s penance you became water.

From water you became a woman

So beautiful that gods and ascetics

Their loins hard with desire

Abandoned their contemplations

To pursue you . . .

The Terrible One was moved to laughter.

To watch you the Destroyer said,

Oh damsel of the beautiful hips,

Evoker of Narma, lust,

Be known as Narmada

Holiest of Rivers.

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1 Mehta, A River Sutra 8.
This chapter examines, first, the treatment of foundational Hindu myths embedded in the novel *A River Sutra* in order to explore how they coax out of the religious tradition, a cluster of both sacred and profane trajectories that either reflect or distort the archetypes. Second, I represent the Narmada River as a bridge between the worlds of myth and reality. Third, I construct the river as an ideological consensus between Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism. Fourth, I argue that the nameless Narrator becomes the translator of multiple narratives, and transcreates pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial oral and literary traditions. Finally, I argue that the project to build a series of dams across the Narmada is an attempt at containing not just the waters, but also Bhil and Gond tribal women.

In his magisterial work *Myth*, Laurence Coupe points out that “... archetypes are permanent, eternal patterns of understanding,” and that although they are “unrepresentable in themselves, they are manifest as ‘archetypal images.’ These are universal motifs that come from the ‘collective unconscious’ and are the basic content of...”

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3 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 143.
religions and mythologies.”

The goddess Narmada, in this novel, is referred to as “Her holiness,” and “a whore.” In the first part of this chapter I explore the nuanced ways in which author Gita Mehta creates the six stories that reflect and re-present the myth of the river goddess Narmada. Hidden among these six narratives is yet another myth—that of the Aryan immortal who slumbers on the banks of the river Narmada, in deathless sleep—which I unpack in the course of my analysis. And in the second part, I explore one specific myth of the Naga that has a strong pan-Indian presence, connecting East and West—not just Assam and Gujarat, but India and Greece as well. In A River Sutra, one of the characters, Dr. Mitra, points out that the Alexandrine geographer Ptolemy wrote about the Narmada: “The ancient Greeks would probably have sympathised with the river’s mythology but at least they only had to deal with one set of myths, whereas Indians have never been prepared to settle for a single mythology if they could squeeze another hundred in.” In Mehta’s novel, the story of Nitin Bose and Rima reveals how the patriarchy must ultimately learn to respect the power of the divine feminine that resides in a myriad manifestations: in the sacred waters of the Narmada, in the serpent cult of the Vanos, and in the character of the tealeaf-picker, Rima.

Since A River Sutra incorporates both oral and written traditions of mythmaking (including myths from Hinduism as well as those based in folk cults) these narratives

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4 Coupe, Myth 139.
5 Mehta, A River Sutra 145.
6 Mehta, A River Sutra 143.
7 See, Geoffrey Waring Maw, Narmada: The Life of a River, ed. Marjorie Sykes (Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh: Distributor, Friends Rural Centre, 1991) 3. Geoffrey Maw was an English Quaker who spent nearly forty years (1910-1949) working in the Hoshangabad district in Central India, on the South bank of the Narmada River. In this compelling travelogue Maw maintains: “In the Ramayana and the Mahabharata the river has another name. She is Rewa ‘the leaping one’ . . . she dances down her rocky bed in countless rapids and water-falls. She is holy throughout her course, whether inhabited or uninhabited.”
8 Mehta, A River Sutra 145.
lend themselves to my analysis of how sacred myths evolve in a profane framework.⁹ In The Positivity of the Christian Religion, Hegel maintains, “Every nation has its own imagery, its gods, angels, devils, or saints, who live in the nation’s traditions, whose stories and deeds the nurse tells her charges and so wins them over by impressing their imagination.”¹⁰ Although he was critical of the domination of the Indian family by patriarchy, it is easy to connect Hegel with postcolonial theorists such as Dipankar Gupta¹¹ and Gopal Balakrishnan.¹² The Hegelian idea of metaphors that inspire and enliven the national imagination, sparking and awakening the “sacred” and the “secular,” is reiterated by both these postcolonial theorists. As suggested by Gupta’s root metaphors, which posit a “regnant set of meanings and saliences,” Hegel’s claim too seems to support the argument that “a nation’s gods and heroes and myths are all linked with public spheres of national events, memorials and temples.”¹³

I argue that the sacred and the profane are constantly blurring boundaries and borders because by their very nature they are “two faces of the same coin” and cannot be contained within paradigmatic geographies. And Eliade fits well with my own argument about the boundless fluidity in the physicality of water, which by its very nature resists constraint and containment. Moreover, A River Sutra, with refreshing contemporaneity, echoes Eliade’s multiple theory of cluster myths, where the principal myth of the ascetic

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⁹ See, Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2000). A River Sutra follows Frye’s idea of the metamode. For Frye, romance is the metamode of all literature. Halfway between myth (the abstract forms of an ideal world underlying all literature) and realism (the concrete necessities of life in the real world), stands romance—a genre where magic can happen. The stories of the immortal Aryan warrior, Rima and Nitin Bose, and the courtesan and the bandit, are built on this model.


Siva and his daughter Narmada is echoed in the profane canvas of parent-child relationships that punctuate the many tellings. These tellings include the story of the musician who was deformed and stood up on her wedding day by her betrothed, but was vindicated by the love of her father; the story of Shankar, the archaeologist-turned Naga ascetic and Uma, the female infant whom he rescued from an abusive brothel keeper; the story of the beautiful young woman who fell in love with the bandit who forcefully abducted her, and her meeting with her weary mother after years; and the story of the exceptionally talented infant, the singer Imrat, who was murdered because he had a melodious voice, and who left an inconsolable teacher-father grieving for him. Thus, Eliade avers in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*: “The sacred is significantly different from the profane, yet it may manifest itself no matter how or where in the profane world because of its power of turning any natural object into a paradox by means of a hierophany” (the manifestation of the sacred).\(^\text{14}\)

Postcolonial activist-writers such as Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy all concur that their politics and their fiction are affected by the myths they heard during their childhood. Roy acknowledges that “listening to stories, or reading them as a child--I read voraciously as a child--made you think deeply. We didn’t have television so hours were spent in contemplation when we went fishing.”\(^\text{15}\) Later, the stories “drove” her to write about Velutha and Ammu: “I had two options: writing or madness.” Amitav Ghosh, on the other hand, celebrated the oral repository of stories that he had heard right from the time he left Dhaka, in 1965, when he was only seven years old: “All that I heard and saw became a part of a strange and moving experience and I remembered the details when I


\(^{15}\) Arundhati Roy, Interview with Julie Mehta, Feb. 1998.
was working on *The Shadowlines*.”\(^{16}\) But it is Gita Mehta, perhaps, who most succinctly concedes how inspirational myths have invigorated her as a writer:

> Myths are extremely powerful tools and can convey a whole range of meanings. As I say in my preface to *Karma Cola*,\(^ {17}\) since East and West increasingly meet under such unlikely circumstances, it might be wise to remember two myths—one Eastern, one Western—which provide a cautionary note to the human race. The Indian myth maintains we are living in the age of Kalyug which presages the end of the world. Kalyug is characterised by speed. Speed, being the enemy of reflection, will spread fantasy with such velocity that humans, in their pursuit of escape, will ultimately destroy themselves. The Western myth, as expressed in Goethe’s *Faust*, introduces the devil as a poodle, welcomed as something harmless and amusing until it turns into the implacable force that exacts damnation as the price of greed.\(^ {18}\)

**THE NARMADA: BRIDGING THE SPACE OF MYTH AND THE SPACE OF REALITY**

In this chapter I interrogate the flux between the sacred and the profane and pose a string of questions: Does the sacred permeate the profane? Is the private appropriated

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\(^{18}\) Gita Mehta, personal interview, Nov. 2004. When asked about where she sourced her stories, Mehta said: “I read the autobiography of the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. At one point he had to make twenty films a year to survive. There is an image in his book about how he used to close his eyes to recollect his earliest impressions. That stuck with me. I literally closed my eyes and tried to recall my earliest memories, stories my aunts and mother used to recount about the Hindu myths; incidents that occurred with people I knew when I was young, strange stories I heard from friends. And they unfolded in front of me.”
by the public sphere? How do the stories created by human beings become mirrors in which the myths of the divine are reflected? If translation and transmutation, as avatars of transformation, are the driving forces that fuel Ghosh’s project in *The Hungry Tide* (to re-(a) dress the divine myth of the river goddess Ganga, an act of resistance that resurfaces strategically throughout his novel), I posit in this chapter that the successful reconstruction of a pre-colonial identity in Mehta’s *A River Sutra* is based on the retrieval of the feminine principle from the collective unconscious of the “male warrior.” This chapter represents the male warrior in two ways. First, as a rare breed of ascetic who dwells in the sacred world and is persistent in his search for abstinence and a release from sexual pleasure that stems from being attracted by feminine beauty. Secondly, as a fascist in the profane world, where he aggressively battles female ascendancy of any kind even as he indulges in satiating sexual desire through repressing or dominating the feminine. Barbara Ehrenreich’s preface to Klaus Theweleit’s seminal work on male fantasies delivers the message with lucidity and sharpness: “. . . the fascist is not doing ‘something else,’ but doing what he wants to do . . . these acts of fascist terror spring from irreducible human desire, which springs from the need to contain female sexual power.”19 The reader is confronted with questions because of the strategic placement of the myth of “the great warrior,” which is only superficially touched upon, and buried in the middle of Mehta’s novel.20 It is a mystery as to why the author should introduce this little-known myth in the course of telling the story of male desire and male fear of female power. Perhaps, Mehta was mirroring the mythical world in the earthly world of a bandit and an abducted girl through reinforcing the idea of a bridge that the river goddess Narmada forms in

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19 See, Theweleit, *Male Fantasies I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History.*
20 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 145-149.
connecting the two worlds. In the novel, the young abducted girl, a courtesan, falls in love with her kidnapper, the bandit Rahul Singh, who never forces himself on her and wins her over with respect, subjugation to her whims, and by restraining his desire. The myth of the immortal warrior is reflected in Rahul Singh’s tragic end when the police catch up with him, shooting him dead. The Aryan warrior, too, several centuries ago had fallen deeply in love with an indigenous woman of the Narmada Valley. He was caught, tortured, and beheaded by the aboriginal people of the valley. The woman, who had fallen in love with the warrior, died of sorrow, as does the abducted girl in Mehta’s novel, who jumps into the Narmada River when the police shoot her abductor Rahul Singh. Before the abducted girl commits suicide she tells the nameless Narrator (who Mehta uses to tell the stories):

He [the abductor] told me a great warrior slept somewhere close by with honey bees circling his head. He laughed, saying his men thought he was himself immortal because he had been stung by one of those bees. I wanted to be stung by such a honey bee so we could be together forever and sometimes we set out to search for the warrior but we never found him . . .

Paradoxically, therefore, the River Narmada is both a site of renewal and life (as in the case of Nitin Bose, manager of a tea plantation in India’s hilly northeast, who recovers from lunacy after appeasing the goddess), and a place of death (as in the case of the abducted courtesan who jumps off a cliff into the turbulent waters of the river, ensuring her sins are cleansed). The river, like the government-run Narmada rest-house, where the nameless Narrator resides, and through which a motley brood of hustlers, bandits, ascetics, archaeologists, civil servants, and tribals constantly transit, becomes what

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21 Mehta, A River Sutra 176.
Foucault terms heterotopia. In “Different Spaces” Foucault uses this term to refer to actual locations that can both reflect and challenge the stratifications of other social spaces or times in a single locale. 22 The Narmada, as a river, becomes an “excellent” 23 heterotopic space since the Narmada River 24 and its surrounding areas are both a sacred crucible (where people fasting unto death or immolating themselves on its banks, or drowning in her waters, gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth), and a profane space (where child prostitution, abject poverty, larceny, and killings are a part of everyday existence, as the six tales bear testimony).

I also address how the divine feminine, as reflected in the geo-body of the goddess Narmada, actually encourages analysis of fluidity, and in turn infects the reading of the text itself by releasing fluidity: a profound subject is explored with effortless ease, and enables the prose of A River Sutra to flow like a sacred stream. The lucidity of the narrative style has a certain luminosity about it that reminds the reader of the jyoti or light that is associated with this river in related myths where she becomes the space where immortals pass through the mortal plane. This encourages the reader to dissolve the rigid binary of boundaries, ultimately enabling the Narmada’s powers to infiltrate the text. 25

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23 Foucault, “Two Lectures.” Foucault refers to the boat as a place of heterotopia ‘par excellence,’ because it is already afloat on a heterotopic space like water which is a repository of many movements and peoples and becomes a heterotopic space itself, by virtue of its phenomenology of fluidity and mobility.
24 The Narmada is 1,250 km long, with its source in Madhya Pradesh, central India, and flows west between the Satpura and Vindhya mountain ranges through Gujarat state to the Gulf of Khambat. Because the river is turbulent and confined between steep banks, it is unsuitable for navigation or irrigation. The Narmada, sacred to Hindus, is said to have sprung from the body of the god Siva. Hindus aspire to perform parikrama, or a round-trip pilgrimage on foot along its entire length. Many holy baths and sites line its banks; at Marble Gorge, whose 100-foot-high (30.5-metre) walls bear inscriptions and sculptures, is a twelfth century temple dedicated to Siva.
25 See Diana Eck, “India’s Tirthas: ‘Crossings’ in Sacred Geography,” History of Religions 20.4 (May 1981): 323-344. Eck, a scholar of Comparative Religions at Harvard University, argues that Siva manifested himself on earth twelve times as a shattering sheath of light, known as jyotirlinga, which are sacred crossing places of the gods, and have become the preeminent destinations for Hindu pilgrims. The
Like the preceding chapter on *The Hungry Tide*, this chapter argues that Mehta’s novel deploys transformability (which occurs when the profane is represented in the sacred, and the sacred in the profane) in order to resist colonial and nationalistic projects to contain women in the making of a postcolonial nation. Here masculine identity is represented as a “flight from the feminine,” and male asceticism and penance is represented as an escape from involvement with human relationships: the archaeologist V.V. Shankar who becomes an ascetic comes back to a “normal life” when his asceticism is touched by the plight of Uma, the female infant he rescues from a brothel. Theweleit’s argument that male fear stems from women’s overwhelming capacity to arouse male desire, and makes the male perpetually anxious about the loss of agency and ego, is appropriately applied to Mehta’s narrative. The dread of women and the fear of subjugation by the female directly affects male agency in all six narratives that make up the novel. With versatility and intertextuality, Mehta employs the argument that there is a deep-seated fear at the heart of patriarchy of this uncontainable quality of feminine power, through each of the six short narratives. This *sutra*, or thread, as reflected in the title of the novel, forms a link or a bridge across the narratives. In each story Mehta sources, targets, narrates, and unpacks male anxiety about female sexuality and its latent power. The process of exploration may be different every time, but the underlying message is a series of echoes of the original Narmada myth, which are reflected in the question the Narrator asks repeatedly through the novel: “I imagine the ascetics sitting in the darkness like myself, their naked bodies smeared in ash . . . with the waves of the

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Narmada gently lapping at their thighs. And I wonder what their thoughts are about this loose-limbed seductress, the beautiful Narmada, Siva’s daughter?"

The reader is constantly persuaded to wander between the sacred, mythical world and the profane, mundane world, and to ponder “whether the ascetics are threatened by the beauty of the river from their meditations,” which is their path to ultimate power, and the key to release from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

PARADOXICAL BEDFELLOWS: THE SACRED AND THE MUNDANE

A River Sutra addresses the inevitable crosscurrents that arise when an ancient literature meets a modern language by focusing on the creator-destroyer deity Siva and the serpent image in the Hindu myths of creation that abound in classical Sanskrit texts. This section explores myth as a powerful tool that can connect not only the past to the present, but also an obsolete language with a global lingua franca, allowing us to transcend borders of time, genres, literary tradition, and space. The novel makes clear its involvement with the sacred at the outset. Its central character is the Narmada River:

It is said that Shiva, Creator and Destroyer of Worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The stream took on the form of a woman—a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl, at another as a romantic dreamer, at yet another as a seductress loose-limbed with the lassitude of desire. Her inventive variations so amused Shiva, that he named her Narmada the Delightful One, blessing her with

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27 Gita Mehta, A River Sutra, 132.
the words, “You shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible.” Then he gave her in
marriage to the most lustrous of all her suitors, the ocean, Lord of Rivers.\textsuperscript{28}

However, later in the story the river is addressed in profane terms: first in a suggestive
image with the Narrator wondering one night what the ascetics thought about as they
watched the water flowing from some secret stream, whispering in eddies below their
crossed legs, mysterious and alluring in the dying night. The rhetorical questions posed
by the novel shift the representations from the sacred to the profane: “Did they [the
ascetics] brood on the Narmada as the proof of Shiva’s great penance or did they imagine
her as a beautiful woman dancing towards the Arabian Sea, arousing the lust of ascetics
like themselves . . . ?\textsuperscript{29} And again: “Did you know ‘narmada’ means a whore in
Sanskrit?”\textsuperscript{30} Thus, the narrative is pervaded by a remarkable tension that arises from a
curious mixture of affirmation of faith in life and in the emotional roller coaster of living
itself. The novel juxtaposes desire, sorrow, passionate intensity, blind faith,
disappointment, pain, and love, on the one hand, with renunciation, self-realisation,
detachment, calmness, and wisdom, on the other.

The divine masculine tale of Siva is mirrored in the secular tale of Shankar (a
namesake of Lord Siva) and Uma (the namesake of the great goddess Parvati). Shankar,
an archaeologist who becomes a \textit{Naga} ascetic and then returns to his job as an
archeologist, rescues and subsequently adopts Uma, an abused young child prostitute and
protects, nurtures, and educates her. Like Lord Siva, he releases Uma into the world as a
minstrel who sings songs based on stories of the Narmada. As Patricia Williams points
out, for the “historically disempowered, the conferring of rights is symbolic of all the

\textsuperscript{28} Mehta, \textit{A River Sutra} 8.
\textsuperscript{29} Mehta, \textit{A River Sutra} 132-133.
\textsuperscript{30} Mehta, \textit{A River Sutra} 143.
denied aspects of their humanity: rights imply a respect that places one in a referential range of self and others, that elevates one’s status from human body to social being.”31

By encouraging Uma to develop her talent as a singer, Shankar empowers her to attain a sense of self. And like Siva, in the myth of Narmada’s birth, Shankar, the human manifestation of the divine, bestows agency to the former child prostitute and sets her free:

That summer the child and the Naga Baba lived in the cave behind the waterfalls. The ascetic taught the child to read and write and at night he sang to her of the Narmada. Over the months the child heard the songs so often she asked to learn them herself.

Only when she had fallen asleep did the Naga Baba begin his own meditations so that sometimes in her dreams she heard his deep voice chanting,

“Shiva-o-ham
I that am Shiva
Shiva-o-ham
Shiva am I.”

. . . Often the monsoon storms were so heavy the swollen waters of the river flooded their banks, swirling around the tree trunks and the bamboo thickets until they flowed right into the hut, as if trying to embrace the child learning to recite the river’s praises.32

The two parallel narratives of the Siva myth and the Shankar story are at the heart of Mehta’s exploration. Their intricate relationship invokes the oral storytelling tradition of

the Vedic and Puranic period. The invocation of the Narmada finds articulation in the pre-colonial Skandapurana and in the Ramayana. The Siva myth and Shankar’s tale are simultaneously told in contemporary fiction and undergirded by a common philosophy of renunciation, a pivotal principle in Hindu and Jain thought. They echo the story of renunciation of Ashok, the Jain monk in Mehta’s novel. These two tales of Siva and Shankar signpost the myth of creation of the River Narmada from Lord Siva’s meditative energies, which are evident in Jain ideals of asceticism and giving up worldly pleasures. In the myth of the Narmada’s creation, Siva’s intense meditation gives rise to beads of sweat. The sweat, in turn, is transformed into a rivulet, which becomes a turbulent torrent--the river goddess Narmada. What is striking is Mehta’s strategic placement of the story of the Jain monk’s renunciation that is used as a curtain raiser to the six compelling narratives. The Jain faith’s name derives from the word Jīna, meaning conqueror or liberator. And as Pratapaditya Pal states in The Peaceful Liberators: “Jains believe that an immortal and indestructible soul (jīva) resides within every living entity, no matter how small. Passions such as desire, greed, and hatred render the soul vulnerable to the effects of former deeds (karma), which cause the soul to suffer from repeated rebirth . . .” Pal posits that the “final goal of a Jain--like that of a Hindu or Buddhist--is to sever the chain of rebirth and achieve a state of liberation known as kaivalya, moksha, or nirvana.” Some members of the Jain faith, as well as Buddhists and Hindus, become homeless wanderers in search of truth and liberation. Such people are known as sramanas, and their tradition sramanical.

