THE COUNTRY AND THE VILLAGE: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE RURAL IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURES

by

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Graduate Department of English and the Collaborative Program in South Asian
Studies
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ABSTRACT

Twentieth-century Indian and Sri Lankan literatures (in English, in particular) have shown a strong tendency towards conceptualising the rural and the village within the dichotomous paradigms of utopia and dystopia. Such representations have consequently cast the village in idealized (pastoral) or in realist (counter-pastoral/dystopic) terms. In Chapters One and Two, I read together Mohandas Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* (1908) and Leonard Woolf’s *The Village in the Jungle* (1913) and argue that Gandhi and Woolf can be seen at the head of two important, but discrete, ways of reading the South Asian village vis-à-vis utopian thought, and that at the intersection of these two ways lies a rich terrain for understanding the many forms in which later twentieth-century South Asian writers chose to re-create city-village-nation dialectics. In this light, I examine in Chapter Three the work of Raja Rao (*Kanthapura*, 1938) and O. V. Vijayan (*The Legends of Khasak*, 1969) and in Chapter Four the writings of Martin Wickramasinghe (*Gamperaliya*, 1944) and Punyakante Wijenaike (*The Waiting Earth*, 1966) as providing a re-visioning of Gandhi’s and Woolf’s ideas of the rural as a site for civic and national transformation. I conclude by examining in Chapter Five Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2005) as emblematic of a recent turn in South Asian fiction centred on the rural where the village embodies a “heterotopic” space
that critiques and offers a conceptual alternative to the categorical imperatives of utopia and
dystopia. I use Michel Foucault’s notion of the “heterotopia” to re-evaluate the utopian
dimension in these novels. Although Foucault himself under-theorized the notion of
heterotopia and what he did say connected the idea to urban landscapes and imaginaries, we
may yet recuperate from his formulations a “third space” of difference that provides an
opportunity to rethink the imperatives of utopia in literature and helps understand the rural in
twentieth-century South Asian writing in new ways.
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They say completing a thesis often ushers in a “post-partum depression,” or at the very least, a form of ontological unmooring from which it is very hard to recover; and true recovery lies in a head-on plunge into the epistemological circuits of a postdoc or the pedagogical conundrums of an assistant professorship. Phew. Now that I am in this delicious cusp between a completed project and an uncertain future, I look back on these years and I find it hard to come up with anything close to “partum” or “depression.” When it comes to the former, the feminist in me shrinks from the perils of analogical thinking: after all, motherhood is really serious stuff. As for the latter, these past few years have been so wonderful, so exciting, and such an adventure that things could only get better from hereon!

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Introduction

A Proper Place: Theorizing the Rural

If we want freedom . . . we will have to give the villages their *proper place*.

(Gandhi, *Harijan*, 1940; my emphasis)

Even as contemporary academic investigations into the urban space and the city confirm the global mixing of the world into multicultural units (“megacities” characterized by the flow of immigrants, outsourced labour, amalgamated cash inflows and outflows, open foreign investment), my thesis visits the village and the rural imaginary in twentieth-century South Asian writing in English and translation. In particular, I propose to look at Indian and Sri Lankan writing that emerged in and out of the colonial experience, and of the Gandhian politics of *swaraj* and village economics in the case of India, and out of dominant Sinhala and Buddhist literary and cultural traditions in the case of Sri Lanka. In such writing, the agrestic and the rural promised the space for an organic subcontinental interiority (both psychological and spatial), one that was to trenchantly rebut the colonialist, masculinist, and industrialist forces of capitalist modernity that swept the Indian subcontinent in the wake of the British empire. Gandhi called on India to accord villages their proper place but what is the proper place for villages in the twenty-first century? Do we conceive of village life as a stage or phase in socio-economic development, from whence one might imagine progress to a city, and then a nation? How has the village in South Asia endured? How has the rural been appropriated by writers in India and Sri Lanka over the decades since Independence? What place does the rural have
in South Asian modernist writing of the twentieth-century? These are some of the questions that drive my project.

Rural studies have figured prominently in sociological literature on the Indian subcontinent. British administrators of the nineteenth century pioneered scholarly investigations into villages in India: Baden-Powell wrote about autonomous self-sufficient villages; Sir Henry Maine developed a theory of primitive communism of property on the basis of his study of Indian villages; and Sir Charles Metcalfe (reformulating an idea that Thomas Munro first coined in 1806) famously wrote, in 1830, in a Minute for the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company: “India’s village communities are little republics, having nearly every thing they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolution, but the village community remains the same. This union of village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India” (qtd. in Ludden, 161). This was a reading of India that came to influence Karl Marx greatly. The “static village” is, thus, a point made by almost all the scholars associated with the British Raj (Saraswati, “Project-Village India”). In contrast, post-Independence studies on the village in India tended in great part to be studies of caste and social stratification, and a host of British, American, and Indian scholars re-oriented the field towards understanding the village as a dynamic space of multiple internal and external connections and associations. Prominent among these scholars were anthropologists and social scientists like F. G. Bailey, Kathleen Gough, William H. Newell, David G. Mandelbaum, G. Morris Carstairs.
S.C. Dube, M.N. Srinivas, and N. K. Bose. Where former studies under the Raj tended to study villages according to people’s relationship with the land and on the basis of prevailing systems of land ownership, tenure, and bequeathal, these later studies focussed on the cultural life of villages: “the wisdom tradition, the value system, and the local ontology that has been handed down from times immemorial. . . [its] complex system of cultural structures identified with art and architecture, religion and specialized knowledge, human behaviour, environmental conditions, and so on” (Saraswati, “Project-Village India”).

In Sri Lanka, as early as the sixteenth century, Portuguese captain Joao Ribeiro noted the hierarchical and functional organization of villages in Ceylon (Mahroof 3). Early work on twentieth-century Sri Lanka focused on the market societies that emerged from the “plantation capitalism” (Nira Wickramasinghe 6) of the Portuguese (1505-1658), the Dutch (1658-1796), and then, with greater momentum, under British rule (1796-1948). The work of American anthropologists B. Ryan and Nur Yalman in the 1940s and 1950s paved the way for the studies of Sri Lankan scholars Stanley Tambiah, Gananath Obeyesekere, and Michael Roberts. While caste was a ruling theme in the work of many twentieth-century studies of India, it remained a comparatively secondary theoretical issue in anthropological studies of Sri Lankan agrarian societies. This is because, in general, much anthropological work on Sri Lanka was concerned with the documentation and analysis of rural change, particularly in Sinhala Buddhist areas (Nissan 6). As I will discuss more fully in Chapter Four, this focus on the rural, in particular on the paddy-centred and religious (expressly Buddhist) dimensions of village life was to influence numerous Sinhala writers, and the work of Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976), the
doyen of Sinhala literature, presents, in many ways, a literary equivalent to the anthropological interest shown in rural Ceylonese history and traditions.

A cultural understanding of villages is, then, vital for comprehending the ways in which the rural has featured in the works of Indian and Sri Lankan writers. As I will show, writers in the Indian subcontinent have shown a strong tendency towards conceptualising the rural and the village within the dichotomous paradigms of utopia and dystopia. Such representations have consequently cast the village in idealized (pastoral) or in realist (counter-pastoral/dystopic) terms. In my dissertation, I focus on twentieth-century literatures of India and Sri Lanka and examine representative texts from the two countries (two in translation) that rehearse configurations of the village along the lines of utopia/dystopia as well as urban/rural, and national/local, configurations that recent fiction from the subcontinent has disassembled through the construction of what I will call “rural heterotopia.”

While the histories and cultures of the countries making up “South Asia” are linked, there is also vast internal sociocultural and religious diversity. This becomes particularly significant to an understanding of utopia: in India, utopian ideas emerged in twentieth-century literature largely as a result of Gandhian politics against British rule, and Gandhi’s various ashrams across the country served as blueprints of the kind of political utopia he imagined within local villages. Such utopian communities, based on the principles of sarvodaya (the rise of all) and swaraj (self-rule), defied caste boundaries, sought to eschew the industrialism of the cities, and, by creating in the village a site for

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1 Throughout this thesis, I will be using “utopia,” “dystopia,” and “heterotopia” as collective nouns whose singular or plural status will be defined by the context (and use of verb form). In this, I am following the example set by Kevin Hetherington’s well-known monograph The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Othering.
change and (nationalist) agency, provided the impetus to many writers to re-imagine a free new India. The village-centred writings of Premchand in Hindi and Raja Rao in English are good examples of the utopian impulse in early twentieth-century Indian writing. In Sri Lanka, conceptions of utopia have tended to bear explicit historical connections with Buddhism and the Buddhist past of Sri Lanka’s majority population, the Sinhalese, so that twentieth-century literary representations of rural utopia drew their power not only from the epiphenomenal effects of Indian nationalism but also from the cultural and historical significance of Buddhist doctrines and practices in the everyday lives of the Sinhalese. A large number of Sinhala language writers, led by Martin Wickramasinghe, projected on to the rural the possibility for reclaiming a pre-colonial indigenous subjectivity unsullied by colonial inequities. The village was an integral trope in such works in which a powerful counterdiscourse to the Manichean politics of the colonial metropolis emerged, one that reasserted in conceptions of rural utopia an autochthony against which the colonial present could be depicted as dystopic. I argue in the following chapters for a need to separate this kind of writing from conceptions of utopia and the utopian that can still be meaningful for multicultural collectivities, and I propose that the terms homotopia and homotopian be used to understand the essentialist and homogenizing imperatives of such writing as Rao’s Kanthapura and Wickramasinghe’s Gamperaliya.

My thesis begins with Mohandas Gandhi’s seminal treatise Hind Swaraj (HS) and Leonard Woolf’s novel The Village in the Jungle (VJ), a product of his seven-year stay in Ceylon as a colonial administrator. Woolf’s anthropological novel and Gandhi’s fictionalized manifesto may seem to be an unlikely (albeit, as I will argue, a rather
heroic) pair to study together, but it is revealing how much the two share in terms of a critique of colonial modernity. Gandhi’s Gujarati original was written in 1908 and was promptly banned by the British government for fear of sedition, after which Gandhi himself translated the book into English in 1910. Woolf’s novel was published at the Hogarth Press he founded with his wife, Virginia, in 1913, after a seven-year long stay in Ceylon, where he served as a colonial administrator for the Empire. Written, then, a few years apart, both works are centrally concerned with notions of colonial collectivity, and especially with the village as a unit of social organization in South Asia. Woolf’s role as a colonial officer intimately informs his vision of the village, and the novel becomes a remarkable document of the times, extraordinary when one considers Woolf was only 24 when he first enrolled as a cadet in the Ceylon Civil Service, spending a formative seven years in Kandy, Colombo, and finally Hambantota in the south of Ceylon. It is from this experience that he fashioned his vision of rural coloniality that forms the backdrop of VJ and Stories from the East, a collection of short stories based on his Ceylon days. These were published after his return to England, his marriage to Virginia Stephen and resignation from the Civil Service, marking 1912 as an eventful year in Woolf’s life. At this point, he was just 32 years old. To this “set” of writings also belong the letters Woolf exchanged with close friend, fellow-Apostle, and later luminary of the Bloomsbury group, Lytton Strachey; the meticulously annotated journal he kept (under orders of the then Governor-General as part of imperial policy) while serving between 1908 and 1911 as Assistant Government Agent in the Hambantota district (later published in 1963 as Ceylon Diaries); and his personal diary entries that would eventually become Growing (1961), the second part of his five-volume autobiography.
In Sri Lanka, the impact of Woolf’s novel has been vast and significant. Yasmine Gooneratne posits that “the novel holds a central place in the English literature of Ceylon as the first great (if not quite the first) work of creative art to emerge in modern times from the experience of local living” (3). Regi Siriwardena notes in his 1979 essay on Woolf that on reading W. Robson’s obituary article after Woolf’s death which did not so much as mention VJ, “listing even his minor accomplishments in gardening and cookery,” he had written a letter to the *New Statesman,*

. . . remarking that the neglect of Woolf’s novel by English readers had always surprised me; that many of us in Sri Lanka thought much more highly of the book; and . . . that it was a novel unique in the English literature of the colonial era, since Woolf had succeeded in doing what none of his contemporaries, not even Kipling or Conrad or Forster, had attempted—to get inside the skins of Asian peasants. (qtd. in Gooneratne 253)

The novel also received wide praise from Arnold Toynbee and Kingsley Amis, and in 1947 a Sinhalese translation by A.P. Gunaratna, *Baddegama,* confirmed the original’s genius, “its closeness to popular idiom, to the habitual rhythms of thought and expression” (Gooneratne 2), in such a way as to ensure that both in translation and in English, it has “become virtually a classic of contemporary Sinhala literature” (Siriwardena, qtd. in Gooneratne 257). Considered in this fashion, the novel then did not quite sink into critical oblivion, as Anindyo Roy laments (*Civility* 150), but, despite the

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2 See *The Life of Kingsley Amis* by Zachary Leader and Toynbee’s *A Study of History,* Vol. 10, where Toynbee places Woolf in the august company of Herodotus, Tolstoy and Victor Hugo, men he rates highly for their excellent ability to weave the literary and the political.
comparative slimness of Woolf’s corpus of creative fiction, came into the purview of a few intellectuals where it ranked among the very best. Woolf’s work also set the tone, in many ways, for much of the writing in English that was to follow in Sri Lanka. It was anti-canonical and counter-discursive in how it would not quite fit in with the Bloomsbury brand of intellectualism, and even while employing several of the themes and methods of what would come to characterize high modernist writing, with its discomfiting gaze on the colonial, and an emphasis on a Weltanschauung opposed in power and purpose to the modern/English, it remained rather on the periphery of the fashionable writing of its time. At the same time, it acquired a new canonical status within Sri Lanka, and became exemplary in the way in which it presented, with remarkable sympathy, a micro-narrative of the colonial presence in Sri Lanka. Like Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Woolf’s novel was a grim reminder of the dangers of the orientalizing gaze, even as it heroically presented, differently from the metaphysical and quasi-nihilistic vision of *A Passage*, possibilities for real encounters of affirmative mutual understanding.

Gandhi’s manifesto *Hind Swaraj (HS)* was written during an inspired ten-day period between 13 and 22 November 1909, on board the ship *Kildonan Castle*, when he was returning from England to South Africa “after what proved to be an abortive lobbying mission to London” (Parel xiv). The epiphanic nature of *HS* was important to Gandhi, who consistently reiterated the salience of his treatise to the Indian nationalistic

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3 See Gooneratne (5) for the discussion of the novel’s impact on T.S. Eliot’s modernist masterpiece *The Waste Land* and Judith Herz (81) for the connections between Woolf’s and Forster’s works.
project and to his larger vision of collective living. In a letter to Nehru dated October 5, 1945, Gandhi affirms unequivocally:

> I have said that I still stand by the system of Government envisaged in *Hind Swaraj*. These are not mere words. All the experience gained by me since 1908 when I wrote the booklet has confirmed the truth of my belief. . . . I am convinced if India is to attain true freedom, and through India the world also, then sooner or later, the fact must be recognized that people will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts, not in palaces. (*CW* 81: 319)

An incredulous Nehru – arch-opponent *and* arch-admirer of Gandhi to his last days – wrote back, quite outraged:

> I do not understand why a village should necessarily embody truth and non-violence . . . . A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent. (October 9, 1945, qtd. in appendix to *HS* 153)

While the salvos exchanged between India’s two most charismatic leaders make for a fascinating study in themselves, I am more interested in tracing lines of intersection between Gandhi’s critique of modernity, based on the bedrock of his vision of the village in India, and Leonard Woolf’s critique of imperialism, emerging from his vision of the Ceylonese village, both spawning important trajectories of intellectual thought within the subcontinent regarding nationality, citizenship and the formation of individual and collective subjectivity. Both Gandhi and Woolf proved influential, albeit in different ways, for other South Asian writers of the twentieth century who engaged with the
village as a literary trope and fashioned the rural as a site for social transformation. Where Woolf’s dystopic vision, at once empathetic and pessimistic, fails to provide a future for the Ceylonese village, in the grand march of modern progress, Gandhi insists on modernity’s death, utopically presenting the village as a unit of collective survival, outlasting the apocalyptic telos of urban progress. That these two thinkers chose to place their emphasis on the village, albeit dialectically opposed ways, itself points to the crucial need for a re-reading of the village as a central trope in twentieth-century critiques of modernity, colonialism, and nationalism.

In India, Gandhi’s vision of utopian rural collectivity made for a powerful confluence with the contemporary struggle for independence from British domination, a confluence that was to inspire a host of writers in the early twentieth century in crafting their own critiques of the Empire and visions of an independent nation-state. Indeed, Srinivasa Iyengar called this burst of literary creativity in Indian writing of the 1930s and 1940s “Gandhian literature” (271). Across the seas, Woolf’s novel set in a backward, impoverished Ceylonese village, came in contradistinction to the nationalizing impulses of a contemporary Buddhist revivalist movement that under the leadership of a charismatic monk, Anagarika Dharmapāla, invoked the twin idioms of the Sinhala language and the Buddhist religion for a militant, anticolonial construction of the nation as a Buddhist rural utopia. This makes Woolf’s dystopic portrayal of life in a Ceylonese village all the more remarkable because the novel’s focus is upon people – the veddahs, or the aboriginals – who are victims both of colonial malfeasance and socioeconomic marginalization within the Sinhala-Buddhist dominated social system. As Gandhi’s HS was in India, Woolf’s VJ provided an influential template, especially for writers like
Martin Wickramasinghe, to whom the dystopia of Woolf’s novel offered a reason and model for critique and “writing back.” These early works by Gandhi and Woolf set the tone, then, for visions of utopia and dystopia that have, in varying degrees and in myriad forms, impelled the rural imaginary of several writers in India and Sri Lanka.

In 2008 (before the Sri Lankan government under Mahinda Rajapakse defeated the military forces of the LTTE), William Grassie noted the need to continue, albeit while redefining, the categorical drives of utopia and dystopia for the Sri Lankan national imagination:

As an exercise, I imagine writing two different stories about the future of Sri Lanka, a utopic and a dystopic vision of the future. Both would serve as critiques of the status quo and forms of social imagination. Both would be correlated to different ideological projects in the society today. Making these visions explicit would actually help clarify what is at stake in the contemporary debates about good governance, the hoped-for end of the civil conflict, the issues of cultural identity, economic development, environmental protection, and how to motivate and pursue the good life. (“Entangled Narratives,” The Global Spiral)

In the case of India as well where rival nationalisms have historically wrought tremendous pressure upon a centralizing national narrative (one thinks of Pakistan, the secessionist movements in the 1970s and 1980s for Khalistan in Punjab and Dravida Nadu in the south, the current one in Kashmir, the fissured political situation in the north east), notions of utopia and dystopia continue to remain relevant as political visions as well as literary impulses. But first, some clarifications.
**Terminologies: Utopia, Dystopia, Heterotopia**

A misleadingly neat Hegelian triad of concepts – utopia-dystopia-heterotopia – may provide us with a grid to map and understand the ways in which twentieth-century writings from India and Sri Lanka have portrayed the rural. And yet, all three terms have diverse histories of use and adaptation, and it is with some degree of qualification and delimitation that one must apply the terms and their associated meanings to understand the “structures of feeling” (Williams 27) operating in the literary imaginaries of twentieth-century Indian and Sri Lankan writings. In my thesis, I shall be using a fourth term along with this “set” of connected ideas: homotopia, by which I mean those visions of unified collectivity where an aggressively homogenizing impulse operates and where unity is a form of collective gathering of one or two co-ordinates (race/language/religion) and the deliberate repudiation and exclusion of others. This coinage is, in part, a recuperative theoretical manoeuvre: if utopia is the space for shared transformation and amelioration, then homotopia is its obverse because it foregrounds that such change is engineered for and by a few. In this sense, homotopia works, as I will show, not on utopian principles but on explicitly ideological ones: utopia is the world people desire; homotopia is the world without the things that people do not desire. A recuperation of the utopian instead of the homotopian creates some space for understanding and negotiating, and not subsuming or erasing, difference, a space wherein one may yet speak of ameliorative and socially productive transformation, of utopian projects that are relevant to our complex, multicultural worlds today.

As a literary-philosophical concept, utopia is the name for an ideal community or society featured in *Of the Best State of a Republic, and of the New Island Utopia*, a book
based on Plato’s *Republic* written in 1516 by Sir Thomas More. The book describes Utopia as a fictional island in the Atlantic Ocean with a seemingly perfect socio-politico-legal system and no poverty or misery. More derived the word “utopia” from the Greek “οὐ” which means “not/no” and τόπος, or “place,” indicating that he was using the concept as allegory rather than as a place that might be practically realizable. The homophone “eutopia” derived from the Greek “εὖ” means “good” or “well,” and τόπος, “place,” imparts a second meaning to the term that marks it as a place of happiness. The grey zone between the two meanings – between no-place and good-place – constitutes that horizon of possibilities that defines the diverse social functions the term has accrued in the work of philosophers, writers, economists, and new-age gurus since More. So where “utopia” may be an ideal world (eutopia) or a non-existent fantasy (outopia), “utopian” may describe that which is desirable and ideal or that which is impractical and unrealistic. As Levitas puts it, in “the elision between perfection and impossibility” the concept becomes an “ideological battleground of sorts” (3).

Levitas argues that utopia has generally been defined and understood according to three parameters: content (e.g., as an ideal commonwealth), form (e.g., utopia as a literary genre), and function (e.g., what the utopia will accomplish) (4). A diversity of positions⁴ on the basis of the three parameters is possible: for instance, Karl Mannheim’s vision of utopia as the force that shatters the power of “ideology” (that which is interested in

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⁴ See *Utopian Thought in the Western World* by F. E. Manuel and F. P. Manuel for a fuller discussion of utopia as it has been variously defined over the centuries in Western philosophical thought since Plato’s *Republic*. The book suggests that while it is impossible to formulize utopia, it is possible to identify “historical constellations of utopia with reasonably well marked time-space perimeters and common elements that are striking enough to permit framing generalizations” (3).
maintaining status quo) invests utopia with a radical transformative potential\(^5\) which is a far cry from Marx and Engels’ rather pejorative use of “utopian” in their writings to demark the specifically non-transformative, even counter-revolutionary.\(^6\) And yet, Marxism is often commonly considered to be utopian in that its promise of a “classless, stateless society” is an ever-receding horizon. Ernst Bloch theorized the need to differentiate between “abstract” and “concrete” utopia: the former he defined as those unreal, unrealizable spaces of the future that are pure fantasy, offering compensatory escape but no transformative critique. Concrete utopia, on the other hand, are also invested in the future but in a realizable one, and therefore, hold much that is of value for the present. For Bloch, then, utopia’s “not yet” quality presents an “anticipatory consciousness” which holds a precious realm of possibility, of actionable change: utopia is, thus, an expression of “the principle of hope” – the phrase that is the title of Bloch’s three-volume work. Paul Ricoeur also affirms in his writings the need to resuscitate utopia: “[a]t a time when everything is blocked by systems which have failed but which cannot be beaten . . . utopia is our resource. It may be an escape, but it is also the arm of critique. It may be that particular times call for utopia” (*Lectures* 300).

\(^5\)This is William Grassie’s summary of Mannheim’s ideas on utopia: “Mannheim notes that utopia not only shares with ideology a noncongruence with reality, but that utopia offers a perspective critical of the given reality, thus exposing the gap between *what is* and an ideal of *what should be*. Utopia, in challenging the existing order, is always a projection into possible futures; whereas ideology, in legitimating the existing order, is directed toward perpetuating the past. Utopia tends to be the tool of social groups seeking ascendancy; while ideology tends to be the tool of dominant groups seeking to assuage their own sense of failing and justify the inadequacy of the status quo.”

\(^6\)Thomas Vettickal writes: “It is probably the lack of an effective revolutionary conception and praxis of renaissance utopia that made Marxists dismiss them as mere ‘wishful thinking’. . . . The term utopia is in fact hardly ever used by Marx or Engels other than as a pejorative adjective “utopian,” generally in the terms of ‘utopian socialism’ and ‘utopian communism’” (70).
A host of popular reworkings of utopia since More has established the undying appeal of imagining a perfect world to critique the current: one may count in this list Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627), James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* (1933), B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* (1948), Aldous Huxley’s *Island* (1962), Robert Heinlein’s *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), and many others. Thus, as Levitas puts it, “utopia is seen as presenting some kind of goal, even if commentators, as opposed to the authors of utopia, do not see them as necessarily realisable in all their details. At the very least, utopia raise questions about what the goal should be” (5).

Dystopia appear as contrasts and in opposition to utopia, but their *function* is the same – they hold up mirrors to present-day life and serve as warnings of a nightmarish future that may be averted if we paid attention to our actions and choices today. Again, many definitions proliferate and dystopia are imagined as anti-utopia, counter-utopia, inverted-utopia, and more. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first known use of “dystopia” occurred in a speech by John Stuart Mill in the British Parliament in 1868, in which Mill, decrying his opponents, stated: “It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or caco-topians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable” (*OED*). Dystopia can also, as Bloch theorized of utopia, function in abstract and concrete ways, as templates for fantastic, unreal visions of a terrible future or as blueprints for a forseeably realizable tomorrow whose features echo those of contemporary life and whose quality is a reflection and a consequence of present-day choices.
In the Indian and Sri Lankan contexts, dystopia of the twentieth century are connected in large measure to the failures of the nation-state, but such failures are imagined from varying political vantage-points: for instance, Suniti Namjoshi’s The Mothers of Maya Diip (1989) is set in a fabulous land where there are no men and where the creation of a matriarchal society “deconstructs the nationalist idealization of India as nurturing mother” (Agarwalla 179). Namjoshi’s novel presents a critique of the nation from the perspective of gender and sexuality, and the “queering” of myths of national unity and purity compellingly presents the imbricated agendas of a post-colonial, feminist, and queer revision. In Sri Lanka, Rajiva Wijesinha’s dystopic novels of the 1980s (Acts of Faith, 1985; Days of Despair, 1989) encode in their fantastic, ghoulish spaces a powerful representation of the contemporary civil war-like situation when the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government were mutually engaged in secessionist and retaliatory attacks. A literary technique borrowed from Salman Rushdie’s iconic Midnight’s Children – allegory – allows these authors to create in their dystopia a grim subversion of dominant nationalisms. The urban vantage-point and the generally metropolitan settings of such works is further evidence of the inability to imagine the rural as a bulwark of the utopian nation-state.

Heterotopia is an interesting word and concept: its use in the humanities owes much to Michel Foucault’s March 1967 lecture “Des Espaces autres” (“Of Other Spaces”) which was published later by the French journal Architecture /Mouvement/.

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7 See Ainslie T. Embree’s Utopia in Conflict: Religion and Nationalism in Modern India for a thought-provoking analysis of the religious fractiousness in post-colonial India as a result of the conflict between different visions of religious utopia. In particular, Embree questions the truism that Hinduism is a “tolerant” religion, arguing that Hindu India’s utopian vision essentially works with a form of “encapsulation” (rather than toleration).
Continuité in October, 1984. The word has also been in currency in medicine where “heterotopia” refers to the displacement of an organ or a part of an organ from its normal position in the body. It is quite possible that Foucault did not know of its usage in medicine (“Of Other Spaces” 24) and his reformulation of heterotopia sees it as a function of space and as a critique of and alternative to conceptions of utopia – “hetero” or different/alternative and “topos” or place. Foucault first mentions heterotopia in The Order of Things (1966) where, in the Preface, he makes a startling comparison between utopia and heterotopia, one that he does not pick up further in the book:

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold: they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy “syntax” in advance, and not only that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to “hold together.” This is why utopia permit fables and discourses: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental fabula: heterotopias desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source: they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences. (4)

This definition of the idea and function of heterotopia occurs in the context of Foucault’s now-famous discussion of Borges’ story of the Chinese encyclopaedia whose arbitrary division of animals into various categories Foucault reads as the demise of categorization itself. In such a reading, the Chinese encyclopaedia constitutes a heterotopic space in
which the very naturalness of the relationship between signifiers (categories) and subjects (animals) breaks down, “shatter[ing] . . . all the familiar landmarks of . . . thought” (“Preface,” The Order of Things i). What heterotopia play up then are precisely those fissures, those intimations of discontinuity, disorder, and non-meaning that systems of thought and social structures work at covering up, encapsulating, or erasing. But, as Foucault notes, “no sooner have they been adumbrated than all these groupings dissolve again, for the field of identity that sustains them, however limited it may be, is still too wide not to be unstable. . .” (“Preface,” The Order of Things xx).

Such celebration of heterotopia notwithstanding, Foucault is unhelpful in The Order of Things as to what heterotopia in the real world is. This is the thème propre of his 1969 lecture and here he defines heterotopia more fully, although the definition, as I will show, is still too protean to make for lasting taxonomical difference. In “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault continues to dismiss all utopia (“from communes to communism”) as utopian, “thoroughly fantasmatic” ("Of Other Spaces" 20) and invests instead in heterotopia or “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” (20; my italics). If one were to draw a diagram to understand Foucault’s six-principle conception of heterotopia using colour-codes to distinguish the various examples and principles he provides in order to demarcate one kind of heterotopia from the other, it might look something like this:
In this complex grid-work, what is of special concern for my study is the sixth principle on which Foucault bases his understanding of heterotopia. The principle of function connects heterotopia with utopia in interesting ways, and gestures towards a conceptualisation of “rural heterotopia” that Foucault himself does not pursue (for his focus remains on the city) but that we might use to understand the recent turn towards re-imagining the rural and the village in twentieth-century South Asian writing. Foucault writes:

The last trait of heterotopia is that they have, in relation to the rest of space, a function. The latter unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes all real space, all the emplacements in the interior of which human life is enclosed and partitioned, as even more illusory. (Perhaps that is the role played for a long time by those famous brothels of which we are now deprived). Or else, on the contrary, creating another space, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is disorderly, ill construed and sketchy. *This would be the heterotopia not of illusion, but of*
compensation, and I wonder if certain colonies have not somewhat functioned in this manner. (“Of Other Spaces” 21; my italics)

In the final sentence, Foucault seems to suggest that heterotopia (“counter-sites”) and utopia (“certain colonies”) are when functioning as compensatory social structures one and the same. In this, Foucault tends to think like Bloch whose “abstract” utopia provided compensation for a “disorderly, ill construed and sketchy” real world and lacked that particular quality of hope that would transform escapism into anticipation, status quo into true change. Indeed, Foucault’s specific examples of “colonies” that fit this description become interesting because they recall familiar images of pastoral paradises that have often passed for representations of the rural:

In certain cases, [colonies] have played, on the level of the general organization of terrestrial space, the role of heterotopia. I am thinking, for example, of the first wave of colonization, in the seventeenth century, of the Puritan societies that the English had founded in America and that were absolutely perfect other places. I am also thinking of those extraordinary Jesuit colonies that were founded in South America: marvellous, absolutely regulated colonies in which human perfection was effectively achieved. The Jesuits of Paraguay established colonies in which existence was regulated in all of its points. The village was laid out according to a rigorous plan around a rectangular place at the foot of which was the church; on one side, there was the school; on the other, the cemetery, and then, in front of the church, there opened up an avenue crossed by a second at right angles; each family had its little cabin along these two axes and thus the sign of Christ was exactly reproduced. . . . The daily life of individuals was regulated, not
by the whistle, but by the bell. Awakening was set for everybody at the same hour, work began for everybody at the same hour; meals were at noon and five o’clock, then everybody went to bed, and at midnight came what was called the conjugal wake-up, that is, when the convent bell rang, everybody accomplished his duty. (“Of Other Spaces” 21-22)

So what really are these “colonies”? If, as Foucault says in *The Order of Things*, utopia can be imagined in and as “cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy,” then such rural colonies regulated by religion and intensive labour would appear to exist in clear contradistinction to his utopian cities. And yet, the Foucauldian metropolis is the seat of power, authoritarianism, and domination in ways that echo these highly regulated colonies Foucault describes. Part of the paradox in such formulation lies in the *dialectical* (rather than merely oppositional) nature of Foucault’s imagining of utopia and heterotopia: these are spaces not only counterpoised but also intimately wound up in each other. As Kevin Hetherington says, the fact that heterotopia can be carceral, punishing, and limiting (Foucault’s examples of the military, psychiatric wards, and penitentiaries are relevant in this regard) ought not blind us to the possibilities that such spaces can also be sites for resistance and transgression (e.g., the carnival or the cinema): “the paradox is that heterotopia can be either or indeed both” (42). This conceptual imbrication is what makes Foucauldian heterotopia at once protean, unstable, and elusive: utopia are compensatory heterotopia (“another real space”) that create illusions of order and completion in order to escape from the chaos and fragmentation of “real” spaces. But heterotopia, Foucault argues, are also spaces where social

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8 And here the reference to “whistle” and “bell” become particularly significant, given Foucault’s lifelong interest in penitentiaries and rehabilitation wards.
ambivalences can thrive and diversity and difference can be negotiated – an impulse that utopia too can share. Foucault’s hetero-topia subsists in the intersection between difference (other-space) and alterity (another-space) in much the same way that utopia occurs between no-place and good-place.

There is admittedly a marked strain of pessimism in Foucauldian formulations: he is unable/unwilling to concede to utopia that transformative potential that Bloch, Mannheim, and Ricoeur, in varying degrees, do. Indeed, given utopia’s penchant for becoming hijacked by narrow nationalisms or becoming ghettoized or cultist (of becoming homotopia, in other words), Foucault’s suspicion of practicable social utopia appears to be well-founded. And yet, there is in (at least) the literary appropriations of utopia, “the textual sites [if not] geographical ones,” as Hetherington puts it (43), a promise or possibility that maintains the need to think utopically. This is utopia as “intellectual device . . . [not as] goal and catalyst of change, but one of criticism, and the education of desire . . .” (Levitas 196; my italics). Imagining utopia is ultimately not a question of imminence: what can we do to make my village or my nation into a utopia now? For, as Levitas argues, “[when] utopia is no longer constrained by the need to appear immediately possible [it] allows a freer exploration of desire. Utopia can be a much deeper exploration of the implications of alternative values than when it must be seen as realistically attainable from the here and now” (197). It is in this light that we can distinguish between the markedly different homotopian imperatives of novels like Kanthapura and Gamperaliya, on the one hand, where the dream of national collectivisation, played out in the space of the rural, is conveyed through a desire for the unification of a specific community (Hindu, Buddhist) or the foregrounding of a specific
language or mode of expression as “authentic” (Sanskrit, Sinhala), and, on the other hand, that concretely utopian horizon of transformation that drives the imaginary in novels like Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* and Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*. In these latter novels, utopia is to be seen not in the proliferation of those racially or linguistically the same (or similar), but is seen enacted in spaces of negotiation between multicultural sensibilities where difference is an abiding feature, one that cannot be brushed away under the imperatives of cultural “unity.” In Ghosh’s and Ondaatje’s novels, the endorsement of social and artistic optimism – that change can be brought about, and one can do something about the environment, war, and the trauma of violence and displacement – is an implicit reminder of the need to recuperate utopia from the pessimism of Foucauldian thought as well as from the foreclosing discourses of homotopia where the individual is configured as a mere effect of ideologically-driven social relations.

**Religion and Utopia**

Many religions work on utopian impulses promising followers an eternal afterlife, unending bliss, absolute knowledge, etc. In both India and Sri Lanka, twentieth-century connotations of utopia as an ideal commonwealth were intimately tied to religion; hence there is a need to understand the religious and political surround to utopian ideas in the literatures. In India, Gandhian experiments with small local communities (ashrams) based on manual labour (*shram* or service), cottage industry (the making of *khadi*) and voluntary membership resited Western definitions of utopia within a new political framework of *sarvodaya* (the awakening of all/ maximum good) and *swaraj* (self-rule).
Gandhi’s philosophical principles of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagraha* (the quest for truth) further underscored the potentially explosive political charge of such reimagining for the anticolonial movement against British rule in India. Gandhian politics also refurbished a specifically Hindu past for the service of the anticolonial movement and this in turn created a powerful set of ideas with which to envisage the place of the village, local production, and the rural collectivity for a national imaginary. As I argue in Chapter One, the envisioning of an indigenous utopia in the idioms of *ram-rajya* (the rule/kingdom of Rama, a mythical golden age in Hindu belief) as well as *sarvodaya* (the rise/awakening of all, a specifically political project) made Gandhian ideas widely popular but also problematically appropriable. I study Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938) and O. V. Vijayan’s *Legends of Khasak* (1969) in Chapter Three as emblematic respectively of early and late (before and after Independence) Gandhi-influenced writing to see how such works extended as well as departed from Gandhi’s vision of the self-sufficient village as a template for national progress. In doing so, such writings attest to the undying appeal of imagining in villages a utopia (particularly on Gandhian principles), at the same time as there is (especially in post-Independence writing) a tacit understanding of the limits of such utopian collectivisation. Indeed, Gandhi’s vision was not without problems and in his own time, the Hindu idiom of his politics limited the reach of his ecumenical vision of a free India. After India’s independence from British governance in 1947 and Gandhi’s death in 1948, the steady rise of Hindu fundamentalism (Hindutva) was further evidence of the ways in which Gandhian utopia became a serviceable myth for the championing of an exclusively Hindu agenda.\(^9\)

\(^9\) See Richard Fox’s *Gandhian Utopia: Experiments with Culture* (112-134) for a
In Sri Lanka, as I argue in Chapter Four, the fictional and non-fictional writings of Martin Wickramasinghe and Piyadasa Sirisena, among others, championed in Sinhala literature an ideal and utopian portrayal of rural Ceylon that was an antithesis to the dystopian vision of a brutish colonial existence portrayed by Leonard Woolf in *The Village in the Jungle*. This kind of dialectical interaction forms the separate agendas of Woolf’s and Wickramasinghe’s novels and lies at the core of their different interpretations of what constitutes a realistic mode of representing contemporary Ceylon. Where Woolf’s delineation of Beddagama situates it outside of the pale of civilization – as a village in the jungle eking out its precarious existence – Wickramasinghe’s idyllic Koggala in his iconic 1944 novel *Gamperaliya* presents a completely different kind of rural existence, where the focus on a *walawwe* or a manor reposes faith in the traditional ways of feudal order fortified by the forces of a glorious Sinhala-Buddhist past. In a different vein, the work of art historian and anticolonialist Ananda Coomaraswamy (whom I discuss in Chapters Two and Four) also essentialized Ceylonese rural life, idealizing its pre-colonial structures and presenting in a nostalgic look at Ceylon’s utopian past a mirror for the contemporary dystopian realities of a colonized nation. As I argue in Chapter Four, such writing powerfully echoed the credo of the twentieth-century Buddhist reform movement in Ceylon that, spearheaded by the volatile and charismatic monk Anagarika Dharmapāla, also tended to play down internal differences and ethnic diversity, and in some sense, remained evocative for the Sinhalese alone. A comparison thus of the novelistic visions of Woolf and Wickramasinghe, along with an understanding of contemporary politics in early twentieth-century Ceylon, allows one to understand the compelling discussion of the ways in which Hindutva has “hijacked” Gandhian politics of “affirmative Orientalism.”
two-fold way in which Sri Lankan writers have, in a large part, imagined the village: as the microcosm of a utopian nation-state connected to an explicitly Sinhala Buddhist history and tradition (as seen in the pre-Independence writings of Wickramasinghe, Sirisena, and others) or as a dystopian space of internecine discord that challenges the very bases of earlier nationalisms (as somewhat tenuously drawn in the post-Independence works of Punyekante Wijenaike and later, more intensely, figuring in the full-blown dystopia of Rajiva Wijesinha, Romesh Gunasekera, and Jean Arasanayagam).

Indian Writing and the Utopian Village
The utopian mode dominated much early twentieth-century Indian writing that took its inspiration from Gandhian philosophy and the freedom movement. In Chapter One, through a close examination of Hind Swaraj (1909), I discuss the contours of the Gandhian reimagining of the rural along utopian lines. Gandhi’s insistence on the relevance of rural life and his disavowal of the industrialism of the city, I argue, were part of a larger discourse of eschewing the nation-state model of Western politics, a model that Gandhi believed overemphasized similarity and commonality (on the basis of race/language/religion) and led to narrow, exclusionary grounds for imagining national collectivity. In contrast, Gandhian philosophy, tending towards anarchism, denounced the state as a necessary evil and argued for ethical self-regulation at the level of the individual and for small communities based on the principles of labour (service) and local production. Gandhi’s nationalism was thus integrally tied in with the rural, and in his various ashrams, he attempted to recreate communities of people who volunteered their services for communal living. Through his concepts of trusteeship (the rich are trustees of
their wealth for the good of all), and Panchayati Raj (the village as a central institution, with government by a consensus of leaders), Gandhi sought to develop a model for egalitarian governance that was very different from the centralised systems of the British and the Mughals before them. In this sense, his utopia was not simply a place of happiness arrived-at and guaranteed by a higher authority, but quite the opposite, for it entailed a disruption of the order that successive systems of colonial rule had normalized and made a fact of daily existence.

Gandhian ideas had considerable impact on Indian literatures and recast the nationalist struggle for independence from British rule as a project for gaining self-respect and for unearthing models for indigenous collective existence. Early twentieth-century writing inspired by Gandhian idealism invariably emphasised tradition and history, creating august pedigrees for rural collectivity, and despite the contradictions and paradoxes of global modernity (or perhaps because of them) reinforced the salience of villages to the anticolonial struggle against British governance. To this utopian mode belong the Swaraj-centered writings of Gandhi in the early decades of the twentieth century and the Gandhi-inspired works of writers as diverse as Premchand (“The Holy Panchayat”; Godaan or The Gift of a Cow, 1936, Hindi/Urdu); R. K. Narayan (Swami and Friends, 1935) and Raja Rao (Kanthapura, 1938) in English, and post-Independence, Rahi Masoom Reza (Adha-Gaon or A Village Divided, 1966, Hindi/Urdu); Buddhadeva Guha (Kojagar or The Bounty of the Goddess, 1988) and Mahashweta Devi (Titu Mir, 1989) in Bengali; Kamala Markandaya (Nectar in a Sieve, 1955), Khushwant Singh (Train to Pakistan, 1956), and Attia Hossein (Sunlight on a Broken Column, 1961) in English. Despite many important differences in their visions, these writers produce an
empathetic portrayal of rural realities on the subcontinent, creating out of the village a moving allegory for the nation and a homeland. Shocked by the excesses of the Partition, many of these writers evoke an ideal, pre-colonial, rural collectivity as a model for national solidarity and reconstruction. The impact of Gandhian ideals of labour (the making and wearing of khadi, a locally spun cloth) often features in the works prominently as a symbol of rural self-sufficiency. As Soumhya Venkatesan argues, “[i]n early twentieth-century India are found a set of utopian ideas and actions around pre-industrial material culture: the idealization of the producer and production process, the valorization of the craft or village manufacture, and the location of the ‘real India’ in its villages and craft heritage” (81).

In contrast, the dystopian mode constructed the village as an artefact of a feudal past no longer relevant to a modern or post-modern order, as an antithesis to urban centres of power and activity. In such a vision, villages become the sites for the competing hegemonies of feudal caste structures, mechanisms of colonial suppression, and the many misses and marginalizations of post-colonial collectivisation. Such dystopic envisioning of the rural can be seen in the diverse writings of Shanta Rama Rau (Remember the House, 1956), Manohar Malgaonkar (The Princes, 1963; A Bend in the Ganges, 1964), Kamala Markandaya (Two Virgins, 1973) and Rohinton Mistry (A Fine Balance, 1995) (English), and Thoppil Meeran (The Story of a Seaside Village, 1998) (Tamil), where a disenchantment with the Gandhian vision of rural life merges with a recognition of the inadequacies of the Nehruvian paradigm for urban renewal as the way to national rebuilding. Again, despite many internal differences in idea and political position, these writings re-create within the rural space a powerful counterdiscourse to
the narratives and processes of national unification in which the village and the villager often become instrumentalized and subsumed.

The discussion of Gandhi’s politics and ideas about the materializable utopia helps frame in Chapter Three the cases of two fictive villages, Kanthapura and Khasak, that I read as emblematic of two divergent visions of the rural dominant in the literary imaginaries of the 1930s, the heyday of the anticolonial movement against British rule (Rao), and after Independence (Vijayan). Where Rao’s village Kanthapura provides a literary avatar to Gandhi’s rural utopia that he sought to create in his ashram, Vijayan’s Khasak, I argue, undoes the utopian representation and is, indeed, a precursor to the “rural heterotopia” that are to be found in the works of Amitav Ghosh and Michael Ondaatje. In Rao’s iconic novel published in 1938, the Gandhian vision of collective rural action provides the basis for imagining a resurgent Hindu India that could resist the hegemonic forces of colonial modernity; but such unification effects a form of internal colonization where religious, ethnic, and linguistic minorities become excluded as political actors. The utopia Rao constructs in Kanthapura is, in effect, a kind of homotopia where the imagining of home and nation bolsters a specific kind of dominant Hindu teleology: Sanskritized, textualized, and exclusionary. I argue that Kanthapura is impelled both by a need to show the rise of India against British colonial rule and by the desire to create a new voice for Indian writing in English. Consequently, in many ways, Rao’s novel is caught between the twin pressures of imagining a muscular India resilient in the face of colonial domination on the one hand, and of presenting a new visage to Indian writing in English on the other. This results in a validation of the homotopian village now unified across the boundaries of caste, and of a vision of its Bildungsroman-
like awakening to self-consciousness along the lines of Gandhian swaraj. Such an idealist vision, along with the new lexical innovations Rao accomplishes by infusing into the Queen’s English the modalities of his native tongue, Kannada, create a semiotically complex novel designed to represent new-age India ready for political and intellectual freedom from the British. And yet, it is a problematic narrative where the focus on a handful of Brahmin families and the erasure of non-Hindus from the allegorical national landscape substitute the homotopia of a majoritarian Hindu populace for the nationalist project.

In contrast, Vijayan’s novel thwarts older modes of cathexis in the village as pastoral utopia or modern dystopia, a thwarting that is figured in its construction of Khasak (another fictional village like Kanthapura) on Islamic foundationalist myths. By doing so, Vijayan consciously eschews the dominant framework of Hindu teleologies – a move that highlights the novel’s departure from the “standard” Indian rural novel that was overwhelmingly Hindu in its construction of home/nation. Vijayan’s novel is not the story of the village’s rude awakening to modernity, but of the ways in which the village can itself transform the premises of urban flânerie and superficial cosmopolitanisms. Indeed, I argue that Vijayan’s novel can be seen as a forerunner to the fiction of Amitav Ghosh and Michael Ondaatje, among others, where villages are imagined outside of the triad of rural-urban-national and reconfigured as spaces that exist in heterochronic (time) and heterotopic (space) relations to earlier literary models of villages and modes of rural representation. Khasak, in fact, in its magical liminality, its inclusiveness, its slippery ahistorical being encodes a critique of the premises of the nation-state with its bounded, exclusive spaces, hierarchies, and invented traditions. By configuring the village in non-
dichotomous ways, Vijayan’s novel also crafts an affirming story of the transformation of an alienated urban figure and his reintegration into meaningful community.