In her choice of the Jain monk’s story and its juxtaposition with the story of the Muslim boy Imrat and the Hindu teacher Master Mohan, Mehta signposts the
heterogeneity of the Narmada which is a pilgrimage centre not just for followers of the Hindu god Siva but also those of other faiths. In this way, Mehta represents the river as possessing a multiplicity of identities, and affording the river a certain intermediacy, in-between-ness and interchangeability, that challenges any purist reading of these stories. All the tales echo the running theme of pilgrimage on the banks of the Narmada, and each narrative underscores the importance of this river as a centre for pilgrims of many faiths. As Phyllis Granoff points out: “The medieval Jain ritual of pilgrimage did not develop in a vacuum. It clearly reflects religious preoccupations that we might call pan-Indian, for we find similar tendencies in Hinduism and Buddhism.”

The reader is induced almost immediately into realising the importance of celibacy for the male aspiring to achieve spiritual power. In the passages that trace Ashok’s evolution from playboy to priesthood, the reader is confronted by stringent rituals, even violent scenes of horror as in the plucking out the hair from his head in the initiation ceremony into monkhood. The monk relates the essence of his vow to the Narrator: “You will be deprived of the ministrations of any woman lest she arouse your desire.” Only austere asceticism and shunning of sexual desire, domination, and pleasure of women would allow the Jain monk to possess new powers. In order to gain spiritual powers, the Jain monk, like the Naga ascetic, would have to give up the “ownership” of women. Mehta’s account reiterates Klaus Theweleit’s theory that in order to be free of the fear of feminine domination, men must first relinquish the desire to possess and dominate women. Mehta fictionalises the diksha, or ritual, of renouncing

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34 Mehta, A River Sutra 36
35 Theweleit, Male Fantasies I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History.
the world in order to become a Jain monk in the first story about the Palanpuri Gujarati monk Ashok. According to James Laidlaw, this ceremony replicates the renunciation of the spiritual leader of the Jains, Mahavira, who “took a year to give away his vast wealth (varshi dan) before renouncing.” Laidlaw explains the diksha ceremony: “Mr. Atul Kumar Shah, a twenty-nine year-old bachelor and a diamond merchant based in Bombay, renounced his very considerable fortune to become a monk of the Tapa Gacch order. According to newspaper reports of this event, Mr. Shah rode in a chariot in a procession of seven elephants, fifty horses, forty camels, and hundreds of dancers and acrobats, and threw handfuls of silver coins, diamonds, and pearls into the crowd,” just as Mehta’s unnamed Narrator does, in his recounting of the Jain monk Ashok’s induction into abstinence and asceticism.

The story of the Jain monk Ashok underpins the main sutra, or thread, of the male fear of being dominated by woman’s sexual powers, weaving all the stories into a seamless tapestry of tellings. It also mirrors the influence of the sacred myth of Lord Siva’s asceticism and the immaculate conception of his beautiful daughter the river goddess Narmada on the lives of monks, bounty hunters, pilgrims, retirees, archaeologists, ascetics, prostitutes, doctors, hustlers, and tribals who inhabit the banks of the long and winding Narmada. Ashok, the virile diamond merchant turned celibate Digambara ascetic, admits to his earlier need to dominate women in his youth in order to feel empowered:

38 See, Pratapaditya Pal, The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India, 15. Pal explains that Digambaras (sky-clad) are one of two original orders of monks (the other was Svetambara (white-clad))
For a while it seemed my father had calculated accurately. Knowing my years of pleasure in Europe were limited I had seized on my irresponsible life with hectic delight. Beautiful women were lured by my fast sports cars, the wealth I squandered in fashionable discotheques, and by myself--for I was thought to be handsome with my aquiline features and my slender, muscular body. Then too, the family maintained luxurious holiday homes and I was generous with my invitations.\footnote{Mehta, \textit{A River Sutra} 26.}

In his conversation with the novel’s nameless Narrator, the monk further confesses an impulse to “own” his women:

If the indolent starlets from the film studios of Bombay, the ambitious secretaries from the European diamond companies, the bored girls who haunted the discotheques, sometimes felt I used a little too much force in our love-making, they soon laughed it off when they received my lavish presents, even boasting to their friends that I suffered from an excess of virility.\footnote{Mehta, \textit{A River Sutra} 26-27.}

Later, of course, he realises the truth after an elderly Jain monks instructs him about sexual and fiscal appetites, and the great Jain saint Mahavira’s philosophy: that men “long to be free,” but, “Many men die before they learn the desire for freedom lies deep within them, like a dammed river waiting to be released. But once a man has had that momentary glimpse of freedom he needs to be instructed further.”\footnote{Mehta, \textit{A River Sutra} 29.}

\footnote{Pal points out that Digambaras, like Ashok, “do not wear a stitch of clothing.”}
THE RIVER AS AN IDEOLOGICAL CONSENSUS BETWEEN HINDUISM, ISLAM, AND JAINISM

Mehta’s melding of Hinduism, Jainism, and Islam in her multi-narrative, multi-genre work reflects the fluidity of the river itself. Like the other two postcolonial novelists Ghosh and Roy, Mehta uses poetry, religious invocations, journals, letters, and the oral tradition of storytelling to construct her narrative. And her stories are all punctuated by multiple manifestations of the divine from several religions. Thus, Tariq Mia’s account of the young, dispossessed Imrat’s murder at the hands of the landed gentry, is narrated through the eyes of a Muslim cleric; the reformed playboy-turned-monk’s story is told within the principles of Jainism; tea plantation manager Nitin Bose’s story of offering prayers and performing penance to the Narmada for his mistreatment of the tealeaf picker Rima, is anchored in animistic beliefs; and archaeologist-turned-Naga-ascetic-turned archaeologist Shankar and his “adopted daughter” Uma’s story is grounded in the Hindu myth of Siva and Narmada. Mehta’s approach reflects her oft-stated idea of a tolerant, all-embracing India, not unlike the “universal” India of Tagore’s imagined nation where he upholds a hybridised template of a modern India. In “Hey mor chitto” (Oh, My Soul), Tagore invokes the pre-colonial, hybridised concept of the “Nation” that he wanted the “new” India to represent, where all religions would co-exist in harmony:

No-one knows from where it flows
or who set in motion,
this wild flood-force of Humanity’s course,
to mingle in mid-ocean.
Here are Aryans and non-Aryans,
Moguls, tribes-of-East,
and Huns and Scythians, Pathans, Dravidians,
all in a body pieced.
Now the West has opened its door--
and bringing gifts all through it they pour,
To give, to take, their mixed mixing make…
their way they will not retrace,
where India’s greatness reigns, before
the ocean’s space. 42

Mehta’s account is embedded with the magical qualities of the divine, not unlike the way 
Ngugi wa Thiong’o presents the Honia River in The River Between: “A river flowed 
through the valley of life . . . The river was called Honia, which meant cure or bring-
back-to-life.” 43 Trevor James argues that the Honia River has, “what we might call divine 
functions, it is seen as the creator and giver of life, the ground of the soul, the source of 
what is common to all. In ritual terms, the river is the place of cleansing, initiation and 
baptism.” 44

I argue that A River Sutra draws on the divine feminine embedded in the sacrality 
of the myth of the Narmada--which is inextricably yoked to the phallocentric creation

42 See, William Radice, ed. and trans., Rabindranath Tagore, Selected Poems (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985); and Julie Mehta, “Tagore’s Global Soul: In Flight between Nationalism and Liberalism,” Rubindrnanath Tagore: Reclaiming a Cultural Icon, ed. Kathleen M. O’Connell and Joseph T. O’Connell (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati UP, 2009) 71. The fifteenth piece in the “Swadeshi Parba” (“Nation” section of Gitabitan, the songbook that took the popular imagination by storm during the Swadeshi (Independence) movement), and was an oft-quoted piece during the last century.
44 Trevor James, “Theology of Landscape and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s The River Between,” Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures, 228.
myths of the ascetic-erotic male deity Siva. Drawing on these myths, Gita Mehta’s representations of the feminine as sexually empowered and self-reliant converge with contemporary Western theorists. Klaus Theweleit, Angela Grooten, Maja Pelikaan-Engel, and Lynda Nead have explained how myths of sexuality and male fantasies perpetuate patriarchal desire to possess and rule, often “robbing the feminine of both metaphorical and even morphological agency.”

This chapter also demonstrates how Mehta, in her attempt to blur the lines between the profane and the sacred landscape, confronts the religious divide between Hindus and Muslims. Mehta inserts the unstable Hindu myth of the Narmada into the vexed, subversive battlefield of post-imperial identity, where wounded civilisations of the Muslims and Hindus find confluence. Thus she situates her narratives within the expedient politics of divide-and-rule practiced by India’s British rulers, and a reality of ruthless and unethical governance in postcolonial India. There is a religious plurality that runs through A River Sutra with a nameless Hindu acting as the principal Narrator, and a Muslim cleric Tariq Mia playing the role of secondary Narrator. What was Mehta’s intention in locating a Muslim narrative on the banks of one of the most sacred rivers of the Hindus? Was it Mehta’s imaginary of a cohesive India, or is there a reality that informs her idea of a cohabiting of multi-religious elements in India? In an interview, Mehta explained the influence of religion on her:

I come from a multicultural, multi-religious background. My mother’s side of the family was from Kashmir and could read the Bhagavad Gita in Persian. They

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resided in Lahore (in undivided India) and even though they were Hindu girls, they would go out during the Moharram and give sherbet (cold drinks) to the Muslim Tazia carriers. I married a Sikh and we never thought of us being different in India as Sikhs and Hindus. Politicians in India create religious rifts. Look at the Ayodhya issue. I feel like saying, ‘I own that soil too’ when they kill themselves over temple and mosque. Rabindranath Tagore called it ‘sacred geography.’ It’s a sorry comment on our heritage when the very seduction of our civilisation, which is the massive philosophical leaps of imagination we took at any point in time of our history, has got lost in the politicising of religion.46

A River Sutra shows that it is possible to reconstruct an identity of what it means to be an “Indian” from a fractured, violent neocolonial present where Hindus and Muslims are in conflict. It is possible to do so by looking past the fractured present toward a glorious past that some scholars consider “the golden years of harmonious coexistence when the Sufi saints with their poetry and song captured the imagination of the common people.”47

It is no accident that it is Tariq Mia, a Muslim Sufi poet and teacher with a deep and abiding friendship with the Hindu Narrator of the novel, who introduces the river goddess Narmada’s mysteries to the reader at the outset. On the secular bank of the river, Tariq Mia reveals Bhakti philosophy: “The human heart has only one secret: The

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46 Gita Mehta, Interview with Julie Mehta, Apr. 2005. Gita Mehta explained: “We are the only country in the world where religious plurality is part of our birthright. Bada din (Christmas), Id, Mahavir Jayanti, Buddha Jayanti, Diwali—we celebrate as a nation and it’s built into our genetic frame. We seem to forget that it is an obscenity to homogenise, to quote W.H. Auden. The Mughals came to India, but we absorbed them. They couldn’t take us. Sure there was an Aurangzeb, but there was also a Dara Shikoh. We throw away the huge embarrassment of riches that is our great civilisation. We forget that it’s our ability to embrace that has made us the great civilisation that we are. It’s the greatest gift we have. Our history is very complex: Emperor Ashoka’s mother was an untouchable. We have the caste system, true. But India’s Constitution was written by an untouchable, Ambedkar. We are a civilisation that lives in the midst of mythology and history.”

capacity to love.” The scholar Ashis Nandy posits that in India there are 116 communities that are both Hindu and Christian, and at least 35 communities that are both Hindu and Muslim. He argues that these communities “define their Hinduism or Islam or Christianity in such a way that the symbols of sacredness of another faith acquire specific theological, cultural and familial status.” Further, Nandy’s argument about the need to protect less familiar faiths such as animism and indigenous cults strongly supports Mehta’s project of empowering animism as practiced by Vano tribals and giving them voice and agency. Nandy fears that “South Asia will be poorer if its rich, intricate tapestry of faiths gets destroyed through neglect or shrinks into six or seven standard, mutually exclusive faiths because, in the contemporary world, only such standard faiths enjoy respectability and political clout.” The result will be “a modern tragedy” that will “simultaneously impoverish Hinduism, Islam and the other South Asian faiths.”

Mehta signposts the inextricable ties that bind Muslims and Hindus with India’s complex history by employing and reinventing the memory and language of the sixteenth-century mystics, and representing them in diverse forms, in every story in the novel:

Some seek God in Mecca,
Some seek God in Benares.
Each finds his own path and the focus
of his worship.
Some worship him in Mecca.
Some in Benares.

48 Mehta, A River Sutra 45.
49 Nandy, Time Warps 143-144.
50 Nandy, Time Warps 145.
But I centre my worship on the eyebrow
of my beloved.

--Imrat, singing a hymn by the mystic Sufi saint, Kabir.\(^{51}\)

Mehta’s liberal use of the poetry of the Sufis—who suffered persecution under some
Mughal emperors of India—is more than a tool for embellishment and aesthetics.\(^{52}\) It is
significant that Mehta prefaces the novel with a couplet from the poet-mystic Chandidas:

\begin{flushright}
Listen, O Brother
Man is the greatest Truth
Nothing beyond.\(^{53}\)
\end{flushright}

It reverberates through the novel in many forms, through the words of many characters.
The refrain from Kabir, the Sufi mystic, punctuates the tale of the blind young singer

Imrat:

\begin{flushleft}
O servant, where do you seek Me?
You will not find me in temple
or mosque,
In Kaaba or in Kailash,
In yoga or renunciation.
Sings Kabir, “O seeker find God
In the breath of all breathing.”
--Imrat reciting a Kabir hymn.\(^{54}\)
\end{flushleft}

\(^{51}\) Mehta, A River Sutra 70.
\(^{54}\) Mehta, A River Sutra 69.
In the Sufi poet Rumi, too, we encounter I-ness melting into All-ness, which is the hallmark of Bhakti and Sufi\textsuperscript{55} poetry, and the plinth on which Mehta builds her narratives, artfully reminding us that the River Narmada and her shores are the highly vexed locations of many cultures and creeds. Mehta also shows that the river--as the fluid representative of many faiths--is perceived as nourisher, nurturer, and teacher of the pilgrims and dwellers, instructing them about the truth about equality between all people, both male and female:

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I

We are two spirits swelling in one body,

If thou seest me, thou seest Him;

And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both.

--Jalalu’ddin Rumi.\textsuperscript{56}

Shashibhusan Das Gupta, in his seminal work Obscure Religious Cults, retells the story of the Sufi poet Jalalu’ddin Rumi as the poet describes in the epic poem, Masnavi:\textsuperscript{57}

A man knocked at the door of his friend. The latter asked: ‘Who art thou, my dear?’--‘It is I’--‘In this case be off. I cannot at present receive thee, there is no place at my board for one who is still raw; such a man cannot be sufficiently dressed (that is matured) and cured of hypocrisy, but by the fire of separation and refusal.’ The unfortunate man departed. He employed a whole year in travelling, consuming himself in the flames of desire and affliction, caused by the absence of

\textsuperscript{55} Sufism emerged as a mystic tradition between 661-750 CE. It is considered an inner, mystical dimension of Islam. A practitioner is called a Sufi and seeks remembrance of god through love of god, and above all else, through constant remembrance of the creator and asceticism.


\textsuperscript{57} Rumi wrote the Masnavi, a series of six books of poetry that amount to about 25,000 verses, in the final years of his life between 1258 and 1273 CE.
his friend. Matured and perfected by his long trial, he again approached the door of his friend and knocked modestly, fearful that an uncivil word might again fall from his own lips.--‘Who is there?’ was asked from the interior of the house--‘Dear friend, it is thyself who art at the door.’--‘Because it is myself, enter to-day; this house can contain no other than I.’

Mehta’s novel explores how the Narmada becomes the location of a cultural consensus since its landscape is the site of ancient Hindu and Muslim myths. The path of the Narmada is also the location of a significant tribal and folk civilisation of the Vano that represents a counterculture to the archaic Brahminical Sanskritised script of the Vedic slokas. Mehta with her characteristic attention to minutiae reveals through some impressive research that, on the one hand, the River Narmada may be Siva’s daughter, and hence specifically aligned to the Saivite ascetics and mantra-chanting followers of Lord Siva. On the other hand, she is also the clan goddess of the Vano matriarchs who claim her as their patron goddess and believe her waters possess healing properties against snakebite and even death. So the Vano presence in this novel appears to be yet another tangential force that resists patriarchy, and the colonial effort to devalue the dispossessed scheduled castes of India who do not fit into the mainstream of the stratified caste system. In a compelling yet tangential manner, Theweleit’s theory of how women, floods, and bodies become a threat to monolithic patriarchy echoes Mehta’s suggestion that because the Narmada herself can never be captive nor contained, no woman can be contained because the feminine principle is one of fluidity that makes porous, inundates,

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58 Das Gupta, Obscure Religious Cults 180.
and erodes any resistance to its flow.\textsuperscript{59} Thus, the powers of the river Narmada are properly accounted for in the Invocation to the Goddess Narmada:

\begin{quote}
“Even Siva’s semen
Is cooled to stone in your riverbed
Each seed an idol
Wrested from your blue-black waters,
And worshipped with flower garlands
In the temples on your banks.”
\end{quote}

--Hymn to the Narmada.\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{A River Sutra} provides the reader with rare and hypnotic lyricism through the conjugation of oral and written traditions embedded in the cacophonous storytelling techniques that quite clearly resonate with the gentle and thunderous flow of the River Narmada. The reader is exposed to the recurring theme of the power of human emotion over barriers of hate and destruction through enchanting stories of overwhelming pain and mysterious joy that unravel like the river’s own journey. Like the divine feminine that is the River Narmada, Rima, the Vano tribal woman and the wandering minstrel Uma, signpost the importance of salvaging lost traditions of multiple religious heritages, and their potential to serve as a compass to find new identities among different religious communities that continue to cause communal strife in India.

\textsuperscript{59} See, Theweleit, \textit{Male Fantasies I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History}.
\textsuperscript{60} Mehta, \textit{A River Sutra} 261. Also see Sukumari Bhattacharji, \textit{The Indian Theogony: Brahma, Visnu, and Siva} (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000) 167: “In present day India, Siva is more frequently worshipped in his phallic form than his iconic. Pebbles smoothed by the Narmada are called \underline{Banalinga}, phallic emblems of Siva. The cult is traced to the \underline{Rig Veda}.”
THE NAMELESS NARRATOR, SIX NARRATIVES, AND MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

The plot is deceptively simple: the Narrator, a retired Indian civil servant, thinks he has escaped life in the city by seeking refuge and spending his twilight years managing a government rest-house overlooking the sacred Narmada. Almost instantly he realises his folly and finds himself encountering life in the raw, more so than he had as a bureaucrat. Strategically located near the sacred sites along the river, the Narmada rest-house represents a confluence of sacred and secular spaces. The inn becomes the crossroads of the lives of the many guests that flow, like Narmada’s own tides and indeterminate geography, in and out of its doors. As the ascetic Professor Shankar points out to the Narrator, “You have chosen the wrong place to flee the world my, friend . . . too many lives converge on these banks.” The ex-civil servant becomes the storyteller as his life collides with those of ascetics, minstrels, tribals, and monks who all have their stories to tell. The six stories, loosely bound together by an active Narrator who performs the function of a sutradhar or a storyteller, are about a young and wealthy diamond merchant who becomes a Jain monk, the murder of an innocent singer with an exceptional musical talent, the seduction of a tea plantation executive by a tribal woman who possesses his spirit, the tale of a courtesan abducted by a bandit and is finally driven to suicide, the story of a musician who cannot come to terms with her physical disfigurement and consequent abandonment by her betrothed, and the tale of an eminent anthropologist who becomes a mendicant of the Naga cult (followers of a tantric band of

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61 Mehta, A River Sutra 254.
62 In the Sanskrit tradition, the sutradhar (sutra: thread; dhar: one who holds), like the chorus in Aeschylean or Sophoclean tragedies, is a narrator of events, a commentator on characters and one who holds the plot together.
Siva worshippers), and subsequently returns to his profane existence after saving a child from being sold into prostitution. The Narrator serves as a link between the sacred and the secular spheres by inhabiting an autonomous cultural space that allows him unhindered access to both spheres. The Narrator mediates a dialogic relationship between writer and reader, within this sacred-and-secular space, as the narrative unfolds through the Narrator’s encounters with the pilgrims. “I am now a vanaprasthi, someone who has retired to the forest to reflect,” declares the Narrator of A River Sutra in the first paragraph of the novel, setting the tone for the sacred to be manifest through him. The Narrator is already spiritually awakened because he meditates, and he internalises the message contained in the sacred stories and ceremonies. In Indian philosophy, this process of internalisation is extremely important in the third stage of life known as vanaprastha or aranyaka. The Narrator, who is at the vanaprastha stage in his life, reminds us that he has become a forest dweller, and that his spiritual practice consists of meditation and symbolic worship rather than participation in temple rituals. “Many are

63 The four stages of life in Indian philosophy apply to those who follow the householder’s path. The first stage of life is bachelorhood called brahmacharya. The second stage is known as grihastha during which one marries, raises a family, develops a career, and attends to household duties. Stage three, vanaprastha or aranyaka begins when one’s hair turns grey, and the children have grown up so they can assume responsibility for the home. At this stage, the householder and his wife retire to the forest. During the final stage sannyasa, one becomes a renunciate, free from worldly obligations.

64 Akka Mahadevi, a twelfth-century nun of the Virasaiva cult from Southern India, left a set of powerful poems about the joy and realisation that comes with renunciation of material goods at the vanaprastha stage in life, where rituals are no longer important, but reflection is:

“Till you’ve learnt knowledge of good and evil
it is
lust’s body,
site of rage,
ambush of greed,
house of passion,
fence of pride,
mask of envy.”
--Tr. Ramanujan, Speaking of Siva (126), verse 104.

and, in another poem:
like myself, quite elderly persons who have completed the first stages of life prescribed by our Hindu scriptures . . . and who have now entered the state of vanaprasthi to seek personal enlightenment.”65 But this is not an end, he also reminds us, but a means to the ultimate stage. The Narrator therefore is constantly straddling both worlds: of vanaprastha, with links to the sacred, and mythical world of the divine; and grihastha, the second stage of life as householder, fraught with temptations of the flesh, since he is the manager of the rest-house and is constantly active in the profane world.

Of the six encounters the one with the most complex interplay between the sacred and the secular is the story of Nitin Bose, a successful young tea plantation manager from Assam. Bose feels a need to “reveal” and thereby vicariously relive and share his trauma, and he requests the rest-house manager to read his diary, thereby enmeshing the Narrator in his story. “You will understand why I must find the shrine. Read my diary,” Bose says. The Narrator reaches out of his personal space to the larger space of Bose (and the other pilgrims).66 The Narrator is sympathetic, though distant, in telling Bose’s story. He reads aloud the private journal of the executive who has been possessed by the spirit of the lover he had abandoned, and engages the reader in a tripartite “agreement.” A relationship is forged between Bose, the reader, and the Narrator who builds a channel where the reader may enter as a flaneur,67 an observer. In this way, all three are enabled

“With peace, patience, forgiving and self-command
Who needs the ultimate posture?
The whole world becomes oneself . . .”
--Tr. Ramanujan, Speaking of Siva (128), verse 120
65 Mehta, A River Sutra 7.
to participate in the sacred ritual in the Narmada’s waters and vicariously “cleanse”
themselves with Bose.

Thus, the Narrator becomes the link between the reader and Bose, as he unravels
the complex tale of seduction and ritualistic possession. Already possessed by the spirit
of his lover, Bose arrives at the distant Narmada rest-house singing in a strange, haunting
voice: “Bring me my oil and my collyrium / Sister, bring me my mirror and vermillion /
Make haste with my flower garland / My lover waits impatient in the bed.” This, the third
story in the sequence of the novel, recounts Bose’s systematic seduction by Rima, an
indigenous woman, a member of a remote tribe whose ancestors were the Nagas, whose
ruling deity is the snake goddess. The tribe is still extant in the northeastern region of
India, and many of its members are migrant workers who frequently find employment in
the tea plantations of Assam. The story traces Bose’s transformation from a disciplined
bachelor and conscientious manager with an empathy for his workers who spends his
spare hours studying Hindu philosophy, to an insensitive, greedy, lustful, petty despot by
day who consumes great quantities of alcohol and gives in to unbridled lust after
sundown with the tealeaf picker Rima. His biggest mistake, however, is abandoning
Rima who has fallen in love with him. Unrequited love and the scorn of a man who
leaves her without an explanation, starts up a cycle of revenge, and the victim, Rima,
turns to her serpent goddess for redressing the pain Bose has inflicted upon her.

Mehta makes effective use of the narrative tool of suggestion in the telling of
Bose’s tale. In his first weeks during the twilight hours at the Assamese tea-estate, Bose
assiduously read the books from his grandfather’s trunk: “I even discovered mythology
dealing with the very area in which my tea estate was situated, legends of a vast
underground civilisation stretching from these hills all the way to the Arabian Sea, peopled by a mysterious race of half-human, half-serpent.”  

He viewed the tales “through the prism of anthropology,” and enjoyed “a world devoted to pleasure and learning, its serenity guarded by hooded serpents with great gems flashing from their hoods.”  

But the executive undergoes a slow transformation after the visit of his colleague Ashok, from the corporate world of Calcutta, who encourages him to “enjoy” his life, suggesting sexual pleasure as a way to combat his solitary existence in the gardens. Subsequently, Bose is haunted by erotic imaginings and gradually his will to self-destruct is almost predicted as his grandfather’s books “offered no escape” from sexual temptation:

Once I pulled the Rig Veda from the bookshelf, hoping to find some philosophical consolation in it, but the passage I read shocked me, so accurately did it describe my loneliness.

‘At first was Death.
That which did mean an utter emptiness.
And emptiness, mark thou, is Hunger’s Self.’

Immediately after reading the Rig Veda, Bose experiences restlessness: “For the first time I was lonely and when I entered my bedroom I felt the massive bed sneering at my unused manhood.” Thus begins his nights of delusion in drunken stupor until one evening he finds the tealeaf-picker in his bed, and surrenders without a fight in the arms of a girl.

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68 Mehta, A River Sutra 114.
69 Mehta, A River Sutra 114. Also see, David Smith, Dance of Siva: Religion, Art and Poetry in South India (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996). Smith’s translation of the Tamil poet-saint Umapati’s composition of the Cidambara Mahatmya, where he describes the “erotic ascetic” Siva sculpting a bracelet of a bejeweled naga (like the one Bose reads about), for his arm: “The snake rushing at Him / a gem blazing on its hood / the god made a bracelet /on His auspiciously marked hand.”
70 Mehta, A River Sutra 117.
from the “Naga world.” In the cold light of day he recalls “. . . her small teeth pierced my skin again and again, like the sudden striking of a snake, and I heard the hissing of her pleasure against my throat.” And when she left his bed, Bose was already asleep and “dreaming I still held a creature half-serpent in my arms, my sated senses pulling me to the underground world of my grandfather’s legends.” Abandoned by Bose, when he was promoted to the tea company’s headquarters in Calcutta, Rima turns vengeful and appropriates Bose’s identity by performing tantric ritual practices and asking a boon from the Naga goddess.

A body of myths from medieval Eastern India plays out with interesting parallels in the story of the possessed tea plantation executive. The Sakti cults, rituals and beliefs pivotal to the idea of the powerful female deities, were especially popular in Bengal and Assam. One of the most enduring of these myths concerns the Serpent Goddess Ma Manasa, which is recorded in a vast body of literature known as the Mangala Kavyas during the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries. This Eastern Indian myth has a mirror

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71 Agehananda Bharati, The Tantric Tradition (New York: Doubleday, 1965) 94-95. Bharati writes: “The Naga deities--represented by snake idols [indigenous deities in Assam and South of the Vindhyas] of various shapes and sizes on a plinth usually at some distance from the shrines of the main (Brahmin) deities, or under specific trees in the village--are chiefly deities of fertility and the life-cycle. They are also installed in the vriksha-vivaha mandapam, i.e the tree marriage platform, a platform erected around two inter-twined trees, which are fairly frequent all over India, which women circumambulate . . . in order to remove sarpa-dosa, the curse of barrenness, a curse incurred by harming a snake--either directly or indirectly.”

72 Philip Rawson, The Art of Tantra, London: Thames & Hudson, 1973). According to Rawson, many sacred ritual artifacts survive as anthropological evidence to show how pervasive and extensive the Naga cult was, and still is, in India, from pre-Aryan centuries. Of the many archaeological pieces, two specific examples in Rawson’s study support the Naga antecedents of Rima--first, the wooden sculpture of a yogini (lesser deities) with serpentine energy manifesting from her yoni (South India, dated 1800); and, second, a chased brass and carved stone emblem depicting a five-hooded serpent enclosing a stone emblem of the original egg-lingam (South India, dated 1900).

73 See, Manasi Das Gupta and Mandakranta Bose, “The Goddess-Woman Nexus in Popular Religious Practice: The Cult of Manasa,” Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India ed. Mandakranta Bose (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000) 148. A popular narrative in medieval Bengali literature during the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries was the mangala kavyas, verse tales celebrating the power and munificence of divine beings. What distinguishes these myths from older ones is that the deities at their centre are all female. In each of these stories, a male figure either scoffs at a goddess, or neglects
image in the Western part of India in the rituals of the Vano tribals of the Vindhya mountains. The mythical tales of Manasa revolve around a male authority figure (for our purposes, Bose, an employer) that scoffs at a goddess or, at the height of his fortune, neglects her. Her vengeance follows and he propitiates the goddess and regains peace of mind. Bose, then, travels thousands of miles to the banks of the Narmada to appease the river goddess who is closely related to the snake goddess, her sister. Bose makes water offerings to the goddess and vindicates himself.

Gita Mehta employs this Naga myth, incorporating both beauty and fear, most effectively in the adivasi (indigenous) woman Rima’s premeditated and systematic strategy of destruction--first seducing, then possessing and, when neglected, attempting to destroy the lover: “Then she seduced me with tribal songs in a language I could not understand so that I heard only the sweetness of the melodies. She told me tales of a great serpent kingdom lying inches beneath the soil.” And: “She spoke to me of charms that gave men the strength of elephants in rut and of magic performed during the eclipse of the moon when a man’s soul could be captured inside the two halves of a coconut.”

This crucial detail, the trapping of the spirit of a human being within two parts of a skull or a coconut (a metaphor for the skull, in tantric rituals) is a familiar one among Eastern Indian mystics and is the very same ritual employed by a vengeful Rima to “possess” the spirit of her neglectful lover Bose. This story internalises two immensely powerful

74 Mehta, A River Sutra 121; See Das Gupta, Obscure Religious Cults 195-196: “All the myths surrounding Nathism are permeated with a spirit of supernaturalism more in the form of display of magical feats and sorcery by the Siddhas (those who have achieved siddha or enlightenment), than by gods and goddesses. In the history of Indian religions, occultism is associated with religious beliefs and practices from the time of the Atharva Veda, and is hence associated with all esoteric religious systems in the Hindu and Buddhist schools. Patanjali, the great propounder of yoga, who dealt primarily with the psychological aspect of yoga, also devoted a full chapter of the yoga sutras to the different kinds of supernatural powers, attributed to Siva himself.”
myths: Saivite esoterism and the Manasa myth of the fatal strike of an angry Snake Goddess. The mythical Saivite angle is important primarily because it addresses the issue of gaining control of other beings or forces through the disciplining of the body or kayasadhana (kaya: body, sadhana: practice). Known in Assam and Bengal as Nathism, it was essentially a yogic cult that aimed to make the body perfect, immutable, and immensely powerful. The ultimate power Isitva, to “subdue, fascinate and bewitch,” was one of eight powers of Lord Siva, the Lord of Yoga.

The power of the occult is a palpable presence in the novel and the hypnotic, serpent-like spell Bose gradually comes under is also effectively demonstrated:

“Swarming like clusters of black bees in the whiteness of her eyes her pupils mesmerised me as her low voice gave substance to the worlds I had dreamed of when reading my grandfather’s books.”75 The narrative pattern in the Manasa snake goddess myth contains conflict, retribution and reconciliation. Manasa has control of snakes and although her actions are snake-like, she is a goddess in human form.76

In A River Sutra, Mehta strategically exploits an obscure connection between two Hindu myths and coalesces them into one connective narrative. Doing so extends the geographical and historical scope of the work. Thus the two myths—one centred around the river goddess Narmada, and the other around the snake or Naga goddess Ma

75 Mehta, A River Sutra 121.
76 Edward C. Dimock, “The Goddess of Snakes in Medieval Bengali Literature,” The Sound of Silent Guns and Other Essays (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1989). According to Dimock: “Manasa is believed to have been born from the erotic imaginings of Siva and his seed fell on a lotus leaf and seeped into the underworld kingdom of Nagas, or serpents, where it took the shape of a girl, named Manasa, since her origin was in Siva’s mind. Also see, Tarfadar, Montazur Rahman, Husain Shahi Bengal 1494-1538 A.D (DaCCA: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1965). Tarafdar points out that in some versions Siva is Manasa’s mentor and imparts to her the mysterious powers of life and death.
Manasa—77 are employed to transmit the Hindu *paap* and *prayaschitta*, or sin and retribution, concept in a mythic framework. Since Bose has offended the snake goddess, he must propitiate her and repent, but since the snake goddess and the river goddess are sisters78 (being formed by the same father Siva, the Narmada from his perspiration, and Manasa from his imaginary eroticism, *manas*), Bose is allowed the flexibility to carry out his penance in the waters of the Narmada River. This is where the novel exhibits a unique treatment of myth, where the sacred (the myth) is imported to the secular sphere to drive the narrative. Thus, the novel uses the link between the River Narmada and the *Nagas* to underscore a bond between indigenous tribes who shared similar ritual practices, although they might live in far-flung corners of a vast subcontinent. Saved from aggressive Aryan forays and annihilation by the powerful waters of the River Narmada, the grateful Vano tribals conferred on the Narmada the gift of curing snakebite, as did their Assamese cousins, in Kamakhya.79 The narrator’s oblique reference very early in the novel, to this healing quality of the river is suggestive:

I have often heard pilgrims who have never met a tribal reciting the same invocation [one hears from the tribals]:

‘Salutation in the morning and at night

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77 See, Eva Rudy Jansen, comp, *The Book of Hindu Imagery* (Diever, Holland: Binkey Kok, 1993). “The Naga, in Hindu mythology, is the symbol of the eternal cycle of time and immortality; in Southern Indian states it is also a symbol of fertility.”

78 John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History, and Literature* (New Delhi: Oriental, 1973). Dowson writes that the *nagas* are said to be semi-divine beings, having a human face with the tail of a serpent, and are the peoples of the underworld, where they reign in great splendour. Their dominion, when taken by the *gandharvas* (assistants to the gods), was recovered by their sister Narmada, the river. Their women were handsome and inter-married with men, as seen in Arjuna’s union with Ulupi in *The Mahabharata*.

79 Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* 86-87: Kamakhya is considered a *Sakta pitha*, a place of pilgrimage where one of the limbs or body parts of Siva’s wife Sati are believed to have fallen, after Siva had cut the dead body of Sati in his dance of destruction, *tandava nritya*. The places where pieces of Sati’s body fell are said to have become holy seats or resorts of the great goddess. Also see, D.C. Sircar, “The Sakta Pithas,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 14.1 (1948): 58: Kamakhya is where Sati’s (The Great Goddess’) *yoni*, the female organ of regeneration, had fallen.
to thee, O Narmada!

Defend me from the serpent’s poison.

The Narrator sets the tone for Bose’s tale of repentance early in the novel: “Indeed the Vano village deity is a stone image of a half-woman with the full breasts of a fertility symbol . . . ” The constant overlap of sacred and secular space allows the author to use myth. The Narrator sets the parameters for the narrative, locating the river goddess at the centre of his design:

. . . the bungalow’s proximity to the Narmada River was its particular attraction. Worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva, the river is among our holiest pilgrimage sites. During my tours of the area I had been further intrigued to discover that the criminal offence of attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself in the waters of the Narmada.

For the Narrator (who lives in a small cottage, adjoining the rest-house, and whose gardens lead to a stone terrace overlooking the Narmada, which flows seven hundred feet below and is a mile wide at that point), “the river has become the sole object of my reflections.” But the river also has an erotic imaginary in the Narrator’s psyche as we discover, running parallel to the tale of the young executive. The vanaprasthi, who mistakenly thinks he has escaped the wheel of desire by retiring to a sacred site, finds himself standing in the borderless crosscurrents of the sacred and the secular as he meditates on the Narmada. Watching the river in predawn darkness, the Narrator conceptualises her as a woman “indolently stretching her limbs as she oiled herself with

80 Mehta, A River Sutra 6.
81 Mehta, A River Sutra 6.
82 Mehta, A River Sutra 2.
scented oils, her long black hair loosened, her eyes outlined in collyrium."\(^{83}\) As he witnesses dawn rise and the waters slowly redden, he perceives the river “as a woman painting her palms and the soles of her feet with vermilion as she prepared to meet her lover.”\(^{84}\) By his own admission, as he watches the beauty of the waterfalls on the river refracting the first rays of the sun, “the legends of the Narmada merged with Nitin Bose’s story as I struggled to understand the power of the woman who had enchanted him.”\(^{85}\)

Not only is the solution to the conundrum of kama and tyaga, desire and renunciation, embedded in the myth of the Narmada, so too is the vindication of Bose’s transgression. We are once again reminded of Theweleit’s critique of the source of male desire and its error in wanting to contain the feminine, as we read the Narrator’s remarks about Nitin Bose’s naivete to first want to own the “living goddess” Rima, and then abandon her completely once his lust is satiated. Ahead of Nitin Bose’s arrival at the rest-house, the Narrator wonders whether Bose was aware of the powers of the goddess:

"Did he know the goddess who had incinerated even the Great Ascetic in the fires of longing, the Goddess whose power had been acknowledged by the ancient sages with such fearful names as the Terrible One, the Implacable Mother, the Dark Lady, the Destroyer of Time, the Everlasting Dream--did he know the goddess had been worshipped by the tribal inhabitants of these jungles for thousands of years?"

"... Would a brilliant mind be enough to protect the young man from the dark forces of the jungle, from the tribal worship of that Desire which even their

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\(^{83}\) Mehta, A River Sutra 133.
\(^{84}\) Mehta, A River Sutra 133.
\(^{85}\) Mehta, A River Sutra 133.
The conquerors had acknowledged to be invincible, describing it as the first-born seed of the mind.\textsuperscript{86}

The Narmada ultimately vindicates Bose of his crime, transforming an urbane alcoholic into a penitent pilgrim. Bose’s complete surrender to the river goddess and his devotion in carrying out the rituals (which include the fashioning of a clay image of the river goddess and its subsequent immersion in the waters of the Narmada, as a signifier of sins drowned), connect two interrelated spaces--of myth and its enactment in daily life. One of the most memorable moments in the story is Bose’s embrace of the clay image of the goddess before immersing it in the Narmada. By virtue of the effortless alignment of subject (Bose), object (the reader), and link (the Narrator), the reader is enabled to experience the sublime through the simple act of worship. No Brahmin priest is needed here to endorse the offerings:

\ldots he [Bose] put his arms around the idol, lifting it from the ground. Holding the idol he walked into the water. The tribals waded in behind him, their hands raised, their faces turned to the West \ldots Nitin Bose immersed the idol in the river, chanting.

‘Salutations in the morning and at night to thee, O Narmada.

Defend me from the serpent’s poison.’

The mud idol began to disintegrate in the current and we watched fragments of the image being swept downstream--a broken arm, a breast, torn garlands

\textsuperscript{86} Mehta, \textit{A River Sutra} 92.
spinning in the water, as they were carried towards the clay lamps floating in the
darkness at the river’s bend.\textsuperscript{87}

At the end of the executive’s story there is a cusp of a beginning and an end, a sense of
lost innocence that carries within it an unuttered glimmer of hope. There is still a tension
between choice and compulsion at the end of Bose’s story, and we are left with
ambivalence where we might have expected concrete answers. Because myth eludes a
pegging-down-to-reality and constantly evolves, Bose’s story is made universal. Even
without the foregrounding of the Hindu pantheon of Manasa, Narmada, and Siva, the
archetype of sin and transgression appeals to humanity as a whole, and is not culture
specific.

**DAMMING WOMEN: CONTAINING THE UNCONTAINABLE**

Projecting the ancient on to the contemporary, Mehta touches upon the
contentious issue of ecology as it affects postcolonial India of the present. The novel’s
affirmations of nurture by Nature, in the geo-body of the goddess Narmada, underscore
the importance of this river as a sustainer and provider of life, where:

- Turtles and river dolphins find refuge in your
  waters.
- Alighting herons play upon your tranquil surface.
- Fish and crocodiles are gathered in your embrace.\textsuperscript{88}

*A River Sutra* augments the relationship between ecology and literature by affirming the
intricate and abiding connectivity between different religions, communities, and cultures

\textsuperscript{87} Mehta, *A River Sutra* 138-139.
\textsuperscript{88} Mehta, *A River Sutra* 242.
that thrive within the “sacred geography” of the Narmada. The stories affirm an ancient bond between nature and culture, intuitive knowledge and technology, love of life and devotion to a creative force.

Mehta’s views converge with those of the ecocriticism movement: “Literature does not float above a material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely global system in which energy, matter and ideas interact.”\(^9\) The Jain monk’s sermon to the Narrator—that men long to be free, but many “die before they learn the desire for freedom lies deep within them, like a dammed river waiting to be released”\(^9\) --contains important environmental lessons for the Indian government’s project to build a series of dams across the Narmada River, which has caused police brutality against indigenous women, and men, of the Narmada River Valley. In this battle scheduled caste and scheduled tribes like the Bhils and the Gonds are resisting the government and its bureaucracy that intends to implement the Sardar Sarovar Dam project. A local cry of dissent from the project has galvanised global civil society against the Indian government’s project.