As my discussion of Rao and Vijayan shows, it would be a mistake to imagine that there is in twentieth-century Indian writing some kind of a self-consistent linear progression in representations of the rural from utopian (Rao-Premchand-Narayan) to dystopic (Vijayan-Rama Rau-Mistry-Meeran) to heterotopic (Vijayan-Ghosh). Such generalizations are often misleading and one must note that utopian/dystopic/heterotopic impulses animate many works synchronously and constantly exceed linear paradigms to whose heuristic boundaries one may note many exceptions: Krishna Sobti’s magnum opus Zindagi Nama or Life Story (1979, Hindi/Urdu), Vijayan’s Legends of Khasak and Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide are especially remarkable (and I discuss the last two in special detail). In these works, the village’s contrasts with the city and its love-hate connections with the nation recede from the critical horizon, and an “other space” emerges in which the village exists as a heterotopic other of the city and the country. This is primarily accomplished in and through narration where the descriptive modes of utopian pastoral and the gritty realism of dystopia are simultaneously undermined and exceeded. In Sobti’s novel, for instance, there is no central symbol or narrator to carry the burden of allegory; instead, a heavy reliance on orality and oral traditions allows her to construct a dense multilayered narrative in which the village is imagined as a node of collective memory, a space where colonial historiography co-exists with the age-old songs of the itinerant “mirasis,” and where for the first eighty pages, the story “doesn’t move forward in terms of happenings; instead, nursery rhymes, children’s verses, riddles and games are introduced and the change of seasons mark the passage of time” (Jain 19).
The novel confounds the double-binds of pastoral-utopia and realist-dystopia and re-situates a village on its own terms – connected to its own unique pasts and memories. There is no attempt in the novel to forge a national consciousness (the move towards a Jamesonian national Bildungsroman), but there is a tacit recognition that community is forged in the intimate practices of a quotidian existence.

In the concluding section of the thesis, I examine Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* that, like the works of Sobti and Vijayan, is also invested in a vision of the village that does not merely locate it in contrast to the city or as a unit of the nation. Indeed, the fragile and endangered villages of the Sundarbans in Ghosh’s novel appear on the very margins of urban progress and national collectivity, and present a counter-narrative of homelessness and unbelonging. In this section, I outline the ways in which the villages in the works of Vijayan and Ghosh (among Indian writers) and Michael Ondaatje and Tissa Abeysekera (among Sri Lankan writers) can, following and nuancing Michel Foucault, be labelled heterotopic. Although Foucault himself under-theorized the notion and what he did say connected heterotopia to urban landscapes and imaginaries, we may yet recuperate from his formulations a “third space” of difference that provides a critique of the categorical imperatives of utopia and dystopia and helps understand the rural in twentieth-century South Asian writing in new ways. In this last section, I study how the heterotopic village charts fresh roads to understand the rural as holding the possibility for a new kind of cosmopolitanism. Such a vision implicitly ties the heterotopic rural space to the utopian villages/ashrams of Gandhi’s imaginary, but Ghosh’s “rural cosmopolitanism” (well-known anthropologist Oscar Lewis’s term) also significantly differs from the ideal Gandhian village/ashram whose austere inward-
looking quality was also a renunciation of the world and its global demands. Ghosh’s vision of a collaborative community sees it as a continuum of human effort, spanning the unusual solidarity that can form between two very different people (e.g., the American-Indian scientist Piya and the illiterate fisherman Fokir) as well as the kind of community that forms when people organize their life and labour together (e.g., the village Lusibari created by Nirmal, Nilima and the local people’s efforts). Such collectivity becomes the space that critiques the ways in which the Indian nation-state has not been the egalitarian, free place that its founders had promised. In the move away from a national utopia towards a rural heterotopia, the novel encodes its investment in local narratives of agency, ethical action, and sustainable development.

In conventional narratives of the village, the connection to land often figures as a significant trope (as is seen in many of Premchand’s stories and in Kanthapura which I discuss more fully in Chapter Two) in which the villager’s attachment to land becomes dichotomously a symbol for patriotism and industry or for superstition and feudalistic territoriality. Indeed, the three works mentioned earlier – Zindagi Nama, Khasak, and The Hungry Tide – eschew the connection with a national narrative and construct villages as intimate parts of the natural world and as sites for the exercising of environmental responsibility and ethical choices for social development. Such a turn towards “green postmodernisms” may be very recent, but in works as early as Sobti’s and Vijayan’s, there are intimations of the need to create ethical actors rather than docile citizenry.
Sri Lanka: Buddhist Utopia and the Dissidents

In the case of twentieth-century Sri Lankan writing, a concept of utopia very different from the one at work in Indian writing provides the ideological surround to visions of the village and narratives of rural collectivity. Sri Lanka is made up of a population that is 73.8% Sinhalese, 13.9% Sri Lankan Tamil, 7.2% Sri Lankan Moors, 4.6% Indian Tamil,10 and 0.5% others (“Sri Lanka,” The World Factbook). Charles A. Hoole has suggested that underlying the “psychology of Sinhalese nationalism” are “the twin political idioms, dharmadipa and sihadipa, [11] frequently used in ministerial speeches . . . . Aided by these concepts, the Sinhalese were able to visualise an ideal Buddhist society, a Buddhist utopia, and anticipate its historical realization in the advent

10 Also known as Hill country Tamils or Up-country Tamils, the Indian Tamils are mostly descendants of workers sent from South India to Sri Lanka in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to work in coffee, tea and rubber plantations. The Sri Lankan Tamils (or Ceylon Tamils) are descendants of the old Jaffna Kingdom and east coast chieftaincies called Vannimais. Most Sri Lankan Tamils live in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka and in the capital Colombo, whereas most Indian Tamils live in the central highlands or the hill country where the plantations are.

11 “Dhammadipa” is literally “the island of the Buddha’s Dhamma,” or the truth as taught by the Buddha. “Sihadipa” is literally “the island of the Sinhala people.” Hoole writes of the Mahavamsa (a quasi-historical account of the Sinhala dynasty of the kingdom of Anuradhapura dating around the sixth century B.C.E.): “the destiny of the island (dharmadipa) and its people (sihadipa) was first manifest in the archetypal gestures of the Buddha himself, whose visits to the island provide the blueprint for the ordering of Lanka” (100). Thus, the island is pictured explicitly as Buddhist and the chronicler constructs the arrival of the Buddha in Lanka as “a paradigm, a foretaste of what must occur throughout the island’s history. That history begins to unfold with the arrival of Vijaya – the progenitor of the Sinhala race – whose advent synchronized with the Buddha’s parinibbana [the final nirvana]. An explicit connection is made between the two kingships . . . . [Like the Buddha] Vijaya too must conquer the yakkhas [evil spirits too inferior to accept the Buddha’s word]. . . .” (101). It is however, the military king Duttagemunu “who is the closest realization of the Buddha. Responding to the threat of non-Buddhist Lanka, the Sinhalese hero vanquishes the Tamils – a typological equivalent of the yakkhas, and after restoring the unity of Lanka, he brings glory to the dhamma by the prolific building of thupas [shrines] and the like.” (102)
of Maitreya Buddha [the Buddha of the future], through which they also received direction and impetus for collective action” (99-100; my emphasis). The Mahavamsa and other Buddhist chronicles have thus allowed for a cosmological theory of the Buddhist state “patterned on the mandala design,” as Michael Roberts describes it, or in the words of Stanley Tambiah, as a “galactic polity.” Such patterning has served to establish “a soteriological framework in the memories of the Sinhalese, who in the course of time came to regard themselves as a people chosen for a mission in a world of impermanence and self-seeking” (Hoole 102), an assumption that provided a powerful interconnection between religion and nation.

For this conception of utopia, the village is crucial. As Tambiah’s model of galactic polities to describe fifteenth- and sixteenth-century pre-colonial kingdoms in Ceylon suggests, the center-satellite radial arrangement of village communities, united by a shared reliance on the paddy field, irrigation tank, and temple, offered a devolved system of governance and collective consciousness. This vision, interpreted widely in popular Sinhalese imagination as a golden past, however, is a far cry from the essentialist model of national consciousness made influential by the Sinhalese Buddhist reform movement in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The revivalist movement called “Protestant Buddhism” by Gananath Obeyesekere found its strongest spokesperson

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12 Roberts and Tambiah conceive of the mandala (a concentric diagram having spiritual and ritual significance in both Buddhism and Hinduism) as providing “geometrical, topographical, cosmological, and societal blueprints” (Tambiah, Culture 253) for the “galactic polities” of Southeast Asia, which Tambiah defines as “an arrangement of a center and its satellites and employed in multiple contexts” (Culture 258).

13 Sri Lanka was granted independence by the British after peaceful negotiations in 1948 but continued to be known as Ceylon until 1972, when, during Sirimavo Bandaranaike's second term as prime minister, the country became a republic within the Commonwealth, and its name changed to Sri Lanka.
in the charismatic monk Anagarika Dharmapāla (1864-1933), in whose writings and speeches the historical Buddhist village was invoked as the steadfast paradigm for an expressly Sinhala-Buddhist nation. Of the decisive changes in political consciousness in twentieth-century Ceylon, Roshan Wijeratne writes:

The genius of the Sinhalese Buddhist reform movement was its capture of the tools of positivist historiography. They [sic] systematically denuded the rural Buddhism of the Sinhalese masses of its cosmological and ritual base and re-imagined it as rational, logical and scientific within an Orientalist frame that privileged religious, racial and linguistic markers of identity. What emerged was an amalgamation that, drawing on the institutional and literary forms of Protestantism, has been classified as Protestant (or Modernist) Buddhism. Protestant Buddhism secularized the ethical framework of Buddhism and through it, the Buddhist revivalist movement was able to look “to the past for evidence that their faith provided an effective base for action in the modern world.” (Wijeratne “States of Mind”)

The contrasts between the two kinds of Sinhala Buddhist consciousness (as described in the Chronicles and as co-opted and adapted by the reformist, anticolonial movement in the twentieth century) constitute an important reminder of the dangers of historical revisionism.

The deliberate distillation of national identity along the lines of religion and language is, of course, part of a larger global discourse of the rise of nationalism whose full scope and ramifications are beyond this study. However, it might be relevant to note here, even in brief, that in the case of Sri Lanka, national self-fashioning in the twentieth
century consisted of a two-pronged ideological manoeuvre: the marshalling of the historical “evidence” of the Buddhist Chronicles especially with regard to the utopian organization of villages and rural economic life whose core values are sanctioned by adherence to the Dhamma and to Sinhala language, and the deployment of such a vision to project Sri Lanka as the final sanctuary in the world of Theravada Buddhism and the Sinhala language. This latter agenda has, in the recent past, taken a particularly virulent nationalistic form, and the active and passive marginalization of Sri Lanka’s minorities, the rise of Tamil nationalism, the formation of the Liberation of Tamil Tigers of Eelam, and the protracted 30-year internecine military confrontation can all be seen as connected to this particular brand of ethnic-utopian nationalism.¹⁴

And yet, as Tambiah warns, any self-evident connection between Sri Lanka’s hardliner politics (especially since the 1970s) and the nation’s Sinhala-Buddhist past interpreted as a model to follow for all time, is a fraught enterprise, and in fact, flies in the face of much historical evidence of the Chronicles themselves which suggest that pre-colonial Ceylonese kingdoms under various Sinhala and Tamil kings were inherently pluralist, fluid, and intermingling dominions, “producing social and political processes that were flexible, accommodative, and inclusionary, as well as competitive, factional, and fragmenting” (Buddhism Betrayed? 174). Palmer-Fernandez also describes the

¹⁴ At the time of writing this thesis, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) under Mahinda Rajapakse’s Presidency, successfully carried out a military campaign against the LTTE, in which most of the LTTE top brass including the organization’s leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, was killed or captured. The decimation of the LTTE’s hold on the north-eastern parts of Sri Lanka, in effect, signals the completion of a central objective of United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA), the coalition to which Rajapakse’s Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) belongs, and which has since its inception in 1951 campaigned on largely Sinhala nationalist policies.
arrangement of Ceylonese kingdoms\(^\text{15}\) as being “fuzzy . . . rather than bounded, exclusive spaces” in a manner that is opposed to the “anticolonial, antiminority ideology” (Hewamanne 33) of the colonial (and post-colonial) nation-state. The difference in the two conceptions of Sinhala Buddhist polity becomes particularly interesting for a consideration of the rural and the village in the Sinhalese (literary) imaginary:

This [the galactic polity] is the kind of sovereignty in which a monarch is envisioned as standing in the center of a cosmic, ceremonially maintained, moral and physical order, with the rest of the social system, a complex system of ranked castes and communities, comprising a widening series of encircling emanations around it. It is important to note that within such galactic polities it was always possible to contain various languages and religions . . . . This galactic form of governance also explains why one of the dynasties that ruled Hindu Jaffna was Sinhalese, while the last dynasty to rule Buddhist Kandy was of South Indian, Hindu origin. This fuzziness of boundaries between polities was replicated, in some ways, in Hinduism and Buddhism themselves as these religions were practised in pre-colonial times. The form of Hinduism associated with the Jaffna kingdom was Saivism (or Saiva Siddhanta). The form of Buddhism associated with the Buddhist kingdoms was Theravada Buddhism. These two religions often touched, however, at the village level and in their pilgrimage systems. (Palmer-Fernandez 409; my emphasis)

\(^{15}\) While there were a number of small kingdoms in Ceylon, in the sixteenth century, the important ones were: the largely Hindu Tamil Jaffna kingdom in the North, and two mainly Sinhalese and Buddhist kingdoms in Kotte and Kandy. All the kingdoms, except Kandy, were taken over first by the Portuguese (in the 1590s) and then the Dutch (in 1758); Kandy remained independent until it was captured by the British in 1815.
Indeed, it is at the level of the rural that cultural and religious syncretism between the two seemingly disparate systems is best seen, so that the notion of a Sinhala-only village or a Tamil-only village would be not only ahistorical but possible only within a ethnically-driven nationalist rhetoric. In Martin Wickramasinghe’s *Gamperaliya* (1944) (and, to some extent, in Punyekante Wijenaike’s 1966 novel, *The Waiting Earth*), the construction of a homotopian village necessitates a selective focus on life within a village and a strict policing of the village’s boundaries: whatever transit or traffic occurs in these novels is subsumed within a largely static look at a predominantly fixed village whose idyllic character and feudal-patriarchal hierarchies, though brought under stress by colonial realities, are nonetheless inviolable because they are ostensibly fortified by (Sinhala Buddhist) tradition. In the novel, the metonymic focus on the lives of a Sinhala-speaking Buddhist rural population allows for a powerful evocation of a cultural identity, buttressed by tradition and history, that even under the yoke of colonial rule remains resilient; what such assembling leaves out are those minorities (ethnic/linguistic/religious) whose lack of visibility in the nationalist narrative was to have serious repercussions for Sri Lankan polity in the 1970s onwards. In contrast, in the novels by Leonard Woolf (*The Village in the Jungle*, 1913) and Michael Ondaatje (*Anil’s Ghost*, 2000), although the cast of characters continues to be largely Sinhalese, the focus is on specific communities (the profoundly marginalized aboriginal people, the *Veddahs*, in the case of Woolf), and on individuals (in Ondaatje). Furthermore, as we shall see, an emphasis in these novels on journeys and pilgrimages creates the sense of rural life as already multicultural and plural, so that the distillation of communities into single-religion or single-caste spaces is understood as a denudation of the fuller life possible
through egalitarian and meaningful collectivity. Read in this light, the slow decay of Beddagama in Woolf’s novel is an indictment both of colonial mechanisms of exploitation that impoverish the already poor and of twentieth-century discourses of Sinhala nationalism that inhibited cross-cultural social interaction and promoted endogamy in the name of caste and religious purity. The only heroes in Woolf’s novel are those that challenge and breach the boundaries of homotopia (Babun who marries outside of his caste in defiance of his high-born family; Hinnihami who loves and tends to an injured fawn and gives up her life to save it; and Silindu who plots and carries out his vengeance against those who harm him and his family). Additionally, the novel’s centre is occupied by a transformative pilgrimage to a Tamil shrine that Silindu undertakes with his daughters and which provides for Woolf an opportunity for some ethnographic commentary upon such public spaces in Ceylon’s villages where different religions and people could mingle. In *Anil’s Ghost* as well, Ondaatje ties up a consideration of the rural with an examination of its changing position in Sri Lanka’s contemporary politics. A series of journeys by Anil and Sarath into various villages not only highlights internal diversities (eschewing the recourse to allegory), but creates, within the rural, spaces for a heterotopic examination of mainstream rival nationalisms. A simultaneously outward- and inward-looking quality characterizes the novel’s perspective: on the one hand, Anil’s experience in Guatemala’s war-torn countryside frames her work in Sri Lanka, encouraging the reader to see the many connections between the “killing fields” and the dead and injured in both countries; on the other, Anil recognizes the ways in which the Sri Lankan countryside has changed irrevocably since she left it 15 years before. This kind of a “complex seeing” (to borrow a Brechtian phrase) enables the novel to challenge
the intellectual and political imperatives of homotopia, as well as renew faith in some core humanist ideas (of peace, freedom, and truth) that connect people across villages and nations.

I agree with Tambiah in his position that there is a need to keep distinct (and not conflate or connect in any linear/genealogical way) representations of pre-colonial Buddhist utopia and the “bounded state” model of twentieth-century Sri Lanka “impelled by calculations of majoritarian arithmetic” (Buddhism Betrayed? 176). On the other hand, however, it is equally important to uncover the ways in which the two visions of a Buddhist utopia commingle in Sri Lankan literature and the popular imagination, where the distinctions often become subsumed within a revisionist and narrowly nationalist tale of post-colonial reconstruction. In this light, the writings of such influential twentieth-century Ceylonese writers as Ananda Coomaraswamy (whom I will discuss in some detail in Chapter Two) and E. R. Sarachchandra, along with those of Wickramasinghe, need to be read anew for their part in the popular idiom of Sinhala nationalist discourse where “images of the village community that inspired [a] nationalist vision” attempted to create and make normative what Tambiah has called “the lost utopia” of past ages (Buddhism Betrayed? 109).

The Village in Ceylon and the Three W’s

The colonial experience as well as the Buddhist revivalist movement forms the critical backdrop to two major works of the first half of the twentieth century that deployed the Ceylonese village as a trope: Leonard Woolf’s The Village in the Jungle, published in 1913, and Martin Wickramasinghe’s Gamperaliya, published in 1944. They also provide
the ideological *a priori* for the dystopic imaginary of Punyakante Wijenaike’s *The Waiting Earth* (1966), endorsed tacitly through the character of “the ideal Sinhala woman” whose “invisibilization” is both an effect and a critique of the chauvinisms of male-authored nationalisms. Read together, Woolf, Wickramasinghe, and Wijenaike provide an imbricated triplex of literary attitudes towards the rural as utopia and dystopia. Although my reading situates the different writers and their novelistic visions in a diachronic grid, it goes without saying that the ideological compulsions to which each novelist was in his/her own way responding also connect their visions intimately to one another and to a larger picture of the ways in which the rural has been represented in Sri Lankan writing. I argue in Chapters Two and Four that the dystopic portrayal of a Ceylonese village in Woolf’s novel implicitly set the agenda for Wickramasinghe’s iconic first novel where rural collectivity is idealised as feudal order, a novel whose success bore witness to his time’s need for positive models of indigenous collectivity. In this light, it is also clear that *Gamperaliya*’s lasting acclaim is tied intimately to the endorsement of the ideals of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Such nationalism is the ideological surround also of Wijenaike’s 1966 novel, where the portrayal of Sellohamy at once upholds and undermines the discursive construction of an ideal Sinhala Buddhist womanhood (a construction that *Gamperaliya* made popular and dominant). This critique is, however, only tenuously accomplished, for in the novel’s acceptance of the land occupation and reterritorialization policies of the Sinhala-dominated governments of the 1950s and the 1960s lies an ideological accommodation to the majoritarian rhetoric of nationalist unity. Although the novel is able to question the legitimacy of male-authored discourses of territorial ownership when it comes to the marginalization of women’s
rights and women’s labour, it neglects to extend the critique to other minorities (ethnic/linguistic/religious), and the novel remains circumscribed by its tacit complicity with the Sinhala nationalist agenda. Taken together, the three novels indicate broadly the dichotomous ways (utopia/dystopia) in which the village has been represented in twentieth-century Sri Lankan literature – a model that recent fiction (and in my concluding section I consider the case of Anil’s Ghost as emblematic of this tendency) has attempted to disassemble by locating in the rural a heterotopic vision that exceeds the limits of the earlier binarism and presents the village in an altogether new light.

In the novels I study of Wickramasinghe and Wijenaike, the representation of life in a village is mediated through a static, unerring narrative focus on one family, a focus that eschews any form of movement within or outside of the village. The result is an evocation of rural life as fatalistic and pre-determined by the twin burdens of a feudal past (as in Gamperaliya) and exploitative modernity (as in The Waiting Earth), and somehow unconnected to any form of agential intervention that might break open the chains of rural poverty and territorial dispossession. In the post-Independence works of authors such as Wijenaike and James Goonewardene, who worked in a significant way with representations of the village, the loss of a rural utopia emerges as either a form of nostalgia (Goonewardene) or as a dystopic evocation of homelessness and unbelonging (Wijenaike). In their writings, villages become the embattled terrain where contemporary nationalist politics of territorial ownership (between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government) become compressed into a malefic vision of a national dystopia. Such events as the JVP insurrection in 1971, the Tamil secessionist uprisings, and the Sri Lankan government’s reprisals all feature as the dystopic background for a slew of novels
emerging in the late 1970s until the turn of the century. As I argue in Chapter Four, even in a novel like *The Waiting Earth*, where the author critiques from an emergent feminist standpoint the essentialisms and homogenizations of mainstream nationalism, she is unable to break out of the self-legitimizing binaries of ethnocentric models of national collectivisation. For even as the perspective of Sellohamy rebuts and undermines the lust for territorial ownership that drives her husband’s desire for land, the novel, set in the aftermath of reterritorialization programs of 1950s Ceylon, neglects to critique the very bases and further ramifications of such domestic realignments in the name of the nation-state. Whose land is taken? To whom is it given? On what moral or ethical ground is such redistribution accomplished? These questions do not figure in the narrative. The novel, in this sense, continues the interest shown by Wickramasinghe in rural collectivity, critiques it from the vantage point of the “invisibilized” woman, but does not extend such critique to questioning the very bases of majoritarian/representative nationalisms based on ethnic differences. In its spirit of complicity, *The Waiting Earth* provides a good illustration of the ways in which utopian idealizations of the rural (as seen in the early writings of Wijenaike and in the novels of James Goonewardene) wrestled with locating in the rural an ontological mooring for a uniquely Ceylonese identity. That location, however, tended to align a majoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist vision of social collectivity with national citizenship, bolstering the foundations for Sinhala nationalism as well as reinforcing in literature the continued exclusion of minority communities from such envisioning. As Chelva Kanganayakam has noted,

> [t]he 1950s and 1960s were a period of cultural renaissance, particularly in Sinhala literature, and a period of active engagement with social issues in Tamil
literature. Vernacular literatures focused on the rural, either as a site of cultural wholeness, or as a site in which the sense of community needed to be critiqued. For vernacular writers, the village was a community they identified with and often used as a recognizable referent. Decolonization in the 1950s was evident in a number of spheres, and vernacular literatures that represented the village were part of the process of national recuperation. . . . [And] in the context of a decolonizing effort that was sweeping across the country, and at least in the Sinhalese areas, these took the form of looking to the rural and the agricultural as the “pure” and the “authentic.” (unpublished paper, 2008)

In the decades after independence from British rule, Ceylonese writing in English and the vernaculars was, thus, impelled both by the decolonizing effort and by the need to “write back” to colonialist (mis)representations of Ceylon by creating around the village a utopia that the newly-formed nation could call its own. Such a conception, invariably, turned to Buddhist models of rural collectivity, most famously reinterpreted by Dharmapāla’s school of Buddhist revivalism, an early precursor of such Sinhala extremist ideals of the 1980s as Gunadasa Amarasekera’s jatiya chinthanaya (“nationalist consciousness”).

The first fissures in such utopian imagining occurred in 1971 with the violent Janatha Vimukthi Parimana (JVP) insurrection led by primarily unemployed rural Sinhalese youth against the urban-centric policies of the Sinhala government. Although, the movement was violently quashed, more than 5000 lives were lost in the clashes between the rebels and the army. The event spawned a veritable “literature of the

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16 I discuss Amarasekera in greater detail in Chapter Four.
insurgency” (Goonetilleke, “The 1971 Insurgency” 132) that shared the belief that neither
a Buddhist utopia nor a naïve, nostalgic evocation of a nationalist utopia (based on the
former) could any longer be credibly imagined around the village. As Kanaganayakam
puts it, “[f]or writers in English, this was a clear signal that the village as a trope was no
longer feasible. The upheaval in the referent made it impossible to use the trope in
utopian terms” (unpublished paper, 2008). In the late writings of Wijenaike (The Rebel,
1979) and Goonewardene (Acid Bomb Explosion, 1978), and those of writers like
Ediriwira Sarachchandra (Curfew and a Full Moon, 1978), Raja Proctor (Waiting for
Surabiel, 1981), and M. Chandrasoma (Out Out Brief Candle, 1981), the image of a
destabilized dystopic rural life becomes the allegorical space for a chaotic social and
national situation.

The ethnicisation of literature and politics became in the 1980s a flash-point
between the Sinhala-dominant government and the LTTE, whose steady rise since its
formation in 1976 brought to the forefront the related issues of Sinhala hegemony and
political dominance, on the one hand, and Tamil territorial dispossession and political
marginalization, on the other. Much writing of the 1980s and 1990s focussed on the
urban and the national, and the move away from the rural indicated the unfeasibility of
imagining any kind of rural utopia in a nation so explicitly divided on ethnic/linguistic
trends. A form of “apocalyptic writing” (Kanaganayakam) characterizes the output of these
two decades: Rajiva Wijesinha’s Acts of Faith (1985) and Days of Despair (1989), Jean
Arasanayagam’s Apocalypse ’83 (1983), Romesh Gunasekera’s Monkfish Moon (1992)
and Reef (1994), and the poetry of Richard de Zoysa, who was abducted and murdered in
1990, are all good examples of writing in the turbulent eighties and nineties when the
violent, internecine war with the LTTE brought to a head the warring ideologies of Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms. The aporetic contradictions of such nationalisms and the need to redefine “democracy” in the Sri Lankan situation are summed up eloquently by Qadri Ismail:

To Sinhala nationalism, the Sinhalese, the Sri Lankan majority, have the right to rule and set the rules for the country; the minorities don’t matter, have no choice but to know their place: to be ruled. If they dissent, they will be disciplined – by any means necessary. Tamil nationalism, crucially, doesn’t dissent from such an understanding of the majority and the minorities; it insists that its subjects, the Sri Lankan Tamils, are not a minority (lesser in number/significance) but a nation (equal). If it follows that the Tamils, too, will dominate the minorities in their desired country, that, again, is inevitable in a democracy. (“Response” 192)

Constructing New Paradigms: Rural Heterotopia

In the concluding section of this thesis, I study in brief two recent works from India and Sri Lanka in order to understand an emergent, new kind of envisioning of the rural. In the novels of Michael Ondaatje (Anil’s Ghost, 2000) and Amitav Ghosh (The Hungry Tide, 2005), there is an attempt to reassess the salience of the village by disassembling the binaristic logic of the utopian and dystopian through which much twentieth-century writing in South Asia has tended to read the rural. The post-Rushdie literary output in India, since the 1980s, has overwhelmingly favoured the urban and the city as the locus for understanding the place of the individual in a globalized world order. The policies of economic liberalization in 1990 in India spawned a host of writers who
attempted to convey from their different vantage points across the world the experiences of the urban, metropolitan migrant whose bohemian subjectivity took him from New Delhi and Bombay to London and New York. Rushdie, Anita Desai, Vikram Seth, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, among many others, are writers who have focussed in their fiction on predominantly urban milieus and the dislocations and contradictions of a new kind of global cosmopolitanism. In particular, such cosmopolitanism creates the city as the centre of global attention; as Rushdie says,

If people ask me to describe what kind of writer I am, the most truthful description I can give is that I feel that I’m essentially an urban writer, that I’m a writer of the big city. And so I’ve spent most of my life thinking about big cities and what they are and what they do and how they work. (Lynch, “Salman Rushdie”)

Amitav Ghosh has been, in this sense, a different kind of writer, moving as a historian, travel-writer, and novelist between continents, cites, and villages, working versatilely with different genres and styles. The Hungry Tide is set amongst the monadic, impoverished communities of the Sundarbans, the mangrove swamps lying between India and Bangladesh, and one of the most vibrant (and now increasingly endangered) ecosystems in the world. A forgotten historical incident – the Morichjhāpi massacre of 1979 – provides the novel its action and plot. However, the thesis of the novel is to create a new paradigm within which to imagine ways in which the rural can feature agentially in the emergent discourses of migrant cosmopolitanisms. This, in a way, is also the theme of Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost and is one of the many uncanny similarities that surface in the two novels. At the level of characterization, the novels resemble each other remarkably:
like Anil, a forensic anthropologist, who returns after many peregrinations to the country of her birth during the tumultuous civil war of 1980s Sri Lanka, Piya, an Indian American cetologist, returns to India for research on river dolphins and finds herself embroiled in the complicated and sedimented histories of the Sundarbans, the people, and the *Orcaella brevirostris* that she has come to collect data on. Sarath Diyasena, a Sinhalese archaeologist in *Anil’s Ghost*, and Kanai Dutt, a translator and interpreter of languages in *The Hungry Tide*, provide the foils to Anil and Piya, creating bridges between outsider and insider, albeit in problematic ways that the novels themselves foreground. Sarath’s political allegiances are always a source of mystery for Anil, whose Western humanism skirts the edges of danger in a politically turbulent time; in similar ways, Kanai’s unreciprocated sexual interest in Piya and middle-class elitism complicates his role as her translator and transcultural conduit. Finally, the figures of Ananda in *Anil’s Ghost* and Fokir in *The Hungry Tide* present two versions of the “native informant,” but in both novels, these subaltern figures become crucial as their “place – or lack of place – in the scheme of things as determined by state authorities” (Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh* 18) becomes a powerful way to raise vital questions regarding environmentalism, humanism, and the position of the unaccommodated village/r in the grand narratives of national and global development.

What place does the artist have in the South Asian village? Are only positions of hegemon and subaltern possible? At the risk of valorizing endings over journeys, let me draw up from the works I consider in this thesis a list: there are three novels that more or less consider the village as a self-contained unit for the (homogenized) nation—*Kanthapura, Gamperaliya, and The Waiting Earth*. Despite registering the various ways
in which villages respond to the pressures of a changing time, rural collectivities in these novels stay more or less the same over time and space. Even the destroyed Kanthapura blends into the new village, Kashipura, where its survivors relocate. In three other novels – Khasak, Anil’s Ghost, and The Hungry Tide – villages change utterly and people who come to the village, live and work in it, transform the space as well as their own lives. In the last two novels, in particular, such change and the possibilities for the exercise of ethical and meaningful action is envisioned in the violent maelstroms of natural and national existence. There is inherent in these latter novels and in the villages they imagine that strain of agency – the power to think and do – that dismantles formulaic conceptions of the other and allows us, as Edward Said wrote, to “open up . . . fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis [that might] replace the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity rather than understanding and intellectual exchange” (Orientalism xvii).
Chapter 1:

*Hind Swaraj* and Rural Utopia

*Time* magazine’s cover for June 2006 (Asian and U.S. edition) carried the declamatory headline “India Inc.”, an emphatic confirmation of the widely-held belief in the increasing economic and political clout of “the world’s biggest and rowdiest democracy” (Robinson, “A Young Giant”). Central to this picture of a “marching” India are the industry and service sectors and a burgeoning consumer base whose global connections are making strategic allies out of the West. This popular image of Indian prosperity has its focal point very firmly in the all-powerful city. In such a light, Mohandas Gandhi’s vision of village economics and rural living, so salient to the trajectory of the Indian political movement for independence from British rule in the first three decades of the twentieth-century, appears to have lived out its short life. The boom in electronic technology, the proliferation of megacities, the creation of urban outsourcing, and the complex trends of labour migration away from villages, all seem to hint at the death of the village as the symbol of India, a symbol that long bore the burden of many (often, either negative or, at best, romantic or pastoralized) representations of colonial and pre-colonial India. This symbolic demise, however, is gravely misleading, for the figures of the 2001 census of India tell a different story. A story that testifies to the continuing survival of the village: according to the census, 74 percent of Indians live in 638,365

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1 Interestingly, in *Building our Villages* (1952) Kumarappa mentions a rough count of “700,000 villages of India” (32). That is 61,635 villages or approximately 8.8 percent of the villages “disappeared” – a number that provokes thought, for very clearly, the village in India has not “died” or been supplanted by the city – given the increased demographic
different villages whose sizes vary remarkably. 236,004 Indian villages have a population of less than 500, while 3976 villages have a population of 10,000 and more (Census India). Furthermore, the remarkable success of the Panchayati Raj system of governance advocated by Gandhi (which he called Gram swaraj or village self-governance) also refutes the position that identifies the city as the template of a “modern” order in India. Adopted as the system of local administration by Indian state governments during the 1950s and 1960s, and constitutionally granted politico-legal status in 1992, the development of Gram Panchayats as agents of rural transformation, attests to the need for a revisiting of Gandhian ideas regarding village collectivity.\(^2\) This is significant not because the village as a unit of collectivisation has not become, in the great march of urban progress, a moribund entity, but because to resuscitate Gandhi’s village is to also glean insights into those processes of nation-building and nationalism by which we have figures, it is, indeed, a fact, as the 2001 census makes clear, that villages have only become bigger and more populous.

\(^2\)If multiculturalism in Canada is a constitutionally-enshrined civic promise, in India, the Panchayati Raj constitutes the State’s commitment to decentralization of power and to ensuring the most effective system of local self-governance. In effect from 27 May 2004, a Ministry of Panchayati Raj was created to look into “all matters relating of Panchayati Raj and Panchayati Raj Institutions.” A Panchayat literally means an assembly (yat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders, chosen and accepted by the village community. Traditionally, the Panchayat settled disputes among villagers and maintained general peace. Over the years, the numbers and the scope of the Panchayat has expanded to cover members totalling up to 31, according to the size of the village, and to a range of powers guaranteed to create local self-sufficiency and proper governance. Under the 73\(^{rd}\) Amendment Act, 1992 (popularly known as the Panchayati Raj Act), a three-tier system (village – block – district) of Panchayati Raj for all States having population of over twenty lakh was devised, the functions of which included the preparation and implementation of plans for economic development and social justice; the levying and collecting of taxes, duties, tolls and fees; the constituting of District Planning Committees to prepare draft development plan for the district as a whole. For a more detailed analysis of the scope and range of responsibilities and powers of the Panchayat, see <http://panchayat.nic.in/>.
come to accept the organization of civil society, and then, to perhaps breathe life into paradigms and technologies far too easily considered outmoded.

_Hind Swaraj (HS)_ is Gandhi’s central treatise on government, modernity, and “Indianness,” and at various points in his life, Gandhi emphasized its salience. Gandhi’s defence of the system of governance envisaged in _HS_ was often asserted by him as a staunch disavowal of the premises of nation-building and nationalist rhetoric that provided the impetus for much anti-colonial protest in India during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Gandhi perceived that the homogenizing forces of a cobbled-together nationalism, that sought to play down, indeed sublate, difference in the name of a common, external enemy, helped constitute solidarity in problematic ways. Invariably therefore, he emphasized the village as the locus for an Indian collectivity and by creating within his ashram\(^3\) a prototype of the kind of progressive village he had in mind in his construction of “India,” Gandhi sought to present an alternative to “national” politics. Indeed, nearly a century after the book was published, Gandhi’s words ring true, at several levels, for the Indian subcontinent: the nation-state appears to be in a critical state, in a process not completely unlike what Europe witnessed in the middle of the twentieth century, but with its unique cultural burdens that mark the competing discourses of its hegemonies. There is a certain sense of the apocalyptic to Gandhi’s imagery in _HS_ that seems to leap off the page into our political lives today: “You want the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English, and when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindostan but Englistan” (28). This was Gandhi’s caveat against an

\(^3\) From the Sanskrit _ashraya_ which means shelter or haven; hence, _ashram_ is the place of shelter. In all, Gandhi founded seven ashrams, two in South Africa and five in India.
uncritical acceptance of patterns established, experienced and rejected by Europe, of the European experiment with the nation, that with the Nazi and fascist rise and the two World Wars brought to the fore problems regarding the very premises of nation-building. In many ways, the subcontinent is witnessing a version of the European disenchantment with the nation as a category of collectivity, although the variegated histories, cultures and local politics of the area/s disallow mimetic consequences.

What is Gandhi’s case against modernity in *HS* and how is it connected to the village, as he imagined it? In this chapter, I shall look at the ways in which Gandhi’s very local critique of British colonialism, launched from the bedrock of his vision of the village, presented a powerful challenge to the metropolitanism of colonial power. Significantly, Gandhi’s challenging of the colonial machinery was part of a larger indictment of a European civilizational ethic wherein modernity, progress, and development were defined in terms exclusively Western, and in paradigms that did not take into account the profoundly different cultural histories of South Asia, paradigms that inflected Nehru’s vision of free India but were categories of thinking that Gandhi consistently repudiated. This important way of looking at India and Europe comes with its fair share of problems, which I shall also look at in order to study what Gandhi meant by village, by *swaraj*, and civil society, and how these terms came to shape literary representations of South Asian rural collectivities.

**Modernity in *Hind Swaraj***

*HS* is structured as a series of dialogues between a Reader and an Editor, ostensibly to “make it easy reading” (Foreword to *HS* 11), but such a structure allows
Gandhi a twofold benefit: it allows for an energetic critique to emerge from what might have become a ponderous treatise and affords the space for a neo-Socratic exercise in rhetoric.\textsuperscript{4} For really, the Editor,\textsuperscript{5} who is Gandhi’s spokesperson, succeeds by way of a Socratic dialogue, in undoing, strand by strand, the Reader’s positions. What appears to be a literary trope in dialogism is actually a strategic device to proceed by way of, what Noam Chomsky might call, “manufactured consent” on the small issues up until the point when the big ones appear to have been logically covered by previous dialectical consensus. The Reader, meant to represent variously the naysayer, the extremist, and the revolutionary, comes across as a somewhat gullible, credulous being, and a poor match for the resolute Editor. As a reading practice, then, it becomes more fruitful to consider the Reader and the Editor as twin facets of the same voice, vehicles for the explication of Gandhi’s notions of India and the world. HS can thus be read in the tradition of but also as an extension of the Indian sutra (literally, “thread,” and in rhetoric, a narrative, usually consisting of aphoristic commonplaces/truths) where the Editor as sutradhar (“one who links/threads together”) performs before a sahrdaya audience (the Reader, in narrative and at large, and “one who is of the same heart”) the function of suturing his many-edged critique of the times. The looping structure of HS (the to and fro movement from one

\textsuperscript{4} There are many direct and indirect references to Socrates in HS, including Plato’s Apology to Socrates that Gandhi lists in the Appendix as among the texts that have influenced his thinking. Many have seen Gandhi in the line of essential philosophers of the world, including Anthony Parel who writes in his ‘Introduction’ to HS: “The Gandhi of Hind Swaraj is no doubt the Socrates of modern India” (35). In this light, HS can be read as a philosophical treatise as well as a political manifesto for rural reconstruction.

\textsuperscript{5} Gandhi was himself Editor of the paper Young India, an important tool by which he clarified his ideas and positions to the general public and in which he ran debates with other leaders, notably the famous exchange in 1928 with Nehru regarding purna swaraj or complete independence.
point to the next and then back again, mimetic of the loose, perambulating ways in which everyday dialogue occurs) enables Gandhi to programmatically present his critique of modernity and his vision of social change in India from multiple points of reference, from various different contexts and angles. Such multiple focalization disallows stable, veridical judgements – universalisms that apply to all collectivities at all points of time – and, instead, foregrounds a horizon of imaginative possibilities for communal action that engages with and transforms local contexts in atypical, non-formulaic ways. This is best evident in Gandhi’s tackling of the vexed idea of “modernity.”

In HS, Gandhi’s most important reworking of modernity subsists in his very (re)definition of it. European “modernity” is not an uncontentious term. Peter van der Veer posits modernity as a “project and an ideology that originates in the Enlightenment. Modernity celebrates freedom from localized, hierarchical bonds, progress in terms of scientific knowledge and economic welfare, and rejects the past in so far as it does not fit the story of progress” (285). For Jasodhara Bagchi, modernity “was the moment of Europe’s self-realization as the regulatory social order that achieved a kind of fruition. This was the telos in which Europe acquired her [sic] normative claim over the rest of the world” (4). Chinese historian Mark Elvin, in the quest for “a working definition of Modernity,” presents an intriguing notion of “multiple modernities” – Islamic, Chinese, South East Asian – offering as a caveat the fact that European modernity, while unique, was/is not singular, but rather is a phenomenon accompanied by its many counterparts across the world, in a relationship of mutual engagement as well as resistance (209-13). Overall then, one might arrive at a grudging definition of European modernity as being characterized by the rise of capitalism, rapid industrialization, representative democracy,
scientific and technological rationalism, proliferation of mass media, and increasing individualism, as well as by the vast corpus of discourses that reflected, produced, and disseminated these transformations. Whether we define modernity as Arnoldian culture, Hegelian history, Comte’s progress, or Marxian capital, these and other broad features present to us only partial dimensions of the production and dispensation of modernity across the world. Indeed, when it comes to understanding modernity we fall back on certain normative beliefs and principles whose hegemonic status is enshrined in their very reproducibility. It is against an uncritical reiteration of modernity’s monothematic logic that HS posits a (not always unproblematic) conceptual alternative. Gandhi’s disavowal of colonial ideology is embedded within a larger critique of Europe’s civilizational forces; to understand his analysis of colonial modernity in terms of only the nationalist struggle for Indian independence is to lose several ramifications that so powerfully inform his idea of subjectivity and national consciousness. Central to Gandhi’s rejection of colonial a priori was his conviction that European modernity configured itself as the only form of being modern. As part of the colonial project, European Enlightenment values helped in the cause of the oppression of a large part of the world. A challenge to this modernity, whose very dissemination was proof of its hegemonic power, impels Gandhi’s project of reclamation of an autochthonous identity, one independent of the discourse of colonial dispossession. This itself runs the risk of reading Gandhi as some kind of a proto-fundamentalist but for the fact that Gandhi consistently remained aware of the several positives in European modernity and of the many iniquities in the Indian sociocultural ethos. An awareness of this is evident throughout HS where, by foregrounding an encompassing vision of collectivity, and an alternative modernity that
reached out to the masses as well as the classes, the tract becomes veritably “a proclamation of ideological independence” (Dalton 61). Tied into this project of undoing the Empire, by destabilizing the normalizing principles it founded itself on and that it reified as so many “truths,” is Gandhi’s case for revisiting the village as a unit of social organization most suited to India. An understanding of Gandhi’s critique of European modernity becomes essential for the recognition of his idea of the village as the nucleus of equitable social existence.

Gandhi’s second indictment of European modernity exists in his refusal to gauge “progress” in terms purely economic. In this regard, consistently, Gandhi defines modernity as part of “tradition,” a principle centrally transgressive of the binarisms that structure much European post-Enlightenment thought: ancient vs. modern, old vs. new, past vs. present. At the heart of modernity is its validation of “civilization” as having emerged from out of the industrial revolution and which thus Gandhi indicts as having a shallow past, the uncritical reification of which can blind one to diverse “pre-modern” histories and cultures. Such civilization, according to Gandhi (which he often conflates to dismiss as “irreligion”), values pleasure over happiness, bodily comfort over spiritual formation, and divorces the mind and spirit in profound ways. In HS, Gandhi argues for a different reading of “civilization”: “Civilisation is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms” (HS 67).

Much conventional (Western) social theory has read modernity as an aspect of possession, a matter of rights, a position to be arrived at, even to be won. Auguste Comte and Saint-Simon argued for a reading of human history in which freedom, democracy and
industrial development colluded in a final, defining stage of social evolution, pointing toward a modern society. Such a reading puts one’s rights as individual at the zenith of social evolution and points to a general ethic of possession – of material comforts, social liberties, economic equality – as a ruling feature (indeed, the abiding merit) of modernity. Gandhi saw how, riding on a crest of scientific rationalism and liberalism, such a reading of civilization could topple into an ethic of excess, of the sword, of capital – a multi-pronged progression whose manifestation he discerned in Europe’s hyperindustrialized, overmilitarized, and colonialist tendencies. In refusing to define modernity in terms of the industrial/military/colonial, Gandhi presented a powerful critique for the times. By locating civilization within a context of duties, and not rights, Gandhi attempted to re situate the individual within the collective, arguing instead for an austere ethic of duty, for whose re-presentation, not without its share of faults, he mined for images in (largely, Hindu) religion. His point, however, that Western modernity’s colonial presence in India was part of a larger complex whose a priori was seriously

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6 Gandhi was candid about the many positives he saw in Western modernity: “I have been a sympathetic student of the Western social order, and I have discovered that underlying the fever that fills the soul of the West, there is a restless search for Truth. I value that spirit” (Collected Works 32. 219). He was also however deeply troubled by what he saw as the hierarchical and missionary spirit of rationalism, which he perceived as ‘reason enslaved’ or more precisely reason instrumentalized, and warned against the setting up of false uncritical binaries between reason and religion: “Every formula of religion has in this age of reason to submit to the test of reason and universal assent . . . . But rationalism is a hideous monster when it claims for itself omnipotence. Attribution of omnipotence to reason is as bad a piece of idolatry as is worship of stock and stone believing it to be God. I plead not for superstition of reason but for an appreciation of its inherent limits” (CW 32. 223). These “inherent limits” of reason are what Jürgen Habermas, in reading Hegel, has also seen, despite reading reason differently from Gandhi, as among the aporetic traps of reading European modernity: “In Hegel’s view, then, the culture of the Enlightenment appeared as only the counterpart to a religion frozen into positivity. By putting reflection and instrumental rationality in the place of reason, the Enlightenment pursued an idolatriy of reason . . .” (Habermas 2001, 135).
questionable presented a case for a radical re-imagining of world history. His alternatives to European modes of civilization or envisioning human history remain riddled, however, with contradictoriness and complexity, which we will come to presently.

Modernity, as Gandhi posits then, need not always be a function of the industrial/military/colonial complex, as Europe successfully defined it, but can exist outside of this matrix as a feature of a non-industrial order whose own cache of cultural diversity and civilizational past defines the modern differently from the European model. In this sense, Gandhi argues that “modern-ity” as the quality of being progressive/developmental, indeed as the consciousness of a change (articulated as one for the better) is already present within “tradition,” and is, indeed, an aspect of tradition. In such a reading of India’s civilizational advancements, whether in the field of language and literature or medicine or art, Gandhi outlines a notion of modernity that is unyoked from the discourse of the material/rational/industrial, and defines the modern differently. Here, modernity is less a departure from “old” ways, “traditional” discourses, and more a mechanism inherent to tradition, one that provides the philosophy to the practice of tradition, and is, in this sense, a feature that defines many of the indigenous cultural-religious systems of India such as Hindu thought, Buddhism, Jain philosophy as well as the intermixed traditions of Islam and Christianity. This self-modernizing impulse inherent within tradition symbolized for Gandhi a culture’s self-reflexivity, a communal meta-consciousness by which the individual conceives herself as part of a larger group. In projecting such a reading of Indian tradition, Gandhi sought to displace the conventional binary by which it had long been considered the epistemological Other of European modernity. By jettisoning such exclusionist logic, Gandhi prepared the way for an
examination of the civilizing colonial project as well as posited the need to re-visit the more ancient, pre-colonial cultural histories of India.