Feminine acts of subversion manifest in the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Agitation) by Indian women activists such as the convener of the National Alliance of People’s Movements Medha Patkar, the novelist Arundhati Roy, and a million women from the villages that will lose their land, which will be flooded by the project, have once again invoked the myth of origin of this river goddess herself, who refused to be dominated by patriarchy. According to the Government of Gujarat the project to harness the waters of the Narmada for irrigation, power generation, and

\(^90\) Mehta, A River Sutra 29.
drinking aims to “permanently solve the water problem of Gujarat.” A Gujarat
government press release dated 28 January 1992 claimed the government of Gujarat had
“designed a truly enlightened package for dam-oustees,” and that “opposition to the
project was limited to some misguided environmentalists.”\footnote{Amrita Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995) 34-35.}

The very act of attempting to dam the River Narmada is read as a metaphor by
millions of Indians as an act of “violence and rape” on the geo-body of the river.\footnote{Arundhati Roy, in a personal communication with the author, Feb. 1998.} In a
sharp criticism of the Sardar Sarovar Project, Roy argued that more than 57 percent of the
displaced are tribal people, and if Dalits are included the number of people displaced will
grow to 60 percent, a number that “becomes obscene.” Roy further argues:

If you consider that tribal people account for only eight percent, and Dalits fifteen
percent, of India's population, it opens up a whole other dimension to the story.
The ethnic ‘otherness’ of their victims takes some of the pressure off the Nation
Builders. It's like having an expense account. Someone else pays the bills. People
from another country. Another world. India's poorest people are subsidising the
lifestyles of her richest.\footnote{Arundhati Roy, Public Power in the Age of Empire (New York: Seven Stories, 2004) 39.}

There is a great deal of evidence on female resistance to the project, for which they have
faced police violence. Scholar Amita Baviskar has recorded how a tribal woman named
Binda from Anjanvara village attended meetings of the Narmada Sangharsh Yatra (the
accompanied by forty gun-wielding policemen on horseback. The surveyors brought
measuring tapes, and when the villagers saw what they were doing they snatched away
their measuring tapes. For this, the police beat them mercilessly. Binda, too was hit with lathis (bamboo cane) on her head and neck. Her niece Sevanti fell down and policemen trampled over her body. More women from the village faced the wrath of police again in January 1993.

Scholar Jyoti Grewal argues that the changing face of feminism in India “includes the activism of female academics challenging the patriarchal structures at the grassroots level as well as among the personnel of the institutions perpetuating such structures.” Grewal argues that the Narmada Bachao Andolan began in the mid-1908s as a challenge to the Indian government’s decision to build the Sardar Sarovar Dam and other smaller dams across the river. The NBA has fought for the hundreds of thousands who are likely to be displaced by the construction of the dams.

**A River Sutra** leaves us contemplating the plight of the multicultural panoply of communities, local gods and spirits who are on the brink of displacement, dislocation and even death with the impending threat of a flood from the dam: it might appear that the very destiny of the divine goddess is uncertain. Thus this novel speaks volubly to the contemporary problem of growing corporate greed and consumerism that indicates a fast-vanishing sustainable and developed past. The novel reflects fault lines and struggles of a profane life. And in its own representation of contradictory forces that constitute myth, it affords us a passage through the current battle between the state and the people. The only abiding truth the novel reveals is that human beings, in all their imperfection, are the bridge between the sacred and the profane, like the river herself.

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94 Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River* 111.
“You must be careful,” Kuttappen said. “This river of ours--she isn’t always what
she pretends to be.”

“What does she pretend to be?” Rahel asked.

“Oh…a little old church-going ammooma, quiet and clean…idi appams for
breakfast, kanji and meen for lunch. Minding her own business. Not looking right
or left.”

. . . “Really a wild thing …I can hear her at night--rushing past in the moonlight,
always in a hurry. You must be careful of her.”¹


Indeed the whole effort at replacing the real father by a superior one is only an
expression of the child’s longing for the happy, vanished days when his father
seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and mother the dearest and
loveliest of women. He is turning away from the father whom he knows to-day to
the father in whom he believed in the earlier years of his childhood; and his

¹ Roy, The God of Small Things 210-211.
phantasy is no more than the expression of a regret that those happy days have gone. . .

-- Sigmund Freud, “Family Romances.”

This chapter explores three subversive strategies Arundhati Roy employs in The God of Small Things, set in the mythic waterscape of the ferocious River Meenachil, the abode of the river goddess Meenakshi. The first destabilises the purity of language; the second dismantles a highly organised caste structure in a neocolonial state; and the third resurrects the subtle though pervasive presence of the myth of the river goddess Meenachil as a warrior by conflating her with the resistance to conformity exhibited by Ammu, the main character of the novel and mother of the twins, Rahel and Estha. The steely resolve and quiet activism of Ammu, in selecting Paravan Velutha as a surrogate father for her children, is considered a direct affront by a cruel and nihilistic patriarchy. In her myth of origin, Meenakshi or Meenachil Devi’s eyes are fabled to bring life to the unborn. There is also a Christian myth embedded in the fabric of this novel, what Chelva

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3 The River Meenachil, also known as Kavanar, originates at Vagamon in the Western Ghats of Kerala, flows westward through Erattupetta, Palai, Kidangoor, Ettumanoor and Kottayam, in the vicinity of which Roy’s novel is located. Its length is about eighty-seven kilometres. Near Kottayam it splits into a number of tributaries before emptying into the Vembanad Lake. In the ancient times, this region was under the control of chieftains called Meenachil Karthas. They were devotees of Goddess Meenakshi, the presiding deity of Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple in Madurai. It is believed that they had built a temple for the goddess. The place therefore came to be known as Meenachil, meaning ‘the abode of Meenakshi’; the two are interchangeable.
4 The invocation Meenakshi Pancha Ratnam (five jewels of Meenakshi) is a hymn to the goddess Meenakshi in her warrior form and is related to the text of Lalita Sahasranama. There are several other great hymns to the goddess composed in the later centuries by many saints and scholars including the famous Neelakanta Dikshitur, which invoke her armed manifestation in the battlefield, much like the generic Devi, or Sakti, in her form as Mahisasuramardini, as explained in Chapter One of this work.
Kanaganayakam refers to as the “much broader framework of myth,” in his important critique of Roy’s work, which will be discussed later in this chapter.⁵

Although the myth of the Meenachil is not at the front and centre of her novel, as are the myths of the Ganga and the Narmada in The Hungry Tide and A River Sutra, the warrior goddess who is also the river goddess Meenachil is subliminally present in the text as a whimsical, powerful, and fluid presence. To force the mythical paradigm explicitly at every point in my explication in this chapter would endanger the significantly different approach to the divine feminine as Roy envisages her. Moreover, Roy’s keen interest in the genres of epics and myths, and the manner in which they were selectively presented by the Indian patriarchy to the Indian populace at various historical moments to serve the vested interest of patriarchy, is revealed throughout the work in a subtle and implicit manner. And Roy’s greatest point of departure from Ghosh and Mehta, in her representation of the river goddess, is how she conflates Ammu and the Meenachil by a biological bond: “The book is more about biology, than about history,” she has said.⁶

The river goddess Meenachil is Siva’s consort and is intimately connected to him like the other two goddesses encountered in the earlier chapters--Ganga (Siva’s second consort) in Chapter One, and Narmada (Siva’s daughter) in Chapter Two. So the geographical backdrop against which the narrative unfolds is buttressed by the phallocentric myth of Siva. A Tamil poem depicts the goddess Meenakshi as a girl washing crockery and pots (which consist of all the worlds). This is a daily task because

⁶ Arundhati Roy, Interview with Urvashi Butalia, Outlook India, 9 Apr. 1997, 72.
her husband Siva repeatedly messes up the universe, which Meenakshi must once more sort out and clean.

    Shiva wanders through the courtyard of space
    destroying your work again and again,
    and then comes before you dancing.
    You never get angry.
    Every day, you just pick up the vessels.⁷

In thirty-one words, goddess Meenakshi becomes a global icon for all who deal with the “impossible”—male authority or patriarchy that is at once demanding and irrational.

Ammu, like goddess Meenakshi, runs a lifelong hurdle race, the trajectory of which is shaped by three men in her life—her father, her brother, and her husband—each of whom betray her repeatedly in their role as protectors, and eventually become the enemies she must fight in order to survive. Thus, though she is a bright student and an attractive and well-read girl, she is not allowed to go to college; at eighteen she attempts to leave the abusive life that has become a habit with her father who beats her mother unconscious daily. Ammu runs away in desperation and marries a dipsomaniac who is ready to prostitute her, trade her off to his tea-estate boss to keep his job. In the early days of Ammu’s marriage, when the tea-estate manager Hollick offers to trade sexual favours with Ammu in exchange for keeping her husband employed, she refuses. When her husband beats her for refusing Hollick’s offer Ammu realises she must leave one sort of patriarchy for another. Twice disgraced, first as a potential prostitute for Hollick and then

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as a divorcee, she is “doubly colonised. By male authority.” She returns to Ayemenem, unwelcome, as a “divorcee” (“die-vorcee,” pun intended). Ammu helps in the pickle factory but she is unacknowledged even by her Oxford-educated brother Chacko. Women have no property rights in Syrian Christian families in Kerala and Ammu’s fate is sealed. (Although Ammu was denied her property rights in Kerala, the Nairs, a matriarchal community in this state, allows women to inherit property). Ammu threatens the fabric of an unforgiving society that demands complete subjugation to its conventions of caste and gender when she falls in love with Velutha, the untouchable, and is once again confronted with being perceived as a veshya, or prostitute, by none other than the police inspector. Consequently, she is kicked out of her “home,” which was never her home in the first place. And, finally, she is not even allowed a church funeral, but is dragged bumping along in a jalopy to the crematorium.

Located in the watery landscape of Kerala, and chronologically divided between the 1960s and the 1990s, Roy charts her plotline in The God of Small Things along a fine trajectory that follows a broader historical frame. I posit that by highlighting the embedded historical irony of Kerala’s identity as the Indian state with the highest rate of literacy, a Communist state (where gender equality is presumed to be a given) and a largely Christian one (where caste barriers are supposed to be obliterated by massive conversions of the lower castes and higher ones by the Syrian Christian Church), the author systematically deconstructs the myths of an egalitarian society. This chapter interrogates the explicit and implicit connections between deliberate linguistic pollution

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and the deconstruction of a paradigmatic and highly stratified cultural geography in the novel’s postcolonial “linguascape.”9 Furthermore, it examines the contagion of caste by female intervention to dislodge patriarchal stratifications, eventually resulting in death. However, as Victor Li argues, death becomes a transformational force, bestowing these marginalised victims subjecthood, dignity, and a certain kind of glory they never received during their lifetime.10

The trauma of subaltern dispossession takes on an ineluctable significance for India’s southern Marxist state that has the highest literacy rate, and carries the burden of a vexed colonial history of religious conversions to Christianity and deeply embedded social hierarchies of caste. Writers such as Roy, who venture into this territory both as storyteller and activist, must negotiate a form of cross-cultural interaction that is burdened with a highly charged symbolism—in this case the River Meenachil is the transformative trope that evolves into a dangerous force, killing the child Sophie Mol, much like the goddess Ganga, who in her turbulent manifestation as the destructive Matla, kills Fokir in The Hungry Tide.

First though, before embarking on an exploration of the subversions of either language or caste, it is crucial to establish the River Meenachil’s power as an unstable space, as intimated by Velutha’s brother Kuttappen11—where the twins have some of the

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9 I argue that with, what I have termed, “linguascape” (a uniquely wrought language landscape), Roy has exploded the internalised imaginaries of her characters to speak in an encoded language of their own.


11 See, Roy, The God of Small Things 210. [Kuttappen is talking to Estha and Rahel]: “You must be careful,” Kuttappen said. “This river of ours--she isn’t always what she pretends to be.”
happiest experiences of their childhood and their most horrific one with Sophie Mol’s drowning. I find Michel Foucault’s idea of heterotopia most useful here:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places--places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society--which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience . . . As a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live, this description could be called heterotopology.\textsuperscript{12}

The metaphor of the boat on the river, and the boatman’s song, sung by Estha and Rahel at Velutha’s home (thaiy thaiy thaka thaiy thaiy thome),\textsuperscript{13} when they persuade him to mend the leaking vessel which they find discarded on the banks of the Meenachil, also

\textsuperscript{12} Foucault, “Des Espace Autres.”
\textsuperscript{13} The song the children sing when they row their boat on the river. Roy, The God of Small Things, 211.
finds resonance in Foucault’s theory of the ship or a maritime vessel being a heterotopic space.\textsuperscript{14} There can be little doubt about the River Meenachil’s role in this novel:

Three children on the riverbank. A pair of twins and another, whose mauve corduroy pinafore said \textit{Holiday!} In a tilting, happy font.

Wet leaves in the trees shimmered like beaten metal. Dense clumps of yellow bamboo drooped into the river as though grieving in advance for what they knew was going to happen. The river itself was dark and quiet. An absence rather than a presence, betraying no sign of how high and strong it really was…

There was no storm-music. No whirlpool spun up from the inky depths of the meenachal. No shark supervised the tragedy. Just a quiet handing-over ceremony.

A boat spilling its cargo. A river accepting the offering.\textsuperscript{15}

Several South Asian writers have turned to the idea of the boat as a contested space, as seen in Michael Ondaatje’s representation of heterotopia on the ship Ornasay, in \textit{Anil’s Ghost} (2000), where Anil and Sarath attempt a forensic patchwork to put together the real identity of Sailor; in Salman Rushdie’s \textit{The Moor’s Last Sigh}, where the boat becomes an empowering space for gay sexual expression; or more recently in Amitav Ghosh’s description of the Ibis, in \textit{Sea of Poppies} (2008). In environmental studies heterotopia is defined as “an abnormal space,” and Roy uses the boat as a heterotopic device: It was a boat: “a tiny wooden vallom.” And as becomes evident with the unfolding of the

\textsuperscript{14} Foucault, “Des Espace Autres,” “... the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development (I have not been speaking of that today), but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence.”

\textsuperscript{15} Roy, \textit{The God of Small Things} 275, 277.
narrative, it was the vehicle of love that Ammu used to cross the river to meet Velutha, for her nocturnal trysts. But it was also the boat that toppled over with a boisterous and crazed Meenachil out on a mission to exact a penalty, killing little Sophie Mol that fateful night: “Grey green. With fish in it. The sky and the trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it.” ¹⁶ The idea of the river goddess Meenachil being a whimsical divine of many moods, finds nimble description in the way Roy makes her a constantly present entity in the lives of the twins, and everyone else who lives in or visits the Ayemenem home. Thus, “the first third of the river” with the thirteen steps under the surface was “their friend, with the afternoon weed and the different kinds of fish.” Here, their uncle had taught them to swim and the twins had “discovered the “disconnected delights of underwater farting.” Here, they had also learned how to fish, to thread coiling purple earthworms onto hooks on the fishing rods that Velutha made from slender culms of yellow bamboo.” However, they were aware that the “second third was where the Really Deep began.” They learned that here the “current was swift and certain,” and when the tide was in, the backwaters pushed with great force. The last third was shallow again and oozed mud, and though “the twins could swim like seals,” they extended the Meenachil “the deference it deserved.” Unfortunately, for Sophie Mol, who did not know how to swim, the Meenachil dealt the fatal blow. Velutha’s discovery of her little wrinkled body hammers home the instability and whimsy of the river goddess:

Something bobs past in the water and the colours catch his eye. Mauve. Red-brown. Beach sand. It moves with the current, swiftly towards the sea . . . It’s a wrinkled mermaid. A mer-child. A mere mer-child . . . He pulls her out of the

water into his boat. He puts his thin cotton towel under her, she lies at the bottom of his boat with his silver haul of small fish. He rows home . . . thinking how wrong it is for a fisherman to believe that he knows his river well. *No one* knows the Meenachal. No one knows what it may snatch or suddenly yield. Or when. That is what makes fishermen pray.  

**SUBVERTING LANGUAGE: POLLUTION AND (MIS) USE OF ENGLISH**

Lesson Number One:

*Blood barely shows on a Black Man* (Dum dum)

And

Lesson Number Two:

*It smells, though.*

*Sicksweet.*

*Like old roses on a breeze.* (Dum dum)  

The intent of this chapter is to investigate how Roy’s narrative strikes back by destabilising established modes of expression. Roy, like other postcolonial writers, employs a battery of linguistic weapons to subvert adult (and colonial) attempts at confinement and subjugation in order to reclaim indigenous identity and establish a unique voice for “Indian-English.”  

Their arsenal includes: the perpetual re-structuring of the English language to reflect a specific decolonised South Asian context; the manipulation of phrases, the coinage and creation of words, and overt and covert

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authorial efforts at “reconstructing reality through reinventing the English language;”
“rewriting truth by viewing it through the child’s mind;” and the deployment of sound as dissonance and silence to convey resistance to authority.20 Thus, I will argue that the attempt to defend the strict language constraints of English, and curb any creativity in its usage is mirrored in the attempt to “contain” female agency, especially pervasive in the treatment of Ammu. The complex nexus between language and identity will form the focus of this part of the exploration, and I draw on J. Edward Chamberlin, Baneth-Nouailhetas, Christine Vogt-William, and Evelyn Nien-ming Ch’ien to inform my analysis. The victims of tragedy--Velutha (by his inability to speak English) and the twins Estha and Rahel (by creatively reinventing spoken and written English)--suffer immeasurable loss, but they also assert their agency by standing up to institutional power. The twins register their refusal to accept a colonised identity by using Malayalam and English, as well as fragmented language, incorrect spellings, and constantly break the rules of grammar and syntax. The children gain identity and power by blurring the boundaries between purity and hybridity, chaos and discipline, feeling and form through their deliberate act of failing to speak, write, and “pre-NUN-ce” the “pure English” that Baby Kochamma and Uncle Chacko (with their Convent-learned and Oxford English) insist the children speak in the Ayemenem home. The twins adopt a strategy in which

20 Mukherjee, The Perishable Empire 12. Mukherjee defines Indian writing in English as “a body of writing that has gained international visibility post-Empire. The choice of English, although it inevitably affects the style and form of the work, is in no sense a bar to this work being profoundly Indian in concern and potentially as rich a means of reproducing Indian society and thought. This is attested by the proliferation of other Postcolonial literatures--an Australian literature, a Canadian literature, a West Indian literature, a South African literature--all written in English, but all different from each other . . . Indo-Anglian literature can be just as separate an entity within its own Indian context.”
thought is defamiliarised and language transformed, much in the way that the multilingual Roy communicates on a daily basis. Roy has said:

There are more people in India that speak English than there are in England. And the only common language that we have throughout India is English. And it’s odd that English is a language that, for somebody like me, is a choice that is made for me before I am old enough to choose. It is the only language that you can speak if you want to get a good job or if you want to go to a university. All the big newspapers are in English. And then every one of us will speak at least two or three--I speak three--languages. And when we communicate--let’s say I am with a group of friends--our conversation is completely anarchic because it’s in any language that you choose.\(^{21}\)

Baneth-Nouailhetas argues that the children’s account of the events in which they are captive performers or witnesses reveals the inadequacy of the English language to express reality accurately. For instance, Rahel very quickly sees through the cruelty of the ‘old’ bellboy at Hotel Sea Queen: “The bellboy who took them up wasn’t a bellboy and hadn’t a bell,” she observes.\(^{22}\) The twins also put up resistance by singing the Malayalam boat song which is peppered with scatological humour as a form of subversion. Christine Vogt-William suggests this is their active resistance to the demands of authority figures such as Baby Kochamma and Uncle Chacko, who expect them to

\(^{21}\) Arundhati Roy, quoted at website.lineone.net/~jon.simmons/roy/tgost4.htm
speak only the “Queen’s English.”

The twins, who exhibit an extraordinary knowledge of English literature and an impressive fluidity with, and command of, the English language (because of their mother Ammu’s early induction into the world of books) are able to read everything “backwards” (‘ehT serutnevA fo eisuS lerriuqS’--The Adventures of Susie Squirrel,\(^\text{24}\) and threaten the smug mediocrity of their teacher Miss Mitten and their Aunt Baby Kochamma). Consequently, they are made to write, “In future we will not read backwards” one hundred times. They are not allowed to speak their mother tongue Malayalam, and if they are heard conversing in any language other than “pure English” they are made to write innumerable times, “I will always speak in English.”\(^\text{25}\) The clash between authority and rebellion continues through the narrative. Estha is severely punished for writing, “I Hate Miss Mitten and I Think Her gnickers are TORN,”\(^\text{26}\) and the twins find some comic relief when they hear that Miss Mitten was killed by a milk van in Hobart, across the road from the cricket oval--“to the twins there was hidden justice in the fact that the milk van had been reversing.”\(^\text{27}\) Baneth-Nouailhetas also points out that although it is almost impossible to record every manifestation of linguistic rebellion by the twins in the novel, there are some unforgettable instances where their attraction for palindromes and love of puns signal “cultural hybridity, the novel’s status as a postcolonial text, and its poetic and ideological


\(^{24}\) Roy, The God of Small Things 60.

\(^{25}\) Ibid, 36.

\(^{26}\) Ibid, 156.

\(^{27}\) Ibid, 60.
impact." In her quirky and insightful assessment of the “musicality” in *The God of Small Things* Cynthia vanden Driesen invokes Helene Cixous’s idea of *écriture féminine*, which challenges and obstructs the binary constructs of patriarchal narratives that are traditionally linear. Gesturing towards the dazzling counterpoints in the novel’s linguistically inventive writing, vanden Driesen applauds Roy’s use of repeated motifs, flowing images, and experimentation with lexical anarchy. Evelyn Nien-ming Ch’ien in *Weird Englishes* asks: “Where does this resistance to orthodox language begin?” In her persuasive analysis of Roy’s linguistic subversion in *The God of Small Things*, Ch’ien points out that language like Roy’s is “making a way.” She argues that in the case of writers like Roy, “we want to hear these languages, allow them to grow, because they are the languages of negotiation that authentically represent people looking for a way.” She posits that language, in its wake of carving out a way, also makes a way *out*: “orthodox language is thrown into question as a communicative tool for those populations who have been colonized.” Further, “anarchic English,” aside from being transgressive as a linguistic strategy, is also a tool in the hands of writers to register objection to conditions of existence of those who are colonised. And thus by interrogating the design of the coloniser’s language Roy is also interrogating the designers. This is not unlike how Tee and Tante and the other children, who are forced to conform in *Crick Crack, Monkey*, “upset” the purity and structure of English. When they are made to recite The Lord’s Prayer under the hawk-eye of Mrs. Hinds, they “vernacularise” it to establish a kind of self-assertion:

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Our father (*which was plain enough*)

witchartin

heaven

HALLE

Owedbethyname

THY

Kingdumkum

THY

Willbedunnunnert

Azitizeyn . . .

Postcolonial poets from the West Indies like Lorna Goodison, John Agard, Derek Walcott, and Edward Kamau Brathwaite to name a few; postcolonial writers from Africa and South Asia such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and Raja Rao as well as Rienzi Crusz and Amitav Ghosh; and a writer like David Malouf from Australia, have often mocked the colonisers’ need to assert their power through “purity” of language. In the chapter titled “Kochu Thomban” (Small Tusker) Roy establishes the importance of dialect and local language as an effective weapon against the “purity” of upper class English mandated for the children’s education. Her “misuse” of the tongue of the colonial masters is akin to Kamau Brathwaite’s statement: “it was in language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master, and it was in his (mis)-use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled.”

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colonisation on the Caribbean people, J. Edward Chamberlin argues that the slave rebelled most effectively against his master by his (mis-)use of the English language. “This ‘misuse’ is of course a matter of perspective, like the misuse of freedom by blacks who demanded racial equality and political power,” Chamberlin explains, adding that the “story of contemporary West Indian poetry is the story of a better perspective and of more power,” and that “the English language no longer belongs to the English, just as West Indian blacks no longer belong to their white masters.”32 The more Roy employs local speech, the more she calls into question the artifice of narrative, and as she textures the written dialect with the history of the rich oral and gestural tradition of the classical Kathakali dance performance of the epic Mahabharata, the pre-colonial, glorious past and the fractured, destabilised, postcolonial present fuse seamlessly into a single powerful telling.

The language that signifies death in The God of Small Things is inextricably linked to the primary focus of this study--the subversion of language in order to establish identity. It may be useful to recount what Raja Rao, a pioneering Indian writer in English, had to say about the formidable challenge of employing English to convey a non-English ethos:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word “alien” yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up--like Sanskrit or Persian was before-

32 Chamberlin, Come Back to Me My Language 67.
but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians.  

This section concerns itself with a variety of defamiliarising linguistic strategies Roy employs to open up the child’s world in the novel with a view to establishing linguistic disruption and dissonance. On one level, language emerges as a means of enforcing compliance with, or adherence to, a particular set of rules, socially agreed upon notions, values or norms, and is despotic by nature (as evinced in the physical expulsion of Rahel from Nazareth Convent when she was blacklisted for a prank). Language also becomes the focus of symbolic resistance in the manner the word “depravity” informs the first chapter of Roy’s novel and sets the tone for the entire narrative: 

At assembly the next morning she was made to look up *depravity* in the Oxford Dictionary and read aloud its meaning. “The quality or condition of being depraved or corrupt,” Rahel read, with a row of stern-mouthed runs seated behind her and a sea of sniggering schoolgirl faces in front. “Perverted quality: Moral perversion; The innate corruption of human nature due to original sin; Both the elect and non-elect come into the world in a state of total d. and alienation from God, and can, of themselves do nothing but sin. J. H Blunt.” Six months later . . . she was accused (quite rightly) of hiding behind doors and deliberately colliding with her seniors. When she was questioned by the Principal about her behaviour (cajoled, caned, starved), she eventually admitted that she had done it to find out whether breasts hurt. In that Christian institution breasts

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were not acknowledged. They weren’t supposed to exist, and if they didn’t could they hurt?³⁴

Passages like the above in *The God of Small Things* rigorously expose the depravity in those very depraved institutions societies continue to hold sacrosanct. In colonised states, convent schools were, until the last century (and, in some cases, continue to be) bastions of social and spiritual order. Here rules and conventions are located, disseminated, and foisted upon helpless victims systematically and even ruthlessly as in the case of a traumatised child like Rahel. Instead of drawing into their fold the lost, the challenged, and the ostracised, as institutions like convents and churches are meant to do, they become perpetrators of policies aimed at further dislocating and isolating children from their families and indigenous society. The word depravity, which resonates with enforcement of authority and unforgiving judgment, is first used by the Nazareth Convent to locate the errant Rahel. Roy, then, subverts the word, and uses it to mock the very agency that labels Rahel in the first place. A reconfiguration of the word turns the pointed finger to the despot itself (the Convent, a trope for organised religion and colonial power), lending a sense of empowerment and agency to the child Rahel. By blurring the binaries of offender and offended, language problematises the issue of subjugation and control. Breached borders and unruly creatures abound in Roy’s novel. The very name of the Ayemenem family business, Paradise Pickles and Preserves, for instance, seems to fall between the cracks:

> It lay between the house and the river. They used to make pickles, squashes, jams, curry powders and canned pineapples. And banana jam (illegally) after the FPO

(Food Products Organization) banned it because according to their specification it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said. As per their books.\(^{35}\) The subversion continues even as the metaphor of the mixed preserves enters the lives of the “transgressors,” Ammu, Rahel, and Estha:

Perhaps Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors. But it wasn’t just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly.\(^{36}\)

By transposing the microcosm of the unclassifiable jam-jelly problem on to the macrocosm of the ambiguous lives of the Ayemenem householders, the narrative seeks to resist any attempt by a stratified culture to compartmentalise or label the non-conformists Ammu, Rahel, and Estha into convenient familiar types. The theme of subverting conventional social rules and regulations finds repeated articulation in the narrative:

“Estha’s full name was Esthappen Yako. Rahel’s was Rahel. For the Time Being they had no surname because Ammu was considering reverting to her maiden name, though she said that choosing between her husband’s name and her father’s name didn’t give a woman much of a choice.”\(^{37}\) Hybridity lies at every bend of the story, and is encrypted within each character. Thus, the twins are hybrid: half-Bengali and half-Malayali; Sophie Mol is an Anglo Indian with an English mother and a Malayali father; the twins are also

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half-Hindu and half-Syrian Christian, reason enough for no self-respecting Syrian Christian to marry them, as Baby Kochamma points out (who is herself born a Syrian Christian, an unrequited lover of a Catholic priest and a failed nun). Cecile Oumhani claims that “it is the idea of hybridity [that] engenders the primal fear that unleashes violence against Velutha.”

Subversion also comes in the familiar postcolonial manifestation of glossing. Just as Roy employs glossing and intertextuality to represent the challenged identity of those at the fringes with “No Locust Stand I” in the novel, she uses multiple perspectives to suggest how unconventionally recounted “truth” (as in the evidence of Ammu and Estha to save Velutha) is manipulated by those in authority to serve their own agendas of control and conformity. In this crucial project Roy’s goals converge with J. Edward Chamberlin’s view presented in “Doing Things With Words,” where he discusses the complex nexus between events and words, and how white Canadian authority seems to discount the relevance of aboriginal non-written evidence as evinced in the Royal Commission’s traditional response to the non-Western style ada’ox evidence given by Mary Johnson to the court:

What was most problematic, we felt, was the habitual privileging of events over words. We wanted to turn that upside down. This is where the issues of historical theory and practice come into clearest focus, and into clearest conflict. History—the history we were being presented in performance—is primarily about words, not events . . . A catalogue of events is not the burden of history . . . the remedy for

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39 Ashcroft, The Empire Writes Back 60-61.
the dispossession of Aboriginal historical discourses, and therefore of aboriginal history, may ultimately lie less in recovering the realities of the past than in encouraging the imagination of those who will shape the stories in the present.\footnote{J. Edward Chamberlin, “Doing Things With Words: Putting Performance on the Page,” Talking on the Page: Editing Aboriginal Oral Texts, ed. Laura J. Murray and Keren Rice (Toronto, U of Toronto P, 1999) 84-85.}

Roy does not adhere to the category of conceptual coherence because her novel’s entire historicity is founded on “verbal fictions”--from Baby Kochamma’s manufactured account of Velutha’s murder, to Estha’s, Ammu’s, Rahel’s, and the narrator’s stories. Roy actually discards the concept of a real and knowable past for one in which the past and its possible meanings are seen as purely literary and tropological constructions.

Moreover, the novel seems to suggest that it is the writer’s intention to provide a multi-perspective of “truth” by exploring and representing it, as the “truth” was unearthed in the “compulsive questioning” of the relatives and friends who knew Ammu’s family several decades ago. As the chapters entitled “Pappachi’s Moth” and “The God of Small Things” show, Roy appears to disable herself from locating the facts (about what actually happened, and why did it happen?) because she constantly shifts focus among several members of Ammu’s family in order to get to the unrevealed facts. And so, Baby Kochamma’s hysterics, Uncle Chacko’s rants, and Rahel’s, Estha’s and Ammu’s innumerable accounts blur any hope of getting to the truth:

Memory was that woman on the train. Insane in the way she sifted through dark things in a closet and emerged with the most unlikely ones--a fleeting look, a

and

“Behave yourself!” Ammu said . . .

“It was Velutha!” she explained with a smile . . .

“You are a stupid and silly little girl!” Ammu said . . .

“But it was him!” Rahel said . . .

“Shut up!” Ammu said.  

At first Roy’s well projected oral testimonies about Velutha’s murder at the hands of the police appear to preserve collective memory, but in reality they generate a highly contradictory body of tellings which give sometimes three and even four versions of the same story, or a multiplicity of dimensions to the single character of Velutha. Nowhere is this multi-perspective approach better showcased than in the chapters entitled “Work is Struggle,” and “The Pessimist and the Optimist”:

Nobody ever learned the precise nature of the role that Comrade Pillai played in the events that followed [Sophie Mol’s drowning and Velutha’s murder]. Even Chacko . . . never learned the whole story . . . To be fair to Comrade Pillai, he did not plan the course of events that followed. He merely slipped ready fingers into History’s waiting glove.

It was not entirely his fault that he lived in a society where a man’s death could be more profitable than his life had ever been.  

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41 Roy, The God of Small Things 72.
42 Roy, The God of Small Things 71.
At the Kottayam police station, a shaking Baby Kochamma was ushered into the Station House Officer’s room. She told inspector Thomas Mathew of the circumstances that had led to the sudden dismissal of a factory worker, a Paravan. A few days ago he had tried to, to . . . to force himself on her niece, she said. A divorcee with two children.

Baby Kochamma misrepresented the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, not for Ammu’s sake, but to contain the scandal and salvage the family reputation in Inspector Mathew’s eyes. It didn’t occur to her that Ammu would later invite shame upon herself—that she would go to the police and try and set the record straight. As Baby Kochamma told her story she began to believe it.

Inspector Thomas Mathew, receding behind his bustling Air India moustache, understood perfectly. He had a Touchable wife, two Touchable daughters--whole Touchable generations waiting in their Touchable wombs . . .

Later, when the real story reached Inspector Thomas Mathew, the fact that what the Paravan had taken from the Touchable Kingdom had not been snatched but given, concerned him deeply.44

Through the presentation of several versions of the truth in the novel, Roy actively interferes with “history.” Roy evinces a particular mastery over recounting multiple histories through many eyes and ears. Her employment of fragmented narratives appears to emanate in part from her professed interest in the untold tales of people's lives. The text captures Roy's process of writing herself into the telling as an active narrator. She is

deceptively anonymous at times and she often merges her own versions with Rahel’s. This makes it difficult for the reader to grasp who is actually recounting the event. Her skill at playing fast and loose with the facts in this narrative is mirrored in inaccuracies, and lies that are intentional, as in the account of Baby Kochamma at the Ayemenem Police Station about how Velutha had attempted to rape Ammu. In the chapter titled “Mrs Pillai, Mrs Eapen, Mrs Rajagopalan,” Roy uses silence as a form of auditory dissonance (through absence) as a trope for the gap between reality and imagination. Estha’s silence that takes over the narrative following Velutha’s death and his own unintentional betrayal of his friend are reflections of the unfordable gap between what is said and what is understood, or even between what is reported and what is true:

Estha had always been a quiet child, so no one could pinpoint with any degree of accuracy exactly when (the year, if not the month or day) he had stopped talking. Stopped talking altogether, that is . . . A barely noticeable quietening. 45

. . . Once the quietness arrived, it stayed and spread in Estha. It reached out of his head and enfolded him in his swampy arms. It rocked him to the rhythm of an ancient, foetal heartbeat. It sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles inching along the insides of his skull . . . It stripped his thoughts of the words that described them and left them pared and naked. *Unspeakable*. Numb. 46 [italics, mine].

. . . Flatmuscled and honey coloured. Sea-secrets in his eyes. A silver raindrop on his ear. *Esthapappychachen Kuttappen Peter Mon.* 47

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The suggestion of Velutha’s betrayal by Estha in that word “unspeakable,” is in itself a strong statement about how Roy is purposefully looking for truth in a place where she cannot find it: in someone who could not speak the truth even when he wanted to so very much. So the two-faced representation of “truth”--the lapse in what is being said and what is being heard--becomes an effective tool to emphasise the inauthenticity of both memory and intent. With diverse accounts that are overlaid and subjective, the reconstruction of a doomed family is finely woven out of a whole choir of dissonant sounds with the Roy worldview precariously balanced on the constantly shifting unreality of unreliable representations from subjects who are far removed from any vestige of normalcy. Thus, sound has many literary uses: in Baby Kochamma’s utterances, sound is either a “filler” between words or suggests the incoherence that signifies a shrewd, manipulative mind; or sound is a dysfunctional tool because Estha is unable to articulate or communicate; or mimetic in nature where a certain inability for authentication of the truth is suggested by the narrator when the subject interviewed is often led by the narrator’s query or thoughts (and words) and not her own ability to formulate an answer, as in the case of a crushed and frightened Ammu who was dying:

That whole morning Ammu talked incessantly. She asked Rahel questions, but never let her answer them. If Rahel tried to say something, Ammu would interrupt with a new thought or query. She seemed terrified of what adult thing her daughter might say and thaw Frozen Time. Fear made her garrulous. She kept it at bay with her babble.⁴⁸

The most memorable and poignant events that reveal themselves by their muted tellings are the stories of quiet dissonance that wrecked Rahel’s mother’s life. The tragic lives of Ammu and Velutha, however, are recounted in the language of silence and reiterative symbols—the birthmark shaped like a “lucky leaf” on Velutha’s back, the spider Chappu Thamburan, a symbol of survival and triumph over forces of oppression for the lovers—and unfold to the reader in a genre that echoes the silent films. It is this very absence of sound that conveys the strongest emotions and duplicates the irretrievable silence of the bond between the lovers, and the silence that finally engulfs Estha. As he sits with his twin Rahel in the temple watching the Mahabharata being enacted in a classical Kathakali dance performance, Estha remembers “terrible pictures in his head.”

But worst of all he carried inside him the memory of a young man with an old man’s mouth. The memory of a swollen face and a smashed, upside-down smile. Of a spreading pool of clear liquid with a bare bulb reflected in it. Of a bloodshot eye that had opened, wandered and then fixed its gaze on him. Estha. And what had Estha done? He had looked into that beloved face and said: Yes.

Yes, it was him.⁴⁹

Complicity with the neocolonial legal system comes in the form of a mute though assenting witness, too frightened and confused to comprehend the magnitude of his consent. Estha’s inability to speak is also a reflection of the trauma he has suffered, participating in Velutha’s violent death. The dark silence within, a condition that the writer-narrator has captured effectively in the stories about Estha’s isolated existence following Velutha’s death, is arguably more powerful than any words might convey. The

⁴⁹ Roy, The God of Small Things 32.
final abandonment by his mother--while he waits for the train that will take him away, tearless even while his child’s heart breaks in terror of separation from his mother and twin Rahel, to remember and also to forget, alone and broken, anxiously hoping that he may not have to go by some magical intervention--shows a deep pathos that overrides all other responses the narration arouses.

The dissonance at the end is different from the beginning of the novel. At the end, the dissonance does not reflect the cacophony in the first half of the story that is used to introduce the Baby Kochamma family history, for instance the motley band of characters, and some humour with images of ambassador Estha doing his Elvis Pelvis twist; or the three children looking like raccoons dressed up as married Hindu ladies in sarees, visiting Velutha; or the twins’ preoccupation with English words such as “nictitating” membrane.

The second part of the narrative contains the confusion of crisscrossed narrations by different characters. Here, as we inch towards the end of the story of self-discovery, the deceptions are put to bed and the work resonates with a thunderous silence, the most powerful of all subversive tactics of language, or absence of, employed in the novel.

I also argue that in the process of subverting “master” discourses and narratives (the monolingual truths of the “master,” of correct or pure English, of the one master narrative) Roy begins to try out new languages and new multiple narratives. She even tries silence as a way of narrating the “master” narratives of patriarchy, as in the case of Estha’s lack of speech after the trauma of Velutha’s death.

Roy’s writing constantly strives to capture a sense of belonging--a sense that even though the there-and-then is filtered through the here-and-now, the layers of the past are palpably present. And although Rahel has moments of distress--for example, when Rahel
recognises that she is both self and other as she travels through Ayemenem on her return from America—her belief in the recuperative power of storytelling ultimately sublimates her anxiety. Here Rahel’s view seems to obliterate the gaps of time and place, and achieves a moment of connection, no matter how tenuous. Although they remain uncertain, tradition, story, and genealogy can offer some sense of continuity, heredity, and belonging.

“The Cost of Living” chapter is an especially effective representation of a ruthless and relentless hierarchical social system that is capable of inflicting the worst kind of oppression—the politics of caste. It is significant that the silence that thunders through the closing lines of the novel is not of fear or loss, but a mysterious and calm muteness that echoes in Ammu and Velutha’s most natural, simple and triumphant love for each other, a love that breaks through the dark and devastated heath of death and despair, a love that remains with the reader long after the reading: “She kissed his closed eyes and stood up. Velutha with his back against the mangosteen tree watched her walk away. She had a dry rose in her hair. She turned to say it once again: ‘Naaley’. Tomorrow.”

Admittedly, Roy seems quite inept in writing about the lovemaking of Ammu and Velutha (not surprising, since she says she finds the Kamasutra a most effective piece of writing). And although this is one of the biggest challenges she faces in her craft, with that one Malayalam word Naaley, the reader is left hopeful, even though she has been told the ending in the first chapter of the novel. As Roy explains: “I think one of the most important things about the structure is that in some way the structure of the book ambushes the story. You know, it tells a different story from the story the book is telling.

In the first chapter I more or less tell you the story, but the novel ends in the middle of the story, and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love, and it ends on the word ‘tomorrow.’ It’s an assertion that it’s wonderful that it happened at all.”

MURDERING THE “CASTELESS”: RESURRECTING THE PARAVAN AS FATHER OF AMMU’S CHILDREN

On another level, the sub-text in The God of Small Things takes centrestage with the resurrection of the missing father-figure for her twins Rahel and Estha, by a divorced woman, Ammu, “from a high-caste Syrian Christian family” through her rebellious act of sexual involvement with a “casteless” Paravan, Velutha. I argue that in pretending to protect the purity of the woman’s womb, and hence the tribe’s purity, patriarchy primarily denies women the choice of a mate, particularly if the selection threatens to pollute the homogeneity of the group. This second part of this chapter turns to Freud’s theoretical argument in “Family Romances” and examines how Ammu, in her attempt to seize agency for herself from the entrenched patriarchal culture by creating a father in Velutha for her “fatherless” children, mirrors the warrior spirit of the river goddess Meenachil. Freud maintains that, “Indeed the whole effort at replacing the real father by a superior one is only an expression of the child’s longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women.” Velutha’s role as a father-figure to Ammu’s children

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52 Meenakshi or Meenachil (the goddess with the eyes of a carp). Devi’s eyes are fabled to bring life to the unborn. The invocation Meenakschi Pancha Ratnam (five jewels of Meenakshi) is an incantation to the goddess in her all-powerful warrior form.
53 Freud, “Family Romances” 74-78.
finds a spirited presence in the chapter entitled, “The River in the Boat,” when Rahel and Estha cajole him into mending a leaky boat they find abandoned by the riverbank. Velutha is almost always associated with the river. Ironically it is this very boat that leads to the nightmare that follows Velutha to his death: “Estha, delirious with joy, jumped on Velutha, wrapped his legs around his waist and kissed him.”