In this same vein, Gandhi advocates a case for understanding “History” in a different way. In HS, he argues for a reading of History not as linearly readable phenomena orderly presentable as the narrative of progress (that serious and complex item “offered at the superstition fair of our time,” as Hannah Arendt memorably put it in her book On Violence [29]), but an inherently irretrievable series of contiguous pasts, connected in time only by memory and the will to narrativize: “The Gujarati equivalent [of history] means: “It so happened.” . . . History, as we know it, is a record of the wars of the world . . . not [of ] the force of truth or love . . . . Hundreds of nations live in peace. History does not, and cannot, take note of this fact. History is really a record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul” (89). In insisting on finding a local Gujarati version of “History,” one that brings to the fore the decisive role played by memory (“it so happened”) and language (“equivalent”), in foregrounding the edifice of the human condition as being constituted of an ethic of compassion and tolerance (Edward Said would later call it “cultural hospitality”), which opposes the European standard of individualism and the theory of rights, Gandhi speaks of a version of history unaccommodated in the grand march of Hegelian time. In thinking like this, Gandhi was startlingly being postmodern and his intuitive suspicion of the metanarratives of history, progress, and reason connect him presciently with what would come to characterize “the postmodern condition”:

READER: What will you say to the nation?
EDITOR: Who is the nation? (HS, 115)\(^7\)

In identifying the *nation* as the space where these grandnarratives would be sorely tested, Gandhi was remarkably prophetic of “the intimate enemy.”\(^8\)

In these lines, Gandhi forces into exposition patterns of traditional Western historiography, which flesh “History” out as so many narratives of unrelenting conflict and confrontation, constituting, as it were, one big meta-story of sustained battles, wars, and upheavals, and relegating to the background those important events and times of peace, hospitality, and cultural dialogue that have also characterized human interaction over centuries, and that can animate narratives of world history in constructive and illuminating ways. Herein, perhaps, lies Gandhi’s response to the undying conundrum of the “East-West encounter,” to which neither Forster nor Woolf could find a satisfactory or optimistic horizon because neither could step outside of the limits of the discourse of representation of such encounter, as Gandhi could and did. He points to the fact that the

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\(^7\) The concern with *defining* the nation – in the very midst of nationalist agitation – and, indeed, with orienting the *gaze* not only at the colonizing centre but also inward, towards the philosophy and motivations underlying the struggle for freedom itself, made Gandhi rather unpopular with his contemporaries, including his arch-supporter and protégé Nehru, whose call for *purna swaraj* or complete independence overrode Gandhi’s more gradual model for an evolutionary Dominion status in the 1928 Congress meeting. Gandhi considered India unready for complete independence and his reluctance was read by many as his inability to disengage himself from British loyalty. In *HS*, Gandhi identifies one of the reasons for his reluctance: his lack of conviction in precisely an “India.” Gandhi’s misgivings regarding the nation-state as a representative category of collectivity signalled his unease with the fraught history of the nation-state in Europe, as well as his sense that a highly statist, bureaucratized, top-down government (Nehru’s Soviet vision) would be highly unsuitable to harness India’s teeming differentiae.

\(^8\) The phrase is Ashis Nandy’s from *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983). As Donald Pease puts it, “if what Jean-François Lyotard has called the postmodern condition entailed the dismantling of the Enlightenment’s grand narratives, the *nation*, as the surface on which those master narratives were inscribed, also names the space in which that condition has become pervasive” (1).
histories of the East and West did not only present patterns of conflict, exploitation and loss, but were also constituted of rich traditions of intercultural exchange, vital trade and economic links, and tremendously empowering examples of cross-pollinating interaction. Gandhi cites as examples the links since Antiquity between the Africas and Europe, sidelined by much nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography, as well as the uniquely indigenous Bhakti and Sufi movements, where a fusion of Islamic and pantheistic traditions gave rise to a rich composite subculture that challenged much of the meaningless ritualisms inherent in Hinduism and Islam in the times.\(^9\) In this way, Gandhi presents an entirely new domain for historiography. It is into such a re-reading of History that Gandhi inserts an enabling discourse of pluralism and heterogeneity, in a way that offers a perspective different from the comparatively disabling critiques of Forster and Woolf that could not see, given an \textit{a priori} belief in narratives of confrontation and suspicion, avenues for (East/West, Hindu/Muslim, Self/Other) solidarity and amity. Gandhi’s disavowal of such conflict-based historiography serves as a reminder in today’s turbulent times as well, when intercultural understanding is being cast within formulaic - and dangerous – trajectories of “clash-of-civilizations” or “us-and-them” discourses.

In \textit{HS}, Gandhi voices his anxieties about “civil society” – that institution of both capitalist and socialist concern that Slavoj \v{Z}ižek, in his article “Attempts to Escape the

\(^9\) See Manfred B. Steger’s \textit{Gandhi’s Dilemma: Nonviolent Principles and Nationalist Power} for an exploration of Gandhi’s thoughts on Hindu-Muslim hospitality. In \textit{HS}, Gandhi proffers: “[t]he introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation, they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. India has ever been such a country. In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals . . . if Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Hindus, Mahomedans, the Parsees and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen and they will have to live in unity if only for their own interest” (113).
Logic of Capitalism,” has argued, is not always a positive or value-neutral idea: “. . . [While] the idea of civil society refers to the opening up of a space of resistance to ‘totalitarian’ power, there is no essential reason why it cannot provide space for . . . nationalism and opposition movements of an anti-democratic nature. These are authentic expressions of civil society - civil society designates the terrain of open struggle, the terrain in which antagonisms can articulate themselves, without any guarantee that the ‘progressive’ side will win” (Žižek, *London Review Bookshop* par. 20). Gandhi’s critique of the British government (including the somewhat maladroit section in which the British Parliament is likened to a “sterile woman and a prostitute”) needs to be read, then, in the context of a critique of the construction of English civility itself. His repudiation of the British Parliament as “a costly toy” and his dramatizing of the Prime Minister as a slave to party politics are, at once, an indictment of the self-aggrandizing rhetoric of the British civic/civil system, one that drove its expansionist policies over centuries, and a powerful examination of its capitalist logic: “To drive the British out of India is a thought heard from many mouths, but it does not seem that many have properly considered why it should be so” (*HS* 87).

To throw the British out but supplant them with a derivative government that continues their hegemony is to doom oneself to an unending cycle of exploitation. The recognition that “we created the circumstances that gave the [English East India] Company its control over India . . . that we gave India to the English [rather] than that India was lost” allows Gandhi to recuperate a discourse of collective responsibility from out of the very moment of dispossession; in re-casting a history of disenfranchisement and exploitation (“the English nation . . . has been able to take India,” presents the
Reader) as a narrative of self-abnegation and collective dereliction of duty, Gandhi is able to retrieve from such historiography an enabling sense of agency and shared accountability (HS 41; 39). It is from this premise of a joint plan of action that Gandhi proceeds with his critique of modernity and with his vision of a purposive national project: “We brought the English, and we keep them. Why do you forget that our adoption of their civilization makes their presence in India at all possible? Your hatred of them ought to be transferred to their civilization” (74).

Consistently, Gandhi upends the language of such civilization whose brute logic ends in exploitative colonialism; as noted earlier, Gandhi’s overhauling of “History” and conventional Western historiography connects him presciently with postmodern critiques of masternarratives. In his many neologisms or revisitations of familiar terms, Gandhi hits upon an ingenious strategy to reach out to the masses and to project a radical critique of the very language of English civility. This is the language of precision and economy wherein the ideological positions occupied by progress, civilization, and economic development mark the West in those preordained ways by which the East is already also marked by savagery, superstition, and poverty. It is in such an ideological climate that Gandhi’s insistence on embracing poverty, vegetarianism, manual labour, chastity and truth need to be read. This is a minefield of an enterprise: riddled with all the

10 See Peter Brock’s Mahatma Gandhi as a Linguistic Nationalist (45-63) for a fuller discussion of Gandhi’s championing of the vernacular languages and the problems identified by Gandhi in the creation of a rashtrabhasha (literally, the language of the country). This was a project he gradually came to eschew in light of his increasing understanding of the aporias inherent in the nation-building project as well as the very real hurdles in cobbled together from out of the several hundred Indian tongues and dialects any one language (Hindustani, as Gandhi first thought) to carry the burden of nation-wide communication. Ironically, Gandhi widely wrote and corresponded with fellow-activists in English and, in his letters, often alludes to his awareness of this irony.
ambivalence that comes with using the master’s language to bring down the master’s house as well as the additional risks of sounding naïve, simplistic, and redundant, this is the path of revisiting Gandhi on the very brink of an epistemological precipice.

**Civility and the Village**

When Nehru and Gandhi argued over their different visions of the village, there was more at work than just semantics. But there was also that. Nehru’s harkening to conventional definitions of village was an attempt to align himself with that representational scale of ideas in which the village stood for everything that was opposed to the city, which was the new hub of economic and social progress. A village, in this sense, was all that was “backward intellectually and culturally,” a place that foreclosed all possibility of progress. Gandhi’s definition of the village eschewed its place within such a discourse of representation by which the village is already marked as the epistemological other of the city. In arguing for responsible technology, communal accountability, and social and economic sharing, Gandhi was at once challenging Nehru’s semantic conflation of village and primitivism, as well as outlining his vision of the village as a site for social change and as the arena for a new civil order. In recalibrating the definition of a village within a matrix of the indigenous/agrarian/communal as opposed to the colonial/industrial/individual model, Gandhi was tapping into a mode of collectivity he perceived as ancient, time-tested, and appropriate for the Indian cultural milieu. This insistence on the local, first and foremost, before the national or the global, connects him with much postmodern thought, but in thinking like this, Gandhi was only affirming a
model he felt was an intrinsic part of the deep and diverse cultural past of India, a past that subverted the presentism and seeming immutability of colonial rule.

Gandhi’s recalibrations of colonial/Western signifiers went beyond the village and encompassed concepts such as truth, consciousness, and pleasure, indicating that he was a self-conscious philosopher along with being a writer-activist. As we will see, this has relevance to our purpose of looking at Gandhi’s radical redefining of the agrestic and the village. Repeatedly, he takes words and concepts from out of their discursive histories of use and re-coordinates their meaning and purchase for autochthonous conditions. The result is often a startlingly new product, a notion that points to a remarkable fusion of Eastern and Western, old and new, traditional and modern, but one that also runs the very dangerous risk of confusion and misinterpretation.  

A good example of this is Gandhi’s notion of “chastity.” In 1906, Gandhi took the vow of brahmacharya or celibacy and in HS, he speaks of embracing chastity:

Chastity is one of the great disciplines without which the mind cannot attain requisite firmness. A man who is unchaste loses stamina, becomes emasculated and cowardly. He whose mind is given over to animal passions is not capable of any great effort. This can be proven by innumerable instances. What, then, is a married person to do, is the question that arises naturally; and yet it need not. When a husband and wife gratify the passions, it is no less an animal indulgence on that account. Such an indulgence, except for perpetuating the race, is strictly prohibited. But a passive resister has to avoid even that very limited indulgence, because he can have no desire for progeny. A married man, therefore, can observe perfect chastity. (HS 97)

The disquisition redefines chastity but also presents problems at multiple levels: on the one hand, Gandhi’s notion of chastity weds the realm of the sexual with his overarching project of swa-raj (self-mastery) even as he insists that chastity is not a state of physical being but one of mental discipline, so that it is possible for married men to observe perfect chastity as well as the unmarried man. As Parel notes, Gandhi is not alone in this line of thinking – his personal favourite, Tolstoy, conceived of chastity as a state of mutual fidelity in marriage, thus attempting to accommodate the traditional Judaeo-Christian reading of sexual innocence within the social boundaries of marriage, arguing for chastity within marriage to mean abstinence from adultery. At the same time, then, as Gandhi attempts to wed together Western and Eastern, he attempts also to re-present the
The Gandhian village presents the locus of an important transformation in social thinking. This is not just the place where will reside an unthinking or an uncritical rural ethos, but will constitute a vantage-point that challenges some of the most powerful give n of capitalist modernity and present a case-study of a mode of collectivity alternative in power and purpose to it. In this sense, poverty, civility, and progress become terms whose meanings Gandhi frees from their conventional semantic and ideational underpinnings and invests, instead, with agency and responsibility by re- coining them as trusteeship, duty, and common good:

pragmatic face of the well-known Hindu notion of brahmacharya, making available in a Gramscian way an organically-forged intellectualism.

Here, however, are also several problems and contradictions: not only is the language rather forgetful of the woman satyagrahi, here is a reading premised on the very divorce of pleasure and sex, arguing for a sexual abnegation not very different from utilitarianism and bourgeois conservatism. How then was Gandhi a radical? Was his approach to life singularly impracticable? Gandhi’s own brahmacharya at the age of 37 and his thorough embroilment in nationalist politics came at a tremendous personal cost: his eldest son became an alcoholic, causing a heartbroken Gandhi to publicly disavow him as son, and his other sons consistently suffered from an absent father. And what is the story of Kasturba’s response to her husband’s high decision? Perhaps we shall never fully know – in a candid moment in his memoirs, My Experiments with Truth, Gandhi himself admits to the many problems his vow of celibacy presented to his young wife. Quite unselfconscious in his paternalism towards Kasturba, he writes of his first forays into the celibate life with a degree of comic exactitude:

What then, I asked myself, should be my relation with my wife? Did my faithfulness consist in making my wife the instrument of my lust? So long as I was the slave of lust, my faithfulness was worth nothing. To be fair to my wife, I must say that she was never the temptress. It was therefore the easiest thing for me to take the vow of brahmacharya . . . (The Story of My Experiments with Truth: Brahmacharya I)

Trusteeship is a crucial idea in Gandhi’s program of swaraj. Intimately tied to what he defines as “neighbourliness,” trusteeship forms, for Gandhi, the very essence of interpersonal relationships. Many of Gandhi’s ashrams and social programs were funded by renowned wealthy businessmen such as Jamnalal Bajaj and Ratan Tata, an illustration of the idea of trusteeship, wherein the rich reinvested money in society and converted individual wealth into communal value. For an analysis of the philosophy behind trusteeship and its economic efficacy, see C. Gopinath 331–44.
Just as there is necessity for chastity, so is there for poverty. Pecuniary ambition and passive resistance cannot well go together. Those who have money are not expected to throw it away, but they are expected to be indifferent about it. They must be prepared to lose every penny rather than give up passive resistance. (HS 97; my emphasis)

It is important to note, as Parel does, that Gandhi, in these lines, does not valorize involuntary poverty nor is this an argument for status quo and social inequity (97 fn.). Gandhi’s insistence upon indifference to economic gain derives its force from the ethic of detachment – which he borrows from nishkama karma or “selfless action” of the Bhagavad Gita—and presents the face of a voluntary poverty, one that is even desirable as integral to one’s role in the collective. In thus approaching poverty as a matter of choice, indeed even one of responsibility, Gandhi was perhaps seeking to unlock that mind-forged manacle by which to be poor automatically meant to be worth and worthy of nothing. It is a fine-edged sword though, for when faced with the very real deprivations of food, clothing and shelter, how exactly is one to go about forgetting one’s poverty? Indeed, indifference to wealth also begets its twin, indifference to poverty, thereby, compounding that vicious cycle of false consciousness out of which there may be no exit.

Nonetheless, in questioning the very discourse of English civility as the sociocultural edifice of its civilization and its colonialism, Gandhi was foregrounding a nuanced reading of British social organization and by corollary, calling for alternative, indigenous models of local self-government. His ambitious program of swaraj was just such a plan and his various experiments with village collectivity in the form of Panchayati Raj and various ashrams – the Phoenix settlement and the Tolstoy Farm in
South Africa and more famously, Sabarmati in India – provided the space wherein Gandhi attempted to develop an alternative to the hegemonic notion of modern/nationalist/industrial society. An ethos such as the one Gandhi attempted to forge in these settlements challenged notions of a bourgeois, quasi-capitalist, fervidly nationalistic society whose underpinnings within the politics of colonial civility made it difficult to fully disengage from colonial Realpolitik and that in many ways, did not fully represent the interests of the teeming non-literate millions of India. It is to these millions Gandhi reached out, in imaginative but often contradictory and politically ambivalent ways, and from a vantage-point within the surge of the nationalist movement, Gandhi attempted to steer protest away from the public statist domain of swantantrata or political independence towards the more private but also collective space of swaraj or self-government, a movement that Gandhi perceived would be the more lasting or enduring form of freedom.

**Gandhi and the Public Sphere**

There are two seminal ways in which Gandhi revolutionized the “public sphere,” that domain of civil society wherein the self-reflecting intellectual and the “unrepresentable” subaltern present two dirempted ends of “a profoundly ambivalent spectrum of [social] phenomena” (Habermas 137). Firstly, by dismantling English civility itself as a hegemonic discourse that sustained the Empire’s pretensions, at the same time as it masked its expansionist reality, Gandhi presented the agenda of a *counter-civility*. English “civility” was, at once, a set of practices encompassing etiquette, comport, and fashion (desirable, imitable, dominant) *and* also that “Englishness” (in-born, inimitable,
foreign) whose very inemulability created, as Homi Bhabha notes, the mimic-man “as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite,” (85) thus, reinforcing its all-powerful mystique and keeping the Indian native at a firm remove. By connecting civility with “civilization,” which he defined as the “path of duty,” Gandhi was effectively striking at the very edifice of the English ideal. The emphasis on homespun _khadi_, on indigenous goods and on labour were all, then, strategies for the eschewing of a colonial civility and the affirmation of an autochthonous identity, forged from outside the colonial anvil. And Gandhi’s ashrams were to be the Joycean smithy for the forging of a new kind of consciousness; one Gandhi called “soul-force” or _satyagraha_.

At another level, Gandhi revolutionized the public sphere: by bringing into the private world of the ashram issues hithertofore considered public, Gandhi was attempting to open up the domain of nationalist politics to those whose disenfranchisement had kept them away from political consciousness. The ashram, then, became the space for a new kind of confluence of the public and private, of the bourgeois and proletarian, of affirmation and resistance. Gandhi’s notions of _satyagraha_ and _ahimsa_ are central to understanding his redefinition of the public sphere and his original deployment of the public-private dualism towards the fraught agenda of _swaraj_. To this vision is particularly important Gandhi’s crafting of a village ethos, and his experiments with the creation of

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12 See Parekh 37-46 for a discussion on how Gandhi came to choose the term over others presented to him by friends. _Satyagraha_ in Gujarati as well as in Hindustani (Gandhi’s preferred language of communication with the general Indian populace) means literally “the desire/quest for truth.” Gandhi spoke of this desire however as a _force_: “The force implied in this [ _satyagraha_ ] may be described as love-force, soul-force, or more popularly but less accurately, passive resistance” ( _HS_ 85). See also Dalton (42-66) in “Gandhi as Leader” for the difference between _satyagraha_ and _duragraha_, its philosophical opposite.

13 In Sanskrit, _himsa_ signifies violence and _ahimsa_ is its opposite, non-violence.
ashrams and settlements in South Africa and India are significant examples of his reconfiguration of the city-village dialectic. It is possible to see in Gandhi’s ashrams some of his central tenets at work and the ashram marks the space where he presents in praxis his critique of “modern civilization.”

Because the public sphere is at once that domain of collective consciousness created by as well as subversive of the State’s regulatory and policing impulses, it becomes the site for competing forms of power. To speak of the formation and functions of the public sphere is, then, to engage in an examination of the politics of Power itself and the many forms it takes. Hannah Arendt has argued persuasively for the need to maintain epistemological distinctions between power, strength, force, and authority, “all of which refer to distinct, different phenomena and would hardly exist unless they did” (43). Arendt insists that the popular tendency to confuse all these terms “not only indicates a certain deafness to linguistic meanings, which would be serious enough, but it also has resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities they correspond to” (43). Power, Arendt argues, corresponds to “the human ability not just to act but to act in concert” (44). Power in this sense never belongs to an individual but to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. A powerful politician then is always a metaphor because “potestas in populo, without a people or group there is no power” (43). Power outside of/without metaphor Arendt defines as strength . . . [found] in the singular, an individual entity; it is the property inherent in an object or person and belongs to its character, which may prove itself in relation to other things or persons, but is essentially independent of them . . . . It is in the nature of a group and its power to turn against [this] independence, the property of individual strength” (44). Force should be reserved, Arendt
argues, “in terminological language, for the ‘forces of nature’ or the ‘force of circumstances’ (la force des choses), that is, to indicate the energy released by physical or social movements” (45). This brings her to authority, the “most elusive of these phenomena and therefore as a term, most frequently abused . . . [whose] hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed. . . . The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter” (45).14

While institutionalized forms of power in organized communities have recourse to exhibiting all four kinds, Arendt’s distinctions are timely in remembering the differing thrusts of each kind of power and in ultimately their relationship to violence. Arendt warns against conflating power with violence: . . . it is particularly tempting to think of power in terms of command and obedience, and hence to equate power with violence, in a discussion of what is actually only one of power’s special cases – namely, the power of government” (47). Arendt’s insights into the nature of power and its differing manifestations can prove to be a valuable gloss in understanding Gandhi’s advocacy of non-violence (ahimsa) and his lifelong repudiation of the violent method. Indeed the insistence on method, on the intricate and inseparable connection of means to ends, was to prove fatal for Gandhi: Gopal Godse, the brother of Gandhi’s assassin Nathuram Godse.

14 At the end of the highly successful Salt March in March 1930, Gandhi was invited to the negotiating table of Lord Irwin, sent by the Crown for the express purpose of salvaging for the Empire some semblance of face from the entire situation. Gandhi was presented with a glass of lukewarm water as he requested. Rather quietly, he took out from a roll in his dhoti something which he then proceeded to add to his glass of water and then he drank the mixture. With a smile, Gandhi is then said to have informed Lord Irwin that he had officially defied the authority of the English Salt Law. To Arendt’s thesis, one may also add as footnote smiling defiance as a milder but equally effective cousin to laughing contempt.
Godse, complained that Gandhi had “consistently insulted the Hindu nation and had weakened it by his doctrine of ahimsa” (qtd. in Parel 2000, 120). Dennis Dalton has insightfully argued that Gandhi was original in his conception of the relationship of means and ends, one over which thinkers as varied as Tolstoy, Lenin, Trotsky, Emerson, and Tagore presented their differing views (“Gandhi’s Originality,” 63-86). The ashram was the space where Gandhi’s idea of *ahimsa* found its most constructive avatar. Given that Gandhi was at the forefront of a people at the brink of some kind of revolution, his unwavering disavowal of violence was a powerful example of his highly original critique of Western hegemony as well as its revolution-loving dissidents:

> I do not know whether [Bolshevism] is for the good of Russia in the long run. But I do know that in so far as it is based on violence and the denial of God, it repels me. I do not believe in short-violent-cuts to success. Those Bolshevik friends who are bestowing their attention on me should realize that however much I may sympathize with and admire worthy motives, I am an uncompromising opponent of violent methods even to serve the noblest of causes. There is therefore no meeting ground between the school of violence and myself. But my creed of nonviolence not only does not preclude me but compels me even to associate with anarchists and all those who believe in violence. But that association is always with the sole object of weaning them from what appears to me to be their error. For experience convinces me that permanent good can never be the outcome of truth and violence. (*CW* 25, 423-34)

Consistently, Gandhi repudiated violent action – each time a Civil Disobedience Movement threatened to become violent, or as in the case of the notorious Chauri Chaura
incident did become violent, Gandhi called off the agitation, insisting, as it were, from within the potentially all-consuming dance of destruction a moment of reflection, an inward glance into one’s own motives and conscience. Gandhi’s skepticism of the efficacy of “revolutions” echoes Arendt’s position on the misleadingly valorized but highly limited capacity of violent power. Arendt challenges the case that argues in favour of the “necessity” for violent revolution and argues instead for a necessary differentiation of violence and state, presenting a picture of power radically different from the model theorized by Max Weber. In an important lecture in 1918 at Munich University, “Politics as a Vocation” (Politik als Beruf), Weber put forward a definition of the state that has come to be pivotal to sociology. The Weberian state is an entity that holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force (by which Weber means power) and politics is the activity by which such power is distributed among the populace (Weber 3). Weber’s thesis upheld the integral connections of the state with force, a notion whose ramifications rather appalled Arendt, who saw in such a conception the possibility for the rationalization of violence and authority exercised beyond check. Instead Arendt points out that it is not violence but power that is the essence of government. Violence can destroy the old power but it can never create the authority that legitimizes the new. Violence is therefore the poorest possible basis on which to build a government: as she puts it, “[p]ower and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance” (56). This is Arendt’s case against “revolutions” as well and she presents the idea that the only true revolution is the one engendered from within and terminologically, “revolution” can be used only to indicate fundamental changes in the
ways in which humans understand and relate to their political environments. In a passage that echoes Gandhi in powerful ways, Arendt asserts that to “substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished but it is also paid by the victor” (53). This was also Gandhi’s case against the colonial State, whose legitimating tactics deployed violence as a front for power. With *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, Gandhi sought to disrupt this equation between statist power and violence, presenting, in its stead, a version of strength whose power resided in its very determination to *not* fight back.

In a crucial way, however, Gandhi’s conceptions of *satyagraha* and *swaraj* extend Arendt’s distinctions of power’s various forms and present a notion of *strength* that resides in the high moral force of right and that binds the individual and the collective within a common program of service and duty. This is possibly Gandhi’s singlemost vital insight for the epistemological sciences: European modernity’s greatest handicap for Gandhi is its embedment in binarist discourses of the cloven body and the senses on the one side, and the soul and its travails on the other, offering a reading of human consciousness premised on the confrontation of the material with the spiritual, a war between the sensory and the spiritual. This was a dualism Gandhi trenchantly disavowed. The divorce of the body from the soul was for Gandhi an unconscionable reduction of the ontological self, and by carefully and consistently jettisoning that cleavage, Gandhi sought to reinvigorate human consciousness itself. The materialist body, Gandhi perceived, creates the lack which it then fetishizes, expanding on those needs in cycles of endless deferral, producing desire without contentment, deploying all labour within a horizon of infinitely multiplying wants. A civilization based on such a conception of
human selfhood and collective existence had for Gandhi merely a “tinsel splendour” and was fundamentally erroneous (HS 109). It is this conviction that impels Gandhi’s unbending criticism of ideological apparatuses of state power where the convoluted chains of command obfuscate issues of justice and morality and present bureaucratization and procedure in the place of due process and timely action.

It is in the context of his broader criticism of European modernity’s diremption of the body and the soul that Gandhi bases his condemnation of the machineries of “modern civilization” and the advocacy of responsible technology within communal living. It would be far too easy to dismiss such conception as utopian and impracticable but it is a matter of some thought that the chasm between “developed” and “developing” or “under-developed” countries is nowhere most evident than in their ability/ inability to create access for their citizens. A welfare state’s litmus test inheres in its ability to guarantee for its subjects access to a life of dignity and value; Gandhi’s denunciation of the corruptions of the legal and medical professions is rooted in his more fundamental criticism of the alienating effects of systems of organization where the centralization of power in the hands of a few, the bureaucratization of access, and the “juridification” of justice (Habermas Theory 356), all combine to produce the spiritually-disoriented and politically-deracinated body of the abject citizen.

**The Ashram and Civil Society**

The ashram presents Gandhi’s intervention in the discourse of utopia, as understood in conventional Western political theory. It was a prototype both of the village of Gandhi’s vision, and the locus for a public consciousness that had the potential to become the lynchpin for a new kind of civil society. The connections between civil
society and the public sphere were the lifelong interest of Jürgen Habermas who defined the public sphere as constitutive of those institutions of consciousness that provide the space for effective intersubjective communication and collective action. This, for Habermas, ranks as chief among the merits and capabilities of an ideal civil society. The emergence of this public sphere where large numbers of the middleclass,\textsuperscript{15} qua private individuals, come together “to engage in reasoned argument over key issues of mutual interest and concern, creat[es] a space in which both new ideas and the practices and discipline of rational public debate [are] cultivated . . .effectively [forming] a zone of mediation between the state and the private individual . . .” (Roberts and Crossley 2). This zone, Habermas argues, shapes and in turn is shaped by the consciousness of “publics” and their vital presence in and to the state.

As Partha Chatterjee has argued and as studies of the Subaltern School have shown, there existed

\begin{itemize}
  \item a structure of duality in the nationalist mass movement. A coming together of two domains of politics seems to have occurred. On the one hand was the domain of the formally organized political parties and associations, moving within the institutional processes of the bourgeois state forms introduced by colonial rule and seeking to use their representative power over the mass of the people to replace the colonial state by a bourgeois nation-state. On the other hand was the domain of peasant politics where beliefs and actions did not fit into the grid of “interests” and “aggregation of interests” that constituted the world of bourgeois representative politics. Seen from the former domain, the latter could appear only
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{15} One might add, middle-class men.
as the realm of spontaneity, which was of course nothing more than the
acknowledgement that the specific determinants of the domain of peasant political
activity remained incomprehensible from the standpoint of bourgeois politics.

(159)

It is precisely this second domain – gone unrepresented in nationalist politics, or more
accurately, only essentially represented, not often complexly “envoiced”\(^\text{16}\) – that
Gandhi’s concept of swaraj was designed for. Part of Gandhi’s success as a political
activist stems from his very shrewd understanding of the symbolic power of India’s
“invisibilized”\(^\text{17}\) masses: among some of the most haunting images of Gandhian protest
are those of the Civil Disobedience movements, where thousands of men and women in
white khaddar and white caps nonviolently take on a handful of soldiers in uniform –
even as the first row of dissenters are hit down by baton-sticks of the police, a second line
takes their place. Or, in what was the acme of Gandhi’s political career, a seething mass
of tens of thousands of khadi-clad demonstrators, following Gandhi on a 24-day, 241-
mile journey, march towards Dandi to break the Salt Law. These and other examples
evidence Gandhi’s ability to harness the symbolic visual power of representing subaltern
collectivity, a political strategy he resorted to consistently, holding the Empire to public
ransom, on the grounds of a high moral ethic difficult to impugn.

The years between 1867, when Dadabhai Naoroji (Gandhi’s professed guru)
founded the East India Association, and Gandhi’s Salt March in 1930 saw Victoria
become Empress of India in 1877, and witnessed in Bengal, the Indo-Gangetic belt, in

\(^{16}\) To borrow a term from Carolyn Abbate (223).

\(^{17}\) The felicitous phrase is Valerie Traub’s (118).
Maharashtra, and parts of the Deccan, the creation and proliferation of several sociopolitical organizations whose luminaries were also staunch opponents of colonial rule. In particular, the activism of the Brahmo Samaj (founded in 1828), the Young Bengal Movement of Henry Derozio and his followers (during the 1830s), and the events of the 1857 Mutiny destabilized the Empire and marked the nineteenth century in defining ways, paving the way for a well-documented cultural renaissance in Bengal whose effects were also felt in large parts of India. Following the course of Surendranath Banerjea’s Indian National Association (founded in 1876) and the Congress (1885), this was the time that also saw the making of the Prarthana Samaj (1864), the Arya Samaj (1875), the Deccan Educational Society (1884), and a host of literary clubs and organizations, each of which was integrally connected to newspapers, dailies, journals, and created audiences for powerful literary and political “publics” that transformed the local citizenry. Indeed, well into the 1930s and 1940s, in tandem with Gandhi’s stewardship of the Civil Disobedience and Non-Cooperation Movements, the Progressive Writers Movement and the Indian People’s Theatre Association, among many others, continued the work of these sociopolitical organizations in the sphere of art and literature, enabling a powerful confluence of counterdiscursive energies. As Rudolph and Rudolph note, these organizations redefined the public sphere in the Habermasian sense, by creating the space for an “awakened” collective civil consciousness forged on the basis of rational public debate – a development that went in concert with a new nationalist project of anti-colonialism (76-80). With these institutions were associated big names of leaders at the forefront of the “freedom movement” such as Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Justice Ranade, Sri Aurobindo, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Surendranath Banerjea, Sarojini Naidu, all
of whom were associated with reform and social service organizations, and who made public – and legal – a new language of social change. Nineteenth-century legislations on widow remarriage, abolition of sati and female infanticide, and reforms in the social practices of (mostly Hindu) religion gradually paved the way for a discussion of the role of the state itself in making positive interventions. Yet these were also the elite spaces from which a vast non-literate majority of the population was estranged, and where campaigning for socioreligious reform (in tune with the ideals of European liberalism) often did not find local or popular support. In this sense, ironically, there was already germane in the process of creating public consciousness an impulse towards “refeudalization,” Habermasian processes which involve a merging of the (colonial) state and (colonized) public sphere over issues of common social/political concern, and that create a zone of shared benefit, not unlike the structures of allegedly-moribund feudal economies. Rudolph and Rudolph have shown (140-176) how Habermas’s concept of refeudalization can be particularly relevant to understanding the nineteenth-century movement in Bengal for social reform, at the forefront of which were such thinkers as Rammohan Roy, Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, who were shapers of the different Samajes that were begun to initiate reforms in socio-religious

18 See Partha Chatterjee for a provocative analysis of the “nationalist resolution of the woman question” where he posits that by focusing on practices such as sati, early and widow marriages and purdah, colonization involved “assuming sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, [through which] the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country” (118). By making a public-private binary between the home and the world, the spiritual and the material, the nationalists recast the issue of women’s emancipation as the site for forging cultural identity; the discourse simultaneously made women subjects of debate and objects of change, a kind of spectator politics that allowed the question of women’s rights itself to be transcribed as one about the identity of the colonized nation.
practices, mostly concerning women. As Habermas has argued, “publics” is the arena by which a special kind of public consciousness is articulated and formed into a discourse that often presents a check on the excesses of the state and that actively attempts to deploy the state for civil welfare. The proliferation of these organizations that sought to make the colonial state take an active legal role in the welfare of the colonized presents one kind of publics, in nineteenth-century India. At the same time however, it is possible to see these bourgeois institutions as embodying a limited public sphere of popular representation – of the educated middleclass, popularly called the bhadralok (literally, “the well-mannered people”), whose pretensions to English customs and long pasts of feudal or neo-feudal privilege, kept them at a remove from the vast underclass whose women and outcastes they sought to uplift. While many of the major reformers were well-meaning individuals, much of the discourse which was in the nature of articles (often written in English) published in journals and weeklies, or tracts, presented the notion of reform and change only to the literate classes –the English and other members of the bhadralok. It is arguable therefore that in many ways, these nineteenth-century bourgeois organizations, working within the universe of colonial policy, achieved a kind of merging with the colonizing state on significant social issues, becoming the leading voices of reform and obtaining from the colonial state special privileges and powers (“refeudalization”) but such consensus also alienated this strong and articulate meliorist discourse of change from the specific site where change was sought to be engendered.19

19 The Bhadralok has been well studied as a remarkably heterogeneous body whose collusions and collisions with the colonial government necessitate the need for reimagining the role of the Bengali intelligentsia in the cultural Renaissance and the nationalist movement of the nineteenth-century. The alienated non-elite, non-bhadralok sections of nineteenth-century Bengal have also been well examined, and have been the
While reformers such as Rammohan Roy and Surendranath Bannerjea lobbied for progressive legislation against inequitable practices within Hindu and Muslim patriarchy (the abolition of sati, purdah, and laws favouring widow remarriage), a vast majority of the non-literate populace was also alienated from such top-down transformation, of which it had become the arena and not the agent, and from whose perspective such tinkering could well have appeared as a new strain of (colonial) oppression. This was the language of social change whose inspiration was to be found in the Enlightenment ideals of rationalism and scientific inquiry, as well as in the principles of the French and American Revolutions. Access to this language, however, was a matter of class and education, and a dangerously large number of people appeared, then, to be outside the authorizing of social reform and its anti-colonialist politics. By the twentieth century, this “refeudalization” itself had undergone a vast transformation and the collusions of the English colonial state and reformist organizations had also created collisions and fissures in the elite discourse of change. By the time Gandhi arrived in India in 1914, there had emerged already a mood of disavowal towards English colonialism, and in that unique focus of the Subaltern Studies school, in whose variegated work, events of extraordinary resistance or “revolts” (Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Shahid Amin) as well as of quotidian dissidences (Douglas Haynes and Gyan Pandey) have been studied as presenting the “other” face of a publics that differed from, subverted, and challenged the narratives of elite nationalism. There is, however, in this powerful “subalternist” argument a general tendency to recast social relationships within dichotomous paradigms of the dominant and the dominated – a formula that allows for an easier designation of subalternity, and hence helps understand the complex plays of “voice,” resistance and autonomy, but that also obscures those times and spaces of overlap and intersection that characterize all power equations in real life. In this sense, Gandhi’s role in wedding subaltern publics with elite publics is a case in study of a novel kind of collectivisation whose fulcrum was constituted not by the familiar variables of class, education or colonial dispossession, but by a shared ethic of voluntary service, of duty. His ashrams were places one could gain “entry by merit [and] exit by choice,” instantiating one kind of civic solidarity and collective action where paradigms of dominant-dominated did not quite hold (Rudolph and Rudolph 162).
intellectual climate whose way had been laid by nineteenth-century publics, under the aegis of such thinkers and activists as Rabindranath Tagore, Dadabhai Nauroji, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant and many more, a critical moment in the history of British imperialism had arisen, and “India” was its centre.

It is important here to appreciate this propitious environment of reformism and social change into which Gandhi introduced his ideas of swaraj and satyagraha. Such a project might blunt the edge of Gandhian singularity and displease his hagiographers, but it is, without doubt, a fact that Gandhi’s success was much indebted to, and emerged from, the initial work of these nineteenth-century organizations and the many remarkable figures of the time. I share with Rudolph and Rudolph the general inclination to not “. . . draw too sharp a distinction between the public sphere associated with the coffee house and ashram. Both are about civic virtue and realizing the public good . . . . [However] unlike in the world of the coffee house, in the world of the ashram, . . . the individual in civil society becomes the decisive arena for change” (162-63). What Gandhi succeeded in doing, then, was to disrupt the transactional connections between bourgeois interests and the colonial state, and imbue the language of political action with the moral purpose of swaraj. His attempt was to resituate the underclasses within the discourse of change not as the arena or site of bourgeois will but as the agents of their own social transformation. This conversion or transfer of agentic responsibility lay at the heart of Gandhi’s vision of the village and he was unyielding in his refusal to give up to the forces of urban modernity this vision of rural reconstruction. Read in this light, Gandhi’s role in gathering the vast numbers of the unaccommodated masses becomes the high-point of a special kind of subaltern refashioning. Outside the clubs and coffee-houses, a completely
different kind of collectivization occurred under the leadership of Gandhi and populist reformers (many, avowed Gandhians) such as Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy in Tamil Nadu, Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra and Sree Narayana Guru in Kerala. What was happening here was the formation of a distinctive force, not completely identified with the “peasant rebellions” of Subaltern School historiography, but one in whose disaggregated quotidian resistances were being forged powerful rebuttals of both colonialist as well as elite nationalist narratives of progress and freedom.

It is in this light that Gandhi’s ashrams can be read as the prototypes of his vision of the village, a category Gandhi sought consistently to distance from all that was predeterminedly primitive or savage or retrogressive. Instead, by fashioning this new vision of the village within a telos of service, by eschewing the all-consuming modernity of both colonizer and elite dissident, by recreating a secular taxonomy of signs and symbols, by instituting labour, and not capital, as the fulcrum of rural economic life, and by undergirding the conceptual universe of his ashrams with the core ideas of satyagraha and ahimsa, he sought to present a face of civil society that was inclusive, powerful and truly revolutionary. As Habermas might put it, “networks” and “lifeworlds” met in the ashram.20

The Ashram as Model for Gandhian Utopia

The village of my dreams is still in my mind. After all, every man lives in the world of his dreams. My ideal village will contain intelligent human beings. They

20 “... a ‘functional integration’ of social relations via networks ... [meets with] ... a ‘social integration’ of the collective lifeworld of those who share a collective identity; a social integration based on mutual understanding, intersubjectively shared norms, and collective values” (Habermas, Postnational Constellation, 82).
will not live in dirt and darkness as animals. Men and women will be free and able to hold their own against any one in the world. There will be neither plague, nor cholera nor smallpox; no one will be idle, no one will wallow in luxury. Everyone will have to contribute his quota of manual labour . . . it is possible to envisage railways, post and telegraph offices etc. For me it is material to obtain the real article and the rest will fit into the picture afterwards. If I let go of the real thing, all else goes. (Letter to Nehru dt. 5 October 1945, qtd. in Parekh 150-1).

Gandhi’s village was far from the “harmless and happy form of human existence,” the idyllic vision of rural India, Sir William Wedderburn had extolled in the brief paragraph that Gandhi himself added (perhaps not entirely innocently) in the appendices to the first edition of Hind Swaraj (Parekh 123), just before the British government banned the book in March 1910 for fear of sedition. Clearly, to the colonial Government, not all that Gandhi showed, in what was to be the manifesto of his India, was “both picturesque and attractive” (Parekh 123), and his ashrams and villages were very real threats to the Empire, and to the structural foundations of English civility. The ashram presented that transgressive space in which Gandhi attempted to bring the private into the public:

How to arrange the preparation of food, dining and cleaning up? By allowing every family to operate its own kitchen as religious and caste rules required? Most ashram volunteers came from caste backgrounds that forbade inter-dining on grounds of purity and pollution. And what about those differences between those who were vegetarian and those who were meat-eaters? And who was to wash the spoiled dishes…? (Rudolph and Rudolph 153)
The ashram’s solution of a single kitchen, common vessels, individual cleaning and rotational service for public areas ensured an order and regimen far removed from the philosophical or political anarchy his opponents often charged Gandhi with. Indeed as Rudolph and Rudolph point out, “the ashram and the satyagraha as vehicles for displaying a democratized public sphere became a new kind of political theatre” (155). If, as Chatterjee has argued, the high nationalist project of the time involved a segregation of the public from the private and the creation of discourses of purity and chastity, best emblazoned in the women of the country and the feminization of the “motherland” itself, then Gandhi’s ashram presents a striking rupture in the formation of such a dichotomy. For in these ashrams, people from all walks of life voluntarily joined, instantiating one kind of response to bourgeois refeudalization – here, a transformation of elite publics of nationalism into a more mass-based publics of Gandhian politics engendered the creation of a space where discursive binaries between bourgeois and plebian politics became more porous, less overwhelming. The ashram, however, ran a very real risk of appearing escapist, cultist, and disengaged; this Gandhi sought to rectify by resorting to active journalism and by incorporating ashram-members in a daily activity of debate, writing and public discussion. Additionally, the fact that these ashrams

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21 In 1903, in South Africa, Gandhi started a weekly newspaper, Indian Opinion, issued every Saturday in four languages. Three years later Gandhi dropped two of those languages for lack of competent editors, but he himself edited the paper in the other two languages and issued the paper on time until he left South Africa in 1914. From India, Gandhi continued supporting Indian Opinion all his life by providing regular editorial materials and moral and financial support. In 1919 Gandhi started two weeklies in India, Young India and Navjivan and issued it regularly all his life except for the durations during which the government banned the press. In 1933 Gandhi added a third weekly, Harijan and ran it all his life except when the press was ceased.
contained within them movable communities of people, allowed them a conceptual and real deterrioriality that illustrated the village as a category constituted not on the lines of such variables as territory, language or religion (bases on which narratives of nation-states have been discursively “imagined”) but on the more cosmopolitan and inclusive lines of “communicative action” (Habermas, Theory 70) by people whose very real interactions create and animate the ontological itself.22

**Gandhi and the Language of Change**

In the previous section, I discussed briefly some of the features of Gandhi’s ashram that best identifies it with Habermas’s conception of “publics” and presents a new kind of collectivisation. In this one, I consider how the very signifiers of such fashioning also contain a destabilizing ambivalence whose political ramifications consistently undermined Gandhi’s high moral vision. The principle of *swaraj* was Gandhi’s “architectonic symbol” in vision and praxis (Kaushik 63). By making central to his vision of free India the idea of individual independence – *swaraj* translates as rule or mastery

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22 Consider, for instance, when Kochrab village was attacked by plague in 1917, the Satyagraha ashram moved to Sabarmati where it renamed itself after the place, only to be re-named once more as Harijan Ashram in 1930 when Gandhi turned his attention to the amelioration of “untouchables,” whose emancipation he espoused by calling them “Harijans” or “the children of god.” The renaming, however, was not an unproblematic move and B. R. Ambedkar, a fierce opponent of Gandhi’s policies, although a lifelong friend, rejected the epithet as condescending and favoured ‘Dalit’ (meaning ‘the downtrodden’) the term that has now come to categorize the whole range of discourse and literature of/about the formerly-Untouchable. See Ramachandra Guha’s article “Gandhi’s Ambedkar” published in *The Hindu* for an interesting analysis of the two leaders. Ashrams similarly at Wardha and Segaon were instituted by the charity of prominent industrialist Jamnalal Bajaj; Segaon was a strategic move because it was a village of outcastes and Gandhi renamed it “Sevagram” or the “village of service” to symbolize his campaign against untouchability.
over one’s self – Gandhi speaks of a need to locate anticolonialism within a broader, new humanistic vision of the individual: “[i]t is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves . . . the Swaraj that I wish to picture before you and me is such that, after once we have realized it, we will endeavour to spend our lifetime to persuade others to do likewise. But such Swaraj has to be experienced each one for himself” (HS 73). In HS Gandhi consistently advocates swaraj over swatantrata, recasting the question of political independence (“purna swaraj”) as always first a matter of self-enlightenment, of a grassroot-level social transformation, that comes prior to collective governance, which was the aim of the movement for political freedom. To convey the difference, Gandhi tapped into India’s deep pasts of philosophical self-consciousness and deployed a rich popular universe of faith and religious symbolism. Gandhi was deliberately eclectic in selecting symbols for

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23 Gandhi’s championing of the Panchayati Raj as a system of grassroot governance was essentially an articulation of a mass-based democracy. Here too, Gandhi resorted to the use of symbols to convey his idea of a democratic India as “composed of innumerable villages [where] there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid and the apex sustained by the bottom” (Harijan, 28 July, 1946; CW 45: 220). For a fuller discussion of Gandhi’s vision of panchayat self-governance, see Terchek 198–227.

24 Gandhi’s own belief in morality paralleled his faith in God, and in HS, he represents his empirical critique of modern civilization within the rubric of “godlessness”:

The British Government in India constitutes a struggle between the Modern Civilisation, which is the Kingdom of Satan, and the Ancient Civilisation, which is the Kingdom of God. The one is the God of War, the other is the God of Love. My countrymen impute the evils of modern civilization to the English people and, therefore, believe that the English people are bad, and not the civilization they represent. My countrymen, therefore, believe that they should adopt modern civilization and modern methods of violence to drive out the English. “Hind Swaraj” has been written in order to show that they are following a suicidal policy, and that, if they would revert to their own glorious civilization, either the English would adopt the latter and become Indianised or find their occupation in India gone. (Preface to HS 7)

If the idealization of the past and the propping up of false binaries, this time to bolster his argument about the inherent superiority of the Ancient over the Modern, presumably the
his political messages – these often have deep roots in systems of Hindu mythography 
\((\text{ram-rajya})\), Buddhist doctrines \((\text{ahimsa})\) and Islamic thought \(\text{(the tradition of Sufi}
\text{ songs)}\); in Western philosophical writers such as Tolstoy, Ruskin, Mill, Emerson and 
Thoreau; as well as those he ingeniously came up with by using indigenous implements 
such as the \text{charkha}. A shifting valency and a general commodiousness inherent to the 
process of symbolization itself presented a Janus-faced result: what was accommodability 
of a vast array of meanings also necessarily produced an instability of meaning, that was 
often detrimental to the overall project of collective integration. In his ashrams as outside 
them, Gandhi deployed an array of signs and symbols that carried the weight of his 
critique of modern civilization. The \text{charkha}, \text{khadi}, and \text{swadeshi} were symbols of 
domestic technology aimed at challenging industrial ones – by deploying them as sites of 
resistance, Gandhi revolutionized the national imaginary. The \text{charkha} was a simple 
wooden spinning machine\(^{25}\) from which Gandhi himself spun thread for cloth; he 
conducted several high-profile meetings from his ashram, while spinning, making the

\(^{25}\) To the pesky question if the charkha was not \textit{also} a machine, Gandhi avers with 
moving simplicity: “. . . I would make intelligent exceptions. Take the case of the 
Singer’s sewing machine. It is one of the few useful things ever invented, and there is a 
romance about the device itself.” (Preface to \textit{HS} 8). More pertinentlly, he clarifies: “What 
I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they 
call labour-saving machinery. Men go on `saving labour’ till thousands are without work 
and thrown on the streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for a 
fraction of mankind, but for all. I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a 
few, but in the hands of all. Today machinery helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. 
The impetus behind it is not philanthropy to save labour, but greed.” (8)
private act an open public symbol of non-violent protest. Several of Gandhi’s significant criticisms of modern technologization came to vivid illustration in the act of spinning: by taking up, as a man, an activity generally considered to be the woman’s job, Gandhi sought to break down the ideological fictions sustaining gender binaries, even as the labour-intensive activity of spinning yarn presented a radical symbolic statement against capitalist policies of colonial exploitation. Gandhi also espoused the cause of \textit{khadi}, a cloth made domestically, thereby spawning the ideology of \textit{swadeshi} (“of one’s own country”), whose ramifications, when amplified, connoted a domain of organically-forged resistance most powerfully emblematized by but also going beyond cloth. These were significant populist ways of grabbing the imagination of large numbers of the non-literate populace, and for this Gandhi tapped into the vast reservoir of a cultural \textit{anima mundi}, from which he made powerful symbolic use of simple implements.

Such a deployment was, however, not without its share of faults: much of Gandhi’s imagery stemmed from Hindu cultural iconography and his overarching image of an idealized past was articulated as \textit{ram-rajya} (“the kingdom/rule of Rama”), whose peculiarly Hindu meaning did not reach out convincingly to non-Hindu minorities. In this sense, Gandhi perhaps failed to realize that the language of symbolism is already \textit{internally cloven}: even as he wished to re-use symbols for his more comprehensive

\begin{itemize}
\item[26] “The movement of the spinning-wheel is an organized attempt to displace machinery from that state of exclusiveness and exploitation and to place it in its proper state. Under my scheme, therefore, men in charge of machinery will think not of themselves or even of the nation to which they belong, but of the whole human race” (\textit{Young India} 17 September, 1925; \textit{CW} 23: 321).
\item[27] \textit{Swadeshi} became a popular face of \textit{swaraj} and bonfires where Manchester cloth and imported English goods were publicly burnt became vivid examples of the reach of Gandhi’s call for supporting all things \textit{deshi}.
\end{itemize}
purpose of heterogeneous representation, the project of re-presentation itself remained fraught by a structural paradox – how to capitalize on a symbol’s past of previous and popular uses as well as disengage it from the limitations of such uses so as to make the symbol more appealing, more inclusive, more far-reaching? This is a problem intrinsic to the process of symbolization itself and is most evident in Gandhi’s attempt to transform Hindu religious symbols into vehicles that would carry his secular vision. Essentially, then, we are speaking of those processes by which disaggregated heterogeneities can be strategically brought together without threats of hegemony or dissolution – a high, perhaps even impossible, ask. The Muslim League under Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the Dalits under B. R. Ambedkar, and Rabindranath Tagore were significant opponents of Gandhi’s symbol- and protest-based movements, even as proponents of Hindutva capitalized on many of Gandhi’s symbols to bolster the call for a Hindu nation, a call to which Gandhi himself was vehemently opposed.28 His own wide reading of important texts of world religions as well as of major thinkers (he counted Tolstoy and Ruskin among his most important influences) had enabled Gandhi to forge an evolved and ecumenical vision of Hindu religion that sought to be culturally assimilationist and socially empowering, but such a vision threatened to sound and become hegemonic, and in many ways, Gandhi’s political symbols remained fragile and vulnerable to the internal pressures of their own construction.

28 For a fuller discussion of the role and work of V. D. Savarkar, Gandhi’s contemporary and advocate of Hindutva, their differences, and the history of the formation and growth of the Hindu Right in India see Kapur 119-138 and Jaffrelot 83-93.
Conclusion

Gandhi’s utopian vision of the village – whether the projection of a fantasy or a social project he sought to materialize in praxis – was to prove influential for a flood of writers in the Indian subcontinent. Among other languages, a range of writers in English – from Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao to later Vijay Tendulkar, O. V. Vijayan, Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie – have built on, departed from, and engaged with Gandhi’s ideas on national collectivity, rural organization and self-transformation – concepts Gandhi felt were intimately tied to each other. For a host of writers in the twentieth-century, Gandhian ideas regarding village collectivity, Indian modernity, and the role of religion and tradition proved pivotal to literary representations of the rural and the national, and the commissions and omissions of the civic life. At about the same time as Gandhi was crafting his critiques of British modernity and imperial politics, Leonard Woolf was coming to his first lessons in British colonialism and making his first forays into what would come to be famous as English literary Modernism. A study of their different visions of the village allows us an interesting perspective on the trajectories of the village as a literary trope in much South Asian writing in English. Cumulatively, both Gandhi and Woolf were significant in centering attention on the village as strategic to any representation of South Asian collectivity. In the next chapter, I look at Leonard Woolf and his dystopian configuration of the Ceylonese village as providing the basis of his critique of the Empire and of English literary modernism of which his wife was a luminary and he was as much a part as he was a critic.
Chapter 2
Beddagama: Dystopia in Ceylon

There have often been groups of people, writers and artists, who were not only friends, but were consciously united by a common doctrine and object, or purpose artistic or social. The Utilitarians, the Lake poets, the French Impressionists, the English Pre-Raphaelites were groups of this kind. Our group was quite different. Its basis was friendship, which in some cases developed into love and marriage. The colour of our minds and thought had been given to us by the climate of Cambridge and Moore’s philosophy (Leonard Woolf, Beginning Again 25).

This was Leonard Woolf’s summing up of the Bloomsbury group’s association: friendship and philosophy. One of twentieth-century England’s most remarkable confluences of energies occurred in “a rather less respectable address in Bloomsbury” – 46 Gordon Square – where the “Apostolic code of candor” brought together two young women, “beautiful, highly intelligent and somewhat formidable in their aloof sensitivity,” and a bunch of young men, almost all from Cambridge, where they had belonged to a select club, the Cambridge Conversazione Society, whose elected members were called the Apostles (D’Aquila 6). In age and in aesthetic sensibility, there was much that linked this group: both Vanessa and Virginia Stephen were artists, one a painter and the other a writer, while Lytton Strachey, E.M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, Clive Bell (who would marry Vanessa), Duncan Grant and Roger Fry were aesthetes, intellectuals, and idealists of different shades and degrees. In this bunch, Leonard Woolf was as much
insider as he was a marginal figure: Virginia’s first impressions of Leonard give us a clue to the introspective intellectual:

He was as eccentric, as remarkable in his way as Bell and Strachey in theirs. He was a Jew. When I asked why he trembled, Thoby [her brother] somehow made me feel it was part of his nature – he was violent, so savage; he so despised the whole human race . . . . Most people, I gathered, rather rubbed along, and came to terms with things. Woolf did not . . . . I was of course inspired with the deepest interest in that violent trembling misanthropic Jew who had already shaken his fist at civilisation and was about to disappear into the tropics. (Moments of Being 166)

The description reveals as much about Leonard as it does about Virginia, of that streak of anti-Semitism that never quite left her and was only, by degrees and in consequence of her marriage to Leonard, modified to a cautious identification of its injustice. Leonard Woolf’s profound seriousness, intent ways, nervous tremor (which as Richard Kennedy describes “gave the impression, not of infirmity, but of the vibration of a powerful intellectual machine” [6]), and general interest in all things political set him apart from the aesthetically-inclined, art-loving members of the Bloomsbury with whom he otherwise shared an abiding love for literature and the visual arts.

The decision to join the Ceylon Civil Service at the end of five years at Cambridge also set Woolf apart from his fellow Apostles and proved life-changing; as Meyerowitz writes, “the sense of being an outsider . . . because of religion and class position” helped him forge “[a] synthesis of intellectual and aesthetic theory with political practice [that] was the beginning of a commitment to practical politics which
Woolf maintained throughout his life” (3). The time Woolf spent in Ceylon was a formative period: many of his convictions regarding the Empire, the fissures between its rhetoric and politics, and the need for an internationalism that did not become exploitative, were formed and reinforced by the work he did in Jaffna (1905-1907), Kandy (1907-1908), and Hambantota (1908-1911). While in Ceylon, Woolf learned Tamil and Sinhala and kept a record of his final stint in Hambantota in scrupulous detail. These records were presented to him as *Diaries in Ceylon* when he revisited Sri Lanka in 1960, and along with his letters to Strachey and others,¹ comprise a fascinating document of the times. The diaries and the letters present rivalling sides of Woolf in Ceylon: while the former outline in meticulous detail Woolf’s constant involvement in “essential aspects of village life: health and sanitation of the villagers and livestock, methods of salt collection, agriculture and irrigation, and education” (Meyerowitz 4), the letters to Strachey and others suggest a fascinating personal commentary on “the cognitive slippages and Conradian misrecognitions concerning what colonial reality really involves” (Boehmer, *Empire* 188). On his return from Ceylon to England, Woolf married Virginia in 1912 and published in 1913, at the Hogarth Press he founded with his wife, his first novel, *The Village in the Jungle*, and some years later, three short stories in a collection entitled *Stories from the East* (1921). In the 1960s, Woolf published a five-volume autobiography (*Sowing* – 1960; *Growing* – 1961; *Beginning Again* - 1964; *Downhill all the Way* – 1967; *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters* – 1969) which, along

with his diaries, letters, and novel, forms a remarkable commentary upon his life and times.

These works taken together testify to Woolf’s wide-ranging insights into the many paradoxes of his situation: on the one hand, while he recognized with increasing discomfort his role within the imperial machinery of British presence in Ceylon and worked in his novel and short stories a robust counterdiscourse of personal rebellion, his troubled embedment within the discourses of English metropolitanism that formed the backdrop to his upbringing, education and colonial career, impeded him, on the other hand, from stepping outside of that discourse of representational conventions by which a kind of Hegelian dialectic of city-village had been articulated, reinforced and reified. This was a dialectic that configured in its story of historical progress the collapse of the village in the face of burgeoning urbanization and consequent formation of cities and megacities. Such a metanarrative provided, of course, a ready map to represent colonial realities where the primitive village substituted for the entire East and the civilized West became its metropolitan Other. Woolf was very early in his life and career (even precociously so) wary of such all-encompassing explanations, and during his time in Ceylon, remained sensitive to the lapses and lacunae of British imperialism. Woolf’s

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2 Judith Walkowitz suggests that such a modality of opposition could be extended to bifurcate the city itself: for example, a divided London – East End and West End – “took on imperial and racial dimensions, as the two parts of London imaginatively doubled up for England and its Empire” (26).

3 Wayne K. Chapman writes of Woolf’s essay-writing skills as early as his schooldays at St. Paul’s, London: “The end of the English monarchy – and we hear more about that today – was neither shocking nor unthinkable to Woolf, at 17 or 18 . . . as early as 1898, Woolf said that constitutional monarchy ‘is a sham . . . that the time will come . . . when there will be no uneducated class. . . a time when all disguises can be done away with’ (Monarchy 4, 33). This was a very daring position for a schoolboy to take in the context of Queen Victoria’s recently celebrated Diamond Jubilee” (216).
inability or refusal, however, to hold out in his novel a transformative horizon for the Ceylonese village testifies to his place within a modernity that shaped his own artistic and colonial career, and whose critique he arrived at via a different route: anti-colonialism. While such an interest in the disintegration of the empire connects him with Gandhi and like-minded intellectuals of the time, Woolf’s assessment of the possibilities of the agrestic differed greatly from the power Gandhi saw in the rural, and a comparison of their different visions allows one to see two of the major trajectories of thought vis-à-vis the village and national collectivity received by South Asian writers of the twentieth century.

**Bloomsbury and The Village in the Jungle**

Written in the aftermath of a shocking war and before the powerful but exclusive and self-contained counterdiscourse of modernism, *The Village in the Jungle* (*VJ*) was a unique, almost heroic, exception. Considered, on the one hand, as marginal to the more mainstream critiques of Western modernity mounted by the self-reflexive, experimental narratives of Virginia, Eliot, and Joyce, and, on the other hand, as just another story with “too many blacks in it,” as friend Lytton Strachey infamously put it (qtd. in Gooneratne 5), *VJ*’s importance as a work of fiction missed the notice of scholars for a long time,⁴

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⁴There is a fair amount of disagreement over what qualifies as literary success: while Anindyo Roy suggests that the novel missed critical acclaim until the 1960s when a second visit by Woolf to Sri Lanka resuscitated interest in the ex-colonial officer and his records, a late review in May 1939 in *The Daily News* extols the novel unequivocally: “*The Village in the Jungle* is not a work of art – it is a miracle in writing. At no time has the author’s more celebrated wife, Virginia Woolf, approached this height in workmanship” (qtd. in Tansley 46 n.3). In Sri Lanka, the impact of Woolf’s novel has been vast and significant. Yasmine Gooneratne posits that “the novel holds a central place in the English literature of Ceylon as the first great (if not quite the first) work of
even as Woolf cemented his place among the literati as a keen political thinker and internationalist. For many years, the novel and the Ceylon short stories remained more or less unknown to readers to whom, as Yasmine Gooneratne notes, they may have come as “disturbing and discomforting in [their] implied criticism of British imperial policy and practice in Asia” (2). Indeed, the novel could have been read as just another imperial romance, part of the twentieth-century cluster of unsettling and quasi-orientalist explorations of the Eastern *exotique*, the best of which could make the perhaps well-meaning narratives of a Forster or a Conrad appear strained, unconvincing, even downright paternalistic. It is in such a climate that one recognizes with startling clarity the significance of Peter Elkin’s first postcolonial insights into the novel which he read as “more of a genuine masterpiece than Forster’s *A Passage to India*” (qtd. in Gooneratne 3); Elkin, however, also read the novel as an allegory presenting “what may be called in general terms the tragic view of life with depth, seriousness, unity, and vision” (qtd. in Gooneratne 5). In this light, the “endless struggle of the village folk to keep back the jungle . . . seems to be a symbol of the common human situation, reflecting the human struggle to clear a personal space for the individual to dwell in, cultivate, and finally yield to inevitable destruction and decay” (Gooneratne 5). A reading such as this is problematic in its own way, for as Regi Siriwardene puts it, such a “symbol-of-evil” reading of the jungle does great disservice to the “tangible, physical reality” of the north-eastern Dry Zone in Ceylon, “in Woolf’s book as it is in life” (256). In this sense, as Siriwardene insists, “…the jungle is the jungle is the jungle” – any attempt to draw out an allegory

creative art to emerge in modern times from the experience of local living” (3).
for a universal human condition misses on seeing it as the villagers would have seen it:

“It is true, of course, that the peasants see the jungle as evil, but they don’t regard it as a
‘symbol of evil’ either, but as a place of real hunger and thirst and danger and a
habitation of devils. And Woolf makes quite explicit in the novel the way in which the
peasants’ beliefs are shaped by the unequal struggle between themselves and the natural
and social environment.” (256)

The links between imperialism and modernism have been the area of much study
and the collisions and collusions between these multidimensional concepts bear integrally
upon Woolf’s novel. In a rather embattled terrain, two approaches can be roughly made
out. Edward Said, Simon Gikandi and others suggest ways in which modernism aligned
itself with imperialist politics, living off “colonial loot,” as it were, and projecting
radicalism in self-referential forms of an aesthetic experimentalism whose own basis was
in a privileged metropolitanism that the empire made possible. This is the idea behind
Said’s suggestive reading of the classic modernist gesture as “a new encyclopaedic form”
comprising of “a circularity of structure, inclusive and open at the same time,” “a novelty
based almost entirely on the reformulation of old, outdated fragments drawn self-
consciously from disparate locations, sources, cultures” (itself made possible by colonial
contact), and the use of irony in narrative “that draws attention to itself as substituting art
and its creations for the once-possible synthesis of world empires” (189). In this reading,
modernism is seen as having capitalized on its “ability to deploy other cultures and
experiences - those which seemed most removed from the European traditions the
modernists were revolting against – as sources of alternative modes of representation and
interpretation” (Gikandi 147-8). A different approach is multifariously encapsulated in
Patrick Williams’ post-colonial reading of modernism which, borrowing from Bakhtin, he reads as “reaccentuated phenomena” (Booth 32); in Elleke Boehmer’s image of an internationally “efflorescent modernism” (Colonial and Postcolonial Literature 117); and in Melba Cuddy-Keane’s “global modernisms” (Bradshaw and Dettmar 558). In these readings, modernism’s irony and aesthetic formulations are seen as intimately tied to and refracted by colonial ideologies, but ultimately as being so self-dissonant as to already hold within themselves subversions of those ideological apparatuses whose interpellatory and inescapable power provides the premise of Said’s thesis. In this sense, modernism signified a self-conscious break from prior formations but registered the break as loss or a failure that in social and political terms projected a radical undermining of the triumphalist rhetoric of Pax Britannica. (From such a point of view emerges, of course, a special vision of postmodernism, which effects a break from modernist aesthetics, but registers it as cause for celebration.) Frederic Jameson is the proponent of this kind of reading where loss or failure, indeed a fetishizing of loss or failure, provided modernism with an agenda that sought to unravel or deconstruct the epistemological totalities of many nineteenth-century realist narratives and presented in the place of representability a negative turn that Adorno spoke of eloquently as “the process of de-aestheticization . . . the consciously executed destruction of aura” (Aesthetic Theory 123).

Chinua Achebe’s famous denunciation, in a 1974 lecture, of Heart of Darkness and of Conrad as a “racist” set the template for a paradigmatic re-reading of modernism’s links with colonial policy and of many twentieth-century fin de siècle works in which “colonialist tropes co-existed with the ideas and narratives that questioned, and in time helped to end, formal British imperialism” (Booth 2). In an interview with Caryl Phillips,
Achebe posits a general indictment of the popular twentieth-century imperial romance, the finest of which, he rightly argues, achieve a critique of Western imperialism and European civilization only at the unacceptable cost of dehumanizing, essentializing, and Orientalizing the African/Black Other, thereby perpetuating an epistemological colonization (Phillips, “Out of Africa”). The East-West encounter is, to Achebe, an enterprise bedevilled by a history of confrontation, and Conrad is, in this light, a “disappointment” for him, symptomatic of a European canon whose self-congratulatory anti-imperial rhetoric often only masks insidious processes of racism and xenophobia that continue to inscribe the Other within a discourse of inferiorization and inequality:

    [Phillips:] “Which European or American writers do you feel have best represented the continent of Africa and African people?”
    Achebe looks at me for a long while and then slowly begins to shake his head.
    “This is difficult. Not many.”
    I suggest Graham Greene.
    “Yes, perhaps. Graham Greene would be one because he knew his limitations. He didn't want to explain Africans to the world. He made limited claims and wasn't attempting to be too profound. After all, we can’t be too profound about somebody whose history and language and culture is beyond our own.”
    “But you’re not suggesting that outsiders should not write about other cultures?”
    “No, no. This identification with the other is what a great writer brings to the art of story-making. We should welcome the rendering of our stories by others, because a visitor can sometimes see what the owner of the house has ignored. But
they must visit with respect and not be concerned with the colour of skin, or the shape of nose, or the condition of the technology in the house.”

“. . . I expect a great artist, a man who has explored, a man who is interested in Africa, not to make life more difficult for us. Why do this? Why make our lives more difficult? In this sense, Conrad is a disappointment” (Guardian Review, 22 February 2003).

These comments are, of course, reflections on Achebe’s own artistic agendas, and highlight his deep personal investment in the war against Eurocentric essentialisms of Africa, a project that prioritizes the reclamation of African identity as the paramount concern for himself and other African writers. Though Achebe is surprisingly silent on the case of Woolf, it is interesting to deploy this idea of writers who “disappoint” in order to study Woolf, whose writings on imperialism in Africa and Asia (Economic Imperialism - 1920 and Empire and Commerce in Africa - 1920) can be read as part of a lifelong concern with anti-colonialist politics, the beginnings of which lay in Woolf’s very first novel, The Village in the Jungle (1913). In this light, one may find exceptional the understanding with which Woolf is able to render his experience of the East, an East different from the one his Bloomsbury counterparts were engaged with in their own writings. The two-fold agenda of working an anti-colonialist critique along with a trenchant questioning of English literary modernism brings a unique vision to VJ, one quite different from the politics that informs Kim or A Passage to India or Mister Johnson. In fact, there is within Woolf’s Ceylon fiction – the novel and short stories – the respect for another’s culture and attempt at empathy whose lack Achebe castigates in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and in the general repertory of the imperial canon.
These varied readings of modernism are relevant to an understanding of early Bloomsbury and that terrain of competing political discourses whose contradictory first impulses formed the compelling backdrop to early twentieth-century writing in England and to Leonard Woolf’s 1913 novel. In particular, it becomes important to see in what ways Woolf was an outsider to the politics underlying the intrigues designed by early Bloomsbury members to shock “the Establishment” but which were not always entirely successful in their radical agenda. Virginia’s half-joking (and now famous) remark in her 1924 essay “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” that “on or about December 1910 human character changed” provides an interesting entry-point into Bloomsbury politics of the time – its refreshingly iconoclastic overtures first seen in Roger Fry’s epochal 1910-1911 exhibition of “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” containing “8 Manets, 20 Cézannes, 36 Gauguins, 22 Van Goghs, 2 Picassos, and 3 Matisses,” seen by 25,000 people and responded to largely with shock and discombobulation (Stansky 196). Both the form and the content of the exhibit’s works “scandalized the public: the nakedness of nonwhite subjects presented through postimpressionism’s nonmimetic contours shattered the English art world’s assumptions about aesthetic civility” (Seshagiri 63).\(^5\) To this time also belongs, however, the (in)famous Dreadnought hoax, conceived and perpetrated by Virginia (then Virginia Stephen), Duncan Grant, Adrian Stephen, Anthony Buxton, Guy

\(^5\) Seshagiri writes: “Gleefully aware that the exhibit’s focus on non-Western subjects appalled London audiences, [Virginia] Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell attended the Post-Impressionist Ball in March 1911 dressed as savages ‘à la Gaugin’ . . . . Vanessa recalls that ‘we wore brilliant flowers and beads, we browned our legs and arms and had very little on beneath the draperies’ (qtd. in Lee 287), and Virginia writes: ‘Vanessa and I were practically naked’ (Moments 201). The spectacle of the ‘bare-shouldered bare-legged’ sisters at the ball outraged ‘indignant ladies who swept out in protest’ (Q. Bell 170)” (64).
Ridley, and Horace Cole. A highly successful caper, the hoax roundly spoofed Britain’s military might, but the subversive power of the practical joke was also profoundly undermined by the racist and colonialist attitudes which made the hoax possible. Taken together, the exhibition and the hoax parenthetically present the tenuous emergence of an early radicalism in Bloomsbury politics – young and iconoclastic, its members were also, in many ways, complicit with the very imperial hegemones they intended to deride. It is in such a light one must revisit Leonard Woolf’s first novel where the eschewing of the openly radicalist stance, indeed, the embracing of ostensibly conservative choices in form and content ran at odds with Bloomsbury’s code of modernist rebellion, but where also lay the first real insights into the limits of Bloomsbury’s sexiness, into the dark corners of “the only genuine movement in English civilization” (E. M. Forster, qtd. in Rosenbaum, *Bloomsbury Group* 25).

6 Stansky writes: “On February 7 [1910], a group of friends, including Virginia, boarded the *H.M.S. Dreadnought*, at that time the most powerful battleship in the world, posing as the Emperor of Abyssinia and his suite” (with darkened skin, fake beards, rented costume, and invented “bunga-bunga” speech) (17). They were given a grand tour of forty minutes aboard the battleship. Two days later, when Cole made the hoax public, The First Lord of the Admiralty, Reginald McKenna, had to answer questions in Parliament about the penetration of military security and the insult to the honour of the Royal Navy.

10 See Rajiva Wijesintha for a reading of Woolf’s novel as “a basically vulgar and patronizing work” that “appears to justify [colonial] presence in and subjugation of another country… [and] is not in fact concerned in the slightest with the moral problems arising from that presence, either in terms of nations or in terms of the individuals who had, either as ruler or as ruled, to face those problems” (139; 145).
The Problem of Voice: Narrative Experiment in VJ

Always conscious of the ironies of his presence in Ceylon, Woolf’s letters as well as his novel foreground the many predicaments of a man aware of his multiple roles in a colonial setting and his increasing consciousness of an untenability basic to those roles. Why after all was he here? In Growing, Woolf writes of that debilitatingly acute self-consciousness that marked his first impressions of imperialism:

... we were all rather grand, a good deal grander than we could have been at home in London or Edinburgh, Brighton or Oban. We were grand because we were a ruling caste in a strange Asiatic country; I did not realize this at the time, though I felt something in the atmosphere which to me was slightly strange and disconcerting. It was this element in the social atmosphere or climate which gave the touch of unreality and theatricality to our lives. In Cambridge or London we were undergraduates or dons or barristers or bankers; and we were what we were, we were not acting, not playing the part of a don or a barrister. But in Ceylon, we were all always, subconsciously or consciously, playing a part, acting upon a stage. The stage, the scenery, the backcloth ... at the Vigors’s dinner table was imperialism. In so far as anything is important in the story of my years in Ceylon, imperialism and the imperialist aspect of my life have importance and will claim attention. ... I had entered Ceylon as an imperialist, one of the white rulers of our Asiatic Empire. The curious thing is that I was not really aware of this...

Travelling to Jaffna in January 1905, I was a very innocent, unconscious imperialist. What is perhaps interesting in my experience during the next six years
is that I saw from the inside British imperialism at its apogee, and that I gradually became fully aware of its nature and problems (24–5; emphases added).

At the heart of any consideration of Woolf’s novel and indeed of the colonial ideological theatre (as Edward Said might say) is precisely this notion of a grand act. A sense of the purely dramatic, of being in a performance, of acting out somebody’s agenda, never quite left Woolf and he alludes to it often in his memoirs. In *VI*, this sense of being watched, of indeed a form of self-watching, manifests itself in all the major characters in the narrative – from the empathetic Magistrate, the nefarious headman Babehami, the helpless Silindu, and his precocious daughters. All these characters inhabit a universe in which a cumulative objectification renders their very existence ironic. The drama of colonial rule in the novel gets simultaneously amplified and dispersed into an existential condition that marks the lives of all its major characters, each of whom suffers varyingly the knowledge that they do not really *know* what life is about. This, here, is the figuration of the quintessential modernist attitude – that larger-than-life way of seeing whose position of realist engagement and aesthetic problematizing stemmed from its place of ironic distance. If, following Elkin, Beddagama is indeed the whole world in allegory, then the puny figures that dot its landscape prefigure those countless nobodies whose disenfranchisement and disaffection provide the premise for Eliot’s wasteland, Virginia’s “darkness,” and Pound’s “lost objects,” the passive backdrop to “those narcissistic delusions of self-identity, totality, plenitude and mastery” whose inherent metropolitanism and locality coloured the signature modernist criticisms of twentieth-century urban modernity (Nicholls 165). The radical aspects in the writings of the Bloomsbury group – the themes of loss, spiritual dislocation, and urban sterility that
critiqued late Victorian and Edwardian attitudes of moral and social conservatism, and reflected the political mayhem of the World War – were ultimately offshoots of a very local disenchantment dissembling as global. As Edward Said and Simon Gikandi have suggested, what made this discourse of rebellion and aesthetic nihilism possible were those very same discourses of metropolitan civility and colonial modernity whose “root fantasy of omnipotence” manifested itself in its extremity in the “myths of absolute presence and the ‘organic’ society [of] … European fascism” (Nicholls 165). Woolf’s anticolonialism in VJ is integrally tied into unpicking this fantasy of omnipotence linking English modernism to European modernity; however, his embedment within those very forces that create his objects of examination as well as his tools of interrogation provided him a troubled template of self-scrutiny whose ramifications went beyond the purely aesthetic/literary.

Beddagama is at the heart of the Imperium, not only as the colonized Other or even that smithy in which Joyce might have imagined the collective conscience of his race could be forged. In fact, Beddagama marks the site of a special kind of crisis. Woolf’s novel presents a crisis in narrative representation, a crisis that is intimately tied to his increasing sense of the dodginess of imperialist politics as well as precociously connected to a somewhat diaphanous apprehension of the limitations of those discourses of metropolitan civility and public conduct which had been the backdrop to Woolf’s life and education in London and Cambridge, and which so centrally defined Apostolic (and more integrally, Bloomsbury) standards of modernist excellence. A sleight of narrative occurs in the first chapter of VJ that marks a decisive moment in the novel’s storytelling. The chapter opens with a narrator speaking of Beddagama and the jungle without as if he
belonged to the village and were one of its inhabitants. The teller of the story, in this sense, is part of the context he describes and shares in its life and labours. The candid admissions of fear, of lack of knowledge, and a seeming artlessness in expression conventionally associated with rustic speech, all characterize this storyteller’s voice:

There are people who will tell you they have no fear of the jungle, that they know it as well as the streets of Maha Nuwara or their own compounds. Such people are either liars and boasters, or they are fools, without understanding or feeling for things as they really are. I knew such a man once, a hunter and tracker of game, a little man with hunched-up shoulders and peering, cunning little eyes, and a small dark face all pinched and lined, for he spent his life crouching, slinking, and peering through the undergrowth and the trees. He was more silent than the leopard and more cunning than the jackal: he knew the tracks better than the doe who leads the herd . . . . I do not know [how he died]; but I know that he had boasted that there was no fear in the jungle, and in the end the jungle took him. (39-40)

The storyteller’s rhythms mimic those of oral narratives, of the kind Woolf is sure to have heard during his years in different parts of Ceylon, and that form, even today, the rich tapestry of myths and legends animating village life. This storyteller is not, however, the only one in the tale. There are two other tellers of tales about the jungle and its inexorable cruelties: there is Silindu who is introduced by the I-narrator in a manner that marks him out as the protagonist (“In Beddagama there lived a man called Silindu, with his wife Dingihami”) and there is Silindu’s neighbour, Karlinahami, who “was noted for her storytelling” (47; 49). The oral quality of the first rendition by the I-narrator and its
affinities to local techniques of storytelling are underscored by its similarities with
Silindu and Karlinahami’s stories: all three draw from the jungle, mixing legend and
reality freely, drawing liberally on an anthropomorphised mythology to reflect upon the
daily rhythms of village life. By drawing rhetorical connections between the three
storytellers, the novel encourages the reader to consider the opening teller as part of the
rural setting of the novel. This, then, is the modality of the insider, the purportedly
authentic voice of the native (informant) whose language allows Woolf to speak of the
Ceylonese village as a villager might. Such an act of narratorial authority reflects, of
course, upon the mechanism of colonial power, but it also makes apparent those binaries
that sustain the city-village dialectic. The narrator speaks of fear, hunger, thirst as one
from a village might do, and in a way that contrasts with the concerns of the city and its
urban demands. The matters he speaks so felicitously of pertain to hunting, changes of
seasons, animals and rustic hardships, and in a manner that marks him out as an integral
part of the rural fabric he describes. Central to the reader’s experience of this voice is the
invocation of the entire discourse of representation of the village in literature and other
arts, and the effect created is one that opposes conventional pastoralized readings of
village as an idyll or paradise. Beddagama is, in this sense, the last outpost of civilization
before the jungle eats it up, and the reader’s experience of it is configured on the lines of
a dichotomy by which the village is the Other not so much of the city (as in Conrad’s
Heart of Darkness) but of the jungle whose elemental forces are a constant threat to its
tenuous collectivity.

This voice that presents to us the face of this fragile haven and the embattled lives
of its members is, however, one that is very soon counterpointed to a detached,
omniscient third-person mode of narration. This other voice that emerges from within the narrative competes with and provides a commentary on the ‘I-narrator’ by recasting the latter as a character of the milieu he describes. In the space of a chapter, the gaze shifts to include the I-narrator, and the narrative zooms out, as it were, to co-opt the storyteller’s persona into the vision of the village that the latter has just rendered. The final paragraphs of the chapter comprise a moving away from this more “authentic” voice of the “native” teller towards a different voice, that of the omniscient third-person narrator whose semi-detached observations provide a different, “outsiderly” vision of Beddagama: “It was a strange world, a world of bare and brutal facts, of superstition, of grotesque imagination; a world of trees and the perpetual twilight of their shade; a world of hunger and fear and devils, where a man was helpless before the unseen and unintelligible powers surrounding him” (51). The transition to this other voice occurs swiftly and subtly within the first chapter. The voice that declares with apparent naïveté: “All jungles are evil, but no jungle is more evil than that which lay about the village of Beddagama” (40) deliberately invokes the stereotypical voice of the provincial, irrational villager, far removed from the assured scientific logic of the urbanite to whom belongs this voice:

The spirit of the jungle is in the village, and in the people who live in it. They are simple, sullen, silent men. In their faces you can see plainly the fear and hardship of their lives. They are very near to the animals which live in the jungle around them. They look at you with the melancholy and patient stupidity of the buffalo in their eyes, or the cunning of the jackal. And there is in them the blind anger of the jungle, the ferocity of the leopard, and the sudden fury of the bear. (45)
The play between these two voices amounts to a lot more than a play with two narrative modes: it is indeed a tussle between different ways of seeing. How is one to read this kind of narrative sophistry? Is this Woolf as a not-so innocent, not-so unconscious imperialist? Is this Woolf foregrounding the problems (even the impossibility) of empathy in the colonial office? To borrow from Dickens, why “do the police in different voices”? In many ways, Woolf’s play with voice and narrative technique was prescient of the stylistic innovations that would come to characterize the modernist writing of the Bloomsbury group. The play with two possible modes of narration constitutes within the novel an important experiment, one that tested not only the very basis of Woolf’s colonial presence in Ceylon and his capacity to render the story of the colonized people with authority and humanity, but also prefigured in narrative Woolf’s apprehension of a fundamental crisis in those discourses of representation by which colonial/rural/Other realities had traditionally been conveyed. The weaving between the two voices creates in the space of a chapter a field of competing discourses – those that simulate the voice of the Other and those that speak the logic of the Ruler. In both cases, the narrative shows up the lines of tension that disrupt the logic of authenticity and problematize any easy

Interestingly, this odd phrase, taken from Our Mutual Friend, was to be the title of what eventually became the first two sections of T. S. Eliot’s modernist masterpiece, The Waste Land, first published at the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press in September 1923. Yasmine Gooneratne suggests the possible verbal and thematic connections between Eliot’s poem, first published in September 1921 by Woolf in the Hogarth Press, and VJ:

His publisher’s Ceylon experience was, of course, known to Eliot, as it was to the other members of Woolf’s Bloomsbury circle, and it is hardly probable that Eliot had not read Woolf’s 1913 novel, reprinted as often as it was before 1921. The fact that The Village in the Jungle is not among the many references provided by Eliot in this most heavily annotated of poems suggest that the borrowing . . . was as unconscious in fact as it appears to be in the text, the result of an intimate, involuntary communication of impressions, of convictions, and even of images, rather than of quotation consciously and deliberately made. (4)
rendering of either position: if as Rajiva Wijesinha says, Woolf’s account “of life in a primitive Ceylonese community at the beginning of this century . . . is a highly coloured one – reminiscent of the almost salacious excesses that passed for naturalism in some quarters of an ostensibly sophisticated Europe around and shortly before that period” (141), there is indeed no reason at all to assume that the magistrate in the story is a “self-portrait,” or that the portrayal of the British system of justice, rendered at once incomprehensible from the point of view of the native characters, and ill-fitting and imposed from the magistrate’s point of view, is at all accurate about “the actual situation” (142).

This encounter of voices effectively enacts Woolf’s recognition of those boundaries by which he had learnt to make sense of the Other, a recognition that entailed discomfiting self-scrutiny and the rendering provisional of parameters he had heretofore considered verities. There is in this narrative experiment that Woolf performs at the outset of VJ the eschewing of a rhetorical mode – the play with narrative framing and multiple interlocuting audiences – that made Conrad so exemplary and that would eventually become the hallmark of much English modernist writing, of which Woolf’s short stories have been considered good examples.  

12 It is fascinating to trace in Woolf’s letters to his friends in London (in the letters to Strachey particularly) the steady jettisoning over time of the “in-joke” in Latin or of Cambridge arcana, so frequent in his earliest correspondences from Jaffna, for the new etymologies he found when he began to learn to read and write Tamil and Sinhala. One such instance is the four-line poem “To Ponamma” (Ponamma in Tamil translates as “the golden mother”) that he appends to a letter to Sydney Saxon-Turner dated 12 June 1910. The general rubric is Tamil-inspired but the poem is profoundly ambivalent in a way characteristic of the later works by Woolf:

O Golden Mother, in this embrace of thine
Thy fruit of motherhood is bought & sold:
The cancerous kiss, the ecstasy is mine,
Anindyo Roy notes that Woolf’s 1921 *Stories from the East* (“A Tale Told by Moonlight,” “Pearls and Swine,” and “The Two Brahmans”) are preoccupied with “troubling questions about the ‘real’ which Woolf had been posing all along in his letters from Ceylon to Lytton Strachey . . . [and are] . . . framed through shifting metanarratives that constantly force the language of the ‘real’ or ‘reality’ out of the realm of objective narrativization” (*Civility* 147). By locating multiple frames within these stories and by simulating readership as audience within the narration, these stories present, as in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1900) and in other modernist works, “the narrator’s struggle to identify a language that is adequate to the telling of the story, a language whose conceptual and narrative categories about the ‘real’ can on the one side match the expectations of his metropolitan interlocutors, and on the other capture the ‘real’ experienced in the colony” (*Civility* 149). Through this form of narrative manoeuvring, Woolf provides, Roy suggests, “a political critique of colonialism by returning to, and questioning, its normative order of civility and by revealing through narrative impossibility the limits of that normativity” (*Civility* 150). In his disquisition on colonial configurations of civility and their questioning in Woolf’s Ceylon stories, Roy more or

For then thy womb bears gold, Mother of Gold (Spotts 150). Woolf’s short story ‘A Tale Told by Moonlight’ written many years later, during the period of his courtship of and engagement to Virginia, revisits the theme of sexual love, dramatizing the fraught predicament of a Cambridge-educated man seduced by a fair-skinned Burgher prostitute in Colombo who reciprocates his love only sexually, and cannot provide him with any intellectual satisfaction. As often in Conrad, a curious double-edged irony characterizes the man’s attitude to the woman on whom he projects a fantasy of “something beautiful mysterious everlasting” (Glendinning viii). The story’s tragic ending brings to a somewhat expected close a typical Conradian misrecognition, as “the real thing” sifted through interlocutors and narrators, gets dissipated as so much unreality after all (13-14). In the poem then as well as the short story, as in the 1913 novel, the concern with the real and the ways to narrativize the real is at the heart of the writer’s dilemma.
less dismisses the apparently simplistic narration that characterizes VJ. Roy suggests that
the “principles of ‘realism’” on which VJ operates is evidence of the “novel’s orientalism
. . . discernible in its unmediated evocation of the sense of the ‘real,’ the ‘real’ that was
based on a faithful rendition of the life and struggles of the rural poor in Ceylon, which
Woolf had observed from close quarters” (Civility 149; my emphases). Roy sees the
“unmediated” nature of evocation in the narrative voice’s “self-assured felicity of direct
observation and objectivity,” and takes for a given that the “language of realism”
faithfully renders “obscure regions of rural Ceylon” (150). Central to Roy’s reading of
Woolf’s short stories is a valorization of the “incommunicaable nature of colonial trauma,”
which engenders a concern with language that he identifies as crucial to English literary
modernism as a whole (149). In this sense, the short stories “racked by a pervasive
narrative unease” (the device of multiple narrators), offering “the visual description of
colonial bodies,” and “hovering precariously on the impossibility of ever capturing the
‘real’ world” become exemplary of a dissidence from the traditions of Victorian realism
and from other Bloomsbury experimental fiction (150). But the novel’s narration, as I
will show, is neither unmediated nor a faithful rendition; indeed, by playing with the
significatory ramifications of voice and by simulatating and disrupting the logic of
authenticity, the novel problematizes precisely those ways by which much modernist
writing was crafting its credo of radical dissidence. A reading such as Roy’s which
accepts a priori “the novel’s orientalism” misses out on the crucial first chapter of VJ to
whose moment of narrative crisis the later short stories owe a decisive creative and
ideological debt.
The third-person narrator whose storytelling voice, more or less, subsumes the first, ostensibly more authentic, I-narrator’s voice in the opening chapter paves the way for a hybrid narration that draws on oral rhythms as seen in Silindu and Karlinahami’s stories as well as in the daily dialogue of the villagers, but that stays consistently outsiderly and detached, invoking and encouraging the reader to posit faith in its almost ethnographic portraiture of life in a Ceylonese village. One might be led to conceive of this more stable voice as a throwback to the traditional storytellers of Dickens, Hardy, and Tolstoy whose works emphasized realism in representation and formal coherence, a link that many modernist writers were to rupture (although many Indian writers of the time, notably Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan, would embrace). In Joyce as in Eliot and Virginia Woolf, and as in Conrad before, the classic modernist artist-hero was to be one who combined the gritty viscerality of the nineteenth-century realist writers with the revolutionary idealism of the mad Romantics, and managed to subvert both. Their modernist works played with narrative form and linearity, carving a social critique not simply in what they portrayed (after all, the realists and the Romantics before them had done that too), but by throwing into flux established connections between the what and the how, they sought to wed content and form in new ways. As Irving Howe says, “the modern must be defined in terms of what it is not; the embodiment of a total polemic, an indecisive negative. Modern writers find that they begin to work at a moment when the culture is marked by a prevalent style of perception and feeling; and the modernity consists in a revolt against the prevalent style, an unyielding rage against the official order” (13). The Waste Land is, in this sense, powerfully anti-linear, foregrounding in its formal fragmentation and disjuncted narrative an image of the jetsam and flotsam of war-
torn humanity itself. In a similar vein, Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus famously seeks “to fly by the nets of religion, language and nationality” by an act of violent diremption, into which he invests the very future of “the uncreated conscience” of his race. And Mrs. Dalloway’s party represents the struggle of the human race itself to accommodate modernity’s violent birthing. These complex, fraught narrators whose intense questioning of their fractured selves was to figure as a trenchant commentary on the disintegration of their social milieus are, however, nowhere to be found in VJ. The voice that narrates the story of Silindu and his daughters may well have stepped out of any of those “salacious” imperial fantasies Wijesinha throws the lot of Woolf with. It is my contention, however, that such a conclusion is a misreading of Woolf’s achievement in VJ. The assumption of the omniscient voice in the novel is a politically-charged decision: far from being an “innocent” or a serendipitous modus operandi, it is in fact a tacit disavowal of the Orientalist modality of the native informant narrator as well as the modernist one of the cloven but ever bardic artist-hero, and is a result of Woolf’s precocious sense, in the former instance, of the politics of appropriation inherent in the act of “envoicing” the subaltern, and, in the latter instance, of the “particularly ‘brutal’ history of power relations between the metropolis and the colony” (Roy “‘Telling brutal things:’” 189) that so inexorably undermined the left-wing radicalism of the Bloomsbury modernists. By donning and then doffing the garb of the allegedly native speaker, Woolf points to those ideological fictions that sustain Orientalist binaries of One/Other, Ruler/Ruled; by fashioning the voice of the speaker, not as in Conrad or in the Bloomsbury modernists influenced by him - as the ruptured, disenchanted, agonistic Self – but employing deliberately – as in many nineteenth-century narratives – the detached, omniscient,
ostensibly neutral voice of the third-person speaker, Woolf projects a recognition of his own complicity in the power dynamics of the colonial theatre, presenting in the place of authentic voice a mimicry, becoming the dummy to his own act of ventriloquism. When the third-person narrator finally tells the story about “life in a primitive Ceylonese community at the beginning of this century,” he is not the Orientalizing master whose triumphant word enacts the silencing of the Other but really the internally fissured voice of the hegemon whose own utterance of dissent from imperial metanarratives of power and control also no longer holds.

The persona of the storyteller marks his identity within a complex grid of signification in which he performs a ventriloquism of his own position of alleged power. His is the all-powerful parody of a voice because it cannot, in the final analysis, speak for the native; it needs must first envoice itself. The refusal to speak for the native as a native in _VJ_ is ultimately not a question of the failure of empathy in the colonial office. Given the intimate ties that inscribed literary modernism within the exploitative logic of colonial policy, this refusal was built on a recognition, however tenuous and glimmering, of the doomed nature of the modernist hero’s radical, emancipatory politics of forging in the individual heroic soul the uncreated conscience of his colonizing race. In other words, the recognition that the radical portrait of the modernist artist would also be, at some level, the image of the Empire’s faithful lackey inhibits Woolf’s adoption of the classic modernist narrative voice made so influential by Conrad’s Marlow, and perfected to a nicety by many Bloomsbury modernists.

Conrad’s influence on Leonard Woolf, as indeed on Virginia and the other modernists, cannot be doubted. As Elleke Boehmer says, “the formal echoes of Conrad in
Woolf are strong enough to suggest that the younger writer was increasingly relying on Conrad’s epistemological questions rather than Rudyard Kipling’s influential yet to him ultimately superficial colonial caricatures in order to represent his own personal and political anxieties as an imperialist” (Empire 185). In some ways, Woolf was, like Gandhi, startlingly postmodern in his apprehension of the limits of modernism’s radicalism and the limits of those discourses of elite metropolitan civility and urban modernity that created, sustained, and ultimately circumscribed the modernist hero’s war-cry of dissidence. To adapt Melba Cuddy-Keane, VJ marks the moment/ space when/where “the mirror of self-ethnography thus critically disrupts the complacency of self-location” (546).

It is important to understand Woolf’s apprehension of and attempts at working through the problem of narrative voice as a moment of crisis as early as 1913 rather than to read the play with narrative storytelling (qua allegory for a prototypical concern with representing the “real”) as a characteristic of his “recognizably modernist” short stories of 1921 (Roy, “‘Telling’” 189). Boehmer also does not find “noticeably present” in VJ “Conrad’s imprint,” by which she means a concern with “epistemological questions” as opposed to “superficial” ones; she sees this mostly in the short stories (that she calls “arguably [Woolf’s] most achieved short fiction”) and in his letters to Strachey (Empire 185). Instead she reads in Woolf’s letters descriptions of “leaky ships,” flooding

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13 See Jean-Michel Rabaté’s The 1913: Cradle of Modernism for a thought-provoking discussion of the importance of 1913 in the genesis and evolution of artistic modernism. Of particular interest is Rabaté’s discussion of “the splintered subject of modernism” whose emergences in Russian literature occurred in 1913, “first in poetry with [Osip] Mandelstam’s Stone, then with Andrei Biely’s Petersburg” (150-51) and which set the tone for Eliot and Pound’s 1922 efflorescence in England, marking “a privileged moment in the history of modernity, a time full of foreboding . . . [of] a world that seemed on the brink of chaos and uncertainty” (216).
villages, and the petty snobberies of the British officials and their families stationed in Ceylon as emblematic of a “political schizophrenia,” as “signifier[s] of his state of mind, the profound unsettling of his world; not only a part of the geographical colony, the peninsula, [Jaffna, where Woolf was stationed in 1905] but of the colonial structure . . .

The faultlines in the colonial edifice are seemingly tearing the island open from within; in this respect native and colonial worlds are coterminous” (189). In the only mention of the novel in her essay, Boehmer asserts that the novel is “informed by the close knowledge of local cultures” but is also “highly ambivalent” in its portrayal of the Sinhalese village existence as “nasty, brutish, and short” (185). This dismissal, more or less, of VJ with regard to the representation of colonial reality and the question of narrative form is a crucial elision. The short stories with their emphasis on multiple narrators, internal interlocutors, fragmented testimonies and shifting perspectives do powerfully foreground the modernist turn in twentieth-century English literature, but in many ways, the “indecisive negative” logic of modernist dissidence and a precocious apprehension of the limits of that logic are present in Woolf’s novel as early as 1913, even before much of the radical writing of the big guns of British literary modernism. So if the novel does not fit the category of Orientalist fantasy (as Wijesinha might have it) or the archetypal modernist text, what is it? A clue to reading the novel may lie entirely elsewhere.