Rahel, too, sees Velutha as a protector and a father figure whom she invokes whenever in trouble, even with Ammu. In the airport scene, where the twins get into trouble for their playfulness and ineptitude in being “perfect Ambassadors,” Rahel almost prays that Velutha will appear and rescue them from the imminent wrath of Ammu:

Inside the curtain, Rahel closed her eyes and thought of the green river, of the quiet deep-swimming fish, and the gossamer wing of the dragonflies (that could see behind them) in the sun. She thought of her luckiest fishing rod that Velutha had made for her. Yellow bamboo with a float that dipped every time a foolish fish enquired. She thought of Velutha and wished she was with him.

The river goddess Meenachil is configured in Hindu mythology as an ardhanarishwara (a goddess who is half-man and half-woman, and thus changeable in her gender). I argue that Ammu’s embattled ending--where patriarchs such as her brother Chacko, Comrade Pillai, the police force of Ayemenem, and society at large, repeatedly assault her both verbally and physically, ostracising her and labeling her a “prostitute,” ultimately killing her--is represented in the transformed body of the river goddess Meenachil. Thus the Meenachil, once the clean, pristine playground for Estha and Rahel, who rode on the

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54 Roy, The God of Small Things 213.
back of their surrogate father Velutha, and swam in its silky green fish-swarming waters, is desecrated to a polluted, foul-smelling dump of industrial garbage and human excrement, all in the course of twenty-two years.

In The God of Small Things death gleans his trophies relentlessly. Thus eleven-year-old Rahel witnesses the last rites of her mother, only thirty-one, after her body is sent back to Ayemenem, where she must be cremated in an electric crematorium because the church refuses to bury her “on several counts.” Chacko had her wrapped in a dirty bedsheet and laid out on a dirty stretcher:

Chacko hired a van to transport the body to the electric crematorium. He had her wrapped in a dirty bedsheet and laid out on a stretcher. Rahel thought she looked like a Roman Senator. Et tu, Ammu! She thought and smiled, remembering Estha. It was odd driving through bright, busy streets with a dead Roman senator on the floor of the van. It made the blue sky bluer . . . Real life was inside the van.

Where real Death was.  

With her daughter watching, Ammu was fed to the fire. “Her hair, her skin, her smile. Her voice. The way she used Kipling to love her children before putting them to bed: *We be of one blood, ye and I*. Her goodnight kiss . . . All this was fed to the beast and it was satisfied.” Rahel could not cry, even as she carried Ammu’s grit from her bones, her ashes, the teeth from her smile. It was a terrible rite of passage for her that kicked her into the next level of unreal reality.

The slow killing of the feisty Ammu and the brutal murder of Velutha, the father she resurrects for her children, also mirrors the overriding theme of death being a

56 Roy, The God of Small Things 162.
necessary presence in giving voice to, and for the retrieval of, subaltern identity. Victor Li demonstrates that the subaltern Velutha’s sacrificial death is necessary “in order to serve as an irreducible idea.” He argues that “the subaltern is perfected as a concept so pure, no living referent can contradict or contemplate it.” In this respect, Fokir in The Hungry Tide and Velutha in The God of Small Things share the glory of afterlife, a kind of martyrdom that is Christlike. Li further suggests: “Their death guarantees their inaccessibility to hegemonic decoding,” and though death is foreshadowed in the novel, where Roy relates the story within the first ten pages, “it is not because the author does not know how to let Velutha and Ammu go on living. Rather, she knows that their deaths will ensure their living on.” Ammu and Velutha’s deaths, therefore, glorify subversions by those at the margins, and “express utopian possibility of love and transcending social differences.”

Furthermore, L. Chris Fox finds the intersection of trauma and the abject contained in Velutha’s dying body. Fox explains that “the abject is everything the human body excretes in order to live, all that might endanger our lives if we touch or ingest it,” gesturing towards the outcaste status of Velutha, who is a personification of abjectness. The violence he is subject to creates a trauma of formidable proportions. Velutha’s excrement, urine, blood, and bodily fluids that flood the floor of the police station emit a “sickly sweet” odour and take up residence in Estha’s skull, rendering him a witness and a kind of participant in the trauma of Velutha’s death. Fox invokes Cathy Caruth’s contention that there is no definable external determinant for trauma. So, abjection and trauma are strangely similar. They are elusive to any solid definition, “each is oddly fluid,

57 Li, “Necroidealism, or the Subaltern’s Sacrificial Death” 275-292.
slippery, in motion.”59 Fox maintains that the novel “does unveil the abject for readers; however, in the spirit of testimony the novel also implicitly calls for resistance to a social institution that it presents as unjust.”60

I argue that the social abyss that is revealed in the crucible that is Velutha is pried open by Roy with remarkable audacity. The success of her craft is largely due to the way she is able to universalise Velutha’s death as a martyr who attains salvation and self-hood for not just himself but for his community. Chelva Kanaganayakam further explores this idea of martyrdom in the framework of Christianity and provides an insightful and provocative reading. He connects religious myth to subversion and argues that as it reconfigures Christian myth, The God of Small Things forms a “radical critique of religious practice,” and unveils the “collective ideology of an [elite] group that refuses to accommodate the margins except in very limited terms.” Kanaganayakam notes that Roy has appropriated Christian tropes of the abandoned Garden and the symbolism of mythical return, as well as the carpenter image of Christ. This collusion of Christian and Hindu myth that emerges is not oppositional but related in that it suggests that traditional religions work in unison to preserve the status quo.61 The omnipresent images of death (a total of fifty-two in the novel) which are mostly connected with images of water or rain or the River Meenachil, and the metaphors that embellish these images, are the literary devices Roy uses to present a convincing argument against an oppressive, monolithic caste structure that continues to beleaguer India. Consequently, the questioning of an oppressive authority that directly causes the negation of life suggests an unexpected and

59 Fox, “A Martyrology of the Abject” 35-60.
60 Fox, “A Martyrology of the Abject” 35-60.
novel, albeit tenuous, bond in the narrative: a link between the death of innocent victims Velutha and Ammu at the hand of political and social authority, and the death of colonialism (and empire) itself.

The untouchable, according to the meaning of the word, suggests absence since they have no corporeal identity; therefore they are non-existent. Velutha’s father Vellya Paapan’s history, which Roy cites as the walking backwards with the broom to erase all record of the untouchable’s footprints (the signs of his physical presence), begs the question: how could something that is without a body (and therefore non-existent) be violated? The word dalit means crushed under the heel, so the insinuation is that a dalit is one who is unseen since he is stepped upon, and hence invisible. There are several instances of the valorisation of untouchables in the Indian epics, even as they are annihilated by powerful masters from the upper castes. In the Uttarakanda section of the Ramayana, Sambuka, a shudra, or lowest caste member, who dared practice tapas or asceticism (a privilege allowed by the sastras, or scriptures, only to Brahmins), was beheaded by Rama at the instigation of the Brahmins, and went straight to heaven;62 in the Mahabharata, Drona exacted a terrible price (and prize) in the form of the right thumb from a lower caste youth, the brilliant archer Ekalavya (who had begged to be Drona’s student), so he couldn’t ever beat Drona’s favourite student, Prince Arjuna; and the buffalo demon Mahisasura from the Devi Mahatmya (who I invoked in Chapter One of this dissertation) was killed by Devi, the Great Goddess, and instantly attained swargaloka, or heaven.

In January 1999, two years after she had won the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy attended a reception in her home state of Kerala organised by the Dalit Sahitya Akademi. There, she spoke out in support of the cause of untouchables in India, and made clear her solidarity with the Dalit struggle for justice and equality. In her direct, uncomplicated style she declared: “I’m here to enlist.” By her own admission, Velutha, “the Paravan with a future,” the Paravan protagonist in the novel had been a living force through all of Roy’s life, and is now indelibly stamped in her art. “I had two choices: I had to tell his story or to die myself,” said Roy in an interview, on the eve of her book launch, in 1997.

I grew up with people like Velutha. They were my closest, dearest friends. They were much more my family than my family: they were whom I fished with, swam with, dug up earthworms with. I had a sense of what would come down on someone’s head. Syrian Christians think they’re the salt of the earth. Even within the Church, there are sub-sects. They don’t even marry between themselves, so with a Paravan . . .

The first chapter of the novel tells the entire story of the “Love Laws, the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much,” and how the price for polluting those laws and breaking the borders chalked out would be exacted with human life. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy divulges the significance of one’s birthright in a society

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63 In India, several contemporary Untouchable communities, have adopted the term Dalit meaning “depressed” in Hindi, as a means of empowerment. See Trilok Nath’s *Politics of the Depressed Classes* (New Delhi: Deputy, 1987).
65 Rana Behl, a historian at Delhi University, who knows Roy, elaborated: “Roy is not an academic. The people she knew and grew up with were underdogs. She did not come through the normal patterns of social politeness and caution public figures are used to.”
immersed in tradition. To comprehend the story of transgressed love, pollution and death, as told in the novel, between a high-born Syrian Christian woman and an untouchable, is to dive deep into the social and religious currents over centuries that have affected the psyche of millions of Indians, including the sizeable Syrian Christian community to which Ammu and her family belong.66

Images of death are repetitive and embedded in the narrative and metaphoric patterns of The God of Small Things. Thus the emphasis on death begins on page one itself: “The bluebottles stun themselves against clear window panes and die.” The tragedy of the bluebottles operates on two levels of comprehension: a visual agnosia where they mistake what they see and the physical association of death with pollution, putrid flesh and blood. Interestingly, the clear glass window, technically meant to present reality, is transformed into a blind spot that baffles the bluebottles, encrypting in this example the inability of the novel’s characters to read danger and impending tragedy. Thus a similar trope accosts the reader when a sparrow enters Chacko’s car and dies; despite the clear glass windows, no one could see the sparrow desperate to escape. Images of death, mostly brutal (Velutha), sometimes tragic (Ammu), occasionally shocking (Sophie Mol), but never peaceful, are cleverly invoked throughout the telling of the tale with intricate symbols connected to each death like a genetic code stamped on each unfortunate destiny. Foreboding, premonition, and danger lurk in the chiseled symbolic language. On the way back from Cochin airport (Chapter Six), as Chacko drove the family and his precious nine-year-old trophy daughter Sophie Mol back to Ayemenem, near Ettumanoor

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66 John Updike, The New Yorker, June 1997: “Treading Roy’s maze, we learn a great deal about India—a vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation.”
they passed a dead temple elephant, electrocuted by a high tension electric wire. As they neared the Ayemenem Estate gate, “they drove into a cabbage-green butterfly (or perhaps it drove into them)”--small signs from the god of small things of the big crash to come. Then there is the persistent leitmotif of Rahel’s grandfather Pappachi’s furry moth that resides deep within Rahel’s heart and acts more or less like a barometer of danger, raising one bristling leg or fluttering an occasional wing at the whisper of death.

The site of the death of innocence is Abhilash Talkies, where Estha suffers at the hands of the Orangedrink Lemondrink man with his “dirty,” discoloured rag. Recurring euphemisms collectively arouse the Death Moth to wakefulness within Rahel—soo-soo for the soda pop seller’s penis as well as for the act of urinating which damage for ever Estha’s innocence and peace; the disturbing palpability of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man’s lust (“Estha’s hand was hot and sticky. It had egg white on it. White egg white. Quarter-boiled”), and the consequent self-flagging of the sticky hand by Estha holding his soiled hand in a cripple pose (“holding his sticky orange),” and his consequent nausea and fear.67 Close on the heels of these images of excretion and pollution comes the whoosh of Death’s proximity: “A cold moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts landed lightly on Rahel’s heart. When its icy legs touched her, she got goose bumps. Six goose bumps on her careless heart.” And for a final curtain call, in the last few lines of the Abhilash Talkies episode danger swims to the surface of nebulous dreamtime: “A hot twin and a cold one. He and She. We and Us. Somehow, not wholly unaware of the hint of doom and all that waited in the wings for them.”68 [italics mine].

L. Chris Fox further suggests that the trauma of physical abuse often involves both psychological and social abjectness because it is tied to the betrayal of the child’s trust in the adult and the treachery of, “in this case, Estha’s own painfully learned social politeness, which functions to make him unwillingly complicit.” Fox argues that if “misplaced ejaculate” is abject, a corpse is much more so. As the most abhorrent of wastes, the corpse “is a border that has encroached upon everything.” If a corpse epitomises the abject, then to the mind of Rahel and Estha who are forced to witness the “violent and deliberate transformation” of the beloved Velutha into “a near corpse, whose bones and flesh have been transposed and whose inside-belonging blood, urine, and faeces and now not belonging, outside, is traumatic to the degree that is abject.”

I argue that the abject, casteless Paravan is at once expelled from sight and touch and actually self-negates himself and his existence. But he is also the focus of the “touchables’ gaze,” and becomes a part of their fascination. In order to deal with this conundrum, it is useful to turn to Julia Kristeva’s thoughts on abjection in her seminal work, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection: “There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside; ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.” She further posits that the abject really possesses one quality of the object—that of being diametrically opposed to ‘I’. In The God of Small Things, for instance, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma both perceive the Paravan as abject and nauseating but they are also obsessed and fascinated by the abject. In Strange Encounters: Embodied

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69 Fox, “A Martyrology of the Abject” 35-60.
Sara Ahmed concurs with Kristeva that at the most obvious level the abject is a “jettisoned object” that is cast out from the domain of the thinking subject, like Vellya Paapen’s “paravan eye juices” draw horror and disgust from Mammachi. At the same time, the abject holds a fascination for the subject, demanding its attention and desire: “from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.”

The twins’ tale, told on many levels, on a dual time frame, through multiple perspectives, raises many questions about transgression, pollution, chaos, and death in the current Indian context. What are the faces and textures of death Roy structures into her narrative? How do crossing borders translate into paths to irredeemable horror? Can the higher castes unlearn the concept of pollution? How are Hindu-Christian institutional imperatives and ethics concerning peaceful coexistence and universal brotherhood manipulated and metamorphosed into tools of murder and disinvestment of human value and worth? How do polar aliens such as the police force, Marxist messiahs, and Christian matriarchs and patriarchs transform into kissing partners to crush and kill an innocent man, “like an ant under a shoe,” as Rahel asks at strategic points in the novel?

One of the problems is that Estha carries inside his well of silence some of these very answers, answers that are never really articulated. They lie buried deep in the recesses of the memory of a seven-year-old forced by an unscrupulous aunt to pass the

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73 Roy’s India, as projected in The God of Small Things is a dark and dissonant one, and not truly representative of the whole. Roy’s India evokes a certain negative response from several Western critics. A case in point is Anthony Spaeth, in Time, 14 Apr. 1997: “In Roy’s India, a land of little hope and unqualified squalor, buildings are in near rot and roads are graced with squashed animals and, at one point, an electrocuted elephant . . . the oppression of India drips from every page.”
death sentence on his dearest friend Velutha, so his mother Ammu might live: “The memory of a swollen face and a smashed, upside-down smile. Of a bloodshot eye that had opened, wandered and then fixed its gaze on him.”  

The guilt he suffers on account of this terrible betrayal silences him forever, so the unspeakable horror is never told. Questions of history, collective memory, and cultural inequality are constitutive of the category of the twins’ experience.

In the actual horror of the Christian Velutha’s death, and in its witnessing by the twins, the darkness that pervades the novel appears to finally reconcile with the hope of Christian faith, if the Resurrection is accepted as being the central beacon of hope, pivotal to Christian theology. Suguna Ramanathan claims that “the novel offers nothing but the irredeemable darkness of the human heart.” She further argues that the Resurrection, which renders death irrelevant, is precisely what gives Christianity its consoling and healing powers. Without the Resurrection, it would have been a dark and hopeless Gospel. The final cry on the cross, of a man put through terrible suffering and agonising cruelty: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” would be the cry of an abandoned man on a blasted heath. But she also suggests that it is possible to make alternative interpretations. 

I argue that Velutha suffers horribly, but with hope of redemption. Velutha’s death carries with it much of the Christian notion of suffering, and in his suffering is foregrounded the passion of Christ. One of Velutha’s most impressive traits is his utmost comfort level with children. 

Thus, a cluster of associations with

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74 Roy, The God of Small Things 32.
76 “Suffer the little children to come unto me” (Mark, x:14).
Christ give Velutha immense stature and dignity, even in death, making him stand tall while lying in a pool of his own blood: his poverty, his skills at carpentry (Jesus of Nazareth was the son of Joseph, a carpenter, and the trade is linked with Jesus), his outcaste status in society, his gentleness and creativity, and the connotation embedded in his name, Velutha, meaning white and pure. Roy underscores the practice of untouchability within the church by pointing to the separate pews, separate graveyards, even a separate pariah bishop for the Rice Christians in *The God of Small Things* using the metaphor *Heart of Darkness* in an inverted chiasmic sense. So, while Roy fills her novel with Christian characters, she downgrades Syrian Christian ineptitude and unchristian behaviour to a level of spiritual impotence. Comrade Pillai feels the current generation of Papacchi’s family was perhaps paying for their forefathers’ bourgeois decadence: “*One was mad. The other die-vorced. Probably barren.* Perhaps this was the real revolution. The Christian bourgeois had begun to self-destruct.” However, like Christian precepts, the party leader Comrade Pillai’s ideas of nemesis and Marxist determinism can hardly account for “the cost of living:” the death of two people and the loss of two childhoods.

Lover and surrogate father Velutha is a Paravan, generally understood to be a member of the caste of polluters. The irony being, of course, that they were actually the

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78 Observation by Chelva Kanaganayakam in a discussion of *The God of Small Things* at a graduate seminar on South Asian Literature, at the Department of English, University of Toronto, Nov. 2003.

79 “The metaphor *Heart of Darkness* appears in *The God of Small Things* as a reversal of Conrad, a kind of oblique reference to *Heart of Darkness*. It’s saying that we, the characters in the book, are not white men, the people who are scared of the *Heart of Darkness*. We are the people who live in it; we are the people without stories. . . In Ayemenem, in *The Heart of Darkness*. . .” -- Arundhati Roy in an interview in Frontline, 8 Aug. 1997.

cleaners who “unpolluted” the pollutants that emerged from the high-caste polluters. The Paravans turned Rice Christians to escape the Brahmin hegemony and brutality, unsuspecting that they would encounter the same sort of discrimination by the Church. They are still not allowed to cross the threshold of the home of a Brahmin or highborn Syrian Christian such as Ammu’s ancestral residence. They are not even allowed into the regular churches where high-caste Syrian Christians gather for prayer. They are forced to have their own churches and separate services with “Pariah Bishops.” Velutha’s father, Vellya Paapen remembers when he and his ilk “were expected to walk backwards with a broom, sweeping away footprints so that Brahmins and Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint.” Surprisingly, the voice of inevitable doom is not located in Rahel, nor can it be pinpointed as belonging to the narrator, but it is, like the heat in Ayemenem, everywhere: in the events that unfold, in the language used by the characters in the story, in the silence by the Meenachil’s banks, in the spotless, humble mud and thatch hut where Velutha lives, in his persona, in his sparse words, and his powerful love for the twins, and their love returned to him. The entire construct of the novel replicates the author’s subtle insistence that the emphasis of her novel is in recognising the plight of the Paravan. Velutha is shown as an Untouchable in a Touchable community. Parallels with Bakha, the protagonist in Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable, inevitably arise, though Roy’s understated approach, indirect narrative mode, and conscious control over putting words in Velutha’s mouth (he hardly speaks five sentences in the entire novel), has been applauded and seen to be a far more effective
literary device than Anand’s presentation of an angry Bakha (and Sohini) by several Dalits today.  

Pollution is given multiple representations: When a broken Vellya comes as a Judas to betray his son’s forbidden love for Ammu to Ammu’s mother Mammachi that fateful night, he is kept waiting at the door of the kitchen for a long time by Kochu Maria the cook, who is also conditioned to believe that a Paravan would defile her sacred cooking space by entering it, so deep runs the boundary between Untouchables and Touchables in the social milieu of Kerala. Eventually, when Vellya was allowed to speak to Mammachi--he held out his glass eye in obeisance, a gesture of servility, gratitude, and absolute surrender--a blind Mammachi, mistaking the eye for the kilo of red rice she had given him that morning, recoiled in horror at having touched a Paravan’s eye juices:

She groped her way to the sink, and soaked away the sodden Paravan’s eye juices.  
She smelled her hands when she had finished . . .  
She thought of her [daughter] naked, coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie. She imagined it in vivid detail: a Paravan’s coarse dark hand on her daughter’s breast . . . the sound of their breathing. His particular Paravan smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. Like a dog with a bitch on heat.  

But pollution is an engendered philosophy. What’s pollution for Ammu is acceptable as a “need” for Chacko. Mammachi’s tolerance of “Men’s Needs” (she had personally

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81 “Mulk Raj Anand was so patronizing,” says Narendra Jadav, the author of Outcaste: A Memoir (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003), and an economist with the Reserve Bank of India, and adds: “The difference between Dalits writing about themselves and others, is what you see between the love of a mother and a nurse.”  
supervised the building of a side-entrance to her son Chacko’s room for a bevy of low-caste factory girls to come warm his bed frequently, and even handed out gratuities to them in appreciation of their services to her son) became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. She had defiled generations of breeding and brought the family to its knees.