**Constructing Beddagma**

*VJ* presents Woolf’s implicit belief in the Empire as a failing construction – there is in the novel an undermining of the white man’s burden as personally onerous, politically unjust, and ethically unsustainable. Woolf arrives at this critique by way of his
own interest in the Empire and in many ways, his experience in Ceylon was crucial in his fashioning an internationalism that espoused humanitarian work but did not proselytize or conquer. Such a belief did not, however, extend to or factor in a fuller appreciation of the colony’s own ability to resist and/or channelize forces of colonial modernity. This was in part due to Woolf’s own embedment within grandnarratives of English civility and metropolitan progress whose parameters of citified development set the template for much of the modernization he took charge of as colonial officer in different districts of Ceylon. A sensitivity to the many ruptures to older forms of community, of more ancient ways of life and labour that these projects entailed does implicitly inform *VJ*; at the same time, however, Woolf is unable to see in the village any self-evolved immunity against the disruptive forces of colonial modernity; nor could he see in it a capacity to positively adapt to modernity’s march – a vision quite opposed to Gandhi’s belief in the village’s self-sustaining and self-transforming capacities. Woolf’s failure to envoice the Ceylonese village in this way is, in light of his reworking of the modernist literary impulse, an implicit comment on the failure of the bardic hero in the face of collapsing old world values; at the same time, this failure stems from an inability to fully understand and appreciate the saliency of the village in the Ceylonese context.

For the most part of the novel, the working of human agency is cast within the larger, and mostly inscrutable, will of natural forces – the oppressive natural jungle is a perennial danger to Beddagama’s enfeebled collectivity, while the mechanisms of British administration, equally opaque, present a more immediate peril. Everyday life in Beddagama is a battle between these unyielding forces and almost all the villagers are involved, in one way or another, in a desperate bid to stave off hunger, thirst, and death.
And yet there are some glimmerings of human agency outside of those driven purely by the instinct to survive – Silindu’s love for his daughters that defies the stereotypical valorization of the male heir, Babun’s refusal to toe Babehami’s line and his marriage to Punchi Menika that flouts caste and class boundaries, Hinnihami’s love for a fawn that she rears as her own child, and Punchi Menika’s cleaving to the village, braving solitude and danger, until her death. All these are examples of an extraordinary village life upon which the narrative casts an instructive although ultimately distant light.

In the figures of Babehami and Fernando, Woolf suggests the ways in which colonial hegemony creates mimic structures that scavenge upon the British system’s inequities and transform institutional processes into bureaucratism and exploitation. Significantly, Fernando and Babun delineate two opposed allegiances: Babun’s refusal of Babehami’s injunction to not marry the *vedda* Silindu’s daughter but someone else of the same caste is founded upon an insistence on the familiar: “I tell you I want no Kotegoda woman. I will take the daughter of Silindu. I want no strange woman or strange village” (76). Fernando, on the other hand, parades his unbelonging:

Fernando laughed. “What talk is this of villages?” he said. “Everywhere here the question is, ‘Of what village is he?’ And then, ‘He is of Beddagama or Bogama, or Beragama, or any gama.’ And the liver in villages says, as you did but now, ‘How can I leave my gama?’ Did I not tell you I am of no village? My father’s village is beyond the sea, and they say that the father’s village is the son’s. I have never seen that village; I have forgotten its name. I was born in Colombo, which is no village, but a town (146).
Fernando refuses to live “like a sanyasi on the top of a bare rock” (146), casting aside a familiar stereotype of village life and its isolation. Instead his credo – “I have no village. I live always among strangers...” – posits a new knowledge, a different way of life (146). This new way of life, however, is an undesirable change and the novel’s casting of Fernando as a villain secures his polarization within a matrix perceived by the villagers as one of good and evil, where Babun’s innocence and fealty to the land are the ideological opposite of Fernando’s wily metropolitanism. The good-evil binary does not hold for long as both emerge in the novel as rhetorically constituted positions rather than absolute values in whose conflict one may be sure of a moral outcome. Indeed, Babun’s innocence provides no stay against Fernando’s machinations, and neither is afforded the space for the exercise of an ethically correct choice. Fernando’s victory over Babun – the latter’s humiliation, imprisonment, and later death – is finally avenged only by Silindu’s pariah justice which contravenes colonial legality, embodying instead an atavistic code of honour whose inspiration and setting is the jungle and its unwritten order. The novel, then, is unable to configure for Beddagama an ethical subjectivity outside of this discourse of binaries where savagery counters innocence, and the villagers, either as dupes of colonial power or animal-like, outside of social control, are no more ethical or self-conscious than the forest animals they hunt. This is a critical simplification, and perhaps is a face of that lack of respect that Achebe decries in imperial literature. However, it is perhaps also possible to read this simplification not from the vantage-point of ethnographic veridicity (“the actual situation” as it were) but from the position of a strategic essentializing central to Woolf’s real agenda of problematizing the modalities of post-Conradian, modernist representation.
The novel’s play with voice, enacted in the choice of the third-person narrator after a brief bold experiment with first-person narration, uncertainly treads the thin line between fiction and ethnography. While the stories of Silindu and his daughters are manifestly tales that draw from popular representations of Ceylonese folk-mythologies, passages like these also occur: “In towns and large villages there are, especially among people of the higher castes, many rigid customs and formalities regarding marriages always observed. It is true that the exclusion of women no longer exists; but young girls after puberty are supposed to be kept within the house, and only to meet men of the immediate family . . . .” (73) The novel’s telling actively encourages a belief in its veridicity (Roy’s “faithful rendition”) even as Woolf was centrally concerned with those fissures that break open the voice of colonial recounting and rupture the discourse of authentic representation. As a colonial officer in Ceylon, Woolf came to understand the Sinhalese village as an age-old, time-tested, and institutionalized unit of social collectivisation. Despite the discomfitures of his colonial presence, Woolf sensitively witnessed the remarkable efficacy of village economics, and in his own way, contributed to it, although at all times, he felt that his role as colonizer rendered him an outsider in a Ceylonese village. Nonetheless, Woolf was unable to see for the village a future: in part, this was because the transnational, imperializing forces of colonial modernity

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14 “They were the nicest of people and I was very fond of them, but they would have thrown stones at me or shot me in the back as I walked to the trap, had they dared” (Growing 193). This is Woolf’s despairing assessment of the situation in which he found himself ordering recalcitrant villagers in Hambantota into various formations that would minimize the spread of rinderpest among precious cattle. This also occasions another of Woolf’s epiphanic moments where he decries the nature of his imperialist location: “the absurdity of a people of one civilization and mode of life trying to impose its rule upon an entirely different civilization and mode of life” (Growing 193).
redefined power on a scale multiple times larger than how power is configured in the local and quotidian dynamics of a village economy. Indeed, in VJ Babehami and Fernando suggest those insidious ways in which these two Manichean realms of colonial power – the global and the local – can collude. But largely, this was also because Woolf could see in the average Sinhalese villager only a type – this was the unthinking, uncritical being who, to adapt the famous Cartesian aphorism, just “was” but did not “think he was.” This was an obvious empirical fallacy – despite his sympathy and sensitivity, Woolf often indicates that he did not think the Ceylonese villager was capable of being anything but what he was, according to a type.15 There is a certain reduction here of the category of the villager and, by extension, of the village, which, in the grand march of time, would always lose out to the city where self-consciousness allegedly lay. Such a theory of the village necessarily rendered it unilateral - as an existential concept and not also an epistemological concept - and stripped it of its deep pasts of Buddhist and Hindu consciousness and history.

In the novel, this emerges time and again in the ways in which Silindu is characterized: on the one hand, though he is the protagonist, he has no heroic quality worth mentioning. It is Babun who presents whatever heroism one may wish for in a

15 See Woolf’s description, e.g., of the Arab fishermen and Tamils: “The Arabs fascinated me, both in themselves and because of the contrast between them and the Tamils. The Tamil crowd was low in tone, rather timid, depressed and complaining in adversity. The Arab superficially was the exact opposite” (Growing 93; my emphasis). Here also, Woolf modifies his descriptions of the Tamils and Arabs (“the behaviour of the Semitic [as contrasted] with that of the Dravidian”) that he sent in his letters to Lytton Strachey as a contrast rendered “perhaps somewhat unfairly” (93). Later, he writes with some dismay of his unpopularity among Jaffna people, but it is tempered with a recognition that his presence as “imperialist and proconsul” was in itself an extraneity that perhaps justified their hostile reaction (111).
setting where hunger and want drive human will and effort. Silindu is a dupe at many levels and a multiple marginalization besets his every step: his is the incomprehension that emblematizes the slow and painful obsolescence of an older, quasi-feudal economy in the face of colonial modernization; his is also the powerlessness in a system of casteist oppression where to be a *vedda* is to live a life only at the very margins of social collectivity. To Silindu also belongs the burden of allegory, for on him, Woolf reposes the onerous task of symbolizing a universal human unknowingness. Burdened as he is at so many levels, Silindu must yet convince us that he is closer to nature than we are and shares a connection with flora and fauna in which silence itself becomes a mythic tongue. His taciturnity, lack of socialization, and fatalism is the hallmark of an *essentialized* creation that is meant to stand for the average Ceylonese villager. How is one to assess such a representation?

Until the gruesome climax, there is no space in the narrative where Silindu is given a rational understanding of his situation: “... life continued to become harder for him. The headman’s ill-feeling worked against him unostentatiously, and in all sorts of little things. He never thought about the motives and intentions of those around him ... He did not become conscious of Babehami’s enmity, or aware that many of the difficulties of his life were due to it” (67). Silindu is often rendered mute and powerless by events: “... as his anger died down fear possessed him utterly ... The terrible sense of a blank wall of fate against which a man may hurl himself in vain, was upon him ... he sat terrified and crushed by the inevitableness of the evil which must be” (94). The novel underscores Silindu’s “vacant” and “drawn” looks continually (108), building up a tremendous pressure of circumstance and external events that finally explodes as
murderous rage when Silindu, repossessed with a hunter’s instincts and the blind ire of one repeatedly wronged, resorts to a pariah’s version of justice and murders Fernando and Babehami (191). The juggernaut, however, that effects the transformation of an essentially peaceful, loving, and fatherly man is never really checked and there is in the novel something of the theatricality of a Greek tragedy that engenders such unchecked calamity.

Silindu’s anger presents the face of a terrifying justice – if the echoes of Conrad are the strongest here, it is with good reason, for the transformation of a peaceful man, at the end of all tether, is Woolf’s take – albeit with a twist – on the “going native” trope so powerfully present in much Conradian writing and always a hovering presence in Kipling and Forster. Silindu’s final confrontation with Babehami is the scene of a compelling anagnorisis as he speaks with the assurance of the omniscient who has finally seen the truth:

Silindu began to speak with great excitement. As he went on his voice began to get shriller and shriller; it trembled with anger and fear and passion. “I am afraid of everything, Arachchi [Babehami]; the jungle, the devils, the darkness. But, above all, of being hunted . . . the buffalo is stupid, isn’t he, Arachchi? Very stupid; he does not see – he does not hear – he goes on wallowing in his mud. And they hunt him – year after year – he does not know – he does not see them – he does not hear them. Do you know that? I know it – I am a hunter. Then – having crept close, they shoot him. It was near here. At first, crash – he tears through the jungle, the blood flowing down his side. He is afraid, very afraid –
and in pain. But the pain brings anger, and with anger, anger, Arachchi, comes cunning. And now, Arachchi, comes the game, the dangerous game . . .” (191)

When he finally shoots Babehami, the narrative hints at the deliberateness of his intent and recasts blind vengeance as a special kind of agency. His next act of shooting Fernando, after ascertaining Babehami was indeed dead, shows a volition we have not seen before in the passive villager: “He took careful aim between the bars [of the stile] and fired. Fernando fell backwards, writhing and screaming with pain . . . . ‘The trouble is ended,’ he muttered. He walked very slowly to his house. He put the gun in the corner of the room, thought for a minute, and then immediately left the hut” (192).

Had the narrative ended here, Woolf’s story might yet have reinforced classic stereotypes of the primitive, ruthless native, but we are taken into Silindu’s thoughts after the deed, and a nascent, although still circumscribed, ethical subject emerges:

He wanted to think . . . His first idea had been to simply run away into the jungle, to get away at any rate from the village. . . If such a life were possible . . . it would be easy for Silindu. But as he squatted under the trees thinking of what he should do, a feeling of horror for such a life crept over him, and his repugnance to flying became stronger and stronger . . . in the jungle, there would be no rest. It was just in order to escape that terror – the feeling of the hunted animal, the feeling that some one was always after him meaning evil – that he had killed the Arachchi and the Mudalali [Fernando]. And if he fled into the jungle now, he would have gained nothing by the killing. He would live with that feeling for months, for years, perhaps for ever. The hunt would begin again, and again it was he who would be the hunted. (197-8)
Silindu’s surrender to the law enacts the final step in an important ethical decision, and in the encounter with the British magistrate, Woolf provides for Silindu an opportunity for the expression of his suffering. A re-telling of the motives and method of his crimes humanizes Silindu and in the brief connection he is able to forge with the British magistrate (while being treated without sympathy by the local Ceylonese official), the narrative points to those fissures in the imperial edifice by which Woolf sought to hint at possibilities for intercultural understanding. Woolf further underscores Silindu’s humanity in his encounter with the Buddhist monk, the other “mad old man” of the narrative (216). Earlier, in his sickness, and held in complete thrall by the machinations of Babehami, Fernando and the Punchirala (the medicine-man who coveted Silindu other daughter, Hinnihami), Silindu had met a roaming monk. He had been entirely passive then, his physical and spiritual sickness evidence of the hold of superstition on him and the other villagers. This time, Silindu engages in a dialogue with the mad monk who suggests to him a karmic connection between his life as a hunter and his current acts of human killing. The old man gives Silindu a stanza in Pali from which the latter derives comfort and solace, and through which Woolf suggests, although he does not fully explore, the transforming capacities of religious/spiritual belief in the Ceylonese village ethos.

In *Growing*, Woolf writes of his affinity towards Buddhist thought and philosophy, and quite often alludes to a certain attraction for the soft cadences of the Sinhala tongue. In his memoirs, Woolf gives much space to memories of the villages in

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16 “... Polgahawela. What a soft liquid gentle Sinhalese word this – Field of Coconuts – was when compared it with Tamil places like Kangesanturai and Kodikan!” (*Growing* 132)
Ceylon where he worked and the integral role religion played in the lives of ordinary people. Empathy and a characteristically ecumenical spirit pervade Woolf’s nostalgic narrative here: “Buddhism seems to me superior to all other religions . . . it is a civilized and humane dream of considerable beauty and it has eliminated most of the crude anthropomorphistic and theological nonsense which encrusts other religions” (Growing 159). None of this, however, makes its way into VJ, where a “crude anthropomorphism” manifests itself in the consistent alignment of men and women with “nasty, brutish” jungle animals, and in the crafting of Beddagama as a penumbrous space for a fragile collectivity, one where fear and danger are the only constants: “they felt they were living in a doomed place” (234). On the one hand, such an alignment presents as great virtues the villagers’ closeness with nature and natural rhythms, implying, as its obverse, a familiar discourse of the city’s sterility and urban alienation; on the other, this is recast as the hallmark of a primitive, debased existence whose amelioration can occur only in the wake of an encounter with colonial modernity. In Growing, Woolf’s memories of village existence in Ceylon are far more complex, and his rendering of agrestic rhythms more cognizant of the possibilities of self-transformation and self-determination. In a passage describing a Buddhist ceremony, Woolf records precisely such spiritual capacities and a life-affirming quality in the daily pattern of village life – a vision missing in the village he constructs in VJ:

On poya days, the days of the full moon, I used to like to go and sit in the Maligawa in Kandy and watch the ceremony, the ceremony of a civilized religion. The villagers, whole families, men, women, and children would flock in with their offerings of flowers. For hours the priest would sit reading from the sacred books,
and all round him sat the people in family groups with their little children and babies, occasionally talking or eating, but imbibing unconsciously, it seemed to me, something of this doctrine of quietude and gentleness. It differed entirely from the scenes of worship in Roman Catholic countries where people still flock into churches and cathedrals, for there was none of that horrible insistence upon sin and crucifixion, and much less tawdry worship of bad statues. (162-3)

There is then, in the novel, a very deliberate essentializing of the Ceylonese village which allows Woolf to craft his critique of colonialist and modernist premises. It is important to understand this as one of the working impulses of the novel whose real strength lies not so much in the sensitivity with which Woolf portrays the horrors of colonialism, remarkable as that is, but in providing a searching exploration of the grim underbelly of twentieth-century liberalism and the limits of the radicalism of early metropolitan English literary modernism.

**Beddagama and the Buddhist Utopia**

Woolf’s attitudes toward religion of all kinds were, in many ways, shaped by his own experience as a non-practising Jew, and indeed, as has been ably shown in Victoria Glendinning’s biography of Woolf, his general mood of detachment towards life and its pressing problems (“a kind of fatalistic and half-amused resignation,” as he himself put it) (*Sowing* 12) stemmed, in large part, from his sense of being an “outsider” – religious and social – to (Christian) English society in general and to the more immediate intellectual society of the cultivated, privileged Cambridge Apostles and his Bloomsbury friends. Despite this or possibly because of his “outsiderliness,” in his memoirs Woolf
documents a fondness for Buddhism’s philosophical uncertainties and a personal admiration for the contemplative life as enshrined in the Buddha’s teachings. Such a fondness, however, was very different from the deep interest shown by American military officer Henry Olcott, who founded the Buddhist Theosophical Society in Colombo, or Madame Blavatsky whose interest in Hindu and Buddhist revivalism in India and Ceylon respectively were to profoundly influence Dharmapāla and his credo of Buddhist nationalism.17 In Chapter Four, I discuss in greater detail the role played by Dharmapāla in popularizing an expressly Sinhala Buddhist nationalist discourse. During the time that Woolf served as a colonial officer (1904-1911), Angarika Dharmapāla’s writings and teachings were at a zenith of popularity and Buddhism in Ceylon was, as Bond notes, being reasserted by at least three groups: “the Kandyan élite who sought to regain their traditional position; the militant reformists who followed Dharmapāla completely in his attempt to revive Buddhism and nationalism; and a more moderate group that might be called neotraditionalists who, while admiring Dharmapāla’s high ideals, sought more political and less radical ways of restoring Buddhism in the modern context” (61-62). It is with this last group that one might speculate Woolf’s own affinities lay. D. B. Jayatilaka, who was a leading politician in the Ceylonese liberation movement as well as a senior statesman of the Buddhist laity movement (Dharmapāla was a monk), published in 1901 in *The Buddhist* an article significantly entitled “Practical Buddhism,” that adumbrated the precepts for the theory and practice of a layman’s Buddhism in contradistinction to Dharmapāla’s militant nationalistic form of Buddhist revival. The central tenets of

17 See George D. Bond (53-7) for a fuller analysis of the influence of Olcott and Blavatsky upon a young Dharmapāla.
Jayatilaka’s Practical Buddhism emphasised a traditional belief in renunciation, non-violence, and the pious life contingent upon a threefold task: “to observe the precepts, to support one’s family by right livelihood, and to ‘do good in the world’” (Bond 65). Such an approach departed greatly from Olcott and Dharmapāla’s insistence upon a “this-worldly asceticism for the laity” (Bond 64) and the militant, even violent, connections they sought to make between British colonial policy and the decline of Buddhism in Ceylon.

A close reading of Woolf’s novel provides some evidence of his distance from Dharmapāla’s aggressively militant kind of Buddhist nationalism and an affinity for Jayatilaka’s less glamorous and more pacifist form of Buddhist belief. Such distance also meant that Woolf could not bring himself to agree to the vision of a rural utopia that Dharmapāla and his followers championed. Through the focus on Silindu and the veddah people (an indigenous, forest-dependent community in Sri Lanka that follow a mix of animist and nominally Buddhist beliefs), the novel looks at a demographic that within Ceylon had for centuries been marginalized and to whom reached neither the tenets of Protestant Buddhism nor the limited benefits of colonial organization. Indeed, Silindu’s life can be seen as emblematising the crisis brought on by the compulsions of coloniality upon that Practical Buddhist directive “to observe the precepts, to support one’s family by right livelihood, and to ‘do good in the world.’” The novel’s centre is occupied by a

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18 Woolf records his fascination for the contemplative and meditative aspect of Buddhist philosophy, all the more remarkable to him because he was sensitive to the ways in which it provided a stay to its followers who were among the most impoverished people he had ever met (Growing 159). In the novel too this interest in Buddhism emerges in the descriptions of Buddhist ceremonies that perform a primarily communal function – of bringing people together in a mood of quiet contemplation, of allowing them to recast their struggles and hardships within a larger, cosmic order (162-3).
ritual pilgrimage Silindu undertakes, ostensibly to rid himself of a physical and spiritual sense of unease stemming from his intuitive knowledge of the malefic designs of Babehami and Fernando. The pilgrimage and its ritualistic importance allow Woolf the space to expand upon the highly syncretic nature of village life and to emphasize precisely those aspects of an intercultural, rural fabric that did not quite fit into (and indeed, defied the parameters of) the exclusivist and narrowly nationalist vision of the Sinhala nation as championed by Dharmapāla and his followers. Such representation is conceivably also a throwback to those pre-colonial structures of communal interaction that Palmer-Fernandez argues as having existed at the village level in Ceylon (409), having survived successive colonizations by the Europeans. Beddagama is thus a vehicle for Woolf’s dystopian allegory of colonial malfeasance, but also an early, provocative riposte to contemporary visions of rural utopia that were rife in the discourse of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism of the times. Woolf’s alienation from such a narrowly imagined collectivity was, indeed, part of what Leventhal argues was a general “dislike for capitalism, nationalism, and communism . . . [and] a suspicion of any form of militant ideology . . .”(165). But it was more –when proposals for Indian independence were being discussed in London, Woolf, then an influential member of the Labour Party, lobbied strongly lest Ceylon be left out just because it did not have a freedom movement as organized as the one in India: “If a large measure of responsible government be

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19 In his belief in the necessity for emphasizing means as well as ends, Woolf is almost Gandhian: in one of his letters, he writes to Kingsley Martin that “I cannot pretend to believe what you believe or that any one, individual or government, Jew, Arab, capitalist, or communist, is justified in doing immense evil immediately on the excuse that he thinks it will hypothetically in the distant future prevent a greater evil or produce a very great absolute good.” (qtd. in Leventhal 164).
granted to India and not to Ceylon,” he argued, “the position will be grotesque and impossible” (qtd. in Clarance). 20 Again, as early as 1938, long before federalism was an option on the Tamil political agenda, Woolf sensed and knew that the general drift of the Sinhala nationalist form of anticolonialism needed to be checked early or it would create a civil crisis within the unformed nation: “Consideration should be given to the possibility of ensuring a large measure of devolution or even of introducing a federal system on the Swiss model,” he wrote in a memorandum for the Labour party in 1938 (qtd. in Steele). 21 Given that the Swiss model is broadly tripartite and regionally cantonal, Woolf’s recommendation presented the perspicacious view that Ceylon’s minorities – the Tamils, the Muslims, the Burghers, and the veddahs – also deserved to be part of a new citizenry. Some of this ecumenical Fabian spirit also steals into Woolf’s novel, where the focus on the veddah community and the central space accorded to Silindu’s pilgrimage to a Tamil shrine in Beragama becomes the space for adumbrating, in an overwhelmingly bleak narrative, a vision of real communality and intercultural solidarity that was, indeed, a far cry from the bounded, exclusivist Sinhala-Buddhist community of Dharmapāla’s imagining.

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20 Woolf’s interest in Ceylon’s welfare is well discussed in William Clarance’s essay “The Ironies of Federalism.” Clarance, a former UNCHR representative in Sri Lanka, calls Woolf a “firm friend of Ceylon.”

21 In an article in The Guardian dated 27 October 2006, “Failure can aid the science of comparative peace,” Jonathan Steele writes of Leonard Woolf’s precocious and far-sighted “view that only federalism could solve the conflict between the island’s two main population groups.”
Conclusion

Were there alternatives to Woolf’s vision of the village as he saw it in early twentieth-century Ceylon? Was the average Ceylonese village any better than one of many fragile congeries sutured together by the vagaries of colonization? Was there a rubric of consciousness that tied villages into communities of knowledge and social bonding? The answer to these questions lies in a fuller understanding of the village in Ceylon as a historical, social, and cultural concept with pasts of self-awareness and self-representation. While a detailed examination is outside of the scope of this study, in this brief section, I will point to James Brow’s anthropological work on the life and writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) as an example of an alternative vision of the village that is more cognizant of its positive possibilities and its potential to engender self-transformation.

More or less contemporaneous to Woolf’s stint in Ceylon, Ananda Coomaraswamy’s early work on the Sinhalese village suggests that it was possible to read the village differently, and that these other representations constitute a counter-vision to Woolf’s bleak assessment of village life. There is no way to know with certainty if Woolf was aware of Coomaraswamy’s work and writings, but both men were forming their first objections to the Empire at about the same time in England, and it is fairly safe to assume that the latter’s descriptions of Sinhala villages in the early twentieth century

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22 Coomaraswamy was the son of Elizabeth Clay Beebe, an Englishwoman, and Sir Mutthu Coomaraswamy, Tamil member of the Legislative Council and one of the most distinguished Ceylonese of his time (Brow 68). He is most well known for his work on medieval Sinhalese art, but he was also greatly involved with philanthropic causes and social reform in Ceylon.
drew much material from the established histories and folklore of village communities that Woolf in his own interactions with village people is bound to have been aware of.

Brow’s work on Coomaraswamy’s readings of the Sinhala village between 1906 and 1910 frames its conceptual universe around the rise in the 1980s of a special brand of nationalism in Sri Lanka that pictured “the Sinhala nation . . . as a nation of villages” (68). The ideal social order was represented “as one of self-sufficient village communities, each composed of sturdy family farmers living in peaceful cooperation with one another in accordance to Buddhist precepts and ancient custom. The Sinhala people were held to have a natural affinity for paddy cultivation, and the ‘peasantry’ was conceived as the true locus of indigenous culture” (68). An important source of such fashioning was the early work of Ananda Coomaraswamy. Coomaraswamy made important contributions to art, literature, and religious thought over a long multifaceted career as art historian, philosopher and social reformer. As a young man in Ceylon, he applied the lessons of William Morris to Sinhalese culture and produced in 1908, with his wife Ethel, a groundbreaking study of Sinhalese craft and culture entitled *Medieval Sinhalese Art*. As Brow suggests, Coomaraswamy’s vision of the Kandyan village in this important work was

derived both from [his] reading, particularly of colonial documents, and from his first-hand experience as he travelled around Ceylon in his official capacity as director of the colony’s Mineralogical Survey, a position he held from 1903 to 1907 . . . [and] was pivotal to the ideological history of the village community in Sri Lanka in two respects. First, it effected *a convergence of different, even radically opposed, currents in British images of the village community*; and
second, it offered them in an imaginative new form that was ripe for adoption into
the emergent discourse of Sinhala nationalism (69; my emphasis).
Coomaraswamy identifies in village communities of his time defining features such as
“mutual agreement,” collective farming, “individual property rights . . . [along with]
communal action in cultivation,” a flourishing judicial mechanism that reported to a
monarch (the Dharmaraja) who ruled absolutely, and a system of “reciprocity and
interdependence” that presented a “community of interest . . . confined not to the village .
. . [but] shared throughout the Kandyan kingdom, and which overrode divisions of caste
and class” (75). As Brow himself notes, Coomaraswamy’s rather idealistic vision of the
Sinhalese village helped work in his own time to project a dissident, anti-colonialist
intervention in the discourses of imperialist power, and later, deployed in the 1980s by
political factions in Sri Lanka, to project a Sinhala-Buddhist utopianisation of nationalist
politics. While open to the charges of nostalgia and romanticism, and regardless of the
role these played in the fashioning of post-colonial ethnonationalisms in Sri Lanka, in his
own time, Coomaraswamy’s readings illustrate an important re-presentation of the
Ceylonese village as a concept and community, one that works to counterpoint Woolf’s
symbolic construction of the village in *VJ* as fragile and transient. Coomaraswamy
offered a picture that emphasized, albeit in essentializing ways, the village as an
embodiment of a robust social will and the result of collective volition, as an
indispensable unit of social and cultural order in Ceylon, one that was intimately tied to
the development of an ethical and moral subjectivity, and was not simply an arbitrary or
serendipitous medley of persons connected by common victimization or by colonial rule.
The “death” of the village in Woolf’s novel paves the way, as I have argued, for an
anticolonialist critique that itself functions as a commentary on the first impulses of English literary modernism, generating a more nuanced understanding of the limits of that modernism. At the same time, the dystopian imaginary of the novel constitutes a turning away from the equally exclusionary Buddhist utopias championed by Dharmapāla and his followers. But such a critique is achieved only by paring the Ceylonese village down to the constrained sphere of symbolic meaning where it then functions largely as a device for the unravelling of imperialist and literary “fantasies of omnipotence” or as a dark allegory for the anguish of the existential condition, and not as veridical illustration or faithful rendition – Orientalist or otherwise – of a Ceylonese village in the early twentieth century. To read the novel only within the arena of colonial representation and by the binaristic logic of native or Orientalist retelling is to miss out on those important ways in which it is concerned with contemporary politics in Ceylon and with problematizing standards of Bloomsbury modernism and post-Conradian modalities of imagining through East-West encounters the changing contours of the English literary scene.

One might argue, as Woolf has in Growing, written many decades after the first publication of VJ and after Ceylon’s independence, that “the inveterate empiricism of British imperialism and British administration in Ceylon” (164) inhibited him from sentimentalizing or romanticizing the people, something Coomaraswamy, in a different way, has been charged with doing. Woolf writes of the Tamils and Sinhalese he encountered and worked among:

They are – or at least were in 1905 – nearer than we [“who live in towns and urbanized villages of northern Europe”] are to primitive man and there are many
nasty things about primitive man. It is not their primitiveness that really appeals
to me. It is partly their earthiness, their strange mixture of tortuousness and
directness, of cunning and stupidity, of cruelty and kindness . . . .[W]hen you
get to know them, you find beneath the surface in almost everyone a
profound melancholy and fatalism which I find beautiful and sympathetic – just as
something like it permeates the scenery and characters of a Hardy novel (53-4).
The comparison with Hardy suggests, of course, a romanticism of a different order – one
that if not quite signifying the paradise of Coomaraswamy’s Kandyan village, is
nonetheless mimetic of an older moribund discourse of representation against which
Bloomsbury had begun to form its powerful cult of dissidence but which Woolf had
begun to recognize as early as 1913 as self-undermined and limited. The interest in
forming an anticolonialist, even antimodernist project – one that served to destabilize
both the logic of colonial manicheanisms and the aesthetic dissidences of Bloomsbury
modernist discourse – is what ultimately impels Woolf’s dreary vision in the novel that
imagines for the Ceylonese village a gruesome death. This vision, however, comes at the
cost of denuding the village in Ceylon of an ethical subjectivity and epistemic complexity
that Coomaraswamy in his writing and social work projected as integral and defining
features of village existence and that Woolf, in his 1960s memoirs, allows to animate and
render more fully his memories of the villages he lived and worked in. The differences
among these visions help contextualize the 1913 novel within the early impulses of
English modernism where a gloomy fashioning of the village enables Woolf to carve a
critique for purposes very different from the ones that drive Coomaraswamy’s
ethnographic interests. His was the narrative of a nascent disenchantment with the
premises of empire-building and with the Bloomsbury/Apostolic credo of fashionable rebellion, the contours of which he was yet to fully define, and the ramifications of which would be clear to Woolf only in the evening of his life.

In *Growing*, Woolf writes of his fascination for the jungle: “It is a cruel and a dangerous place, and being a cowardly person, I was always afraid of it . . . . When I left Ceylon, and wrote *The Village in the Jungle*, that was what obsessed my memory and my imagination and is, in a sense, the theme of the book” (211-2). The close of the novel where the village ‘dies’ away of disease, hunger and decay, and “yielded to the jungle,” sees Punchi Menika “alone in the world; the only thing left to her was the compound and the jungle which she knew. She clung to it passionately, blindly. The love which she had felt for Silindu and Babun – who were lost to her for ever, whose very memories began to fade from her in the struggle to keep alive – was transferred to the miserable hut, the bare compound, and the parched jungle” (244). Punchi Menika’s death, as the great boar bears in upon her fragile haven – the final remnant of her village – is the tragic and shocking denouement of a love for land whose most extreme form comes in her refusal to leave the village of her birth for safety and life, and in the surrender of the village itself to a never-too-far-away atavism. That Woolf chose to make the village’s true threat lie in the jungle (and not the city) suggests a modality of representation very different from Coomaraswamy’s fashioning of the Kandyan village’s ancient glory whose biggest threat the latter perceived in the Ceylonese people’s imbibing of colonialist premises. Where both men – like Gandhi in India – sought to undo the tight, often unyielding knots of imperialist politics by centering a resurged focus on the Ceylonese village, the difference in the telling is revealing of their different agendas. Woolf’s primary agenda in *VJ*
remains empowered – and circumscribed – by his interest not so much in rendering the situation as it actually was, but in testing out the limits of those discourses of representation by which much traditional knowledge of and about the colony had come to fashion the metropolitan, modernist Western conception of the South Asian village as the dark Other of bustling, avant-garde metropolis, London. Such an interest in undoing the Empire trenchantly ties Woolf with Gandhi and likeminded intellectuals such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, but it is important to consider VJ and Woolf’s other Ceylon writing as primarily concerned with the connections between colonial politics and London intellectualism, and with the limits of the radical politics of fin-de-siècle literary modernism. At the same time, given the times that Woolf worked in Ceylon, during the heyday of twentieth-century Buddhist revivalism, the novel’s refusal to construct or endorse a Buddhist utopia as a rhetorical device for its anticolonialist politics is an important comment on Woolf’s understanding of Ceylon’s ethnic diversity. In time, the dystopic portrayal of a colonial village in Ceylon became a model against which many writers in Ceylon tested their own mettle. In Chapter Four, I read Gamperaliya (1944), the iconic novel of Martin Wickramasinghe as invested in a critique of this dystopic vision and where the idyllic, utopian unities of a Buddhist village endorse an anticolonial position as well as recreate a problematic ethnic homogeneity – what I have called homotopia – as the allegorical aspect of the emerging nation. In doing so, Wickramasinghe was responding to the first impressions created by Woolf in this remarkable novel whose marginalization in mainstream discussions of twentieth-century colonial and modernist writing needs to be remedied. If, following Roy and Boehmer’s readings of the intricate short stories, we consider Leonard Woolf as part of English
literary modernism, then it is just as important to recognize, by a reconsideration of Woolf’s *Village in the Jungle* that he had also, in his own way, begun to appreciate, as Kevin Dettmar suggests, “that the edifice of Modernism was always vulnerable, and that the best Modernist writing always betrayed the artifice of its construction in ways we have begun to call postmodern – that the monuments of High Modernism already contained within them the seeds of their own (de)construction” (14-5).
Chapter 3

Kanthapura and Khasak: Utopia in Distress

The Gandhian vision of the village has been deeply influential within the Indian subcontinent. To a host of writers, Gandhi’s ideals and beliefs provided the stimulus for imagining a national collectivity and his ashrams provided the templates for defining the contours of a new nation-state. Krishna Kripalani’s astute comments on Gandhi’s impact on Indian writing provide an overview that helps contextualize the two particular writers under study in this chapter, Raja Rao and O. V. Vijayan:

Gandhi’s impact on Indian writers was direct and widespread. Apart from its political repercussions, it was both moral and intellectual and at once inhibitive and liberating. Insofar as it sharpened the writer’s loyalties by narrowing them and encouraging puritanism and a horror of sex, it was inhibitive and unhealthy and resulted, without meaning to, in an irritating sanctimoniousness. But by and large, it was a liberating force and not only widened the range of the writer’s sympathy but also heightened its intensity. (79)

It is interesting in itself that the debut novels of two of India’s most well-known writers – Raja Rao’s Kanthapura (1938) and O. V. Vijayan’s Khasakkinte Itihasam (1969) (Legends of Khasak, translated into English, 1994) – were set in quasi-fictional Indian villages, suggesting something of the salience of the rural and the agrestic to imagined configurations (in an Andersonian sense) of an Indian national identity. What is truly remarkable is how both novels, in constructing their particular visions of rural sociality, exemplify, in the process, the undying appeal of the Gandhian model of rural
collectivization. In Raja Rao, the Gandhian vision of collective rural action provides the basis for imagining a resurgent Hindu India that could resist the hegemonic forces of colonial modernity; but such unification effects a form of internal colonization where religious, ethnic, and linguistic minorities become excluded. Much early criticism tended to celebrate *Kanthapura* for its story centered on the impact of Gandhian politics on a rural hamlet in South India, a facet that later scholarship on Rao came to problematize from the vantage-point of historical accuracy. *Kanthapura* is impelled both by a need to show the rise of India against British colonial rule as by the desire to create a new voice for Indian writing in English. In many ways, Rao’s novel is fraught by the twin pressures of imagining a muscular India resilient in the face of colonial domination, on the one hand, and of presenting a new visage to Indian writing in English, on the other. These pressures show up most resonantly in the portrayal of the village Kanthapura, in the precise ways in which Rao imagines rustic collectivity based on Gandhian philosophy; at the same time, the novel’s close imagines for the village, as Woolf’s had for Beddagama, a gruesome annihilation, a device by which Rao is able to craft a powerful critique of imperialist modernity but only at the larger cost of making the village once again the victim – this time not of an evil jungle (as in Woolf) or of feudal barbarities (as Karl Marx famously imagined of the timeless Indian village) but of colonial modernity. In contrast, *Khasakkinte Itihasam* by O. V. Vijayan, written over the 1950s and published in 1969, is also integrally concerned with questions of modernity and tradition and places a quasi-fictional village called Khasak at the centre of its examination, but repudiates the recourse to rural destruction, and, in fact, avows its very opposite: in Vijayan’s *Khasak*, a strong ethic of communitarian action suggests the village’s survival in the face of all
odds. What might be the reasons for this change in vision? In Rao’s novel, a strategic appropriation of the Gandhian concepts of *ram-rajya*, *swaraj*, and *swadeshi* allows Rao to craft a powerful story of rebellion and nationalism, presenting the face of an awakened subalternity in valorous opposition to British colonial domination. Such unity, however, comes at the cost of cultural pluralism and the novel resorts to a problematic essentialization of Hindu India in order to bolster the nationalist efforts of the 1930s. For the rural utopia of Gandhian imagination, Rao constructs an allegorical homotopia whose unities could present a model for national integration but which premised itself on a very specific kind of dominant Hindu teleology: Brahminical, Sanskritized, and exclusionary. In contrast, in *Khasak*, the Gandhian vision of rural change provides only one of the two templates for forging communal action, and here too, a gentle irony pervades the recourse to Gandhian ideas of rural collectivisation. The other template comes from a peculiar blend of the mythic and the Marxist, a combination that, from the perspective of postcolonial nation-building, is exemplary in its open repudiation of the construction of the Hindu nation that in Rao’s novel had stood for a “united” India. Together, Rao and Vijayan provide two contrasting perspectives on the ways in which the village has been imagined in Indian writing. An added common feature of the two novels is their position as modernist narratives in Indo-Anglian fiction and Malayalam literature respectively, and as I will show, both novels from their positions of the “modernist negative” transformed the literary landscapes of their time and paved the way for new kinds of literary sensibilities.
Kanthapura – The Gandhian Village?

Of the major Indian writers writing in English in the 1930s, Raja Rao, in particular, has long been seen as pre-eminent, more so among the “Gandhian” writers of the Indian English canon. His *Kanthapura* (1938) has been read as a “Gandhi-purana” (Iyengar 391), as the definitive novel of the Indian village, and as having pioneered an idiom that most closely captures the rhythms and oral traditions of quintessential village life in India: “The development of events in *Kanthapura* represents all that was happening in every village and every city at that time” (Srivastava 40). The novel was first published in London, just before the Second World War, and was hailed by E. M. Forster as the best book written by an Indian. However, as Anshuman Mondal argues, despite “the realistic portrayal of village India and his focus on the local minutiae of the nationalist struggle . . . it is simply not the case that Rao’s novel presents us with a realistic and historically accurate moment in the life of a south Indian village” (“Ideology of Space” 109). Mondal shows how Mysore in the 1930s, the chronotope of *Kanthapura*’s action, had not been involved in the struggle against colonialism until 1942, when the Congress under Gandhi’s leadership gave the call for the “Quit India Movement.” The reach of Congress organizations, which *Kanthapura* suggests was extensive and stretched well into the *mofussil* (rural interior), was “in reality barely existent until 1937 even in urban areas,” and far from being peasant-friendly, as the novel presents, in South India these organizations were “in fact vehemently anti-peasant, controlled as they were by urban Brahmins who were in many cases major landholders themselves” (Mondal, “Ideology of Space” 109). The argument for the historical or ethnographic accuracy of *Kanthapura* is weakened also by the fact that Rao wrote the
novel while studying in France, being thus physically (and perhaps intellectually) distant from the contemporary political immediacies of India. There is, then, a real need to revisit the ideological context and compulsions of Rao’s iconic novel: if it is not a portrayal of the archetypal rural village in India awakened by Gandhi’s powerful vision of social change, then what is *Kanthapura*?

When Rao published *Kanthapura* in 1938, Europe was only a year away from the Second World War and the Indian subcontinent was in the throes of an anti-imperial struggle for independence from British rule. Gandhi’s domination of the Civil Disobedience movements was at its zenith. Rao was a maverick: born to wealthy Kannada-speaking Brahmin parents, his formative education – in Sanskrit as well as Urdu – was at a local Muslim *madrassa* from where he went to the Aligarh Muslim University for higher studies and later, repudiating the English of his colonizers, to France to study French. This cosmopolitan upbringing found its most ironic expression – given Rao’s initial resentment at using English¹ – in *Kanthapura*, where as Rao famously put it in his Foreword, he attempted to “convey in a language not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own” (3). The novel is testament to Rao’s lifelong interest in Gandhian politics and Gandhi is the novel’s “transcendental signified” – the absent presence that sets the action of the narrative going. Although Gandhi never appears as a character in the story, in Moorthy, a Gandhian agitaitonist, Rao condenses his important critique of the Raj as well as his vision of Gandhian ideology. *Kanthapura* is constructed on two central structural principles: the primary impetus for the novel’s action comes from the

¹ Indeed, though he spoke and wrote proficiently in English all his life, Rao championed the need to foster Indian vernaculars and making integral to Indian education the knowledge of indigenous tongues.
crafting of Gandhi’s influence through a linear depiction of events and occurrences. The reach and spread of Gandhian ideology are represented in and refracted through the slow rise of Kanthapura’s rustic folk to satyagraha, the difficult transformation of Moorthy and other members of the village towards acceptance of Gandhi’s anti-caste egalitarianism, and the consolidation of Kanthapura’s different social classes (peasants, traders, and plantation coolies) in a unified program of anti-colonial agitation. All this is rendered with a realism and detail reminiscent of the best in the European historical-realism tradition of the novel, a tradition that seminally shaped Rao’s literary horizons. At the same time however, the novel is vitally defined by the woman narrator’s local and contingent realities, the other structuring principle that hearkens to indigenous traditions of epic telling in which the story of Kanthapura’s life and times ties up with the great Hindu epics as a tributary does with a mighty river. A third and equally important structuring template, albeit one that has not been given its due, is provided by the idioms of twentieth-century modernism whose influence on Rao’s early writing is most visible in Kanthapura. In particular, Rao deploys a highly stylized narratorial voice and a carefully-orchestrated skaz effect in the novel that certainly evokes epic storytelling as in the Mahabharata and Ramayana (a feature that early critics of Rao were to capitalize on when making their case for Rao’s radical indigeneity);² such a technique, however, owes even more to the high modernism of Woolf and Pound and Eliot, and to Rao’s own

² That such a case is not entirely invalid or outmoded is shown by James W. Earl’s reading of Kanthapura as recent as in a 2007 essay where he draws the comparison between Achakka’s rambling, digressive style and its “faithfulness to the Indian narrative tradition” whose “uneconomical and un-unified” style he sees “famously” exemplified in the two Hindu epics (111).
“Indianization” of some of the signature features of English modernist writing of the 1920s and ’30s.

Rao’s novel is, in many ways, a response to European (largely English) representations of Indian collectivity, but unlike Leonard Woolf, whose novel questioned the modernist and colonialist imbrications within Bloomsbury politics, Rao sought to wed his re-writing of modernist essentialisms with his own nationalistic agenda of fashioning a literary avatar for Gandhian ideology. The narrative mechanisms he chose for this new matrix that coupled the modern(ist) and the Gandhian – paradigms typically essentialized as polarities – combined the representative conventions of 1920s and ’30s literary modernisms with the native traditions of Kannada storytelling, of the *sthala-purana* that Rao identified his childhood with. This was, of course, for its time, a powerfully subversive combination and presented on the world stage the arrival of a new kind of Indo-Anglian writing. Central to Rao’s agenda is the impulse to show a defiant new face, as it were, to colonial writing in the master’s language now made one’s own. Rao was also sufficiently aware, however, that his Kannada heritage would prove to be a selling point in the metropolitan literary establishment of Europe where he lived and wrote and whose luminaries were among his artistic role-models and forefathers.

Rao’s modernism was a legatee, in many ways, of contemporary English writers’ disenchantment with the certainties of the Victorian *Weltanschauung* based on colonial configurations of Englishness and otherness; it was also a child of the political anarchism of Gandhian anti-modernism that sought to disrupt the manicheanisms of the colonial

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3 *Sthala-purana*, literally in Sanskrit, “place-legends,” are Hindu texts that tell of the origins of particular temples and shrines, written usually in the vernacular languages. As with other *purana*, the *sthala-purana* also tend to be anonymous, with authority for the tales/legends being usually assigned to the keepers of the temple.
ideological theatre in which Indians were seen only in the binarized function of the white man’s Other. In some ways, Kanthapura is situated at the cusp of these two iconoclastic impulses: on the one hand, it carves within its paradigmatic space an indictment of the great colonial metropolis whose largely tokenist and equivocal radicalism towards the colonial hemmed in the intellectual lives of London, Paris, Rome, and Berlin away from the rustic corners of the rest of the world, and on the other, the novel deploys the symbolism and reach of the Gandhian counter-narrative to re-create a resonant, albeit problematic and essentialist, vision of Hindu India as the new rallying space for an expressly anti-colonial modernity. In Rao’s hands, the fictional Indian village becomes the locus of a special kind of awakening. Socially and spiritually, Gandhian politics is seen as rejuvenating the moribund structures of Kanthapura’s feudal communality. A meticulous spatial imaginary is constructed in the very opening pages where the outer bounds of Kanthapura are first mapped and the narrative focus then successively works its way in: “Our village . . . Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the province of Kara. High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane” (7).

The centripetal movement narrows in on the few households that matter and whose stories make up the story of Kanthapura: “Cart after cart groans through the roads of Kanthapura . . . . The carts pass through the Main Street and through the Potter’s Lane, and then they turn by Chennayya’s Pond, and up they go, up the passes into the morning that will rise over the sea . . . . Our village had four and twenty houses” (8-9). It is an evocative opening – so very Chaucerian in the piling use of verbs – that captures the
inexorable movement of everyday life in a small village in India culminating in the Skeffington Coffee House, the colonial estate that promulgates this traffic and, through the trade in spices and labour (of the Skeffington coolies who form the other item of traffic), sets up, as Mondal observes, the two matrices of economic functioning in Kanthapura: “The novel . . . presents us with a matrix of space defined by a system of economic production (capitalism) at one end of which lies a terminus of production and the other end of which is a terminus of consumption (England). In between is a dislocated space filled by channels of mobility. The village of Kanthapura lies in this interstitial space, on one of these channels” (“Ideology of Space” 104).