Baby Kochamma’s initial reaction on hearing Vellya’s confession borders on the macabre; it is simultaneously hilarious and echoes a sense of foreboding: “How could she stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed, they have a particular smell, these Paravans?…He [Velutha] must go.” The pollutant logically smells, and having defiled a woman of high caste by rubbing some of that pollution onto her, her family, her ancestors and her lineage, must expect to be punished. In Velutha’s case, with nothing less than death.

**RESISTING THE DAM, SAVING A RIVER**

The language Roy uses to address social and environmental issues in *The God of Small Things* is factored into her project to subvert the overwhelming, hegemonic power of political expediency and corporate greed that rear their heads in postcolonial India. As her recent fight against the River Narmada Dam Project, and her support for Narmada Bachao Andolan (or Save the River Narmada Campaign) have shown, the author’s psyche is deeply influenced by her love of rivers and the environment. It is striking how the once mother figure, the life-giving, clean, fecund, balmy Meenachil River is transformed into a living yardstick of the body politic of Ayemenem in the novel.  

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83 In an interview with Julie Mehta, February 1998, Roy said: “I think the language of landscape that you grew up in, lives within you. I don’t think it’s true of people who’ve grown up in cities so much,
in the halcyon days before Sophie Mol’s death, when the fish were flying, and the coconut, tamarind, and mangosteen trees, the rushes and green grass, grew tall and lush, “they dreamed of the river. Of the coconut trees that bent into it and watched, with coconut eyes, the boats slide by . . . It was warm, the water. Greygreen like rippled silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night the broken yellow moon in it.”

When the twins reunited, twenty-three years later, the language in the narrative changes to describe the transformation from childhood to adulthood: a sleepy, verdant Ayemenem had changed to an urban trollop, moving towards becoming another twentieth-century ugly ubiquitous cityscape. At the same time, the river Meenachil now reflects the sores, the warts, the terrible pollution, and the pestilence that had strangled the idyllic riverscape the twins had known in their early childhood. When Rahel returns the Meenachil is a sewer:

Years later . . . it greeted her with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed . . . the river was no more than a swollen drain now . . . with the occasional silver slant of a dead fish . . . Children hung their bottoms over the edge and defecated directly onto the squelchy, sucking mud of the exposed river bed . . . On warm days the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat.\textsuperscript{84}

We are presented with the dislocated lives of two children, now dysfunctional adults with no one to love them, their shattered innocence and disjointed realities caught in the ebb and flow of a muddied, murky, scummy Meenachil. The dead fish, the weeds choking the

\textsuperscript{84} Roy, \textit{The God of Small Things} 124-125.
waterways, and the human filth are silent wounds of lives lost and never to be found. The river was their precious venue for forbidden trysts with Velutha. Once the twins swam the breadth of the Meenachil, drank deeply from her depths, and learnt how to paddle over her currents with Velutha as their guide. Death had changed all that. It is as if the mother figure had become a disease-ridden spectre of decay.

As a creative artist and cinematographer in her former life Roy’s familiarity with, and proclivity for, literature and cinema are no secret.  

The author’s concern with caste distinctions and divisions and her memorable depiction of the first meeting between Velutha and Ammu, where Ammu approaches the Paravan with an offering of herself on that night by the Meenachil River, find a startling parallel with the scene where the Duchess proposes to Antonio in The Duchess of Malfi. Does The God of Small Things have any precedents in Western literature about the polluting of the child’s mind? If books, like people, have genealogies, then Roy’s harks back to novels by writers from the

85 Roy has remarked in several interviews of her familiarity with the works of Gogol, Balzac, and Dostoevsky, and her keen interest as a cinematographer in the genre of tragedy, especially in Elizabethan Drama, is well known.

86 The God of Small Things has interesting parallels in The Duchess of Malfi which portrays a patriarchal, stringently Catholic and highly manipulative set of brothers (one of the Malfi brothers is a cardinal), the vulnerability of their sister at their hands, the high-born woman who falls in love with a man of a lower status, the rumours, the discovery, and finally her condemnation for “corruption of the flesh and the Malfi name,” the Duchess’ consequent excommunication, her resulting madness, sickness, the thunder of foreboding and, finally, her death. When Chacko’s dam of grief and anger bursts at his daughter Sophie Mol’s death by drowning, it is Baby Kochamma who channels his wrath against Ammu, eventually driving her out of the ancestral home for defiling herself and the family with a Paravan. Baby Kochamma’s shrewd plan echoes Malfian Duke Ferdinand’s hatred and guile. The removal of his sister, the Duchess, would mean more power, space, and inheritance for himself. The references to Ammu as a prostitute, packages in its folds a whole worldview of pollution: Pollution of space, blood, and genealogy. The scene where Ammu dehumanises herself and dreams a recurrent dream of her hair being snipped off by policemen’s scissors, and the act of branding of a fallen woman in Malayali society, is also reflected in Duke Ferdinand’s outburst:

“Tis not your whore’s milk that shall quench my wildfire, But your whore’s blood.”

Duchess: “The misery of us that are born great! / We are forced to woo because none dare woo us . . . I do here put off all vain ceremony, And only do appear to you a young widow That claims you for a husband, and like a widow,

I use but half a blush in’t.” (Duchess of Malfi, I. (i): 507-525).
American Deep South: a child’s world disordered by adult truths in the muscular narratives of William Faulkner and Harper Lee, violence invading steamy small towns in Carson McCuller’s tales of the half-expected, and incest erupting between the fatally attractive twins in Donna Tartt’s The Secret History.

Roy weaves images of pollution and death, two of the many threads in a tightly packed skein of many sutras, throughout the narrative, juxtaposing them in a stream-of-consciousness approach, gliding from past to present in constant flux, like the ebb and flow tides of the River Meenachil. With her cinematographer’s psyche, Roy dexterously implements “a crosscutting, film-like technique” that exposes her strong links with contemporary Southern Indian cinema.  

The issue of socio-historical development and the resulting debate about Marxist dialectical materialism that arise from the treatment of the Paravan in The God of Small Things needs to be examined in the actual historical context. Of all the issues that came to the forefront during the Indian post-nationalist movement, in the 1960s and 1970s, which is the timeframe for The God of Small Things (Ayemenem, 1969), untouchability was seemingly the most uncontentious. Outwardly, factions as diverse as the Congress Party, the Communist Party of India, the Church, Men’s and Women’s Associations dedicated to social reform, and some untouchables themselves believed that the eradication of the caste system was underway. Yet it proved, and continues to prove, a far

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87 Roy produced and directed the screenplay Electric Moon, Or In which Annie Gives it Those Ones, and also produced a TV series, The Banyan Tree, and performed in the film Massey Saab, prior to writing The God of Small Things. Those familiar with Indian art cinema might see in the novel shades of Malayali film director Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s celebrated film Nizalkkuthu, or Shadowkill, about an innocent young gypsy boy being framed for the rape of the hangman’s daughter: A low-caste, powerless boy, condemned to death for a crime he did not commit. With her hallucinatory mix of desire and violence, in her own inimitable style, Roy becomes the voice of the dead subaltern, in the novel.
more complicated issue than imagined. The problem with untouchability in Kerala in 1969 was that untouchables were invisible.\(^8\) Gandhi’s harijans or “Children of God” were so well hidden away, in the lush green paddy fields of the heart of darkness, in Ayemenem, Kerala, as well as in most of rural India—in Bihar, Rajasthan, in the Chambal valleys of Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh—that never were their voices ever heard despite all the rhetoric of nation-building. Roy has maintained in her interviews that caste is the defining consideration in Indian politics and marriages, and that although caste divisions are blurring, the divisions have not gone away.

The author has received her share of threats and brickbats for trying to resurrect a dead Paravan. Ironically, a criminal suit was filed against Roy and The God of Small Things by a Syrian Christian, Sabu Thomas, in Kerala in 1997, who referred to the descriptive passages in the last few pages of the novel, as “an affront to Indian tradition, culture and morality.” He complained that, “The book excites sexual desires and lascivious thoughts and depraves, pollutes, and corrupts public morality. And it hurts the Syrian Christian community.” The case was eventually thrown out of court, but it showed how an immovable, patriarchal, tradition-bound community resists the issue of untouchables being accepted into the social mainstream.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) See Chelva Kanaganayakam, Counterrealism and Indo-Anglian Fiction (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2002) 82. “The suppression was sanctioned by myth, and its particular contours were drawn by foregrounding Brahminical texts and practices.”

\(^9\) See Veena Das, Structure and Cognition: Aspects of Hindu Caste and Ritual (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1982). Das draws upon her own fieldwork to temper her readings of the Sanskrit texts with caste theory. The West typically confuses “caste” with “class”, and though there is positive correlation between economic standing and caste, it is also true that particularly since Independence the two are increasingly independent variables. (It is, for example, the middle castes from which many of the nouveaux riches emerge. Feminist Madhu Kishwar has argued that the upper and middle caste peasant family structure, that is spreading vertically and geographically through Indian society, is worsening the condition of rural women.)
As a token of her support, Roy announced that she would allow the Dalit Sahitya Akademi to publish a Malayalam translation of her novel and to use her royalties for the promotion of Dalit literature. Roy made clear that she did not see this as an act of charity: “This is not a gift. It is an invitation to enter into a working contract with me. I hope you will publish it, sell it and use the royalties from the Malayalam book to help Dalit writers to tell their stories to the world.” She added, “I give you my book in memory of Velutha.”

The Paravan may have been murdered, his love for the twins and Ammu may be unfulfilled, his blood may still be scraped off the floor at the police station at Ayemenem, where on that night a whole police force kicked open his skull, one at a time, and his annihilation performed with a compounded conspiracy of hegemonic forces. But his spirit stands tall. There are no ready answers in Roy’s novel. Some critics who have approached the novel as eternal optimists believe they have seen a fleeting glimmer of redemption in the hope of a “tomorrow” which lies buried in the cusp of a beginning and an end, in the formless, chaotic moment at the end of Roy’s novel. We will have to wait and see. The only real hope that has emerged from this work is that it has empowered the real Paravan to find participatory spaces.90 Today, with a new affirmative voice, his own

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voice, the Paravan has broken his silence. He has taken the baton from Roy, and is swimming the next lap for Velutha in the Meenachil’s swift current.\footnote{Roy remarked at a forum in New Delhi in October 2003: “I do believe that in India we practice a form of apartheid that goes unnoticed by the rest of the world. And it is as important for Dalits to tell their stories as it has been for colonised peoples to write their own histories.”}
CONCLUSION

NEW HIGHWAYS, OLD WATERWAYS:

“UNDERSLEEP, WHERE ALL THE WATERS MEET”¹

It is significant that these issues of women’s sexuality were essential to the
development of the patriarchal caste hierarchy, both for the maintenance
of the caste and the legitimation and control of inheritance.
--Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi.²

This nationalist colour to what is really a common trend--glorifying
women who fulfill their wife and mother roles with exceptional ardour--
placed an enormous burden on the women . . . It was the women, their
commitment, their purity, their sacrifice, who were to ensure the moral,
even spiritual power of the nation and hold it together.
--Susie Tharu.³

This dissertation contributes to the understanding of how three postcolonial writers--
Ghosh, Mehta and Roy--re-envision the force of the feminine by invoking the
controversial myths of origin of Indian river goddesses in their works of fiction. In
reading The Hungry Tide, A River Sutra, and The God of Small Things against the

² Liddle, and Joshi, “Gender and Hierarchy,” Daughters of Independence 57.
³ Susie Tharu, “Tracing Savitri’s Pedigree: Victorian Racism and the Image of Women in Indo-
Anglian Literature,” Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History, ed. Kumkum Sangari and
broader brushstrokes of history, orality, an ethnographic nexus, cultural sources, classical Sanskrit and vernacular texts, as well as archives of twentieth century Indian political history, and literary traditions, the study presents a new interpretation of how the patriarchal leadership in India utilised the independence movement to subjugate the feminine, particularly feminine sexual agency, to control the nation. This study establishes a scholarly narrative as a transgressive force, and describes fictional representations of the fluid and indomitable feminine in the riverscapes of postcolonial literature. The dissertation exposes a certain incongruity, perhaps even an incommensurability, between what is the real myth of origin of the river goddesses—which according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar represents the return to the womb, that voyage back to the myth of origins, to original time, through original space—and the myth of the domesticated feminine perpetrated by a manipulative patriarchal agenda. Undergirding this tense and vexed connection between the two is the imaginative force of water.

This force, I argue, has a central function as an inspiration for the imagination, and suggests limitless possibilities for the writer. While speaking of water as an “elemental force of the imagination” Gaston Bachelard points out the “extraordinary properties” of this substance, which is far more complex than the mirror in stimulating the poetic process: “One of the elements of natural dream is its need to be engraved

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deeply into nature. One cannot dream profoundly with objects. To dream profoundly one must dream with substances. A poet who begins with a mirror must end with water . . .”

Water also represents a multidimensional compendium of sensory receptors that are potentially oppositional--it creates a sonic turbulence and also a musical cadence, a visual calmness and also agitation; in our tactile encounter, water can inflict pain (as in a flood or torrent), or give relief (while alleviating pain from a wound). It quenches drought and thirst, nurtures and regenerates deserts into grasslands, and changes the geography of the planet and the history of civilisations. Its spirit is multidimensional and can be present as ice and steam. By its very nature water suggests multiplicity, hybridity, translatability, and fluidity.

This study uses the phenomenology of water as a changeable substance to explore other areas of subversion in the works of the three writers. For instance, it examines how Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy selectively use the regional vernacular in their three works to establish a strong Indian identity, even while narrating their stories in English. In its exploratory function, the dissertation unveils the contextual value of re-employing disempowered indigenous languages to invoke the power of traditional faith. This is especially evident in my explanation of how Ghosh and Mehta achieve syncretism of animism, Hinduism, and Islam to re-member the divine feminine in the sacrality of river stories of the Narmada and the Ganga. In A River Sutra the main Narrator (the unnamed Hindu manager at the rest house), and the secondary narrator (his friend the Muslim mullah Tariq Mia), and all six narratives unfold through their respective eyes. In The

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Hungry Tide we are presented with the oral hybrid tradition of the Bon Bibi cult, which is an original synthesis of animism, Hinduism, and Islam, conveyed through Arabic and a dialect of Bengali. In The God of Small Things caste and gender are inextricably linked in the dance of daring by Ammu and Velutha, who are exceptional beings at the margins, crossing borders and polluting the circles of containment, drawn and enforced for centuries by a ruthless patriarchy.

This dissertation has also problematised the issue of representation by looking at the transformative power of water in the myths of Indian goddesses through the use of Western theoretical paradigms and French feminist theory, to address the central question of resistance by the feminine to patriarchal control. This idea of feminine resistance finds empathetic treatment in anthropologist Johann Bachofen’s explication of the idea of the Mutterrecht, Mother Right, and Robert Graves’ conceptualisation of the White Goddess. Both examine the strategic ways an expansive patriarchy attempted to seize power from matriarchal goddesses and societies. Graves, for instance, argues that in late prehistoric times, throughout Europe and the East, matriarchal cultures worshipping a supreme goddess and recognising male gods only as her son, consort, or sacrificial victim, were subordinated by “aggressive proponents of patriarchy, who deposed women from their positions of authority, elevated the Goddess’ male consorts into positions of divine supremacy and reconstructed myths and rituals to conceal what had taken place.” Graves argues that this sort of patriarchal conquest has happened at several times.

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8 Graves, The White Goddess xi.
the postmodern French feminist, Luce Irigaray, it is precisely woman’s status as outsider, neither master nor slave,\(^9\) which gives her power to “upset the order of the dialectic,” to threaten the male members of the community through her unconscious, inarticulate presence. The Hegelian doctrine about women’s position in society is uncannily close to the Gandhian one, as expressed in *The Philosophy of Right*:

> . . . the difference in the physical characteristics of the two sexes has a rational basis and consequently acquires an intellectual and ethical significance . . . man has his actual and substantive life in the state, in learning and so forth, as well as in labour and struggle with the external world . . . Woman, on the other hand, has her substantive destiny in the family and to be imbued with family piety is her ethical frame of mind.\(^10\)

Hegel’s anxiety with female agency being chaotic, uncontrollable, and arbitrary is also noteworthy since it gives voice to the discomfiture caused by female indeterminacy to the male idea of order, as argued in this dissertation:

> When women hold the helm of government, the state is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions. Women are educated--who knows how?--as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. The

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status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion.\textsuperscript{11}

In the work of Patricia J. Mills, for instance, one finds a sustained opposition to any biological and reductionist basis for female difference, and an argument against the conception of woman’s necessary absorption in family life—both ancient and modern. In contrast, both Gandhi and Hegel perpetuated the domestication of women in their writings and their propaganda. Mills offers an example of just such a biologically grounded identification of sex and gender:

The process of mutual recognition in the Hegelian schema necessarily excludes woman. Hegel believes nature has assigned woman to the family, the sphere of first nature, and he keeps her imprisoned there on nature’s behalf. Whereas man finds a self-conscious reality or second nature in community, woman remains in the sphere of immediate biological life.\textsuperscript{12}

The debate on the role of goddesses in shaping the feminine ideal during colonial and newly independent India is vividly represented in historical, sociological, and cultural studies’ scholarship. Historians Christopher Pinney and Sumathi Ramaswamy have carried out extensive studies on the significance of the employment of the image of the goddess during the struggle for independence in India. Kajri Jain has raised important questions about the overwhelming popularity of the printed image of the goddess as Bharat Mata in the bazaar art of calendars and posters during the first fifty years of the twentieth century. Jigna Desai has described the celluloid obsession with the idea of

\textsuperscript{11} See, Hegel, \textit{The Philosophy of Right}.

Mother India, that found expression in a unique genre of film in India during the halcyon
decades of Hindi cinema, with Bombay film studios raking in significant profits with
river goddess-based blockbusters like Jamna Par [Across the Jamna River, 1946], Nadiya
ke Par [Across the River, 1948], Sati Narmada [Chaste Narmada, 1950], Ganga Maiyya
[Mother Ganga, 1955], Mother India [1957], Ganga [1959, Bengali], Jis Desh Main
Ganga Behti Hai [The Country Through Which the Ganga Flows, 1960], Ganga Jamna
[1961], and Sangam [Confluence, of Ganga and Yamuna, 1964]. Newspapers like The
Times of India and The Statesman document that songs from these films were played
incessantly on state-run All India Radio during the year of their release.13

Scholars of Indian history and political culture who have devoted themselves to
unwrapping the vexed and fragile stratifications of gender and caste include Vijay
Agnew, Partha Chatterjee, Veena Das, Mahasweta Devi, Ranajit Guha, Geraldine
Hancock, Rama Joshi, Joanna Liddle, Vina Mazumdar, Partha Mitter, Sumit Sarkar,
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Susie Tharu. They have explored extensively these
gradations of gender and caste that inform narratives of “nationalisms” of India, and have
trained their sights on regional and national patterns of political emergence and use of the
divine feminine. Vina Mazumdar points out: “the most radical of the nineteenth-century
reformers had seen the subjugation of women as an instrument for perpetuating
Brahmanical domination in society.”14

However, it appears that the importance of gender has been surprisingly neglected
as a category of analysis in literary representations of river goddesses in postcolonial

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13 See, Jain, Gods in the Bazaa.; Pinney, “Photos of the Gods” 105-144; Ramaswamy,
“Visualizing India’s Geo-Body: Globes, Maps, Bodyscapes” 238; and Desai, Beyond Bollywood 26.
14 See, Vina Mazumdar, ed., Symbols of Power: Studies on the Political Status of Women in India
(Bombay: Allied, 1979).
Indian literature in English in order to explain the subtle complexities of women’s societal subordination at the hands of a male-dominated leadership during the struggle for independence. By re-envisioning the feminine as water, this study offers a new reconfiguration of the force of the divine feminine by returning to the subversive myths of the rivers Ganga, Narmada, and Meenachil, as an uncontainable force of fluidity in the works of the three activist-writers. Such a study has not been done before perhaps because of its subversive discourse which calls to question the hidden intent of such iconic nationalist figures as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in subduing the feminine. In my survey of literary criticism on the subject of gender and female subversion in the field of postcolonial fiction, I have not come across any mention of the divine feminine in the form of fluidity as river goddesses. Thus, to write about the fluidity and mobility of water as an irrepressible force of the feminine is to go to the heart of what causes fear and anxiety to masculinist power.