It is also, however, an increasingly narrowing vision of rural collectivization and the narrative projects a peculiar kind of contouring in which Kanthapura, whittled down to an agglomeration of twenty-four Brahmin families, becomes the nucleus of Hindu India. In the process, what is left out is the mass of non-Brahmin and non-Hindu families whose existence is rendered peripheral to the saga of modernity that belongs only to the hegemonic twenty-four. In this essentialized portrayal of the Indian village, the narrative eschews religious, linguistic, and ethnic pluralisms, recreating instead an immemorialized India whose core self, though riven by the demons of caste and gender inequalities, stands in nonetheless for a resurgent Hindu nation. Such a fictional construction of an Indian village ritually purified of its internal Others – in Mysore, this would include most notably the Muslims and the lower castes – allows a powerful counterdiscourse of anticolonial resistance to be grafted on to the traditional pastoral, and as literary strategy, Rao resuscitates a moribund genre (of the pastoral) in the service of
the theme of Gandhian social change. The result, however, is a novel fraught by the
tensions of exclusionism and struggling to keep its outsiders outside.

Kanthapura and the Idea of India

[Kanthapura’s] novelty is not an invention of the novelist’s, it is there in the
village, has always been there, in this land of villages . . . . For, Kanthapura is
India in microcosm: what happened there is what happened everywhere in India
during those terrible years of our fight for freedom. (Narasimhaiah 39-43;
emphasis added)

Kanthapura’s importance cannot be doubted: it has for long been considered a
were at the forefront of the kind of reading in the 1950s and through the ’60s and ’70s
that valorized the novel as well as its “accurate” rendition of the Indian village: “One had
not thought until one read this novel that a village could offer such opportunities for
observing human nature in all its rich diversity” (“Foreword” to Kanthapura). From this
point of view, the novel has been read as “an epic of modern India” (Bhattacharya 240),
where Rao “goes to the very roots of transformation, by demonstrating how the
nationalistic fervour in rural India in the 1930s blended completely with the age-old,
deep-rooted spiritual faith and thus re-vitalised the spiritual springs within and helped
rediscover the Indian soul” (Naik, “Gandhiji” 378). Of course, the ironies that inhere in
the fact of Rao’s own location while he wrote the novel are plenty. In a letter to M. K.
Naik, Rao quips: “I wrote Kanthapura in a thirteenth-century castle in the French Alps
belonging to the Dauphins of France and I slept and worked on the novel in the room of
the Queen” (qtd. in Naik, “The Village” 48). Rao was himself conscious that the story of Kanthapura was not the story of his own village and in a subsequent edition of the novel made a crucial emendation. Naik writes:

In the author’s Foreword to the first edition of the novel, Raja Rao described the narrative as the story of “my village.” In the later edition (1963), this was changed to “a village” . . . Rao explains the reasons for this change: “The background is my village – Harihalli or Hariharapura, near Kenchammanna Hoskere Taluk, Hassan district, but nothing like this drama took place in Harihalli. Hence in my new edition I have corrected the “my” into “a” (“The Village” 48).

A small change such as this is at the heart of a whole tradition of reading Kanthapura as “a classic narrative of the Indian village,” a tradition that dominated post-Independence scholarship on Indian writing in English for many decades (Sudhakar Rao 43). In this reading, the novel performed a multi-pronged subversion: by setting itself in rural India, it was “writing back” to the colonizing centre whose metropolitan modernism it decried further by an open espousal of the Gandhian way. And by writing in an English (in the novel form itself imported from the West) that militated against the conventions of Victorian realism, the novel also “wrote back” to the English canon. Thus Rao had, in this interpretation, hit upon a way of “Indianizing” the genre of the English novel by his focus on the Indian rural and by a seemingly effortless blending of the cadences of his vernacular tongue, Kannada, with the language of his colonial masters, now made yielding and pliant. What is more, by writing of the impact of Gandhi on a small village
in India, Rao had made art serve the higher nationalistic purpose. *Kanthapura* thus became “Indian in both theme and treatment” (Sudhakar Rao 31).

Later scholars were to question this kind of uncritical celebration of *Kanthapura* and to note the ways in which the novel has recourse to a problematically essentialist vision of Indian unity – a vision whose subversive genius is only one face of a highly Sanskritized, textualized, and exclusivist enterprise. *Kanthapura*’s status as an “epic of modern India” is destabilized in this re-appraisal of the novel as the ramifications of its authorship “by a writer who [was] himself geographically, socially, and epistemologically distanced from the subaltern characters he [was] attempting to represent” (Knippling 180) become important. As Knippling says, “[w]ho, for instance, is the ‘native’ in Rao’s text, and what is being nativized? Further, we may ask, who recognizes this nativization?” (180) In a similar vein, Tabish Khair argues:

While Rao did give speech to subalterned Indian realities in the colonial and international context, he did so largely by recourse to Sanskritized (at times even high Brahminical) definitions and traditions . . . . Rao’s act of articulation is, thus, both a process of subaltern reclamation and a centred instance of the consolidation of the Brahmin-Babu’s Sanskritized authority, the definition of India from a space that has not been and is not marginalized within socio-cultural India. (204-205; emphasis in the original)

In the novel’s opening pages, an intricate fabric of hierarchal sociality takes shape, where caste and gender emerge as the two most significant axes of organization – or, indeed, as the two realities most immediate for the narrator. For *Kanthapura*’s main narrator, the old widow Achakka, with a precarious mix of unreliability and empathy,
emerges as a character in her own right, as she simultaneously distances the reader with her unsubtle biases and prejudicial observations and draws the reader in with her always-engaging and dynamic narrative of rural life. The novel is ideologically cathected in fundamental ways by the narrator’s position as a poor Brahmin woman in a largely Hindu India. In terms of the novel’s form, her dramatic storytelling is a function of her simultaneously marginalized (as a woman and widow) and privileged (as a high caste Brahmin) position. Her telling is designed to evoke the numerous hybrid traditions of Indian oratures whose typical repositories are to be found in old grandmother figures (consider Paati in R. K. Narayan’s Swami and Friends or the grandmother figure in Ismat Chugtai and Vaikom Muhammed Basheer’s short stories). She is the novel’s kernel, folding and unfolding her heteroglossic narrative through a strategic use of songs, stories-within-stories, local idioms, proverbs, all of which recreate a dense prolixity that attempts to capture the spirit of Indian oratures. At the same time, it is largely through this old Brahmin woman’s narration that a mythic dimension is evoked – a peculiarly Hindu dimension that was no doubt an early sign of what would be for Rao a lifelong preoccupation with Vedanta philosophy and Hindu thought. Indeed, such a Hindu perspective girds the narrative’s present with the sense of continuity and mythic transcendence that in Orientalist discourses had already made it an aspect of India that could be “easily accessed, narrated and valorized” (Khair 204). In this sense, the woman narrator’s large rambling story becomes metonymic of a triple frame of reference: the mythic as her telling recalls katha traditions of folk India, weaving in its palimpsestuous fabric epic stories of Rama and Sita; the local, as she re-tells the stories of Kanthapura’s patron goddess Kenchamma and her victory over the evil forces; and the historical, as
the stories of brave women warriors such as the Rani of Jhansi who fought the British in
the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 become part of her version of the continuing nationalist
struggle for independence. By an intricate, and crafty, process of co-option and
appropriation, Rao creates a layered récit where multiple chronotopes collapse and
memory and myth converge. Achakka’s polyphonic narrative is thus structured to uphold
Rao’s thesis of a “quintessentially Hindu ontology” (Naik 99) wherein past-present,
male-female, human-divine become binaries that are perceived as constantly self-
undermining and not beyond contradiction. Such a Hindu ontology is, of course, founded
upon the marginalization, caricaturisation, and exclusion of minorities such as the non-
Brahmin and the non-Hindu others, and in the novel, this crops up in the form of
historical revisionism or the selective memorialization of the past. For example, the
singling out of Rani of Jhansi as the symbol of the 1857 Mutiny presents, on the one
hand, a female hero around whom Achakka is able to create a rallying space for the
marginalized women of Kanthapura (many of them widows or childless), but, on the
other hand, such a parsing of legend becomes illustrative, as Mondal astutely observes,
of a highly selective version of history, one that purges the role of Muslim mutineers and
glosses over the fact that the majority of rebelling soldiers were Muslim infantrymen
(143). Indeed, Achakka’s polyphonic narrative enacts an insidious silencing of other
voices, for in her highly socialized voice, all boundaries between subjective and objective
break down. As the “I” blends into the “we” and “my” becomes “our,” processes of
“typification,” as Khair puts it, begin to occur (216). Such typification is seen at its most
effective when good and evil are being mapped out in the novel. Hence, for instance, the
villain of the novel, Bade Khan, is not only a Muslim, but also the “meat-eating and
whoring” policeman who fights for the British, and thus, he is doubly treacherous. In contrast, Achakka declares Moorthy, a Brahmin, college-educated boy, as “the saint of our village” (3; emphasis added). Moorthy’s idealization presents the novel with its nationalist a priori and paves the way for Rao’s critique of caste oppression, but such a premise also creates the kind of internal cultural-religious homogeneity that could not have been but a construction. And as Khair puts it, “it is in these contexts that the generalizations, universalizations and abstractions . . . stand revealed as, partly, elaborate garments with which to cover a naked alienation . . . [Rao’s] attempt to restore ‘the India of mythic continuum’ is a genuine case of the subaltern speaking in the international, post/colonial context; but what he restores is itself a Babu-Brahminical construct that has traditionally been central, hegemonic and dominant in Hindu India, a construct that grows out of a privileged Sanskritized discourse often employed to silence millions of subalterns within India” (221).

It is therefore vital to remain aware of the ways in which Rao’s deployment of Gandhian philosophy in Kanthapura is a selective appropriation of those aspects of Gandhi’s politics that most accorded with Rao’s own vision of Hindu India. Anthony Parekh, one of Gandhi’s most astute critics, avers that “Gandhi’s Hinduism had a secularised content but a spiritual form and was at once both secular and non-secular” (Gandhi’s Political Philosophy 109). Rudolph Heredia suggests that Gandhi’s relationship to Hinduism was a far cry from the aggressive Hindutva of V. D. Savarkar.

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4 Heredia writes: “in spite of its pretensions to be nationalist and modern, its militant chauvinism and authoritarian fundamentalism make Hindutva the very antithesis of Gandhi’s Hinduism. Hindutva is in fact but a contemporary synthesis of Brahmanism. This is why in the end the Mahatma [was] vehemently opposed by the traditional Hindu elite, who felt threatened by the challenge he posed” (Heredia).
(a form of political Hinduism that has in the last few decades gained strength under Bharatiya Janata Party’s banner in India):

Gandhi locates himself as an insider to mainstream Hinduism, the ‘sanathan dharma’. Hence, the radicality of his re-interpretation goes unnoticed. Gandhi does not reject, he simply affirms what he considers to be authentic, and allows the inauthentic to be sloughed off. For Gandhi’s Hinduism was ultimately reduced to a few fundamental beliefs: the supreme reality of God, the ultimate unity of all life and the value of love (ahimsa) as a means of realising God. His profound redefinition of Hinduism gave it a radically novel orientation.

(Heredia)

In a heuristic continuum of Hindu political belief, it is possible to understand Rao’s peculiar form of Hindu thought and philosophy (and the consequent configuration of Hindu India in Kanthapura) as situated somewhere in between Gandhi’s Hinduism and Savarkar’s Hindutva. Rao championed the cause of Hinduism and Sanskrit all his life: in his acceptance speech on being made the Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi in 1997, he said: “to have been born in India and not to have written in Sanskrit, or at least in Kannada, is, believe me, an acute humiliation. But I still dream of writing in Sanskrit – one day!” (qtd. in Hardgrave 175-6). In Kanthapura, Rao attempted to stay true to many visions at once: his personal vision of Hindu India, his political vision of a free Gandhian India, and his literary vision of an India rich in the diversity of vernacular and national literatures. Kanthapura’s polysemy is a reflection of all these multiple motivations; its paradoxes too stem from the anxiety-ridden enterprise of staying true to these self-contradicting impulses, and although Rao was fond of hearkening to his village roots
(Trivedi 435), it is revealing that after Kanthapura, he never wrote a village-centric novel again.

**Modernism and Kanthapura**

*Kanthapura* is clearly a novel of many kinds of tensions: its position as an “epic of modern India” is problematized by its narrow, exclusionary vision of Hindu-Brahminical India. At the same time, however, through the evocation of the philosophical and the abstract, it attempted to strike an accord between Rao’s literary and spiritual ambitions as a debutant novelist in twentieth-century Europe. However, by casting a discussion of *Kanthapura* within the rather deterministic paradigms of Indian and un-Indian, what is missed is an analysis of those precise ways by which Rao in his first novel recorded and transformed the salient features of early twentieth-century literary modernism, a phenomenon whose influence on the novel was immediate and decisive. *Kanthapura*’s importance, in this sense, as among the first Indian novel to register and nuance the imprints of European literary modernism is a vitalizing new way to read this much-revered text. In this reading, it becomes imperative to take the novel out of the argumentative ring of Orientalism vs. historical realism (poor pugilists as these positions make in their respectively essentializing reductionism), and see the novel from the perspective of its own stakes in the powerful cultural sweep of modernism in Europe of the 1920s and ’30s. The modernist underpinnings of the novel also provide a vital clue to understanding the peculiar vision of Rao’s village and in what ways the rhetorical device of rural destruction (in *Kanthapura*, the annihilation of the village by the British colonizers) provides, as it does in Woolf’s novel, the basis for forging an expressly anti-
colonial unity and for imagining what must have seemed so radical at the time: the end of Empire.

In her reading of Raja Rao’s oeuvre, Esha Dey provides a refreshing perspective on Kanthapura’s novelistic strategies – its traditional plotting, its scheme of a graded rise and fall, the numerous expository digressions for the benefit of non-Indian readers, and the skaz-like inflection of the first-person narrative voice whose “uninterrupted flow of monologue . . . Rao has adapted from the modern Western tradition of the flux of . . . different levels of consciousness. . .” (39). Dey emphasizes also the importance of numerous European influences on Rao:

We may remember that France in those days was the very heart of all modern European movements in art and literature. So Rao’s heroes may refer to persons like Simone Weil or Poincaré, or books like Le Silence de la mer or use notations of Western music that are by no means familiar with other Indian writers in English. . . . Living in France, Rao’s nationalism [sic] was converted into an adoration of a few selected principles of Indian ethos and developed into a metaphysic of India. (20)

Kanthapura’s turbulent birth into modernity (signalled ironically by the novel’s end – the destruction of the village and the relocation of many villagers to a new village) does possess a strong frame of reference in the epic battles and their telling in the Ramayana and Mahabharata where a change in world-orders is also cast as a war between forces old and new; but in profound ways, the village’s destruction parallels the violent crises so abundantly found in the high modernist writing of Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Eliot in England and of Apollinaire, Proust and Gide in France – writing that formed Rao’s
surround and influence at the time that he was making his debut on the literary mainstage of twentieth-century Europe.

Much early scholarship on Rao premised *Kanthapura’s* Indianness on an automatic alignment between his attraction towards Hindu mysticism and Gandhian politics, an alignment that needs to be nuanced and qualified. We have already seen how the novel’s slippage between “Hindu” and “Indian” paves the way for the creation of an exclusionary vision of Hindu unity and resurgence where ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities get absorbed into a grand-narrative of anticolonial resistance. At the same time, the novel has recourse to a highly textualized and Sanskritized form of Hindu philosophy to create a classical, legitimate, even valorous opponent to Western colonialist scholarship. As Khair notes, Macaulay’s official indictment of Sanskrit and Arabic texts indicates that while “classical and semi-classical texts were made readily accessible by Oriental[ist] scholarship (and often constituted as the window to the

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5 Dey shows the ways in which Rao’s stylized storytelling borrows also from the Bible: “It was only too natural for Rao to look for the linguistic correlative of an orthodox Hindu sensibility in the timeless classic of the English language. The style of the Bible can be more fruitfully adapted to express the concept of an archaic ethos which is presumed to have remained the same for centuries and embodies a lifestyle closer to the ritualistic society found in the presentation of the primitive and close communities of the Biblical time than the complex linguistic strictures of modern English which arise from a mode of life fully defined by the historical, existential present” (49)

6 “I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. --But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I have conversed both here [in India] and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the Oriental plan of education” (Lord Macaulay’s 1835 *Minute on Indian Education*).
‘Oriental mind and reality’), they were by no means considered equal to European texts in terms of worth and achievement” (204-05; emphasis in the original). Rao’s novel is impelled by a need to rebut this kind of essentialization of India. To this, one must also add another kind of strategic appropriation: the novel isolates those aspects of Gandhian philosophy that come closest to Rao’s own Hindu leanings, while leaving out other ecumenical and secular aspects of Gandhian ideology which did not quite fit the homotopian ethic of the novel. In this sense, the novel is built on a strategic misprision of Gandhian thought that allows Rao to create a highly selective literary avatar of Gandhi’s way and present a new radical visage to Indo-Anglian writing. As literary strategy, this kind of (creative) misreading of Gandhian thought is best seen in the novel in the auratic construction of Gandhi as a modern-day Krishna. Such idealization in the novel brings the political and the religious dimensions into the tight knot of allegory and the stage for this is set in Jayaramachar’s well-attended Harikatha7 sessions:

And lo! when the Sage was still partaking of the pleasures Brahma offered him in hospitality, there was born in a family in Gujerat [sic] a son such as the world never beheld. As soon as he came forth, the four wide walls began to shine like the Kingdom of the Sun, and hardly was he in the cradle than he began to lisp the language of wisdom. You remember how Krishna, when he was but a babe of

7 Harikatha literally means the story of Hari, another name of the Hindu god Vishnu whose eighth avatar (out of ten incarnations) was Krishna. Harikatha is traditionally a composite art form usually comprising of story telling around a religious theme and incorporating various populist idioms of poetry, music, drama, dance, and philosophy. During important festivals or on auspicious days, Harikatha becomes a platform for combining entertainment with the transmission of cultural, educational and religious values to the masses.
four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country (18).

Such an idealization paves the way for the “awakening” of the village, as Gandhian symbols of *ram-rajya*, *satyagraha*, *sarvodaya*, and the *charkha* become vehicles for the expression of a unified Hindu resurgence and defiance against Bade Khan and money-lender Bhatta in particular and the English in general. And yet it is a spurious and simplistic logic which capitalizes on a popular stereotype of the provincial and gullible villager (a category Gandhi refused to accept as a given in his vision of the village) and sees the city-educated Moorthy explaining to Kanthapura’s folk modern economics and the need for village people’s participation in Gandhian civil disobedience:

‘The city people bring with them clothes and sugar and bangles that they manufacture in their own country, and you will buy clothes and sugar and bangles. You will give away this money and that money and you will even go to Bhatta for a loan . . . . They bring soaps and perfumes and thus they buy your rice and sell their wares. You get poorer and poorer, and the pariahs begin to starve, and one day all but Bhatta and Subba Chetty will have nothing to eat but the pebbles of the Himavathy . . .’.

‘But tell me, my son, does the Mahatma spin?’

‘The Mahatma, sister? Why, every morning he spins for two hours immediately after his prayers. He says spinning is as purifying as praying.’

‘Then, my son, I’ll have a charka. . .’ (25)

Moorthy casts the fight with empire into the deliberately simplistic terrain of the village vs. the city. Such a dichotomy, however, does not hold for long (in much the same way
that Gandhi’s credo of village development continued to have intricate and integral ties with cities and the development of cities) as the novel’s close sees Congress workers arrive from the city to the aid of the beaten Kanthapura villagers.

Interestingly, in its close, *Kanthapura* departs from the Gandhian way, rather than endorsing or extending it – in Moorthy’s turn from the Mahatma to Nehru, the novel was prophetic of the ways in which post-Independence governance in India would depart from the Gandhian vision of rural development in favour of the Soviet-inspired, Nehruvian blueprint for city-based modernization. Moorthy, the “Gandhi-man,” who is the centre of the action, sets up the Congress committee of Kanthapura, organizes *satyagraha* in the village, and takes on the twin villain figures of Bade Khan, the policeman-colonizer, and Bhatta, who represents Hindu orthodoxy and whose greatest fear is that “the confusion of castes . . . [will lead to] . . . the pollution of progeny” (48). Moorthy is jailed for sedition, but his example has roused the people of Kanthapura to participate in the national movement for independence. Retaliation from the British, however, sees the village subjected to violence and destruction and the novel ends with the dispossession of Kanthapura’s villagers who relocate to a neighbouring village where the novel’s final ironic vision sees “the middle-aged and barren widows go on living almost the same kind of life as at the beginning of the action, believing in the Mahatma as the saviour” (Dey 26). Moorthy becomes disenchanted with Gandhian ideology and throws in his lot now with Nehru whose modern, city-based socialism appeals to him now for its new vision of direct socioeconomic change. By the end of the story, as the grandmother confesses, “nothing can ever be the same again” (182). And while the *grande histoire* of Hindu *karma*, whose contemporary voice Rao found in Gandhi’s
symbol-based philosophy of \textit{ram-rajya} and non-violent resistance, may provide one frame for understanding such upheaval (as Rao says in his Foreword, “the past mingles with the present”), the violence that razes Kanthapura out of existence finds a likelier echo in the post-World War I angst of European modernism and the general theme of alienation and spiritual crisis that characterized much European writing of the 1920s and 1930s. The ironic eye that visits its gaze at the novel’s close upon the annihilation of the Indian village where “there’s neither man nor mosquito” (184), is, in many ways, the same eye that famously saw a heap of broken images in the waste land that modern Europe seemed to many then.

In ways that parallel Leonard Woolf’s narratorial manoeuvres in his first novel, it is in the central narrative voice that Rao most profoundly registers the many schisms of the modernist conception of epistemic violence and, like other writing in the 1920s and ’30s, he represents through the \textit{telling} (rather than the tale) “the lost objects” of the modern world. Much criticism has looked at the ways in which Achakka’s narrative evocatively resonates of that mythic dimension that was recognizably, even formulaically, Indian, but as Dey has shown (24-36), the \textit{skaz}-like performativity of her telling is a throwback to the Russian and English Victorian realist narrators whose diegetic authority and certainty were the hallmarks of a sensibility that was trenchantly challenged by the modernist anti-heroes. Some of this schismatic, almost chiral, impulse also animates \textit{Kanthapura} where Achakka’s narratorial authority is at once densely mimetic of readily-associable village realities and yet is, at the same time, also rendered as strategically circumscribed in its omniscience, a signature modernist manoeuvre. At several points in her narrative, Achakka professes lack of knowledge and these
admissions refocus her commentary on the events in Kanthapura, drawing attention to the limits of her knowledge, reminding the reader of her own status as a character in the events she narrates. An early example of such refocusing is when Achakka narrates the village’s local legends and introduces Kenchamma, the patron goddess of Kanthapura:

Kenchamma came from the heavens . . . and she waged such a battle and she fought so many a night that the blood soaked and soaked into the earth, and that is why the Kenchamma Hill is all red. If not, tell me, sister, why should it be red only from the Tippur stream upwards, for a foot down on the other side of the stream? Tell me, how could this happen, if it were not for Kenchamma and her battle? (8)

The admission of the possibility of an alternate explanation for the colour of Kanthapura’s soil – a possibly scientific one – is signal of the narrative’s recognition of its limits and presents an important moment of reflection in what appears to be transparently communicative storytelling. These are moments in the telling which recall, as Caneda-Cabrera says, “modernist narratives [that] remain suspicious of their own possibility to communicate, although they paradoxically insist on it” (678). Such disruptions, as it were, occur repeatedly when Achakka’s narrative is arrested in its descriptive sweep by structures that prohibit her discursive entry: for instance, Achakka’s omniscience faces its limits when it comes to the strict caste boundaries of Kanthapura. The village is spatialized, as discussed before, in terms of the numerous castes and sub-castes of Hindu hierarchy, and though she speaks with authority of aspects of life important to Kanthapura’s plot, it is significant that the narrative gestures towards, but does not question, Achakka’s alienation from the underclasses:
Till now I’ve spoken only of the Brahmin quarter. Our village had a Paria quarter too, a Potters’ quarter, a Weavers’ quarter, and a Sudra quarter. How many huts had we there? I do not know. There may have been ninety or a hundred – though a hundred may be the right number. Of course, you wouldn’t expect me to go to the Paria quarter, but I have seen from the street-corner Beadle Timmayya’s hut. . . . (11)

If, as Anke Gleber says, the flâneur as “a pivotal presence in turn-of-the-century European culture . . . can be regarded as a dreamer, a historian and a modern artist, an author and a protagonist who experiences the world as a text and transforms his perceptions into literature” (363), then Achakka’s travelling eye, whose movements are circumscribed by her interpellation of caste and gender bounds, both simulates and departs from modernist flânerie. Her omniscience as narrator is brought under stress when we consider that she cannot or will not transgress her territorial (and narratorial) limits – her status as a Brahmin woman “quarters” her away from those outsiders who also form part of Kanthapura the village but whose stories drop out of the limiting horizons of Kanthapura the novel.

Achakka’s polysemous rambling wherein Rao mixes local idioms (from his native language Kannada) with the cadences of English has been a much discussed theme in Rao scholarship, one that has been read as occupying the core of the novel’s alleged realism and indigeneity. However, here too, Rao’s peculiar reworking of the modernist problematizing of the capacity of language to represent and communicate reality is manifest. Here, in an old widow’s highly digressive telling, Rao purportedly breaks the back of the colonizer’s idiom, colours language completely with the vernacular of a
remote South Indian village, leaving on a modern tongue the timeless mark of (South) Indian myth and locality. Of course, as Dey has pointed out, Rao was not the first to do so (though, in all likelihood, the first to inter-relate English and Kannada) – the examples where English was mixed, in varying degrees, with local colour spanned Lal Behari Dey’s very first novel (the very popular Govinda Samanta, later renamed Bengal Peasant Life, 1874) to the use of Cockney in Dickens or the Scottish brogue in Walter Scott (43-4). Nonetheless, there are numerous ways in which Achakka’s narration shows up the fault-lines that make the enterprise of “translation” less than perfect. Rao’s linguistic realism is summed up by Janet Gemmill as “the transcreation of spoken Kannada” into English (191), but it is important to bear in mind that Rao resorts to a highly “Sanskritized” version of Kannada that within Karnataka itself occupied a limited and largely textual space. This “bent” in English, then, only simulates an elite, cultural coign of vantage, and does not adequately represent the wider, more commonly-spoken dialects of Kannada. Indeed, as Khair maintains,

Rao’s Sanskritized English does not mark the inscription of a spoken language – an Indian dialect of English – but the creation of a doubly textualized language . . . [which] reveals itself not only in the knowledge that both Sanskrit and English (to a lesser extent) are predominantly chirographic (textual) languages in India but also by the consciously syntactical, grammatically organized and consistent – highly textual – manner of Rao’s experimentation. (107)

Such a high degree of textual stylization, in fact, is a patently modernist literary strategy that renders the telling greatly unreal. On the one hand, there are the numerous Sanskrit phrases (in italics and usually to do with Hindu religious rituals – e.g., harikatha,
“Vedanta, maya-vada etc.) and Hindi nationalist slogans that, along with the repetitive, sinewy way in which Achakka tells her stories without beginning or end, is designed to “bespeak a distinct Indian sensibility” (Narasimhaiah 71), as in the following:

“Take it Bhattarè, only one cup more, just one.”

“People came and people went; they banged the bell and touched the bull and took the flowers.”

“But to tell you the truth, Mother, my heart it be at like a drum.”

This kind of recognizably different English is a form of nativization that is meant to evoke structures of speech intrinsic to Kannada, an enterprise that is only partially successful for it is subverted by the kind of Kannada (elite, textual, Sanskritized) that is transcribed. There is also, however, the patently simulated or “transcreated” where the attempt to correlate languages (Sanskritized Kannada and English) and world-views are even more stylized and un-real:

“A cock does not make a morning nor a single man a revolution.”

“Post Office Suryanarayana is already a Gandhist.”

‘When, Venkamma, when?’ trembled Narsamma. ‘Ex-comm-u-ni-cation.’

Such examples bring to the fore that the experiment in finding linguistic equivalences is always a fraught one, for as Knippling points out, Rao’s nativizations are not only geared towards a Western audience but also problematic for that very audience, and fails “because Rao does not take into account India’s actual multicultural and multilingual situation of spoken English and the fact that his English can never be Kannada itself” (180).
The telling of *Kanthapura* thus draws only loosely and arbitrarily on the principles of ethnographic realism, and constructs a timeless, mythic India whose narrative capacities it then attempts to mimic for subversive nationalistic purposes. But the novel achieves only a limited success in maintaining such subversion. As in Woolf’s novel, the point of focus, we increasingly realize, is not the village or villager but the telling itself. For this is a novel only peripherally concerned with rendering the Indian village comprehensible to the gazing eye (whether native or western). The novel is, in fact, Rao’s experiment in forging a form that was a combination of the modernist and what he believed was the only valuable Indian way. This way was a peculiar mix of the Gandhian and the Brahminical, and in Rao’s *appropriated* form of Gandhian thought, it was also the *Hindu* way. In this sense, Rao’s novel can be read as a counterpart to Woolf’s *Village in the Jungle* where also, as we have seen, the primary agenda is not to convey the “real” village or to envoice the “authentic” subaltern native, but to foreground those ways in which the construction of a village allows for a critique of colonialist discourses of change and twentieth-century liberalism. But such critique always first constructs and configures its subjects of inquiry and it is in his construction of the classic Indian village that one can see the problems and paradoxes of Rao’s selective and strategic appropriation of Gandhian ideology, Hindu thought, and European literary modernism.

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8 It is perhaps unsurprising that Rao’s biography of Gandhi, published in 1998, was entitled *Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi.*
Malayalam Literature and Legends of Khasak

O. V. Vijayan’s 9 highly popular debut Khasakkinte Itihasam (henceforth Khasak) 10 is the other novel under study in this chapter. The novel is significant for heralding a new aesthetic in Malayalam writing, but it is remarkable also for the ways it deploys, adapts, and reconfigures the Gandhian vision of village collectivity. Khasak was first serialized in the Malayalam weekly newspaper Mathrubhumi in 1968 and published as a book in 1969. After its great success, and 25 years later, in 1994, Vijayan himself translated the novel into English as Legends of Khasak. The novel was written over a long twelve-year period and was a result of Vijayan’s year-long stay (1956-57) in Thasarack, a remote village in Palakkad district of Kerala, where he stayed at the behest of his father in order to keep his sister company as she pursued a career in teaching at the

9 Oottupulackal Velukkutty Vijayan (1930-2005) was born in Palakkad, Kerala to O. Velukkutty who was an officer in Malabar Special Police of the erstwhile Madras Province in British India. As a child, Vijayan was home-schooled until he was eleven. He went on to complete a B.A. from Victoria College in Palakkad and obtained a masters degree in English literature from Presidency College, Madras. Though he began his professional life as a tutor at the Malabar Christian College, Calicut, Kerala and later at the Government Victoria College, teaching would prove to be a short stint. In 1958, Vijayan joined Shankar’s Weekly as a cartoonist and political satirist, launching what would be an extraordinarily successful career as staff cartoonist with such prestigious papers as The Patriot, The Hindu and The Statesman. As his work as cartoonist flourished, Vijayan, with the success of Khasak, continued writing, and although he was to never replicate the thumping success of that first novel, his substantial corpus of six novels and several collections of short stories and essays has ensured him a place in the highest pantheon of India’s most eminent writers.

10 I will adhere to Vijayan’s English translation of the novel for this chapter; however, I am aware of P. P. Raveendran’s argument that Khasakkinte Itihasam and Legends of Khasak differ in some important details – differences that are accounted for by Vijayan’s attempt to take the novel to English-reading audiences as well as by the slow but sure change in aesthetic sensibilities of the writer in the 25 years it took for the English translation to be published. All quotations from the novel in English are from Legends of Khasak, unless indicated otherwise.
local single-teacher government school. Vijayan has said that many of the characters in the novel are based on the people he encountered in Thasarak and indeed, Ravi, the protagonist of *Khasak*, is, like Vijayan’s sister, a teacher in the only school in Khasak. In the afterword to the English translation of the novel, Vijayan wrote:

> It had all begun this way: in 1956 my sister got a teaching assignment in the village of Thasarak. This was part of a State scheme to send barefoot graduates to man single-teacher schools in backward villages . . . . Since it was hard for a girl to be on her own in a remote village, my parents had rented a little farmhouse and moved in with my sister. Meanwhile I had been sacked from the college where I taught. Jobless and at a loose end, I too joined them in Thasarak to drown my sorrows . . . . Destiny had been readying me for *Khasak*. (204-205)

As Thomas Palakeel notes, *Khasak* was read in Malayalam literary circles as “ultramodern” (“athyadhunikam”), an appellation that becomes clear when one recalls that in the 1960s the term “postmodern” was still unavailable in Malayalam literary criticism, and was indeed, almost a decade away (Palakeel “Postmodernism”). The novel’s iconic difference lay largely in its idiom, its “destruction of] the line of demarcation that separates what seems real from the fantastic,” its peculiar mix of the ordinary and real with the magical and surreal (Bishnoi 266). Thus, in what was arguably among the first of its kind in any language, Vijayan drew the contours of Khasak around the same time as Gabriel García Márquez was writing Macondo into existence in his masterly *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *Khasak* was also the fruit of Vijayan’s disaffection with Marxism; in particular, the trial and execution by Stalinist forces of Hungarian politician Imre Nagy in 1958 had a profound effect on Vijayan who had, until
then, been a card-carrying member of the Communist Party in Kerala. In the afterword, Vijayan writes of the first impulses behind *Khasak*:

I had published two long stories depicting imaginary peasant uprisings in Palghat; commenting on them the Comrade-President said, “They were good stories, but I wish you could write something with more Inquilab [revolution] in it.” . . . I told the Comrade-President that I was working on something, and wanted to fine-hone my pilgrim-revolutionary to perfection. He was pleased and said he would wait for the book. It was then that tragedy from afar shattered the carnival of liberation. In Hungary, they tricked and shot Imre Nagy. It blew my mind. I turned away, I began my uncharted journey. Looking back, I thank Providence, because I missed writing the “revolutionary” novel by a hair’s breadth . . . . (205-206).

*Khasak*’s radicalism lay not just in its linguistic innovativeness, the formal virtuosity for which Vijayan has now become a byword in Malayalam writing; as I will show, the novel upheld a vision of rural India that jettisoned both the recourse to allegory that the social realists before Vijayan had capitalized on for nationalistic agendas as well as the focus on the city that his contemporary Malayalam modernists, inspired by the example of their European counterparts in the early decades of the twentieth century, deployed to present the face of post-Independence disappointments and disaffections. In this light, *Khasak* carved a special place with its visionary portrayal of the rural that departed from the idealization as well as the demonization of the village in the literary imagination.

At this point, a brief history of Malayalam literature might aid in understanding the ways in which *Khasak* revolutionized the literary sensibilities of 1960s Kerala.
Panned at first for its “obscurity” and “sexual anarchy” (Satchidanandan), the novel was soon “hailed as the peak of fictional modernism in Malayalam” (Raveendran 177), and has, in the thirty years since its publication, run to twenty-two reprints. Malayalam, the mother tongue of nearly thirty million Malayalis, ninety per cent of whom live in the state of Kerala in the south-west corner of India, belongs to the Dravidian family of languages. Although at least a thousand years old, Malayalam writing is among the younger literatures of India, dwarfed quite easily in range, scope, and antiquity, for instance, by literature in Tamil with which it has historically shared many cultural and linguistic affinities. Literary histories of Malayalam writing tend to be, in great part, histories of poetic achievement and not that of prose/fiction. Hinting at what was, in the first half of the twentieth century, a generally derivative impulse in prose works, the iconic poet and eminent literary critic K. Ayappa Paniker sums up the achievement in Malayalam prose somewhat dismissively: “In the wake of the western novel came the western short story: the stories in the puranas or in works like Panchatantra could not give rise to a modern form of short fiction” (Paniker). The novel developed through the second half of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century in parallel with the short story, with Chandu Menon’s Indulekha (1889) inspired by Benjamin Disraeli’s Henrietta Temple (1836) and C. V. Raman Nair’s historical romances like Martanda Varma (1891), being among the first novels in Malayalam to capture critical and popular attention. The erudite and polished style pioneered by Menon and Raman Nair spawned many unremarkable imitators, but in the 1930s, the major voices of Vaikom Mohammed Basheer, Kesava Dev, and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai brought forth the “Progressive” phase in Malayalam fiction. This was a time that witnessed, as
Palakeel puts it, “the resurgence of the novel as the pre-eminent genre follow[ing] the social and political transformations taking place in response to Western humanist tradition, increasingly drawing its energy from Marxist philosophy and aesthetics” (“Twentieth-century Malayalam Literature” 191). With subtlety and rare humour, Basheer’s novels and short stories foregrounded Muslim village lives at the fringes of the modernity of cities and nations. Thakazhi’s works, inspired by social causes and literary realism, similarly centered on other marginals of Kerala’s diverse community – the lower castes in *Thottiyude makan* (*Scavenger’s Son*, 1947) and the peasant in *Randidangazhi* (*Two Measures*, 1948). Kesava Dev’s novel *Odayil Ninnu* (*From the Gutter*, 1942) had a rickshaw puller as its hero.

The social realists were, of course, challenging the feudal-themed narratives or historical romances of the early decades of the twentieth century, poor imitations of Menon’s and Raman Nair’s path-breaking classics. They were, however, to be challenged in turn by the “modernists” who took Malayalam writing into new directions in the 1950s and ’60s.  

11 R. Prasad has cast this turn in Malayalam writing as a paradigm shift away from “the decadent trends of sentimentality and romantic glorification of reality” and towards a “literature of protest” that was “carried . . . by a romantic enthusiasm for a political revolution” (166-67). This was the theme of the “modernist”

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11 To a literary historian, the chronicling of various “isms” and movements often reveals a kind of anti-incumbency factor which constantly converts challengers into conservatives and creates modernists out of the old guard. Especially in twentieth-century Malayalam writing, as Palakeel says, one finds one has to “relabel the progressives as modernists” (194), and old conservatives often transform into reactionaries. Kesava Dev is a good example of a social realist writer whose idiomatic sophistication deploys several signature modernist features such as irony, juxtaposition, and the use of myth and history in “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (as T. S. Eliot said of Joyce’s *Ulysses* in his famous 1923 essay “*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*”).
poetry led by K. Ramakrishnan, K. Satchidanandan, Attoor Ravi Varma, and the most iconic of them all, the avant-gardist Ayyappa Paniker, writers who were profoundly influenced by the English modernists, especially T.S. Eliot. These writers moved away from the agendas of the “Progressives” before them, whose works had focussed on political and social inequality and deployed literature to expose ills and to exhort reading communities to social action (Prasad 166) but had neglected, in the modernist view, to question the bourgeois underpinnings of the writers (and their audiences) or the writers’ own alienation from the underclasses whose “real” stories still did not make it to the centre stage. The disconnect from the social realism of the “Progressive” writers was complete when Paniker, in his pioneering modernist work, Kurukshethram (1961), declared: “I am not Arjuna listening to the Gita” – thus, severing the connection to shared myth and summing up “the deep distrust of the social self” and the poetic and political disenchantment of a whole generation of Malayalam writers (Prasad 178).

Integral to such proclamations of difference and dissidence was also a disenchantment with Gandhi and Gandhian thought – matters that had inspired Vallathol Narayana Menon’s poetry in the 1920s and 1930s (particularly the eight-volumed Sahityamanjari, 1934-54, where several memorable poems draw their theme from Gandhian philosophy) and the writings of the inimitable G. Sankara Kurup who wrote “some of the most poignant poems in Malayalam on Gandhi” (Nair 1357). To the Malayalam modernists, however, Gandhi was “the god that failed; or rather, it [was] the other way round: this generation [had] failed him” (Nair 1357-8). Paniker’s portrayal of the dried up river Sabarmati (where Gandhi built his most famous ashram in India) sums up the gloom and despair that characterized the general mood of the modernists towards
the path shown by Gandhi. The new writings militated against what they saw as the clichés of the old, and in particular, villages were seen as the saurian remains of an obsolete world order: as Panikkar notes, “an unwillingness to idealize the countryside, a preoccupation with the incipient urban style of life, an ironic attitude to excessive emotionalism, and insistence on precision in expression” (“Malayalam Literature” 253) became some of the ruling features of the modernist writings of the 1950s and after.

In such a climate, Vijayan’s debut appeared and its impact has been described by the poet and critic K. Satchidanandan thus:

Th[e] novel . . . revolutionised Malayalam fiction. Its interweaving of myth and reality, its lyrical intensity, its black humour, its freshness of idiom with its mixing of the provincial and the profound and its combinatorial wordplay, its juxtaposition of the erotic and the metaphysical, the crass and the sublime, the real and the surreal, guilt and expiation, physical desire and existential angst, and its innovative narrative strategy with its deft manipulation of time and space together created a new readership with a novel sensibility and transformed the Malayali imagination forever. (“A Sage and an Iconoclast”)

Although separated by many decades from the early and late modernisms that impelled Leonard Woolf’s and Raja Rao’s debut works respectively, Khasak was a result of and reflection on a different kind of modernism – one in Malayalam writing. As I shall show, Vijayan’s peculiar kind of modernism is intimately tied to the issue of representing villages and rural collectivity; indeed, although the novel’s importance has been seen
largely in its formal innovations, its style and technique. I would like to posit that the novel’s significance lies just as much in its explicit repudiation of a Hindu *telos* for imagining of a pan-Indian collectivity. In a bold move, Vijayan’s *Khasak* is conceived with an overtly Islamic foundational ethos, but ultimately, the novel transcends the question of religion or collectivization based on a common religion by the construction of a sociality whose basis it makes in a peculiar blend of Gandhi’s ideal of a secular and ecumenical village as well as the Marxian *topos* of an egalitarian society.

Vijayan wrote *Khasak* over a long twelve-year period spanning the 1960s, a time that saw much of the idealism of modernist writing fade in impact as many writers embraced the powerful sweep of European existentialist thought mediated through the writings of Kafka, Camus, and Sartre (Prasad 167). On the one hand, the discourse and practice of social realism seemed to have been discredited and sidelined as inauthentic; on the other, when the modernist writer wrote of realities most immediate to him, he became remote from that vast public whose pains, it seemed, he could represent only through allegory (Ramakrishnan 19). Paniker’s poetry called for a change in sensibility, but no one quite knew what *kind* of change:

Let us, then,

Move into a new frenzy

And wage an endless fight

To shape and re-mould

The world around

Nearer to the heart’s desire. (qtd. in Nayar)

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12 See Satchidanandanandan, Raveendran (179-180), in particular, for a discussion of the novel’s unique stylistic innovations in Malayalam.
In such an intellectual climate *Khasak*’s impact on the Malayalam literary world was such that it has become quite conventional to refer to 1969 as a watershed year dividing a pre-*Khasak* and post-*Khasak* time in Malayalam writing. Vijayan came to be regarded among the leading modernists in Malayalam writing of the 1960s; however, a closer examination of the novel shows how he was already dissatisfied with the (potential for) alienation that the modernist protest against the discourse of social realism could make a fetish out of. The novel’s “narrative ungrammaticalities” (Raveendran 191), its move away from the strictly realistic (Bishnoi 264-266), the lack of a plot-driven story (Satchidanandan), and above all, Ravi’s *flâneur*-like narration, whose significance I will discuss shortly – all these were examples of its shocking newness, its modernist appeal. As Satchidanandan puts it, the novel was “‘anti-status-quoist’ in every sense; and readers with orthodox sensibilities charged it with obscurity, partly because of its new idiom and partly its play with space and time that went against the familiar, chronological narration” (Satchidanandan). But there is much in the novel that is also incompatible with the modernist reading – the choice of the *rural* as the site for the story, the continuing insistence on the need to wed art and social purpose, the undermining of the narcissisms of modernist *flânerie*, and the move towards the artist’s reintegration with his social milieu – and it is in these ideas that Vijayan was a pioneering anti-modernist. Indeed, *Khasak*’s setting in a quasi-fictional village marked a significant departure from the city-oriented modernist works of Vijayan’s contemporaries, and, as I will show, by creating a village that survives its encounter with urban modernity and, by crafting a rural ethos quite unlike the idealizations found in pastoral, as well as one that was guided by the spirit (if not quite the letter) of Gandhian communicable change and social action,
Vijayan’s novel presented a powerful counterdiscourse to the urban-centered alienations of modernist writing. *Khasak*’s formal innovations were, in time, to pave way for the “postmodern” in Malayalam writing, but the emphasis on the rural was to be displaced by one on the nation (an emphasis Vijayan himself was to echo when he wrote the English translation, *Legends of Khasak*, in the 1990s). As it transpired, the trope of the surviving village, more or less, fell out of the horizons of the Malayalam novel and in its place, the trope of the dying village became the locus for protest against the iniquities of governance and disappointments with national policy, however, in the 180-odd pages of *Khasak*’s magical space, Vijayan imagined the contours of a very real, functional village collectivity, thus making the novel in the history of Malayalam writing of the twentieth century, a very special experiment in forging an affirmative vision of the village. Such a vision was, as I will argue, deeply informed by the Gandhian model: on the one hand, the novel repudiates the stereotype of the iniquitous, backward village as well as the unthinking, fatalistic villager, while on the other, its unique spin on Gandhian *ram-rajya* lay in the rather ironic creation of a village with an explicitly Islamic foundational past. Gandhi’s presence – and absence – in the novel provides a revealing counterpoint to the homotopian imperatives that drive the explicitly Hindu *telos* of Raja Rao’s narrative, and a comparison of Kanthapura and Khasak yields a searching examination of the appeal of the village as a rhetorical trope in two major works of twentieth-century Indian literature.