I argue that Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy eschew a simple bipolar paradigm of ancient myth and modern narrative of river goddesses, and attempt to break the silent covenant with patriarchal nationalism in their works. The river goddesses in each of the works of fiction has a function as a catalyst for the imagination, using the idea of the river as a feminine force to push and to open up the boundaries of the imagination. In this context, Susie Tharu writes that women were constructed as a “heraldic device” during the Indian freedom struggle. Tharu argues that: “Partially in response to the British focus on women, the emergent nationalist movement chose to create the image of the Indian
woman who was not socially victimised but voluntarily chose the path of suffering and death in order to save her people.\(^{15}\)

There is a large repository of rare primary documents that are proof of the subjugating efforts of the patriarchal leadership of the time in the form of letters and articles that were written to the male leaders by the feisty women who used their position in the women’s wing of the independence struggle to talk back to the centre.\(^{16}\) Geraldine Hancock recalls that when Jawaharlal Nehru critiqued the women’s organisations for being “superficial” in their analysis of women’s problems, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, a socialist, nationalist, and leader of the women’s movement, suggested he be more charitable. Kamala Devi doubted that he truly understood the social prejudice women encountered in their lives and the world they were trying to change.\(^{17}\)

Another way to read this postcolonial project is to unpack the strategy of these writers to re-member the pre-colonial myths of origin of the fluid river goddesses. In the conflation of the imaginary chastity of the mother goddess in her multiple manifestations—including but not limited to the River Ganga—with the exalted position forced upon the young Indian widow, for instance, by political figureheads such as Mahatma Gandhi, there was a concerted effort by the patriarchy in India to control and coerce women, especially their sexual agency. The patriarchal goal was to manipulate female agency to promote a brand of nationalism that bordered on religious zeal and subjugation through

\(^{15}\) Tharu, “Tracing Savitri’s Pedigree” 260-263.
\(^{17}\) Geraldine Forbes, Women in Colonial India: Essays on Politics, Medicine, and Historiography (New Delhi: Chronicle, 2005) 34.
forced paradigms of chastity. In a letter to Navjivan Patrika in 1924 Gandhi had described what Pappachi (Ammu’s father) and Chacko (Ammu’s brother) rigorously implemented as “women’s rules” on Ammu in The God of Small Things. Gandhi said, “The attempt to end the practice of widowhood is injurious to religion.” Gandhi’s advice to widows urges self-control as a way of upholding his vision of a patriarchal Hindu society: “Look upon your widowhood as sacred and live a life worthy of it. There are many instances of such widows in Hindu society.”

This dissertation opens up several avenues for discussions about the representations of the river goddesses at the hands of the three postcolonial writers, who embed discourses of transformation, hybridity, changeability, and even appropriation, in their themes that mirror the ambiguous phenomenology of water. For instance, this study explains the inter-caste relationship between Ammu and Velutha in The God of Small Things; the interclass relationship between Rima and Nitin Bose, and the inter-religious dynamics between the sacred and profane worlds in the single character of the archaeologist Professor Shankar who also metamorphoses into the ascetic Naga Baba in A River Sutra; and the transcultural relationship between Piya and Fokir in The Hungry Tide. Particularly in the case of Piya and Fokir I suggest that their relationship is a “grafting of the past on to the contemporary.”

Finally, this project, written from a diasporic Indian woman’s perspective, presents a new trajectory in postcolonial scholarship to configure representations of rivers as feminine spaces in the fiction of Indian writers. It leaves in its wake a direction that

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18 I refer to two letters written by Gandhi in 1924, published in the newspaper Navjivan Patrika, now in the collection of the National Gandhi Museum & Library, Rajghat, New Delhi.
19 Ibid.
20 See Chapter One of this dissertation
new scholars in the field of World Literature, as well as Postcolonial Studies, Gender Studies, and History may wish to explore in works of contemporary South Asian fiction such as Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, or Proma Tagore’s poetry, among others which show an increasing engagement with images of water. This project might also intrigue a new generation of scholars to dive deep into the river myths of goddesses and break free of the constraining myths of prevailing cultural norms, and so embark on their rediscovery of how myths of the feminine disrupt patriarchal cultural forms. Perhaps the poem “accounting for colonial time,” dedicated to Toni Morrison, by Vancouver-based Canadian-South Asian poet Proma Tagore—is a fitting beginning to the new collective scholarship that might seek out the feminine force of rivers in contemporary texts:

it was only a river
that separated the present from past,
that distanced one state from another,
that marked one kind of un-freedom from something different.
but if someone were to ask whether that river was big or small,
the river might answer that its time cannot be measured,
its journey still not over,

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and besides,

the past was never distant, and

that river was never only

a river.  

Rivers are capturing the cultural imagination and political thought, now more than ever, as water becomes a scarce commodity and rivers become violent sites of contestation. The three novels are preoccupied with ways in which river myths are used to negate a culture’s or an individual’s alterity. As we have seen in this dissertation, the three works represent attempts to subvert or disrupt monologic narratives. The three offer alternatives to colonial or hegemonic discursive practices. Despite the commonalities, the novels approach myths of the river goddesses in markedly different ways. Ghosh, Mehta, and Roy use myth to connect the force of the divine feminine with the contemporary woman, to search for a space of possibility in a postcolonial nation—a space where our mobile identities are freed and transformed from the incessant labelling of a divided world of master and subject, coloniser and colonised, and self and other, and where water is the discursive continuum.

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Providing a glossary actually complicates and destabilises both the host language and the one in which the original is being translated. This is one of the unresolved issues about translation--is there more to be lost, or more to be gained in providing a glossary? It seems to me that there is more to be gained, as Salman Rushdie and Homi Bhabha have argued (and as I have demonstrated in this dissertation).

As Jacques Derrida suggests, there occurs a kind of mutual interference in the endeavour to explicate the meaning of a foreign word. Once we realise that there is another language, we must agree that there is another way of thinking about the world. But some scholars argue that translation might also reduce the complexities of a language or a culture to a simple, translatable word. Either way, there is something new, something discomfitingly attractive about wanting to get to the meaning of an unfamiliar term. And that is what I imagine is challenging about translation. Since this is a postcolonial exploration, I felt it was fitting to cause some discomfort to our normative channels of thinking.

Adivasi: Name given to the aboriginal people of India. The word adivasi denotes traditional autonomy that was disrupted during British colonial rule of India, and was not restored. The Indian government has recognised the adivasis as “scheduled tribes” who are eligible for affirmative action relief.

Agni: God of Fire, and acceptor of sacrifices, in Hindu mythology. Stays forever young and immortal because fires are lit everyday.

Apsara: Water sprites that emerged from the churning of the ocean of milk, and became celestial dancers for the gods.

Arjuna: One of the five Pandava brothers in the Hindu epic Mahabharata. Arjuna was a great warrior-archer who was counselled by Lord Krishna to wage a just war against his enemy, the Kauravas. Referred to in The God of Small Things.
| **Ammooma:** Grandmother, in Malayalam, and referenced in *The God of Small Things.* |  |
| **Asura:** Demon or demon-like in nature, asuras sought power and were opposed by the gods (devas). |  |
| **Bhakti:** Derived from the Sanskrit verb root bhaj, which means “to share in,” or “to belong to,” or “worship in.” *A River Sutra* refers to the Bhakti movement, which spread across central and northern India in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries CE due to the efforts of saints and teachers such as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Vallabha, Surdas, Meera Bai, Kabir, Tulsidas, Ravidas, Namdeo, and Tukaram. As a result, there was an outpouring of devotional literature, prose and poetry. These saints preached that people should avoid caste and ritual, and instead demonstrate their love for god. In this way, Bhakti was closely related to Sufi philosophy. (See entry on Sufism, below). |  |
| **Bharat Lakshmi:** Goddess of Prosperity of Bharat, or India. |  |
| **Bharat Mata:** Mother India, representations of whom were used in art, song, literature, and cinema during, and after, the Indian freedom struggle. |  |
| **Bhil:** Tribal people of Central India, who reside in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan states, and are considered scheduled tribes by the Indian government. |  |
| **Brahmacharya:** The four stages of life in Hindu philosophy apply to those who follow the householder’s path. The first stage of life is bachelorhood or brahmacharya. In the second stage, known as grihastha, one marries, raises a family, develops a career, and attends to household duties. Stage three, vanaprastha or aranyak begins when one’s hair turns grey, and the children have grown up so they can assume responsibility for the home. At this stage, the householder and his wife retire to the forest. During the final stage, sanyasa, one becomes a renunciate, free from worldly obligations. The unnamed narrator in *A River Sutra* is at the vanaprastha stage. |  |
| **Brahmin:** The uppermost priestly class in the Indian caste system. Under it are Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (labourers). |  |
| **Brahminical:** Pertaining to Brahmins, or a study of Brahmin scriptures. |  |
| **Dalit:** Name for a group of people who are considered untouchable even though the caste system has been abolished in India. The word dalit is Marathi, and means “crushed,” or “suppressed.” |  |
| **Devi:** Devi means the great goddess, and has its root in Dev, which means divine—as in the Greek deus. The male divine in Sanskrit is deva and the female is devi. The image of the Devi is represented in the form of the warrior goddess Durga, the Great Goddess. |  |
Devi Mahatmya: A Hindu text depicting the victory of the Great Goddess Devi over the demon Mahisasura. This fifth to sixth century CE text is the earliest sustained written narrative in Sanskrit dealing with the Great Goddess.

Dharmasastra: Hindu religious law and code of conduct.

Durga: Embodiment of the creative feminine force, Durga is a form of Devi; she is depicted as having ten arms, astride a lion and carrying weapons. This Warrior Goddess, also known as Parvati, is Siva’s wife.

Durga Saptashati: A foundational Hindu text consisting of seven hundred verses on (or to) Durga.

Ganga: The Ganges, a central presence in The Hungry Tide, known to Hindus as Ganga, is a major river in India starting in the western Himalayas in Uttarakhand state and flowing into the Sunderbans delta in the Bay of Bengal.

Gond: A four million strong tribe, the Gonds are the largest tribal community in Central India. They are spread across Madhya Pradesh, eastern Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, northern Andhra Pradesh and western Orissa. They are referred to in A River Sutra.

Grihastha: See entry on Brahmacharya (above).

Harijan: A term given by Mahatma Gandhi to India’s untouchables: he said it was wrong to call human beings untouchable. The new name he gave them, Harijan, means Children of God and is widely used in India.

Idi appam: Popular breakfast and dinner item in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and in areas of Sri Lanka, it is made of rice flour or wheat flour, salt, and water. It is served with a curry made of potato, or egg, or fish, or meat, along with coconut chutney, and sometimes with sweetened coconut milk in Kerala’s Malabar area. Mentioned in The God of Small Things.

Indra: Lord Indra is the King of the Gods, or Devas, and Lord of Heaven or Svargaloka in the Hindu pantheon, as well as the God of Storms and Rain.

Kali: The Hindu Goddess representing eternal energy, her name Kali derives from Kala (black, time, death). Siva is known as Kala (of eternal time), and Kali, his consort, denotes the same. She is another manifestation of Devi, the Great Goddess.

Kama: Denotes pleasure, sexual fulfillment, desire, and enjoyment. Hinduism regards kama among the three of four goals of life--the others are duty (dharma), worldliness (artha), and salvation (moksha). Mentioned in A River Sutra.
Kamasutra: Written by Vatsyayana, this Sanskrit text documents human sexual behaviour, and offers practical advice. Historians believe it was collected in its present form in the second century CE.

Kanji and Meen: Malayali cuisine mentioned in The God of Small Things, kanji is rice porridge, and meen is fish, usually in the form of a meen curry, or fish curry made with red chilli.

Karttikeya: The eldest son of Siva and Parvati, Karttikeya is the main god of war of the Hindus, and is also known as Skanda and Subramanya and Murugan. He replaces both Indra and Agni, who in the early stages of Hinduism were considered gods of war.

Kathakali: Originating in Kerala in the seventeenth century CE, Kathakali is a highly stylised dance known for elaborate makeup and costumes of dancers.

Krishna: The eighth avatar of Lord Visnu, Krishna is considered a Supreme Being, and the Lord of Yogis, and is worshipped widely by Hindus. Krishna delivered the Bhagavat Gita sermon to Arjuna on the battlefield, urging him to fight his enemies.

Lakshmi: Revered as the goddess of wealth, prosperity, wisdom, generosity, and courage, Lakshmi is the consort of Visnu. Lakshmi marries Rama, in her incarnation as Sita, and Krishna as Rukmini.

Lingam: Siva, the Lord of creation and destruction and the source of male energy in the universe, is worshipped in many forms. In his divine and universal role, he is worshipped in the form of a lingam, or phallus, which represents the regenerative power of the universe. Lingam, or linga, means “mark,” or “sign.” Central to the myth of the River Narmada, Siva is frequently invoked in A River Sutra.

Mahadev/Mahadeo: Another name for Siva. (See the entry on Siva, below).

Mahisasura Mardini: Mahisasura Mardini is the name of Devi, the Great Goddess, the Slayer of the Demon Mahisasura, and the female principle in the universe. Unable to bear the cruelty of the demon king Mahisasura (half man-half buffalo), the gods appealed to Visnu to help them. The trinity of Brahma, Visnu, and Siva together created a powerful female goddess with ten arms known as the great goddess to slay the demon.

Mahisasura: Born of a father who was king of the demons, and a mother who was a princess cursed to be a buffalo, Mahisasura could change form between human and buffalo. Because of his intense meditation, Brahma granted him a boon of being undefeatable in battle by man or god. As a result, Mahisasura began tormenting the gods in heaven, and people on earth, and drove all the gods out of heaven. The gods then decided to create a female power to vanquish the demon. (See previous entry on Mahisasura Mardini).
Mangala Kavyas: A popular narrative in medieval Bengali literature during the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries CE were the Mangala Kavyas verse tales, celebrating the power and munificence of divine beings. Mangala Kavyas were poems associated with Siva, and with a local Bengali deity, Manasa, the goddess of snakes, or Sitala, the goddess of smallpox. These poems vary in length from 200 lines to several thousand.

Manusmriti: Manusmriti is a part of the Dharmasastra, known as the Laws of Manu in English. The text is a discourse given by Manu, the father of mankind, on the law of social classes.

Meenachil: Arundhati Roy in The God of Small Things refers to this river as Meenachal. The Meenachil, a seventy-eight kilometre long river, originates in the Western Ghats, flows through the Kottayam district of Kerala state, and empties itself into the Vembanad Lake. The Meenachil, too, has her mythology closely linked to Siva: the name Meenachil comes from Goddess Meenakshi of Madurai, the warrior goddess of the ruling Karthas of Meenachil. Meenakshi became Meenachi and later Meenachil. According to various legends this river starts from the kamandalu (holy water vessel) of the sage Gauna.

Meenakshi: This goddess is an avatar of the goddess Parvati, and is a consort of Siva. She is worshipped mainly by South Indians, and is one of the few female deities in South India to have a major temple devoted to her in the Meenaskhi Temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

Naga: Sanskrit word for a deity or entity that takes the form of a great serpent in Hinduism and Buddhism. The Vedic god of storms, Varuna, is considered the King of Nagas. Nagas reside in Patala, the seventh of the nether dimensions, and they are the children of Kashyapa and Kadru. Prominent nagas are Manasa, Sesa, and Vasuki. Nagas are frequently invoked in A River Sutra.

Narmada: The Narmada River is 1,250 kilometres long with its source in Madhya Pradesh, central India, and flows west between the Satpura and Vindhya mountain ranges through Gujarat state to the Gulf of Khambat. Goddess Narmada’s descent is also initiated by Siva’s intervention. A legend relates that a severe drought gripped the earth. The gods and men appealed to Siva for help. Siva began a severe penance along with his wife Parvati. Perspiration flowed from his body in such quantities that it became a river that cascaded down the slopes. It then assumed the form of a woman who propitiated Siva. He blessed her, saying that she would be holy and inexhaustible.

Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Agitation): A resistance movement in India that aims to prevent the government from constructing a series of 3,200 dams across the Narmada River (that
flows through Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat), which will wash away the homes of millions of villagers.

Paravan: A person who is an untouchable, and outside the caste system, such as Velutha in *The God of Small Things*.

Parvati: A consort of Siva, Parvati is the mother of the gods Ganesha, and Skanda Karttikeya. Parvati is considered a representation of Sakti, and the mother goddess, or the Devi. The chief attribute of Parvati is her gentle aspect.

Puranas: Puranas are literary texts written in Sanskrit verse, whose composition dates from the fourth century BCE to about 1,000 CE, post-Vedas. The word Purana means “old.” The Skandapurana is one of the eighteen Puranas, and is christened after the god Skanda.

Rama: The central hero of *The Ramayana*, one of the two great Indian epics. Also known as Ramachandra, Rama is the seventh avatar of Visnu, and is a legendary king of Ayodhya. He is the husband of Sita, who is considered an avatar of Lakshmi. Besides India, Rama’s legend is popular in religion, art, and culture in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Ramayana: This Hindu epic consists of 24,000 verses in seven books and tells the story of Rama, incarnation of Visnu, whose wife Sita is abducted by Ravana, and is rescued by Rama.

Sakti: Denotes the sacred force, the primordial cosmic energy representing the dynamism that sustains the universe. Sakti is the personification of the divine feminine creative power, often known as the divine mother.

Sahara Parivar: Amitav Ghosh refers to the Sahara India Parivar, the corporate conglomerate that was considering developing a resort in the Sunderbans despite its potential to damage the ecology. The business group has interests in finance, infrastructure, housing, media, entertainment, consumer products, manufacturing, services, and trading.

Saivite: Are the followers of Siva, who hold the belief that Siva is the creator, preserver, and destroyer of the universe. Saivites are spread in South Asia, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Sannyasa: See entry on Brahmacharya (above).

Sati: A feminised form of the word “sat,” or truth, Sati is another name for the Great Goddess, but *not* to be confused with the practice of sati, or widow burning. This was a funeral practice among some Hindu communities where a widowed woman would immolate herself on her husband’s funeral pyre, either willingly or by force. The practice has been banned in India. The word sati comes from the original name of the goddess Sati, who immolated herself because she could not bear the humiliation of her living husband Siva by her father Daksha.
Siva: Meaning the auspicious one, Siva is a major Hindu deity who is the destroyer or transformer, and is considered a supreme being. Siva is linked to the myths of creation of all three rivers studied in this dissertation.

Sita: The wife of Rama, Sita is considered an avatar of Lakshmi. Ravana (depicted as the demon-king of Lanka in the Ramayana) abducted Sita, and after her rescue she was put through a humiliating test of fire to prove her fidelity to Rama. Of course, Sita passed the test.

Sufi/Sufism: Sufism emerged as a mystic tradition between 661-750 CE. It is considered an inner, mystical dimension of Islam. A practitioner is called a Sufi and seeks remembrance of god through love of god, and asceticism.

Sunderbans: The largest delta and mangrove forest in the world. Three great rivers, the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna flow through the Sunderbans, and empty themselves into the Bay of Bengal. The Sunderbans is intersected by tributaries, creeks, channels, and shifting islands. It is the habitat of man-eating tigers, orcaellas, crocodiles, and species of snakes, crabs, and birds found nowhere else. The Hungry Tide is located in the Sunderbans.

Swadeshi: The Swadeshi Movement emanated in Bengal in 1905, and was the most successful pre-Gandhian resistance effort under Aurobindo Ghosh, Veer Savarkar, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Lala Lajpat Rai. The movement implemented an economic strategy to remove the British from power in India, and raise the level of India’s economy through the policies of swadeshi, or self-sufficiency, by boycotting British goods, and reviving the production of locally made products through indigenous production methods.

Swaraj: Denoting Mahatma Gandhi’s conception of Indian independence from British rule, the Swaraj movement implied governance by self-rule through community-building and political decentralisation. Under Swaraj, Gandhi urged Indians to reject British political, economic, legal, and educational systems. In 1917, Gandhi asked Indians to sign a petition demanding swaraj.

Tantra/Tantric: Under the tantra philosophy the main deity of worship is Sakti, the female force. The universe is considered a divine drama of Sakti and Siva. Tantra consists of scriptures and ritual forms of worship of Sakti in order to gain liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Tyaga: Refers to an inward renunciation of attachment to the fruits of labour, to the action itself, or to its personal initiation. Inner detachment is only possible when a person meditates sincerely and surrenders to the will of god. A River Sutra explores the philosophy of renunciation.
Vaisnavite: The followers of Vaisnavism are known as Vaisnavite. Vaisnavism is a Hindu tradition of worshipping Visnu, or his incarnations Rama and Krishna, as the supreme god. Their beliefs and practice of Bhakti and Bhakti Yoga are based on the Upanishads, Vedas, and Puranas. (See entry on Bhakti, above).

Vanaprastha: See entry on Brahmacharya (above).

Vano: Tribals living in villages on the banks of the River Narmada, in A River Sutra. The Vano believe they once ruled a great snake kingdom until their defeat by the gods of the Aryans.

Varuna: In the Vedas, Varuna is the God of the Sky and the Water, and a God of Law and the Underworld.

Vedas: The Vedas are a large body of texts originating in ancient India, composed between 1500-400 BCE. In Sanskrit veda means knowledge, and vedic texts constitute the oldest use of Sanskrit in literature. According to Hindu tradition, the Vedas are “not of human agency,” and are supposed to have been directly revealed. Thus they are called sruti (what is heard).

Vedic: Pertaining to the Vedas.

Visnu: The second god (the preserver) in the Hindu trinity. The others are Brahma (the creator), and Siva (the creator-destroyer). So far, Visnu has reincarnated nine times to save the world, and Hindus believe that he will return for a tenth time.

Yama: The Vedic tradition believes that Yama was the first mortal who died, reached heaven, and became the king of the departed. Also known as Yamaraj, he is the Lord of Death, and the nether world.

Yoni: A symbol of goddess Sakti, Yoni is the female creative force in the universe. Yoni denotes the womb, and is associated with the lingam, which is Siva’s icon.
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