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13 Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai’s *Kayar* (*Coir*, 1978) is the most famous of such narratives: the over 1000-page long novel deals with hundreds of characters over four generations, “bringing back to life an axial period (1885-1971) during which feudalism, matriliny and bonded labor gave way to conjugal life, everyone’s access to a piece of land, decolonization and the industrial revolution of the 1960s” (Zimmermann).
Khasak: Progressive and Modernist

Vijayan’s novel exists in a state of counterpoint to the social realism of the Malayalam Progressives as well as to the “indecisive negative” of the modernists: on the one hand, Vijayan debunks myths of Hindu India by creating in Khasak a village with an explicitly Islamic past and a present that is resolutely syncretic in its ethnic and religious make-up, thus providing an evocative example of Gandhi’s ideal village in praxis. Furthermore, by creating within this village a model of change that is self-evolved, the novel allows the village to become an agent rather than a victim of modernity. On the other hand, the novel also treats the village in new ways, presenting the mythical and numinous as a shared, collective legacy of legends, thus, taking Gandhian *ram-rajya* out of the register of the purely Hindu nation. The novel’s action picks up on the familiar trope of Hindu-Muslim conflict\(^{14}\) but ultimately delineates religious identity itself as ineffective and inadequate for the practices of everyday life. In this sense, Gandhian *ram-rajya* finds an ironic parallel in Khasak’s predominantly Muslim *mythos*, a strategy that renders the story at odds with the standard majoritarian (Hindu) narrative of national integration. The novel deliberately mixes Hindu and Muslim mythologies, blending patterns of daily life with the immutabilities of local myths and legends:

Seated in the madrassa, Allah-pitcha the mullah taught the children of the Muslims the saga of Khasak. Long, long ago, in times now unknown to man,

\(^{14}\) It is interesting to note that in *Khasak* the two dominant communities in Khasak are the Ezhavars (the largest Hindu community in Kerala) and the Rowthers (a distinctive Islamic community with Turkish ancestry, living largely in Tamil Nadu and Kerala), while in *Legends*, Vijayan changes these to the Hindus and Muslims – an anxiety-ridden conflation that, as P.P. Raveendran says, is accomplished in the narrative “only by a violent act of ideological invasion” (191). The change is, in all likelihood, a result of Vijayan’s desire to reach out to as wide an English-speaking readership as he can with the English translation.
there came riding into their palm grove a cavalcade of a thousand and one horses. The riders were the Badrins, warriors blessed by the Prophet, and at the head of the column rode the holiest of them all – Sayed Mian Sheikh . . . . The people of Khasak trace their descent from those one thousand horsemen . . . . Both the Muslims and the Hindus of Khasak look upon the Sheikh as their protecting deity. (10-11)

By creating an explicitly Islamic foundationalist myth for Khasak, Vijayan points to the fraught telos of allegorical representation wherein the story of a village can become the story of a nation. If Khasak is originally Islamic, in what ways can it be representative of Hindu India? To what version of history (or myth) can one have recourse when constructing an exclusively Hindu or Muslim nation? The novel points to the arbitrariness and futility of dredging up from history myths of cultural purity to prop up narratives of modern nationalism. In India as well as in Sri Lanka, the politics of ethnocultural purity has played a vital role in the construction of (Hindu) Bharatvarsha, (Tamil) Eelam and “the Sinhala nation,” and the manner in which Khasak’s origins are configured proves to be a telling pointer to the dangers of essentializing inherently complex nation-states as unified cultural or religious wholes.

Khasak’s story begins with Ravi, a brilliant young man who, spurning a bright academic future and disenchanted with the city, embarks on a long journey that brings him temporarily to the small village Khasak, “a kind of nowhere land” (35), where he becomes the teacher of a local school. A central trope in the novel is one of journey and though one might extrapolate a decidedly metaphysical turn to the idea of the unending travel of life, the novel itself is firmly rooted in the expressive and realist, encoding
within its polyphonic space the stories of people more important than the flâneur. For the “quintessential modernist” (as C. Gouridasan Nair calls Vijayan), such an endorsement of the agenda of an outmoded discourse of social realism would, on surface, seem surprising; but it is part of Khasak’s pioneering strategy that Vijayan combines the subjective, iconoclastic point of view provided by Ravi’s flânerie with the resonant, self-envoicing narrative of an Indian village. This is accomplished in the novel by a simultaneous process of installing Ravi as the centre of the narrative as well as thwarting such location by rendering Ravi’s impressions as partial and limited. As with Achakka in Rao’s Kanthapura, Ravi’s encounters with Khasak’s people constitute the many interrelated stories of the novel. But unlike Rao’s novel, where Achakka’s darting eye provides the central, authorizing, representational principle, Ravi’s flânerie is part of an unstable and shifting field where dialogic perspectives of insider and outsider, native and alien, centre and periphery compete in ways that were to herald the “deeply politicized” sensibilities in the Malayalam novel of the 1970s and 1980s (Raveendran 179).

Early scholarship on Vijayan lauded Khasak for its path-breaking idiom, for the novel’s peculiar use of the Malayalam language that departed, on the one hand, from the Sanskritized cadences of C. V. Raman Pillai’s highly influential historical romances in the early decades of the twentieth century, and extended, on the other, the subversive ordinary language of Vaikom Basheer’s short stories based on Muslim life in Kerala. Khasak was praised for its shocking formal virtuosity – “its lyrical intensity, its black humour, its freshness of idiom with its mixing of the provincial and the profound and its combinatorial wordplay” (Satchidanandan). In general, the novel’s vision of rural collectivity has been understood as “magical” (Satchidanandan), “metaphysical”
In such readings, Khasak, situated outside of known parameters of time and space is highly *un-real*, its apparitional quality a far cry from the detail and meticulousness with which Rao’s *Kanthapura* is delineated or the contours of Beddagma’s tenuous collectivity are drawn by Woolf. Khasak is spatialized in ways that suggest numinousness, creating a deliberate disconnection with the temporal and the real: we are encouraged to imagine it like a cell “an entity, a planet of the microcosm, [with] its own aeons of time” (170). Here, a different kind of temporality conditions existence: as Bishnoi says, “instead of moving forwards into the future, the natives of Khasak, like the Greeks, see the past, unbroken and relentless, receding before their very eyes and the future coming up from behind” (264-5). And yet, there are concrete details to Khasak that also render it *un-*magical: the village lies in a valley surrounded by the mountains of Chetali, on one side, and by a small river, on the other. On the east is the only pass that presents direct access to the village, which appears otherwise to be cut off even from the train that passes across the mountains but never comes into Khasak. The village is ringed by small mosques and its central square has a banyan tree. There are schools, a seedling house (granary), small shops that sell everyday groceries, and a whole range of social relations are present: Rowthers, Ezhavas, Christians, basket-weavers, cattle-brokers, toddy-tappers, children, “cretins” (78), nomads, communists, fundamentalists, disgruntled wives, black cobras, bats, dragonflies, “glimmering” palmyra fronds (110), “shoals of little clouds” (114) – there is, indeed, “an intricate lattice” (Bishnoi 265) that makes the village a living, breathing, organic community of human and natural creatures. In fact, there is a certain “geometric precision” (Bishnoi 265) with which Khasak is mapped out, suggesting that it
may not, after all, be as much a mirage or illusion as has been made out by critics. Unlike the utopia of pastoral or the Hindu homotopia in the conventional rural novel, but in ways that make it powerfully echo the oppressed figures to be found in the writings of the Progressives, Khasak is a very real place — calamity, tragedy, and pain strike everyone: Allah-pitcha, the Mullah, is struck with cancer; Maimuna, the village beauty, is married by her father to the lame and ugly Chukra Rawthal, who “followed an unusual calling . . . he dived and retrieved things fallen into wells” and dies in one such attempt (63); Appukkili, a mentally challenged man-boy hunting for dragonflies in Khasak’s valleys is rendered an orphan by an attack of smallpox; Sivaraman Nair is a Hindu fundamentalist whose demented wife spurns him and sleeps with unknown labourers in the seedling house. Through all these seemingly bizarre characters, so apparently outside the ken of the everyday and the familiar, Vijayan creates a very real community of Khasak’s rural life. In its repudiation of the naturalistically or ethnographically realistic narrative (as Kanthapura in its time was widely-held to be), Khasak provides a different template to interpret the rural as a trope in Indian prose fiction of the twentieth century.

On surface reading, in the magical-seeming façade, the Islamic ethos, and the only obliquely spiritual ways of living that characterizes its folk, the village seems profoundly polarized from the Gandhian ashram or even the village Gandhi sought to make real through his experiments with ashram living. On the other, in the intimacy the villagers feel towards each other, in their evolving and self-aware modes of everyday discourse and living, and most of all, in his vision of Khasak’s survival, Vijayan is truer than Rao was in Kanthapura to Gandhi’s vision of a secular, ecumenical collectivity.
Despite its highly experimental idiom so unexpected in a novel centred on the village, *Khasak* continues to posit faith in the resilience of the rural. As Raveendran notes, though there is “a pronouncedly spiritual dimension” to the novel, “the dialogically structured text . . . is deeply politicized,” and this was a significant departure from the prevailing mood of the apolitical 1960s (179). The 1960s, transformed by the powerful sweep of European existentialist thought, witnessed both “Progressive” writing and its modernist counter-narrative become more or less a spent force in Malayalam literature. These were the years when Vijayan was writing *Khasak*, changing it from a story of arrival (a theme popular in much post-Independence writing, and the initial storyline Vijayan had thought of, as he promised the Comrade-President) to one of belonging, as Ravi’s outsiderly view of the rural community adapts and changes to a member’s more intimate sense of belonging and being. In what is a significant reversal of the stock pastoral plot where a despairing city-dweller arrives in the village and changes the face of the countryside forever (not unusually by a dalliance with a village belle, leading to her social ostracism later) before returning (duly chastened by the experience) to the city whose modernity always beckons, *Khasak*’s protagonist enters the village, as Vijayan puts it, “in atonement” and finds himself unable to return to the city: “Ravi, my hero, liberation’s germ carrier . . . would no longer be the teacher . . . he would learn . . . and stay” (“Afterword” 206).

The focus on the village ties *Khasak* in integral ways with the writings of the Progressives and makes Vijayan stand out among the modernists of his generation in whose works the turn towards form necessitated a diremption from the local and the particular, creating (some might say, wallowing in) “an experiential space of static
atemporality” (Ramakrishnan 40). Vijayan’s novel is also remarkable because of its refusal to present the artist as alienated from his milieu; as I will show, Ravi’s transformation from flâneur to fabulist attempts to overcome the bourgeois alienation of the Progressives as well as the non-constructive alienation of the modernist. On the one hand, Khasak re-possits faith in rural collectivity by portraying it as a resilient unit of social action and change – a far cry from essentialized types of villages and villagers. Yet in the treatment of rural collectivity, in the departure from the naturalistic style of social realists, and in crafting a village ethos without recourse to national(ist) allegory, Khasak was also highly self-conscious of its new aesthetic.

**Khasak’s flâneur-fabulist**

From the outset, Ravi’s central position in the narrative is usurped by and diffused into the positions occupied by the marginal characters: there is a deliberate attempt to install Ravi as the authorizing principle of the narrative as well as to thwart such location by rendering his impressions as partial and limited. The novel sets him up early as a figure of modernity, not unlike the flâneurs found in the writing of Heinrich Heine, Charles Baudelaire, and Edgar Allan Poe. As Gleber posits, the flâneur is a “product of modernity . . . [who] experiences streets and commodities as images of visual reflexion . . . . The flâneur is at once a dreamer of exteriors, an historian of the city, and an artist of modernity who transforms his perceptions into texts and images” (363). When the novel opens, the first chapter, tellingly titled “In Search of the Sarai,” presents Ravi’s arrival from the city, and his interior monologue sets the tone of the central narrative: “When the bus came to its final halt in Koomankavu, the place did not seem
unfamiliar to Ravi. He had never been there before, but . . . he had seen it all . . .” (1). Ravi’s vision is thus recognizably the “privileged mode in modern perception” (Gleber 362) and we are encouraged to reposit trust in his urbane, sophisticated commentary. And yet, in his very first encounter with a sherbet vendor, Ravi’s givens are checked by a new reality: “The sherbet vendor had washed the glasses and uncorked the syrup when Ravi from habit asked for ice. The vendor smiled and said, ‘You won’t need any ice, sir.’ True, Ravi realized as he took a sip. The earthen pot had chilled the water and given it the tangy taste of monsoon’s first shower” (2). After this first meeting with Ravi, the reader loses track of the protagonist for four chapters in the course of which Vijayan fleshes out various local characters and their intersecting stories. We also learn that the school that Ravi is in-charge of is not the only place of learning: the traditional schools in Khasak, “the madrassa where the mullah taught the Koran, and the ezhutthu palli, literally the house of writing, run by a family of hereditary Hindu astrologers” also exist as alternatives to the modern, government-sponsored system of education that Ravi represents (12). Much sets Ravi apart from the people of Khasak: while he is the worldly itinerant, the natives of Khasak are said to be “not fond of travel” (120). His nomadism is the sign of his dissident spirit and his radical need to question status quos. However, Ravi’s privileged position is often undermined by local events and his kind of modernity is stalled by the numerous rural forces whose constant skirmishing create in Khasak a shifting, mercurial ethos that is a far cry from the stereotype of the essentialized village.

As an educated school-teacher, Ravi is ostensibly in a position of power, but he is often ineffective in keeping the school going and the unstable roster of students who keep dropping in and out of the tenuously constructed school becomes a metaphor for Ravi’s
general futility as a harbinger of change. He is often at the mercy of unexpected forces and his authority is undermined in ways that are not foreseeable by him: in a matter of three months, the school is up and going, but old students constantly disappear and new ones do not stay very long either. When Chatthan and Perakkadan, the sons of Chenthiyavu Thottiya, join the school, Ravi learns that “the Thottiyas were an ancient martial clan, but now they roamed the villages with their performing monkeys to make a living” (50). Soon the children are taken away by the parents as a “puzzled” Ravi “looked on helplessly”: “. . . after much persuasion, the wild visitors deigned to let him into the clan’s secret. Their language had no script, as only a scriptless language could help them penetrate the forest depths. Chatthan and Perakkadan spent restless days at school . . . keeping away from letters in palpable horror” (51). Such events render Ravi’s authority in the village profoundly subject to forces he cannot quite reckon with. Indeed, Ravi is often at the receiving end of a different kind of education – regarding the lives and histories of the villagers. As the stories progress, Ravi’s position becomes increasingly liminal and the competing voices of Khasak take over the narrative reins.

The novel also insists that Ravi’s gospel of change is itself not immune to Khasak’s enlightened and self-evolved ways of being. Nizam Ali the Khazi occupies the fringes of Ravi’s urban modernity and is, in many ways, Ravi’s agon: in their brief, desultory encounters, Ravi is often rendered speechless or discombobulated, suggesting the ways in which the version of city-oriented modernity that he represents comes face-to-face with its own limits. Ravi’s encounter with the Mullah, who finds himself increasingly isolated on account of the new Khazi as well as his failing health, is equally pallid. Both are aware of the Mullah’s shenanigans to subvert the new school where Ravi
is master, but neither wishes to create a fracas, and when the Mullah offers himself for
the menial job of sweeping and swabbing the school for five rupees a month, the spectre
of an older way of life effectively glides out of the textual space of the new, changed
order. Such a destiny awaits Ravi as well and the famous ending of the novel sees Ravi
glide out of Khasak – does the tiny snake he plays with while awaiting the next bus (to
where?) strike him or does he merely fall asleep?

. . . Ravi lay down. He smiled. The waters of the Timeless Rain touched him.
Grass sprouted through the pores of his body. Above him the great rain shrunk
small as a thumb, the size of the departing subtle body.

Ravi lay waiting for the bus. (203)

There is, however, in the course of the novel a significant change in Ravi’s own
narrative – from the flâneur that he is initially identified with, Ravi becomes increasingly
aligned with Khasak’s own landscape: he becomes one of the Pandaram. It is interesting
that Vijayan’s first vision of the novel had a firm Marxist underpinning: in such a vision,
Ravi’s flâneur-like status would have been particularly apposite. Indeed, some of the
novel’s radically avant-garde charge lies in Ravi’s separation from the “crowd” – that
“dreaming collectivity” that, as Walter Benjamin lamented in post-Industrial Revolution
Europe, had become “the nightmare of the mob” (qtd. in Gilloch 148). Ravi lives, as
Satchidanandan notes, at two levels: “a mundane, instinctive level of lust and longing
and a transcendent meditative level of detachment and spiritual quest . . . . He is an
alien among the rustic folk, seeing them with a kind of philosophical detachment, even
while mixing with them at the level of everyday experience” (Satchidanandan). As the
“harbinger” (Vijayan 204) who would bring change to a sleepy village, Ravi would have
been the classic flâneur turned revolutionary, but it is revealing that Vijayan’s own
disenchantment with Marxism and the subsequent re-visioning of the novel sees Ravi
become a “fabulist” instead. The move from flâneur to fabulist is accomplished subtly
and powerfully within the narrative, as Vijayan turns the novel’s face away from his two
intellectual forefathers: the Progressive writers as well as the modernists. In a chapter
significantly entitled “The Eastward Trail,” Vijayan turns to the Pandaram:

The natives of Khasak were not fond of travel, but the Pandaram were a visible
exception. An immigrant community which had come in through the Palghat pass
centuries ago, they were sworn to mendicancy and ascetic nomadism . . . like the
saffron they donned, they assumed new names as well – names taken from myth
and legend – and acted like gods out of a long lost pantheon. The Pandaram were
great fabulists, because they had nomadic minds. They spun endless tales . . .
[and] at the end of a day’s journey there was always a village, a woman, a god.

(120-1)

In Ravi’s transformed role from flâneur to fabulist, with his own shifting audiences of
school-children, local menfolk, his domestic help Chand Umma and her children,
Vijayan suggests a kinship between his outsider hero and the Pandaram, creating his hero
not as “the flâneur-parasite dragging the crowd for intellectual food – or material for his
latest novel” (Crickenberger), but as one of the Pandaram in whose tales “the truth
unfolded in unending spectacle” (Khasak 122). The seeds of Ravi’s fabulist talents are
revealed to lie in his childhood, particularly that period of “orphanhood” after his mother
passed away:
As the palanquin [carrying his mother’s dead body] rode out of the house, the nurses held him back, gentle hands turned his face away. He did not resist, for he had foreseen this journey down the grass, across the emerald green valley, past the undulant pipes . . . [and] one day, turning away from the hollows of the sky, he looked towards the miraculous horizon. It was then that they came riding the golden surf of the mirage – the winged and diademed serpents, calling him to play . . . . (5)

Adulthood sees Ravi mature into the bright intellectual, dissident, and despair-driven nomad he is when he first comes into Khasak. But it is Khasak that transforms him as he abandons a detached flânerie for the more involved and personally uplifting work of teaching and storytelling. Even as he teaches the children different subjects, it is the “hour of myth” that both he and the children most enjoy and in which they are seen to connect across divides of religion and class:

“Let’s tell a story,” he said to the children. They were overjoyed. Ravi asked, “What kind of story?”

The children began chirping all together . . . “A story without dying, Saar!”

Ravi laughed, “What’s your name, child?”

“Kunhamina.”

Ravi listened to the ballad of Khasak in her, . . . looked deep into those eyes; the story would have no dying, only the slow and mysterious transit. He began in the style of the ancient fabulist.

“Once upon a time . . .”. (46)
It is in such moments that the narrative forges links between the seemingly irreconcilable positions of city and village, alien and native, flâneur and crowd.

**Gandhi and Khasak**

Like the village Kanthapura, one of Khasak’s abiding influences is Gandhi, but Gandhi’s presence is often ironically treated, and there is something of the parodic when resorting to Gandhian philosophy. When Nizam Ali, the precocious young man who challenges the Mullah’s authority by proclaiming himself “Khazi,” is arrested by the police for inciting unionism among Muslim locals, the Inspector forces a conversion whose Gandhian ramifications cannot be anything but ironic: “The Inspector took out a frayed yellow sheet from a pile of government stationery, and wrote out a document for the renegade: I, Nizam Ali, do hereby pledge to eschew violence and to work for a change of government only through constitutional means . . .” (33). On his release, Nizam Ali continues to spread his gospel of change among a village folk habituated to the Mullah’s narrowly religious and hermetic system of learning and Muslim education: it is an important moment in the village’s own consciousness as the new Khazi challenges older epistemologies. In the flashpoint between the Mullah and Nizam Ali, Vijayan compresses a critique of familiar discourses of the village that render it a changeless stereotype, and in their place, he creates within the rural a highly-charged polemical space where the struggle between indigenous forms of “tradition” and “modernity” presents a literary version of the ideal village imagined by Gandhi. Unlike *Kanthapura*, the novel that has been read as “Gandhi-purana” (Iyengar 391) but that, as we have seen, resorts to a problematic and strategically appropriated version of Gandhi’s village for its
own, more exclusivist vision of a Brahminicalized homoptopia, *Khasak*, with its emphasis on the Islamic and the repudiation of the Hindu-Indian equivalence, presents an alter-vision to Gandhian *ram-rajya*. And yet, *Khasak* remains true to Gandhi’s vision of a self-sufficient community whose own histories and traditions provide the bedrock upon which to build an indigenously-forged concept of the modern. In a bold moment in Vijayan’s story, the villagers are seen to be discoursing upon the meaning of truth itself:

“What is the Khazi’s truth?” the troubled elders asked one another. . . .

“The Khazi’s truth,” they told themselves, “is the Sheikh’s truth.”

“If that be so,” troubled minds were in search of certitude, “is Mollakka [the Mullah] the untruth?”

“He is the truth too.”

“How is it so?”

“Many truths make the big truth.” (36)

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15 Raveendran has argued that a literal translation of this significant moment in *Khasak* departs from the translated English text that appears in *Legends*. He provides a literal translation of the passage from the Malayalam original with which I concur:

“What is the truth about him?” They asked one another.

They recalled the spell that the Mollakka had sought to cast on Nizam Ali. It had no effect on him.

“The Khazi’s truth,” they said, “is the Sheikh's truth.”

“What then of the Mollakka's? Is he untrue?” They were puzzled.

“He too is the truth.”

“How can that be so?”

“Because truths are many.”

The last line “*Sathyam palathu*” (Truths are many) can be read “as a metatextual comment on the polyphony implied in the narrative of *Khasak* . . . [as] the guiding motto behind the structuring of *Khasak*” (Raveendran 181). The change from “Truths are many” to “Many truths make the big truth” is accounted for by Raveendran as Vijayan’s concession to an English-speaking audience and to the change in his own sensibilities as a writer in the twenty-five years that separated the first publication of the novel in Malayalam and its translation into English. Vijayan’s late writings, *Gurusagaram (The Eternity of Grace)*, *Pravachakante Vazhi (The Path of the Prophet)* and *Thalamurakal*
Khasak’s modernity entails not an oppositional relationship with tradition, but an extension of it. The stories of the lives of the individuals who make up the village provide evidence not of a slavish resignation to one’s past but of a tragicomic accommodation of it. One character stands out in such a light: Appu-Kili, the mentally retarded and physically stunted dragon-fly catcher, fondly called the Parrot, who becomes the site for a religious conflict when he is orphaned by a small-pox epidemic. Numerous parallels between Appu-Kili and Ravi are present throughout the novel, but towards the close, these become stronger, as both Ravi and Appu-Kili, orphaned, victimized by disease, become the sites of conflict among different modernities. When Appu-Kili is forcibly converted to Islam, Ravi’s school becomes the centre of a religious conflict that could potentially sunder Khasak. He is blamed for allowing Appu-Kili’s conversion and “for leading minors astray” (164). Ravi continues, however, to keep Appu-Kili on the rolls of the class, and eventually, a settlement is reached by the village Panchayat, which defuses the religious tension and renders it absurd: “Within a few days the panchayat’s verdict was known. The Parrot was to be allowed the freedom of both religions. For certain days of the week, he could be a Muslim. For the rest he could be a Hindu. If necessary Hindu, Muslim and Parrot all at the same time” (164-5).

At work here is the classic Vijayan irony which sees in the workings of the Gandhian Panchayat both a sign of the changing political order and that order’s divorce from a more profound metaphysical logic wherein such religious accommodations are often rendered comic and absurd(ist). A double-edged strategy renders the Gandhian

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(Generations) show a mature transcendentalist at work, and the English translation – Legends of Khasak – fits better into Vijayan’s late sensibility than the one that was at work when he first wrote Khasakkinte Itihasam in 1969.
influence in Khasak Janus-faced: on the one hand, Gandhi’s unyielding emphasis on truth and non-violence is subject to parodic inversions by the villagers; on the other, as a village, Khasak is shown as projecting the resilience and capacity for self-generated change that can find solutions to such major conflicts as those that arise between the Hindus and Muslims, or the village and the city. In this resilience, Khasak is more truly “the village of [Gandhi’s] imagination” than Kanthapura is.

Conclusion
Unlike Kanthapura whose realism, as we have seen, is a highly stylized construct that only barely masks the ways in which the essentialized village is quite unreal, Khasak’s apparent unreality, its magical-seeming qualities are the façade for a radical overhauling of those representational discourses of aesthetic dissidence and social change that constituted the locus of Malayalam literature inspired by the Victorian realists as well as the European modernists. In Khasak, a recognizably realist representation of a historical Indian village in the south co-exists with its avant-garde negative that shows up the limits of the real and the ways in which an ethnographically veridical representation of the rural often creates a silenced subaltern out of the village(r), which/whom it then deploys for a critique of hegemony of some sort or the other. But such a creation is always a fraught enterprise and the novel’s idiom proves at once to be an extension of the syntactic and ideational norms of the Malayalam realist novel (Basheer and Thazhi, in particular) and its social purposiveness and a critique of the representational limits of such normative conventions. Such a double-edged strategy makes Khasak an exemplary modernist work, but here too, Vijayan presents his dissatisfaction with a purely linguistic subversion or
modernist negation alone – his own career as social activist and political cartoonist convinced him that one cannot be satisfied with a “modernism that reduces liberating praxis in a gesture of resignation to the philosophical or artistic praxis of dislodging and breaking up ideologies” (Schulte-Sasse xxxiv). Art and literature, as Vijayan said, “had to do and be more” (205).

The transformation of the account of a “pilgrim-revolutionary” (what might have been “one more boring entry in Marxism’s futile, repetitive bibliography”) into a “ballad of re-enchantment” (Vijayan 206), a result of a turn in global events, is thus, an important part of Vijayan’s local aesthetics as well as politics. It is an affirmation of philosophical optimism and an endorsement of the possibilities of engendering true change through art. In *Khasak*, Vijayan moves away from the alienations of realistic discourse (and its underpinnings in the bourgeois world) and eschews the resort to signature (European) modernist confessions of “ennui, angst, weltschmerz, and a host of other pseudo-existentialist passions of the soul” (Schulte-Sasse xxxvi). Instead, he uncompromisingly promotes in *Khasak* the agenda of a counter-revolution: to reintegrate artists and their art into life. This is also why, unlike Rao and Woolf, Vijayan’s novel does not see/project the demise of the village: Khasak lives on not because of its magical-seeming qualities, but in spite of them. In the 200 pages of the novel, Vijayan creates not an ossified, vanishing allegory (Benjamin’s “‘facies hippocratica’ [the deathmask] of history as a petrified primordial landscape”) (166) but a living, organic community of people capable of engagement and change. By drawing Khasak in ways that defy type, Vijayan stakes claim to more than a radical literary aesthetics – his is the cause of the abolition of alienation itself. As the song of “the Sheikh’s chosen insane” echoes through Khasak’s
landscape, the living are celebrated: “I shall take you in my arms. I shall not give you up to the yawning earth!” (154).
Chapter 4
Koggala and the Reclaimed Buddhist Utopia

The village in Sri Lanka occupies, as it does in India, an important place in the local literatures. To the Sinhalese and Tamil imaginaries, the village has historically signified an ancient community, wrought into complex interaction by ties of family, kinship, caste, and occupation. Rural communities in Sri Lanka represent over 80% of the country’s population and are often described as “enjoy[ing] traditional lifestyles, with temples, indigenous medical doctors, and farmers holding great cultural value in the life of the community” (Ariyaratne 2004). Such Gesellschaft has, in particular, provided a powerful site for imagining a homeland for warring sides in the ethnonationalist strife that the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan government (GOSL) on the one side, and various Tamil groups,¹ on the other side have been embroiled in.² To the Sinhalese and the Tamil communal imaginations, the village is an essential node of collectivity – as

¹ The struggle for autonomy by Sri Lankan Tamils goes back to the 1950s, and it assumed a militant trajectory with the rise of the LTTE in the 1980s. In the early 1960s and ’70s, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) worked for Tamil representation, but an increasing hardliner politics of marginalisation and discrimination against the Tamils by successive Sinhala-dominated governments radicalised Tamil youths, and from 1976 onwards, the sectarian discord became more intense under the secessionist agenda of the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE).

² At the time of writing this thesis, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) under Mahinda Rajapakse’s Presidency, successfully carried out a military campaign against the LTTE, in which most of the LTTE top brass including the organization’s leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, was killed or captured. The decimation of the LTTE’s hold on the north-eastern parts of Sri Lanka, in effect, signals the completion of a central objective of United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA), the coalition to which Rajapakse’s Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) belongs, and which has since its inception in 1951 (after Solomon Bandaranaike broke away from the United National Party) campaigned on largely Sinhala nationalist policies.
gama and kiramam respectively, social conscience finds one of its most dominant embodiments in village communities. In general, Sri Lankan writing in English – a young century-old phenomenon – has deployed the rural in a binarized way, veering between a “pastoral mode” that Rajiva Wijesinha calls “the village-well syndrome” (27) or a full-blown dystopian vision where the defining reality is civil war. Of the former mode, Wijesinha writes:

In an attempt as it seems to assert kinship with the vast majority of the population, [such works] deal with rural settings and peasant life, and by and large celebrate the latter though sometimes, it should be added, in terms of tragic consequences that generally have a prurient interest. What is clearest about them however is that they are presented from the point of view of the elevated middle class . . . . The result is a detachment that serves to keep the subject matter at a distance, as though it consisted of specimens to be examined rather than experiences to be shared. (27)

Wijesinha had in mind such works as The Third Woman (1963) and The Waiting Earth (1966) by Punyekante Wijenaike and James Goonewardene’s A Quiet Place (1968) and The Call of the Kirala (1971). Wijenaike (b. 1933) is, in particular, an interesting writer because much of her writing is intimately tied to the representation of Sri Lankan villages. She has consistently favoured a realist idiom in narration that, however, has often found disfavour with some Sri Lankan critics.  

3 D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, for instance, writes “The most that can be said of Wijenaike’s style is that it is lucid. It possesses no distinction. The slow, leisurely pace of the narrative is in keeping with the village life it depicts” (Sri Lankan English Literature 255).
In this chapter, I wish to juxtapose Wijenaike’s writing with the work of a major name in Sinhalese literature, Martin Wickramasinghe (18960-1976), who, like Wijenaike, had a long writing career spanning many decades and was also concerned with the dynamics of the changing village in Sri Lanka. As I will argue, a comparison of their novelistic visions allows one to understand the two-fold way in which twentieth-century Sri Lankan writers have, in a large part, imagined the village: as the microcosm of a utopian nation-state connected to an explicitly Sinhala Buddhist history and tradition or as a dystopian space of internecine discord that challenges the very bases of earlier nationalisms. Wickremasinghe’s writing, in general, presents the rural as the abiding mainstay of a uniquely Ceylonese collectivity caught in a moment of crisis brought on by colonial modernity. Writing several decades after Wickramasinghe, Wijenaike employs in her early writing a similar utopian vision of the village (a vision that she calls “romantically real”); however, her position as a woman profoundly inflects the inscriptions of nationalist rhetoric found in her writings. The 1950s and 1960s saw the first among many waves of peasant resettlement buttressed by a strident Sinhala nationalist discourse that programatically aligned the Sinhalese village with the Ceylonese nation-state and aggressively manoeuvred for a majoritarian national identity by the marginalization of other minorities, most notably Tamils (an intrinsically diverse minority), but also Muslims, Christians, and the Burghers. Wijenaike’s novel, The

4 What is present-day Sri Lanka was known as Ceylon until 1972. The British granted the island independence after peaceful negotiations in 1948. I will be using Ceylonese and Ceylon to speak of the people and the country, since that was the name in currency during a large part of Wickramasinghe’s writing career, and at the time of the publication of *Gamperaliya* (1944), the novel under consideration in this chapter.

5 Preface to *The Waiting Earth*. 
Waiting Earth, published in 1966, appears on first reading to provide an explicit endorsement of the Sinhala ethnonationalism of its times. However, in the figure of the “traditional” woman whose place in the nationalist imaginary was as the inviolable sanctum of the great Sinhala nation, Wijenaike projects a subversion of the phallocratic logic of the nationalism of the times. This proves, however, to be as dangerous as walking a tightrope, and inasmuch as the novel appears to deploy and endorse a Sinhalese vision of national collectivity, a feminist reading of the novel also reveals the ways in which the novel presents, through a questioning of the woman-nation conflation, an important critique of male-authored discourses of postcolonial nation-building.

Sinhala Literature and Martin Wickramasinghe

Sinhalese literature of the twentieth century has centered on the village as the *locus vivendi* of Ceylonese life and the role of Martin Wickramasinghe in this regard has been unparalleled. His life traverses a wide spectrum of Ceylonese history and his writings record the vast changes from feudal to colonial to postcolonial that Ceylon underwent in the intervening decades. Wickramasinghe was a prolific writer whose interests lay in a diversity of fields: natural and social sciences, literature, linguistics, philosophy, education, Buddhism and other religions. Much of his fictional writing took as its centre the folk life and folk culture of Ceylon and the struggle between the changing classes can be said to be a central theme in his entire corpus of writing. He is known in particular for the trilogy beginning with *Gamperaliya* (1944; English
translation *Uprooted* 2009), *Yuganthaya* ("The End of the Era" 1949; forthcoming in English translation as *The Village and the City*), and *Kaliyuga* ("The Epoch of Kali" 1957; forthcoming in English translation as *The City*). *Gamperaliya* is widely considered as the first Sinhalese novel “with a serious intent that compares, in content and technique, with the great novels of modern world literature” and is generally seen as “a seminal work and a point of reference in the evolution of contemporary Sinhala fiction.”

(Abeysekara, “Today”)

In the topoi of manorial life, Wickramasinghe locates the transformations of which the novel is a representation as well as a critique. Unlike the essentialized portraits of Ceylonese peasants in Leonard Woolf’s fatalistic novel, *Gamperaliya* has a wide range

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6 *Uprooted* (2009) by Lakshmi de Silva and Ranga Wickramasinghe (son of Martin Wickramasinghe) is the first translation of *Gamperaliya* into English and came 65 years after the novel’s publication in Sinhala in 1944. The novel has been previously translated into Tamil (1964) and Russian (1965), and other works by Wickramasinghe, particularly the short stories, have been translated into French and Japanese. *Gamperaliya* was also made into a highly-acclaimed film in 1964 by Sri Lanka’s leading filmmaker Lester James Peries who retained the Sinhalese title. The film contributed greatly to the reputations of Wickramasinghe and Peries. In Sinhalese, the title means “the transformation of a village.” Interestingly, the salience of the rural and the still-strong purchase of the idea of the village in Sri Lanka is made evident by the fact that the translators have chosen not to entitle the trilogy in English as strict translations of the Sinhala titles, but have gone with *Uprooted: The Village, The Village and the City*, and *The City* as the three titles respectively. The Sinhalese title, however, remains on the cover page, thus raising interesting issues regarding the ways translations steer (English-reading) audience responses to texts (and authors) hallowed in a certain (Sinhala) culture and literary tradition. Given the demographics of the population in Sri Lanka (73.8% Sinhalese; 13.9% Tamil; and the remaining comprised of Muslims, Indian Tamils, Burghers, Veddas, and others), and the recentness of the translation of *Gamperaliya* into English, it is evident that the novel’s primary readership within Sri Lanka for all these decades was largely Sinhalese.

7 The focus on the *walawwe* or the feudal manor is a significant difference from the focus in Woolf’s novel on the life of the jungle-people, the Veddas. In *Kanthapura*, while the action is centered on “the Brahmin quarter” of the village, Achakka’s narration alludes to the proximity of a diversity of rural castes, subcastes, and occupations.
of characters whose diversity challenges Woolf’s essentialized representation of the “average” Ceylonese villager. It has been ubiquitously extolled for its realism that is, as Wimal Dissanayake writes in his Preface to *Uprooted*, “understood not as a transparent medium but a site for critical reflection and evaluation. In the best realistic novel the trajectories of individual growth and destiny and social growth and destiny are inextricably intertwined and Wickremasinghe establishes this point forcibly in the novel” (1).

To make another relevant juxtaposition, the novel appears, on first reading, to share little with *Kanthapura* in terms of plot, action, or character; and yet as a work of colonial Ceylon by a colonial, its intent and purpose align it implicitly with those of Rao in his first novel. Indeed, like Rao in India, Wickramasinghe’s stature in the canon of twentieth-century Sinhala literature is determined by the role he played as Ceylon’s organic intellectual, as “the man who through his writings, led a heroic struggle to restore the culture of the common people of this land to its rightful place” (Abeysekera).

James Brow has shown how the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy proved “pivotal to the ideological history of the village community in Ceylon in two respects. First, it effected a convergence of different, even radically opposed, currents in British images of the village community; and second, it offered them in an imaginative new form that was ripe for adoption into the emergent discourse of Sinhala nationalism” (69). Martin Wickramasinghe’s novelistic configurations of the Ceylonese village played a similar ideological function in the creation of a village-based indigeneity; as Stanley Tambiah puts it, Wickremasinghe,
[t]he greatest Sinhalese novelist of this century . . . is credited with [the] formula of Sinhala cultural identity: vava (tank), dagaba (temple), yaya (paddy field). So important is this imprint that both in novels and television dramas, the impurities and immoralities of current urban life are uncritically castigated, while out there in the newly created peasant settlements and colonies, in the sites of ancient glory such as Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, might be found the ideal harmonious life.

The new colonization schemes hold the prospect of regaining the lost utopia. (Buddhism Betrayed, 109-110; my italics)

As a virtual paean to the ordered way of manorial life, Wickramasinghe’s novel sought to challenge the ethnographically authorized realisms of colonial representation (one of which Woolf’s narrative must have appeared to be) in which august pedigrees and the hierarchized life were usually absent in favour of a lumpen stereotype. While he may not have intended it to be so (Tambiah, Edmund Leach 232 fn. 62; Spencer 285-286), it is clear that Wickramasinghe’s writings became implicitly connected, as were Coomaraswamy’s earlier efforts, in the recuperation of the village community, to an emergent Sinhala nationalism whose biggest proponent in the early twentieth century was Anagarika Dharmapāla8 and his activist followers committed to “the construction of ‘a

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8 Anagarika Dharmapāla (1864-1933) was a central figure in the revival of Buddhism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was the founder of many schools and YMBAs in the style of Christian missionary organizations at work in India and Ceylon, the most famous being the Maha Bodhi Society he started in 1891 for the revival of Buddhism in India. He is also credited with creating a brand of Buddhist revivalism in Ceylon that Gananath Obeyesekere has called “Protestant Buddhism” (223) for the ways in which it appropriated Protestant Christian ideals of freedom from institutional oppression and focus on individual action, for use towards a rejection of British missionary work and claims of Christian superiority. In his later years, Dharmapāla’s anti-Christian rhetoric became particularly strident as he called for a complete rejection of British ideological apparatuses and a return to Buddhist-Sinhala dominance. Neil
true nationality”” (Brow 81). From 1956 onwards and then more intensely in the late 1970s, nationalism in Sri Lanka went hand-in-hand with state-sponsored land colonization projects that built on as well as exacerbated the Sinhala-Tamil discord.

Within the Sinhala nationalist discourse, projects such as the 1970s Gam Udava (Village

DeVotta characterizes his rhetoric as having four main points: “(i) Praise – for Buddhism and the Sinhalese culture; (ii) Blame – on the British imperialists, those who worked for them including Christians; (iii) Fear – that Buddhism in Sri Lanka was threatened with extinction; and (iv) Hope – for a rejuvenated Sinhalese Buddhist ascendancy” (78).

9 1956 saw the passage of the Sinhala Only Act making Sinhala the only official language of the country. The Act was the first step taken by the new government of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike to realize one of the main campaign promises that had brought about his landslide victory in the general election. The rationale behind the passage of such a bill was to dislodge English from its position of dominance in the system of bureaucratic governance that the British had put into place. However, it was a fact that the civil services and governmental organizations had attracted vast numbers of Ceylonese Tamils who formed a majority of the work-force. Hence, the instatement of Sinhala as the only official language of national governance meant the retrenchment of many Tamils who were not fluent in the language, and proved to be an official endorsement of a general Sinhalese idea that the British divide-and-rule policy had, in a large part, favoured the minority Tamils over the Sinhalese majority. As Tambiah notes, “[t]he law had its intended effect. In 1955 the civil service had been largely Tamil; by 1970 it was almost entirely Sinhalese, with thousands of Tamil civil servants forced to resign due to lack of fluency in Sinhala” (Ethnic Fratricide 62). The Act proved to be the first real speed bump in the post-colonial nation-building process, and was violently opposed by the Tamil-speaking minority. The passage of the bill was followed by rioting and the first of many violent conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist groups. See Tambiah (Leveling Crowds 42-52), in particular, for the importance of 1956 in Sri Lankan history: “The year 1956 was historic, because it saw the political success of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, which had remained latent for some time and begun to gain momentum in the early fifties” (42).

10 1956 saw the first among many internecine riots to occur in Ceylon: the Gal Oya riots were the first ethnic riots that targeted the minority Tamils in independent Ceylon. The riots took place from June 11, 1956 and occurred over the next five days. The Gal Oya settlement scheme was begun in 1949 to settle landless peasants in formerly jungle land. Gal Oya River in the Eastern province was dammed and a tank was created with 40,000 acres of irrigated land. In 1956 the settlement had over 50 new villages where over 5000 ethnic Sri Lankan Tamil, Muslim, Indigenous Veddah, and Sinhalese were re-settled. The Sinhalese made up approximately 50% of the settlers (Tambiah, Leveling Crowds 83). This fact will become significant when we examine Wijenaike’s The Waiting Earth.
Awakening) launched by the United National Party government, were recast as contributing to “the Sinhala nation” that was imagined “as a nation of villages . . . [where] the ideal social order was represented as one of self-sufficient village communities, each composed of sturdy family farmers living in peaceful cooperation with one another in accordance with Buddhist precepts and ancient custom” (Brow 68).

To such an ethos, agriculture was central and “the Sinhala people were held to have a natural affinity for paddy cultivation” (Brow 68) and “the ‘peasantry’ was conceived as the true locus of indigenous culture” (Kemper 140). As Tambiah has shown, images of the village community were used to evoke a compelling vision of the future that was shaped by nostalgic memories of the past, “for it was the explicit aim of many contemporary programs of development to recreate the harmonious village communities that were believed to have flourished under the ancient kings” (*Buddhism Betrayed* 106-14).11

The writings of both Coomaraswamy and Wickramasinghe along with the political writings and activism of Dharmapāla and Piyadasa Sirisena became an integral

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11 Brow provides a succinct summary of the ways in which the discourse of political nationalism of the 1970s and popular representations of the Sinhala nation accorded with each other: “. . . the present ‘era of development’ was bound to the glorious past of the Sinhala kings and the fate of the village community was linked to the national destiny of the Sinhala people, both being contained within a sweeping narrative of virtue, degeneration and redemption. Crudely summarized, in the time of the ancient Sinhala kingdoms the nation was believed to have been ruled by a succession of heroic and righteous kings who presided over a society composed of prosperous, contented and largely self-sustaining village communities. This social order flourished for more than a thousand years but eventually succumbed to foreign invasion and the imposition of colonial rule. Redemption, however, was now at hand, as national virtue could be regained if contemporary rulers were to emulate the ancient kings by governing righteously and pursuing a vigorous policy of development that would revitalize peasant agriculture and restore the village community” (68).
part of the popular idiom of Sinhala nationalist discourse where “images of the village community that inspired [a] nationalist vision” attempted to create and make normative what Tambiah has called “the lost utopia” of past ages.\(^\text{12}\) When Wickramasinghe wrote *Gamperaliya*, just four years before Ceylon’s independence in 1948, the emphasis on the rural and the indigenous provided a powerful evocation of a precolonial identity, all the more precious given that, unlike India at the same time, Ceylon did not go through an intense anticolonial movement against British rule (Goonetilleke 11). Leonard Woolf’s rather unflattering picture of a Ceylonese village was the only (in)famous portrayal of Ceylon in the imperial literary market-place, and *Gamperaliya* is impelled, at least in its design, by Wickramasinghe’s desire to present to the global reader a different Ceylon, a more “authentic” Ceylon.

**Wickramasinghe and the Paradoxes of Realism**

From this perspective, one sees the ways in which the most admired quality of *Gamperaliya*, its realism, seen most vividly in its construction of the Sinhalese village, Koggala, and in the representation of rural life, was in Wickramasinghe’s own time a strategically anticolonial construct, and which in the subsequent politically-charged climate of postcolonial Ceylon proved ripe for adoption into an expressly Sinhala

\(^{12}\) Much anthropological commentary has focussed on the connections between postcolonial Sinhala nationalist discourse and its strategic use of serviceable Buddhist myths and legends in the construction of Sri Lanka as a *Sinhala* nation-state. An overarching ideological framework created continuities between Buddhist myths of origin as recorded in the *Mahavamsa* chronicles of the 6th century B.C.E., linking “the Sinhala race” to the founding father King Vijaya and other heroes such as Dutugëmunu whose victory over the Tamil King Elara of Anuradhapura, provided a readily adaptable pattern for the struggle for a “Sinhala only” Sri Lanka. See Kemper (53-78) and Nira Wickramasinghe (88-92) for a fuller discussion of this.
nationalist discourse. Central to the novel’s vision of rural collectivity is the idea(l) of realism, and the valorization of realistic representation is a crucial factor in the novel’s status as “the best novel in Sinhalese, with a village background” (Sarachchandra, *The Sinhalese Novel* 140). E. R. Sarachchandra’s role in the history of Sinhalese literary criticism is a major one and he has often been credited with (and castigated for) the elevation of *Gamperaliya* as the foremost fictional account of rural Ceylon.

Sarachchandra praised the novel for “its authentic depiction of peasant society in Sri Lanka and the sureness with which the imported art form of the novel was allowed to develop along indigenous tracks of sensibility” (*The Sinhalese Novel* 23).

Wickramasinghe himself diverged from Sarachchandra on important principles regarding the nature and origins of the modern Sinhala short story, but they both more or less

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13 See A. Pemadasa’s *The Incredible Gam Peraliya* (1995) for an extended refutation of the novel’s realism and for a biting critique of Sarachchandra’s 1943 *Modern Sinhalese Fiction* and the Peradeniya School of criticism whose work Sarachchandra led as Professor of Sinhala at the University of Peradeniya.

14 The literary debates between Wickramasinghe and Sarachchandra (lifelong friends despite their differences) form the heart of Sinhala criticism between the 1940s and 1960s. Sarachchandra argued that modern Sinhala fiction was a genre borrowed from the West and a deliberate break away from Sinhalese classical literature: “It is a remarkable fact about modern Sinhalese literature that, not only does it owe little to the literature of preceding periods, but that it even rejects the values of that literature and seeks sustenance from sources far removed from the original fount of its inspiration” (“Preface” to *An Anthology of Sinhalese Literature of the Twentieth Century* v). He considered the greatest limitation of precolonial Sinhalese writing (much of it authored by monks) its inability to be a “mirror of life” and its preoccupation with otherworldly themes, an aspect that made such narratives inherently non-secular in content and non-realist in idiom. In Sarachchandra’s reading, Sinhalese literature bloomed only when the colonial encounter with the West caused the emergence of writers “from among the laity” (“Preface” v), and “a class of western-oriented intelligentsia” that arose in the nineteenth century is credited by him with “the true ‘liberation’” (“Preface” v). Wickramasinghe refuted this position and in several essays written in Sinhala and English “tried to demonstrate that pre-modern Sinhala narratives were indeed realistic and they did have complex ordinary human life as their subject-matter. He also argued that the
agreed on the principle of realism itself as a measure of “good” literature.

Wickramasinghe’s choice of the rural as the setting for *Gamperaliya* was predicated on his tacit agenda for constructing in an anticolonial vein (as Rao did in *Kanthapura*) a uniquely Ceylonese indigeneity and on his configuring a specific kind of realism whose basis he (in contradistinction to Sarachchandra) could find in pre-modern Sinhala-Buddhist narratives that he championed all his life. The precise nature of realism (or its lack) in pre-modern Buddhist narratives is outside the scope of this study, but an exploration of Wickramasinghe’s conception of realism sheds light on the motivations behind the construction and re-presentation in *Gamperaliya* of the purportedly utopian (Sinhala) village.

A quick glance at Wickramasinghe’s essay on the Jātakas compiled in his historical work *Landmarks of Sinhalese Literature* (1948) provides a clue to the kind of realism he thought valuable and worth recognition. *The Jātaka Tales* refer to a large body of folk literature (numbering to about 547 tales) native to India concerning the previous modern short story in Sinhala evolved from narratives like the Jātakas” (Liyanage). Unlike Sarachchandra, Wickramasinghe read the colonial encounter as a mixed blessing: his own history of Sinhalese literature written in 1948, for instance, ends in the seventeenth century with the ballad-writer Alagiyavanna’s death, and in a one brief paragraph, he more or less dismisses “modern” Sinhalese literature of which his own writing would be an integral part: “It is only in the present day that the initial chaos resulting from the contact of our culture with that of the West is beginning to abate. The new literature that is rising from the product of this contact is yet too young to be estimated” (*Landmarks* 202).

15 See Liyanage for a fuller exploration of “overlooked non-realist elements in the pre-modern [Sinhala] narrative prose . . . [and the latter’s role in] contemporary discussions about the nature of post-realism in modern Sinhala literature” (7).
births (jāti) of the Buddha. As Richard Cohen defines, “Jātaka is a generic term for the stories of Shakyamuni’s [the Buddha’s] births while he was a bodhisattva [on the path to enlightenment] . . . . Probably from the time of the Shakyamuni himself, jātaka stories have provided monks and lay folk alike with an imaginative basis for conceiving what it means to train for buddhahood” (211).

For Wickramasinghe, the Sinhalese Jātakas present a “landmark” in the literature, for they eschewed the “punditisms of literary Sinhalese” and adopted “a spontaneity and ease which the classical language did not possess” (125). The result was, he notes, a “simplicity of language . . . [and] a narrative style that was hardly ever excelled in [Sinhala] literature till modern times” (125-6). He further extols “the subject-matter of the Jātakas [that] was drawn from the raw material of life, though in a different country [India], in conditions not essentially different from ours” (126). This “rawness” is, in fact, vital to his conception of the ideal realist idiom: “The Jātakas give us a picture of life in the raw, as the authors found it in the villages of North India, painted artlessly and faithfully by people whose wisdom was ripened by a knowledge of the world. Hence they are our earliest specimens of realistic literature, and have no rival, in this respect, in the entire field of ancient writing” (128).  

These stories have been remarkably popular in Europe too, a point that Wickramasinghe makes as well (Landmarks 126-7). E. B. Cowell in the Preface to the Jātaka Stories observes: “The same stories may thus in course of their long wanderings, come to be recognised under widely different aspects, as when they are used by Boccaccio or Poggio merely as merry tales, or by some Welsh bard to embellish king Arthur’s legendary glories, or by some Buddhist samana or by some medieval friar to add point to his discourse. Chaucer unwittingly puts a Jātaka story into the mouth of his Pardoner when he tells his tale of “the ryotoures three’; and another appears in Herodotus as the popular explanation of the sudden rise of Almæonidae through Megacles marriage with Cleisthenes daughter and the rejection of his rival Hippocleides.” (ix)
The essay’s discussion of a few particular Jātakas, however, creates a completely different picture than the one Wickramasinghe presents: each of the tales he retells is emplotted on themes of violence, torture, sexual promiscuity, and excesses of temperament and action.\textsuperscript{17} There is, \textit{in the tales themselves}, little sight of the “realistic subject-matter” that Wickramasinghe finds a laudable literary accomplishment, and it appears to be a spurious critical logic that argues that “[t]he early Buddhist fashioners of these Jātakas deserve credit for taking up an independently critical attitude towards the rash and selfish deeds of even kings. It is seldom that we see such independence in the later writers of Brahmin literature” (130). Or that “that the writer should have had the courage to record such a flagrant breach of morality shows his first-hand knowledge of life, and his desire to be faithful to it” (130).

In sum, it is by a sleight in critical logic that, despite adumbrating only the most outrageous of the Jātakas with every conceivable excess as the central thematic concern of the story, Wickramasinghe can yet affirm the “realism” of the work:

The Jātakas laughed at all institutions, at women and men, good as well as bad, at Brahmins and monks and ascetics. They smiled at the hypocrisy of the conventional virtues, \textit{much in the manner of a modern author} . . . . They are not primitive myth, as popularly supposed, embodying the repressed wishes of a nation, nor are they fairy tales distorting the facts of life and dealt out as dope to

\textsuperscript{17} Among the particular tales Wickramasinghe recounts are the \textit{Dharmapāla Jātaka} where a king incensed by the love he sees his queen shower upon their newly-born son has the child tortured to death, whereupon, the queen dies in grief; the \textit{Ksāntivada Jātaka} where a sexually dissolute king tortures an ascetic to death for luring his harem-maidens away by his preaching; and the \textit{Asāntamanta Jātaka} where an old woman enamoured of a young pupil of her son’s attempts to kill her son so she may live happily with her young man.
the masses to compensate for their miserable lot on earth. The Jātakas portray life fearlessly, as it is, and seek to make people good by holding up to their view a close-up of reality. . . . They educate, not by providing model worlds and model men and women, but by holding up to view the stark realities of life, by showing the ill-effects of uncontrolled passion on society and the moral order. (136-8; my emphasis)

Additionally, diverging from Sarachchandra in his insistence on the indigenous origins of modern Sinhala prose (that were to be found, he argued, in the Jātakas, primarily), Wickramasinghe sought to further bolster his assessment of pre-modern Sinhala literature by a comparison with *European* writing:

When Dr. Sarachchandra wrote his book [*Modern Sinhalese Fiction*] he did not take into account that some Jātaka stories had some elements of realist novel of eighteenth-century England. He considered Buddhism and ancient Sinhala literature to be lower, and discarded Jātakas as mere folktales. So it is not surprising that he concludes that the Sinhala novel was borrowed from Sanskrit narratives and from the Western novel. (qtd. in Liyanage 5n)

Furthermore, he argued that “the depiction of psychic complexities of the human mind in the Jātaka stories is compatible with the psychological realism of great novelists like Fyodor Dostoyevsky” (Liyanage 6). What he chose to disregard or overlook were the many differences in the two *kinds* of realism he was trying to yoke together, not without a degree of critical violence. For the realism of the Jātakas is a far cry from the historical discourses of secular and rational thought that undergirded nineteenth-century European realism, and ironically Wickramasinghe, who chose to highlight comparisons and
consonances in themes and some stylistic aspects between the two, rarely deployed in his own long career any stylistic/literary devices unique to the Jātakas or other Buddhist prose narratives. It is an irony Liyanage records with a degree of wryness: “Despite being a prolific literary critic, [Wickramasinghe] never discussed how Buddhist narrative structures could be used in modern fiction. Even when he wrote his last book, a fictional biography of the Buddha, *Bhavataranya* (1976), he firmly stayed with realism producing a social realist narrative of the Buddha’s life” (262). Sarachchandra too, with the exception of one novelized retelling of a Jātaka tale, chose in his creative fiction to endorse the kind of realism that he championed in Wickramasinghe. Together, their writings and critical commentaries paved the way for the dominance of social realism as the keynote of post-Independence writing in Sinhala.\(^\text{18}\)

The attempt to assert “realism” in the Jātakas comes at the cost of negating and overlooking many anti-realistic features. The focus in the Jātakas on quotidian lives, on a wide diversity of themes, and the absence of the supernatural or of *deus ex machinas* in

\(^{18}\) A dominance that, many in Sri Lanka have argued, created, for a large part of the twentieth century, a stranglehold on Sinhalese writing: it is not until the 1980s, when Gamini Viyangoda’s translations into Sinhala of Gabriel García Márquez and Latin American narratives of magical realism appeared that a perceptible shift in Sinhalese literary criticism and writing occurred. While an earlier generation of writers (for instance, Gunadasa Amarasekera, Madawala Ratnayake, and Leel Gunasekara), under the august example of Wickramasinghe and Sarachchandra, had preferred and drawn inspiration from French and Russian realist traditions, a new generation of writers emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (such as Simon Navagattegama, Ajith Tilakasena, Daya Dissanayake), drawn to the post-realisms of the Latin Americans and clued into global literary trends in other languages such as English, where the writings of Salman Rushdie (among others) had begun to transform literary landscapes. Interestingly, the impact of much post-realist fiction on the emergent Sinhala writers was also felt in a re-discovery, as it were, of those non-realist and anti-realist aspects of classical Buddhist literature that had been overlooked and marginalized by the dominant realism of Wickramasinghe and the generation of writers inspired by his writing and by the criticism of Sarachchandra. See Liyanage for a detailed discussion of this new generation of writers whose work turns “to classical and folk Sinhala literature for models of alter-realistic narrative” (10).
the telling does mark an important difference from “The Arabian Nights [that] are tales of fancy and imagination, and Sanskrit tales [that] are romances couched in language equally romantic” (Landmarks 127); however, it is also important to note that the metanarrative of Hindu/Buddhist philosophy and the generally didactic and edifying function of the Jātakas firmly ties these stories to a religious framework in ways quite distanced from Wickramasinghe’s other model of the realist method – the social realism of nineteenth-century European writers that was rooted in post-Enlightenment secular thought and philosophy. It is this latter kind of realist narration that in his own writing Wickramasinghe was attracted to, and it is noteworthy that in his first novel there is no hint of the kind of realism he praised in the Jātakas. Indeed, a rather Victorian conservatism rules the major love plot which is centered on the failure of communication between a conformist aristocratic young girl (Nanda) and her effete and diffident English tutor (Piyal). There is in Gamperaliya nothing of the ribald or the violent that one sees in the Jātaka stories Wickramasinghe outlines; nor is there any reflection of the carnivalesque or subversive function that he notes of the Jātakas in general (they “laughed at all institutions . . . smiled at the hypocrisy of the conventional . . . [138]). In fact, the “modern author” of Gamperaliya re-creates in the novel the conventional and the old guard, and through a curious mix of nostalgia and memory affirms, in the face of obsolescence and replacement by the new, those older ways of life and being that seem to hold no more. Enfolded in the novel’s recreation of a timeless Koggala, under the duress of colonial modernity, is a rural utopia of the Sinhalese imaginary, a symbolic space of resistance and history that provides sustenance and a way to reclaim the honour and glory of legend. As Charles Hoole puts it, “Sinhalese history under four-and-one-half centuries
of Western colonial rule would be unintelligible without reference to the concept of utopia. In such times of political subjugation, the utopian ideas enabled the Sinhalese Buddhists to visualize periods of intense spiritual awakening in the future, giving them much needed hope to endure their present state of dishonor. . . . To the Sinhalese community as a whole, utopia became a powerful source of unity and invincibility, in the face of foreign encroachments” (103-104). The valorization of the Jātakas for their “realism,” when it is quite clear that the ascription of such a paradigm is far from perfect, goes hand in hand with Wickramasinghe’s larger agenda for adumbrating an anticolonial, Sinhala-Buddhist cultural tradition that could be proud of its past and its history. Indeed, it is to the forging of such a tradition that he devoted his own lifetime and literary output.

This discussion of Wickramasinghe’s conception of realism sheds some light on the central paradox that defines the kind of realism he crafts in Gamperaliya, a realism that was a far cry from the outrageous, excessive, and ribald Jātakas that he exalted in his critical commentary. The only sense in which the matter and idiom of the Jātakas can be said to be found in Gamperaliya is in the ways in which the novel’s characters are drawn as types (some more ideal than others) rather than as fleshed-out characters. In fact, Gamperaliya is an affirmation of the utopian qualities of a feudal order comprised of a village community headed by an idealized, benevolent feudal male head, and the novel functions as a record of a mode of being that Wickramasinghe sensed was coming to pass as British rule drew to a close in Ceylon and a replacement government of urban elites looked set to take over. The novel’s historical importance, however, is undoubted, as it popularized in the Sinhalese literary imaginary a paradigm for realism in rural
representation, the utopian, which in its own turn became crucial to the discourse of mainstream Sinhala cultural nationalism.

**Gamperaliya and the Homotopian Vision**

Although it has not been noted before, *Gamperaliya*’s storyline shares some startling affinities with Leonard Woolf’s novel, *A Village in the Jungle*. The motive impulse of Woolf’s story comes from the desire of Babun Appu and Punchi Menika to marry across caste boundaries and in defiance of caste-based conventions. In *Gamperaliya*, the central tension emanates from the Kaisaruwatte family’s opposition to Piyal’s proposal of marriage to Nanda (on account of his lower social class background, although they are of

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19 The story of *Gamperaliya* is set in Wickramasinghe’s childhood village of Koggala, about 120 kms south of Colombo, in the first decade of the twentieth century (1904-1910, to be exact). The declining *walawwe* or feudal manor, Mahagedara, is at the heart of the novel. The *walawwe* belongs to Muhandiram Kaisaruwatte and his wife Matara Haminé, their daughters Anula and Nanda, and son Tissa. The novel’s plot is quite straightforward as it follows the fortunes of the Muhandiram and his family. The love interest between Nanda and her lower-class English tutor Piyal provides the main line of action. When Nanda refuses Piyal’s proposal of marriage in the name of family honour, he leaves Koggala for Colombo where he succeeds in building a strong business. Nanda, in the meantime, marries Jinadasa who is of her class and background but with whom she is forced to lead a life of thrift until, forced by penury, Jinadasa leaves the village to make it good in the far-away town of Bibile. There, he falls ill from malaria and refuses to return to Koggala for six years, trying his hand at various businesses, only to fail and become a sick itinerant. The Muhandiram passes away, the *walawwe* faces collapse, and the lives of Haminé, her daughters, and Tissa who studies in Colombo, become increasingly impoverished. Piyal’s love for Nanda draws him constantly back to the village and in the six years that Jinadasa is away, he and Nanda become close, as he also provides financial help to Nanda’s family. Nanda receives news of Jinadasa’s passing away, and finally acquiesces to Piyal’s second proposal of marriage. They marry and begin a new life together, until one day Nanda receives a telegram that her husband has taken gravely ill in a distant village. On rushing to the place, she hears he has passed away. Still in shock, she goes to the mortuary where she finds not the body of Piyal, as she had feared, but that of Jinadasa. She completes the final rites of the dead and returns to her life with Piyal and the two are finally reconciled.
the same caste). Nanda and Piyal’s eventual union presents how social mobility ensured by material success (Piyal succeeds as a businessman in Colombo) loosens rigid class divisions, yet takes a toll in the private realm, for Nanda’s first rejection of Piyal scars their relationship implicitly. This finds a parallel in Babun Appu and Punchi Menika’s union in Woolf’s novel which is star-crossed from the start, and which, despite their choice to marry each other in the face of social and familial opposition, is precipitated into a state of crisis that only deepens with the legal problems Babun gets embroiled in.

In terms of style as well, both novelists resort to a less than perfect template of social realism: in Woolf, as I argued in Chapter Two, the construction of an essentialized Sinhalese villager is vital to the vision of Beddagama’s slow demise in which is compressed a trenchant critique of British imperialism; in Wickramasinghe, the focus on the walawwe and the feudal way of life records an ontology increasingly grown moribund, presenting in the narrowed world of a feudal family a refracted picture of contemporary rurality. Read in this light, Gamperaliya’s ideological debt to Woolf’s novel becomes an interesting new way to read together colonial Ceylon’s two most important fictional works and their different templates and modes of representational realism. Where Woolf’s novel creates through its dystopic portrayal of rural Ceylon a critique of colonial mechanisms of exploitation, Wickramasinghe focuses on the inner life of a feudal manor, creating through a nostalgic portrayal of the ordered, hierarchical life, a paean to a lost utopia.

The novel’s opening also recalls that of Kanthapura and both novels carried, in their own times, a subversive, anticolonialist edge, albeit in different ways. Rao’s novel about a South Indian village was an experiment in finding an “authentic” voice in the
colonizer’s tongue in the fledgling field of Indo-Anglian fiction, while Wickramasinghe’s first novel based on a village in Ceylon was in Sinhala, the language spoken by a Ceylon’s majority, but which had under British colonial rule become relegated to a secondary position. Like Rao, seeking in and through his writing a literary avatar for nationalist consciousness, Wickramasinghe also implicitly sought in his writing to construct a vision of Ceylonese alter-modernity that could rebut Orientalist stereotype. This he sought to bring about, however, in and through Sinhala and not English, which makes the nature of narration in *Gamperaliya* very different from that in *Kanthapura*, as we see in the opening itself: “The village of Koggala lies in a long stretch of land bounded on one side by the Indian Ocean, and on the other by the Koggala Oya, a beautiful wide river. The smooth black ribbon of road linking the southern towns of Galle and Matara runs between the village and the sea...” (1).

More significantly, unlike Woolf’s Beddagama, a fragile village eking out its existence within the menacing, overwhelming jungle, Koggala’s coastal beauty and relative remoteness from the city present the face of a self-contained world far removed

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20 In his poem “Colonial Cameo,” Regi Siriwardene remembers the day his mother, who only spoke Sinhala, “the servant’s language,” took him to school and said “goodbye” in that tongue, to the amusement of his English-speaking classmates:

> My mother pretended not to hear that insult.
> The snobbish little bastards! But how can I blame them? That day I was deeply ashamed of my mother.
> Now, whenever I remember, I am ashamed of my shame. (12)

21 *Kanthapura*’s memorable opening line goes thus: “High on the Ghats is it, high up on the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast it is, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane” (1). Not only is the enjambed prose a unique experiment in Indian English, Kanthapura the village is, unlike remote Koggala, firmly in the midst of centres of colonial traffic of spices and other commodities.
from the metaphysical terrors of the colonial theatre. The narrative eye slowly settles on the walawwe and describes the bastion of an old way of life:

Beyond the grove is a large house. The walls of this house are two feet thick . . . [bearing] testimony to the weathering from the sun, rain, and wind and time that it has endured from the time it was built . . . . The villagers call the house the Mahagedara. The inmates of this house, conscious inheritors of an old lineage in the feudal hierarchy of the village, are the last in the line of a dying generation who had inherited property and privilege. (3-5)

Wickramasinghe creates out of the aging manor an explicit allegory for the declining hold of a local aristocracy:

A discerning observer would conclude that despite its solid structure, this house would decline . . . [and] perhaps a similar fate awaits its inmates, with the inevitable erosion of their pride in their past lineage, a relic of the past no longer relevant to the changing village, and the consequent erosion of their privileged position. (5)

The patriarchal authority and benevolence of the walawwe is established through its two unequal heads – Muhandiram Kaisaruwatte and his wife Matara Haminé – whom the novel presents as ideal types rather than as realistically delineated characters. The Muhandiram (a title given to the male head of the family in a walawwe) is described thus: “Flecks of black stood out in the white beard that covered the Muhandiram’s cheeks, like the sparse scatter of unhusked black grains in a heap of husked white kurakkan [a kind of millet]. . . . The beard gave him a venerable appearance, and completed the intelligence behind his high forehead. The domed shape of the forehead was testimony to the keen
intellect behind it. . .” (20). His wife, Matara Haminé, is portrayed as possessing “a heart that was too full of kindness and compassion. . . . Like the tap root of a tree that always seeks to go deeper and deeper into the earth, Matara Hamine’s mind always burrowed inwards. She probed the depths of her heart, more than the external world around her” (25). In their ritually sanctioned marriage, Wickramasinghe projects the perfect alignment of the Buddhist dhamma (the universal tenets of the Buddha) with the ideally hierarchized rural order, encoding in their union, at the same time, a critique of colonial categories: “The Muhandiram understood his wife’s nature intuitively, although he did not have a head full of the superfluous learning to enable him to analyse his wife’s mind” (25; my italics). This kind of emphasis on the “intuitive” versus what is called “superfluous learning” deliberately sets up a heuristic binary between the Sinhala, Buddhist, rural ethos, on the one hand, and a presumed Western, rationality-driven order, on the other. The first chapters of the novel establish a life of order, civility, and harmony as Wickramasinghe describes in meticulous detail the rituals of the ideal Sinhalese home held in “respect and affection” (56) by the villagers of Koggala. The homeliness of the walawve, reinforced by the combined ritualism of Buddhist festivity and Sinhalese feudal life, makes the home a threshold for the ideal Ceylonese way of life, and creates an enduring image of that conflation between Sinhalese and Ceylonese that is really a form of nostalgia for a lost homotopia. Indeed, the vision of the home and the village in Gamperaliya is a good example of the endorsement of what Partha Chatterjee has identified as the “material/spiritual” dichotomy characterizing the discourse of (Indian) nationalism – a dichotomy that creates “in the nationalist mind [responding to] the colonial situation . . . an ideological framework” that binarizes the “home and the world”: 
“The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples, and by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. That is where the East was undominated, sovereign, master of its own fate” (239). Such a binary also structures Gamperaliya’s anticolonialist agenda and has, indeed, marked a whole critical tradition of reading Wickramasinghe’s novel and life at the forefront of the incipient nationalism of its times (and the more intensively-driven Sinhala nationalism that came long after Gamperaliya but for which the novel was routinely invoked). Wickramasinghe’s Koggala belongs to a recognizably utopian imaginary of the ideal Sinhala village, the micropolitical subjecthood of which was seen in its own time (and later) as crucial to the construction of “a true nationality.” From

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22 See Tambiah (Buddhism Betrayed 72-3) and Spencer (285-86).

23 That such a reading is not a thing of the past is reinforced by a recent feature on the novelist where much acclaimed writer-director Tissa Abeysekara writes of a part of the village Koggala converted into a museum:

Within the grounds is the Martin Wickramasinghe Museum of Folk Culture. The museum has a wonderful collection of artefacts and memorabilia which recreate -- for those familiar with his works as well as the uninitiated -- the world of peace and harmony which forms the key theme of his literature. The artefacts speak to us of a world totally integrated and at peace with the environment. The hand crafted kitchen utensils, the clay and earthenware vessels in which wholesome food was cooked over wood fires, the loft canopying the hearth to filter the wood smoke, the tools used for cultivating paddy fields, the mats, bullock carts and other conveyances; all the utensils of an unhurried way of life rooted in a simple agrarian economy. . . . Here agriculture was tinged with commerce, the ploughman lived side by side with the fisherman, and life did not begin and end within boundaries, but opened out towards distant horizons across the sea. It’s a world now confined to memories and to the written page accessible to those who can read the language in which Sri Lanka’s greatest writer in modern times wrote. (Abeysekara)
this vantage point, all of Wickramasinghe’s writing has often been read as a search “for one thing, the Sinhala Lakuna, the Sinhala mark or identity.”

The novel’s opening is redolent with nostalgia for the ordered life as it presents the picture of a patriarchal family, where everyone has their assigned position in the chain of being, and religious celebrations preceding the Sinhala New Year provide the right space for the evocation of a *triple* utopia: Buddhist, feudal, and familial. The opening coalesces the private and the public in a succinct way:

It was a day in April in the year 1904, a few days before the customary Sinhala New Year celebrations, a day for a special celebration at the Mahagedara, a family event, known in the circle of the Muhandiram’s family and those of his close relatives, as ‘The day for cooking in small pots and pans’. This special festivity, celebrated in no other house in the village, had a curious history. . . . It was six years ago to this day that Nanda, the younger of the Muhandiram’s daughters, then in her early teens, had washed and cleaned a handful of rice and

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24 This is well known Sinhala writer Gunadasa Amarasekera’s summation of Wickramasinghe’s life and work. Amarasekera (b. 1929) is a prominent Sinhala writer, poet, and cultural critic who, along with Nalin de Silva, became popular (and controversial) for the *Jaathika Chinthanaya* (national consciousness) movement, which dominated Sinhala intellectual debates from mid-1980s onwards. A form of Occidentalism impelled Amarasekera’s first formulations of such consciousness (positing itself as anticolonialist but also oppositional to all “Western,” *wijathika* or foreign, thinking) and projected a Sinhala-Buddhist “umbrella culture” into which all minority cultures could be assimilated (Hennanayake 170). While Amarasekera may have meant such consciousness to represent a uniquely Sri Lankan “liberal form of multiculturalism” (Hennanayake 169), it is also true that extreme Sinhala nationalist formations such as the Sihala (also Sinhala) Veera Vidhana (SVV), National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT) and Sihala Urumaya are the progeny of the ideological groundwork laid by Amarasekera’s school of thought. As a litterateur, Amarasekera has routinely invoked the example of Martin Wickramasinghe, and for his own writings, is widely acclaimed as the doyen’s worthy successor (Seneviratne).
some vegetables, and cooked a meal in the toy pots. . . . Nanda’s playful effort
to cook had led to this annual gathering held three or four days before the
beginning of each Sinhala New Year. (5-6)

The narrative moves from the utopian and celebratory public spaces of interaction
between elder family members and younger, servants and masters, men and women,
where no one transgresses their boundaries, to the private space of Nanda and Piyal’s
interface, where simmering passions and social taboos clash and present the first fissures
we see in the peaceful surface of manorial order.

The tussle between the public and private constitutes an important structural
principle of the novel, and all the major characters are given conflicting worlds to inhabit:
the Muhandiram is revealed to have had a relationship with Kathrina, a poor village
woman, before his marriage to Matara Haminé; Kathrina’s daughter Laisa, the village
coquette, is suspected by Haminé to be the Muhandiram’s love-child; Tissa privately
visits a prostitute’s house while ostensibly working and studying in Colombo; Piyal

25 See, for instance, “[t]he elders did not join the young people [in eating]. They knew
that their presence would dampen the spirited exchanges and gibs, and flow of jokes and
laughter of the young folk. Young village folk feel that it is improper to engage in
repartee and tease each other in the presence of their elders” (7).

26 The two servants of the household, Sada and an unnamed younger boy who is a new
recruit, have a differential relation among themselves that comes from Sada’s seniority as
servant as well as his age. Sada is described “as one of the family” and so receives
superior clothes at the New Year, while Nanda kindly gives the younger servant a gift of
a packet of fire-crackers to make up for the latter’s inferior clothes. Neither joins the
family in eating or other public activity; however, as the fortunes of the family decline,
Nanda and Anula begin to rely on Sada increasingly, and the old servant becomes less
amenable to staying within his boundaries.

27 Sada’s unexpected presence and injunction to go into the house, while Nanda and Piyal
are arguing on the verandah are explained by Nanda thus: “. . . it must be because you’re
a young man!” (17).
continues his public visits to the Mahagedara (once Jinadasa goes missing) to fulfil his private desire for meeting with Nanda and kindling a romance. The story, thus, navigates its way through a play of states of being – public, hierarchized, codified, utopian, on the one hand, and private, transgressive, fractious, and disordered, on the other.

Although on the face of it, *Gamperaliya* makes only few direct references to the British colonial system in twentieth-century Ceylon, much in the novel points to the epiphenomenal effects of colonization. Piyal is an English tutor to Anula and Nanda (and Tissa goes to a Christian school in Colombo) and it is in that capacity that he interacts with the Kaisaruwatte family. The learning of English by the girls hints at the power dynamic implicit in knowing the colonial tongue (that also makes the novel written in Sinhala a deeply subversive act). A brief exchange between Piyal and Nanda points to the secondary position Sinhala had come to occupy in the colonial schema:

“Mother says it’s quite sufficient if I learn enough English to sign my name and read a telegram.” . . .

“But hadn’t you learnt to sign your name in English even before you started to learn English from me?”

She sensed that Piyal was leading up to something.

“Yes, all the young people in the village learnt to sign in English.”

“Is that because you think it is demeaning to sign in Sinhala?”

“That may be why you sign in English, Piyal!” Nanda ridiculed him. (14)

Piyal’s success when he moves to Colombo is, in part, a function of his ability to speak and transact in the colonizer’s tongue. Other examples of British presence and the impact of the British system are seen in the references to Piyal’s network of friends and
employees in Colombo. Tissa’s letter to his family confirms Piyal’s material success by alluding to the fact that he has “twenty to thirty employees working for him. . . . [including] a Burgher, a gentleman of Dutch descent, who is paid a high salary” (183).

When Piyal and Nanda are married, Nanda, unusually for a Sinhalese village-bride, wears an English gown with gloves and all the parvenu accoutrements during the ceremony and we learn that “the gown had been tailored with the guidance and help of the wife of Piyal’s Burgher clerk” (185) whose attendance with her family adds to the prestige of the newly-weds and deflects some of the attention away from the stigma of their transgressive union. In Tissa’s character as well, Wickramasinghe records the changes that came upon Ceylonese social structures on account of the colonial system. Tissa is drawn (somewhat autobiographically) as a shy, inward-looking boy with a talent in painting, games, studies, and intellectual thought. Tissa’s education in a Christian school in Colombo and his later employment in Piyal’s business firm brings about marked changes in his outlook. He makes light of his family’s deeply-felt feudal pride and shows a disregard for rural hierarchies that his family finds disturbing. In Tissa, the weaning away from what he calls “the rock-splitting lies propagated in outdated books” (106) is a signal of the clash between Western science and rational method, and traditional Sinhala beliefs and knowledge.

Further contrasts between the colonizer’s system and Koggala’s traditional fabric are seen in the many references to disease and medical treatment. Nanda’s illness, once her mother has publicly shamed her into burning Piyal’s private letters to her, becomes in village gossip evidence that Piyal has administered her a “love-potion,” and her father, the Muhandiram, calls in a doctor from Galle (who diagnoses her illness as a form of
hysteria) as well as the local ayurvedic physician and the exorcist. The Muhandiram’s vacillation between indigenous and Western medicines for curing Nanda’s illness effectively encodes an entrapment between two systems, neither of which he fully understands. Similarly, Jinadasa’s disability caused by the malaria he contracts in Bibile has a real equivalent in a malaria epidemic that lasted from October 1934 to April 1935 and affected 3.5 million people, for the spread of which William Ormsby-Gore, the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, blamed “the retarding effect of Buddhist doctrines over the enactment of scientific measures” (qtd. in Nira Wickramasinghe 101).

There is a kind of tragic dramatic irony when we read that the Muhandiram dies “suddenly of a disease which the villagers and the ayurvedic physicians called avililla” (84) and to which his wife and daughters applied herbal decoctions and hot fomenting on the chest, while it becomes clear that he had died of a heart attack: “The Muhandiram’s affliction was characterized by attacks of acute pain in the chest. The attacks had occurred thrice within the four months preceding his death” (84). Such contrasts are part of the dense and subtle ways in which the colonial system of British governance shapes the lives of the novel’s characters, and they transform the reading experience into a manner of complex seeing, where the reader experiences the interactions of both world-views – colonial and subaltern – at once.

In both Woolf’s and Wickramasinghe’s novels, the play between the public and private realms constitutes an interesting experiment in representing subaltern consciousness. Given the imperial times the novels were written in (and in Woolf’s case, he was also a colonial officer), neither novel is too far from the Manichean binaries of colonial categories. While Woolf’s delineation of caste transgression becomes more
manifestly subsumed into the positions of Orientalist and Other (given his outsider position as a white colonial officer), Wickramasinghe’s portrayal of the loosening of social taboos pertaining to class (interpreted largely as a kind of decline in order) is more explicitly encoded within the novel’s central dichotomy of the public and private. But both novels, in their own ways, were responding to the pressures of the colonial, and in delineating the rural, they project opposite visions of the Ceylonese village: in Woolf, rural Ceylon as the last outpost of the Empire becomes compressed into a dystopian setting of brutish existence at the brink of extinction, while in Wickramasinghe, the record of the passing of a way of life in a small Ceylonese village provides the space for a tribute to a lost utopia.

Stylistically, as well, both novels mix omniscient third-person narration with ethnographic, quasi-digressive commentary, simulating the fraught circuits of authority and authenticity in representation. As we have seen, in Woolf, even when he speaks in the voice of the subaltern, such authenticity is undermined by the very office of power he inhabited, where the mechanisms of colonial control (of which Woolf was himself well aware) allowed for his Orientalizing narrative. In Gamperaliya, the modalities of “realism” are very distinct from the representational conventions in the Sinhalese Jātakas that Wickramasinghe extolled in his critical writing; instead, what we find in the novel is a form of realism “borrowed from the West” (as Sarachchandra extolled it) as well as determined by a complex interplay of nostalgia, memory, and desire.

Nowhere is this more evident than when Wickramasinghe has recourse to ethnographic description when commenting upon village women’s lives and minds. Such writing can be seen as part of what Hewamanne calls “the discursive construction of an
ideal Sinhala Buddhist woman” that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: “Originally constructed as an ideal for middle class women, this image quickly spread to every level of society through nationalist media and local nationalist leaders” (22). In the characters of Nanda and Matara Haminé, the construction of an ideal Sinhala womanhood28 paves the way for the upholding of a uniquely Sinhala-Buddhist way of life.

Through Nanda (and her mother Matara Haminé before her), Wickramasinghe is able to demarcate a threshold of inviolable morality that is tied intimately to his utopian vision of a robust rural collectivity that British colonization has touched but not quite been able to destroy. The emphasis on “the spiritual distinctiveness of our culture,” (Chatterjee, Recasting Women 238), best encoded in the injunctions against rural women’s private desires and the regulation of women’s social and sexual conduct, creates the ground in Wickramasinghe’s novel for an assertion of rural Ceylon’s indomitability even in the face of (colonial) social transition. For instance, Nanda’s conflicted attraction to Piyal – throughout a transgressive desire, first on account of their different class status, and later, class and because of her marriage to Jinadasa – occasions a rumination upon village women, in general:

28 The concern with demarcating the limits of women’s social and sexual behaviour goes back to Dharmapāla’s injunctions upon dress and names as the signifiers of Sinhala Buddhist dissidence. Hewamanne writes: “[r]idiculing both men and women for imitating western fashions, Dharmapāla advocated the Indian sari for women and the cloth and banian [upper vest] for men . . . . Dharmapāla’s mother was among the first women to follow his advice, and the new dress soon caught on. The same happened when Dharmapāla advocated name changes. Deciding that people should first be decolonized within the cultural domain, he wanted Sinhalese to shed their European names and take up “Aryan” Sinhalese names. He himself started this trend by changing his given name, Don David, to Dharmapāla. His close associates did the same and a mass name-changing movement followed in both urban and rural areas” (30).
Her feelings were those of a devoted wife for her husband. A village woman’s relations with her husband was a complex amalgam of passion, empathy, longing to be a mother, mother love, dependence, the love of elegant clothes and gold jewellery, bashfulness and apprehension with regard to the future. Nanda suffered not only from the grief of separation but from the grief rising from thoughts of the future. (134)

Nanda’s introspection, a kind of psychological complexity, belies the stereotype of the simple-minded village woman that Wickramasinghe is often at pains to create within the novel, but provides the perfect platform for assertions about ideal rural morality. A perambulatory style of storytelling moves from omniscient narration to paratextual commentary (that, as in Woolf’s novel, recreates an “ethnographic present” where general actions are narrated as if always and everywhere true) and then goes back into the mind of the woman, arresting her at the very point of transgression:

The reason why thoughts of Jinadasa conjured up Piyal’s image became clearer to Nanda. . . . She now understood the nature of those wayward feelings. But why was it that it did not now evoke feelings of fear, shame or panic in her? It was because the heightened awareness of belonging to a long line of distinguished village gentry, so strengthened the barrier between her and Piyal, who was from a lower stratum. . . . The social milieu of the village encouraged the women, of the

29 Nanda’s mother Matara Haminé is a good example of the kind-hearted but generally vacuous village woman, who gets duped by unscrupulous men and needs her husband to rescue her and the family. None of the women characters are exceptional in any way except as carriers of their patriarchal lineages or as good, virginal girls. Kathrina and her daughter, Laisa, who deviate from the norm are seen by the women of the village as coquettes, and are therefore vulnerable to ridicule and ostracism until they mend their ways.
gentry as well as others, to firmly uphold the sanctity of marital and family life, and frowned on violations of those traditions. Modern life-styles that encouraged a little laxity in this regard was [sic] confined to only a very few amongst the genteel families. The women of the families of village gentry of long-standing, had been brought up in households, where traditional family values and behaviour had been observed as far back as memory could reach, and had become an inborn habit. Any wayward impulse that might occasionally surface never received encouragement in the minds of these girls. . . . The poor folk of the village, who had adapted to their frugal life-style, were not exposed to the temptations that encouraged city-dwellers to immorality. . . . Village society is different . . . not surprisingly, village women are encouraged in various ways, to preserve high standards of morality by these pressures from their social environment. . . . The realization [of her attraction towards Piyal] no longer evoked feelings of fear and shame in Nanda. She was conscious that her strong sense of family breeding handed down through generations, would aid her to confront and suppress feelings the wayward nature of which she could now recognize. (155-7)

Such telling recurs as a pattern in the novel, blurring the lines between the fictive and the factual, story and vision, utopian village and ideal nation. When Haminé, after the death of her husband, discovers the private letters Kathrina had sent him prior to his marriage, her impressions of the Muhandiram change decisively, as the public image of her husband as provider and feudal lord clashes with the other image of him as lover and adulterer. In a similar way, Tissa’s first foray into the prostitutes’ street in Colombo
presents the ways in which private desire impinges upon the public self and causes disorder: “[t]hereby, his feelings were often the cause of self-mortification” (129).

The dichotomy between the public and the private thus provides a vital structuring principle for understanding the novel’s motives, and the allegorical links between the walawwe and the village, the village and the nation show the ways in which Wickramasinghe’s novel was registering and responding to the colonial exigencies of its time. The public-private dichotomy allows the novel to craft an ideological framework for its representation of a Sinhala, Buddhist, rural collectivity brought under the stresses of capitalist, colonial change by British rule. At the same time, the focus away from colonial encounter (such as the one between Silindu and the British magistrate in Woolf’s novel) and on the life of the walawwe itself allows for a distillation of those aspects of Sinhalese-Buddhist life that marked for Wickramasinghe what was unique, abiding, and valuable in Ceylon’s history and culture. The novel’s record of subtle changes in class structures brought on by colonial social transition paves the way for a re-siting of moral and cultural order in the vision of a fading utopia of rural unity. Invariably, such a vision found its most potent representation in the policing of women’s social and sexual lives, a process whose ruptures become evident in the conflicts between women’s (and men’s) public and private selves. In and through such conflicts, the novel hints at the fraught underside of Ceylon’s rural paradise in the new century, but unlike the shocking denouement of Woolf’s novel, the close of Gamperaliya projects in the reconciliation of Nanda and Piyal a rapprochement between the changing faces of rural and urban Ceylon, a rapprochement that provided for the nationalist discourse of his time (and for that of later decades) a symbol and a topos for a unified Sinhala identity.
Utopia and Women’s Lives

Punyakante Wijenaike’s 1966 novel *The Waiting Earth (TWE)* is set within the historical context of peasant resettlement in 1950s’ and 1960s’ Ceylon, a period that built on the Sinhala nationalism of the early twentieth century and intensified it. This kind of nationalism based itself on the “fact” that Ceylon was “inherently and rightfully” a Sinhalese Buddhist state (Nissan 176), with the charge of preserving the “true” Theravada Buddhism (Jonathan Fox 78). As Salgado has argued, a symptomatic reading of the novel reveals the contradictory political drives of an “ethnically engineered socialism” (61) whose aims were nationalistic and exclusionary; it also presents the grim underbelly of the quest for “a lost utopia.”

The land resettlement projects that took place from the 1940s to the 1960s witnessed the reallocation of territory on the basis of ethnic identity, and many Tamil-majority areas were “resettled” as part of socialist measures to alleviate the poverty of a Sinhala-majority demographic. Salgado writes:

. . . the government land distribution programme of the 1960s . . . offered gifts of uncultivated land in the dry zone to landless peasants on the understanding that they clear and work the land themselves and pass it on, undivided, to a single family heir. It was a program that involved significant demographic and cultural shifts: the rupture of settled communities, the division of families, the migration of largely Sinhalese southerners to the Tamil-dominated east. The relocation of the Sinhalese under the auspices of the new nation-state to land that separatist Tamils laid historical claim to on the basis of ancestral occupation created new
rights of inheritance that effectively enforced long-term occupation by the Sinhalese of these areas. (61)

Wijenaike’s oeuvre, as a whole, registers these sweeping changes in the nation’s geography in the decades after independence in 1948 and in TWE she projects a controversial reading of social change that derives its symbolic power from the colonial discourse of the creation of the “motherland.” The novel examines the powerful conflation of the woman’s body with the body of the nation, where territorial colonization is configured on the lines of a compelling metaphor of “rape” or “violation.” Through a complex grid of signification in which “woman” stands for the nation itself and “man” as that nation’s protector and preserver, the novel presents the national geo-body as courting and acquiescing in its own domination and violation, even as the protagonist Podi Singho’s lust for his own land finds fruition in the newly independent nation’s policy of ethnicised land acquisition that dispossesses thousands of Tamils in order to end the poverty of the Sinhalese majority.

TWE tells the story of Podi Singho and his wife Sellohamy and draws an evocative picture of the rural poverty that impinges upon and colours the quotidian lives of the Ceylonese peasants. As in Woolf’s novel, there are villainous characters (Rappiel Appu and the Mudalali) who prey on the ignorance and provincialism of the weak, but the novel’s central tension comes from two plots bonded together only by the tenuous link of allegory. The story of Podi Singho and Sellohamy’s marital discord and eventual reconciliation parallels a larger story of land control, ownership, and territoriality that enfolds their lives in the village within a narrative of the nation’s formation and building. For a large part, the narrative outlines the upheavals in the lives of Podi Singho and
Sellohamy, and their three children – Upasena and Piyasena, twin boys, and their only daughter, the precocious and beautiful Isabella Hamy. These upheavals correspond to Podi Singho’s increasing “land lust” (11) and his frustrations at the hands of Rappiel Appu, a man he considers his friend, but who really secretly controls Podi Singho’s life and dream of owning land for his own interest. The pursuit of this dream of land he can own, till, and bequeath to his sons paves the way for an eventual disenchantment, and in the final sections of the story, Podi Singho is a transformed man who has, it seems, learned his lesson. His son Upasena, however, carries forward his father’s dream of owning land and working on it, and persuades his father to believe once again in the old dream – this time made true by the government’s policy of allocating jungle land.

Interestingly, there is within the novel no space for the recognition of the larger ramifications of such policies or for the ideological bases of land reallocation in which Sinhala nationalism played such a key role. The peasants, trapped by rural poverty and ignorance, await the intervention of both gods and governments in much the same way. A contrived utopian ending – where the family finds itself reinvigorated by the promise of new land – does little to dispel the largely negative, bleak, and dispiriting portrayal of rural life.

In this sense, one may agree with Salgado’s reading of Wijenaike’s novel as partaking of the contemporary climate of nationalist rebuilding and for presenting an ethnicized point of view of the politics of its time. In the final decision of Podi Singho and his family to accept the land given to them by the government, the novel seems, indeed, to have missed seeing the larger ramifications of accepting a manufactured utopia. And yet, a large part of the novel subtly undoes the logic of ownership by contrasting
male and female attitudes to land, agrarian livelihood, and communal living. As in Wickramasinghe, the unrelenting focus on the village (as opposed to say, contrasting the village and the city, or one village and another) polices a border outside of which are the purportedly larger events of national significance. There is a deliberate attempt to keep national destiny outside the purview of individual village folk, as the novel converges on the minutiae of a rural existence rendered abject in the face of “progressive” policies for the greater good. Through Upasena’s enthusiasm for the new land policy, the novel appears to suggest the ways in which lust for land – and not the land itself – becomes a legacy; however, Podi Singho’s own disaffection with titular ownership and his reconciliation with his wife suggests a moving away from the principle of acquisition and ownership that girded the political nationalism of the times.

In Podi Singho’s violent need for ownership (a need that extends also to controlling his wife, his children, and his “fate”) Wijenaike reinscribes (but does not explicitly question) that drive to own, control, and (re)settle that the Sinhala nationalist government of the times had begun to legitimize in the name of rural poverty alleviation. At the same time, the novel highlights how such a discourse profoundly decenters women’s choice and agency even as “woman” is invoked as central to the logic of nationalism and male ownership. In Sellohamy’s private and non-tendentious bond with the land she takes care of, Wijenaike compresses a tacit critique of phallocratic nationalisms, even as she suggests that women engage with the land in different ways than men do and construct the “motherland” on different lines. These ideas do not pertain to ownership or legacy, but to sharing and nurturance, and present a realm of action that works as a counterdiscourse to male narratives of territorial domination.
For such an agenda, Wijenaike’s choice of the village is crucial: on the one hand, the story of territorial resettlement continues the interest in the village that Martin Wickramasinghe and Gunadasa Amarasekera in Sinhalese and James Goonewardene in English made so seminal to the Ceylonese literary imagination. On the other hand, Wijenaike’s peculiarly woman-centric approach to the village and its connections to the national imaginary often deploys the familiar tropes of ownership and attachment to land but turns them on their head, adumbrating such “patriotism” for the motherland as a form of obsession that is counterpoised to women’s intimate connections to the land and their resultant alienation from the discourse of ownership. In this sense, she seems to understand how women remain incomplete citizens of nations and utopias authored and policed by men for whom “woman” functions as a rallying cry and not as a fully-realized subject.

Podi Singho’s desire for ownership of land presents a revealing slippage in his logic – a move that mimics the often sophistic language of proprietorial nationalism30 where “I” and “we,” “mine” and “ours” are loosely, but deliberately, blurred. Podi Singho, we learn, wishes for “a small piece of land with roots running deep within it, a piece of earth whose yields will belong to us by right, and on which, perhaps a small house too, a house the wind of misfortunes cannot blow away, because the earth on which it stands is mine by right” (65; my emphasis). Yet, Salgado rightly notes,

30 This kind of a lexical and ontological blurring has often marked the rhetoric of political Sinhala nationalism per se: for instance, when President Jayawardene became President of Sri Lanka in 1978, he exclaimed: “We have had an unbroken line of monarchs from Vijaya to Elizabeth II for over 2,500 years . . . and now myself, the 306th head of state from Vijaya in unbroken line” (qtd. in Kapferer 85). Kapferer’s point that Sinhala politicians are not manipulating the masses, but “share an ontological ground with them” (81) puts into perspective, indeed, Podi Singho’s constant identification of his own needs as that of his family’s.
Wijenaike “directly challenges the legitimacy of these ‘natural rights’” by presenting Podi Singho’s desire for land ownership in his native village “as a sexual obsession – one that affirms his need for male sexual mastery in the face of his increasing, but entirely unfounded distrust of his wife” (61). Owning land would, for Podi Singho, be a way of controlling one’s very destiny:

[He] filled his mind with thoughts of the land and the land alone which Rappiel Appu would get for him. This one thing he had yet to live for, this dream to keep him sane. He made his mind to see this land now, made it lie open and naked for him and he saw his own body bend over it and his hand thrust the seed into the waiting earth; felt the warm brown moistness against his flesh as it received the seed with a hungry mouth. He even felt the sweat of his body as he worked and then his pleasure and his pride as he watched the first sprouting of the seed he had sown and the great joy he would feel in the final reaping. This land was his and his alone and it would remain so . . . unlike a woman, whatever way the wind blew, this land of his would lie flat and straight and always in the same place. (190)

It is this unspoken obsession that cleaves the husband and wife apart, leading directly to his loss of control and the marital rape of Sellohamy, a violation that is also connected to land: “. . . craving the land like a man would crave the body of a woman belonging to some other man. One harvest, he now remembered, this wanting had been so bad that he had … been compelled to use [Sellohamy] against her own will . . . . [I]t was the land that had driven him to her” (220).
Counterpointed to Podi Singho’s lust for the land which is cast in violently sexual terms is Sellohamy’s affection for “one patch of earth” that presents a compelling counter-narrative to her husband’s acquisitiveness: “To her a harvest meant life. She loved it because it brought her fulfillment, the feeling that here at last she was doing a thing worthwhile. She had this same feeling when she prayed inside a temple on a poya night. It never ceased to fill her with wonder that so much grain could come out of one patch of earth” (17). Her spiritual connection with the land is a striking contrast to Podi Singho’s sexual fantasy of ownership and renders irrelevant the question of legitimate authority, a concern that drives Podi Singho to the brink of desperation. The apotheosis of Sellohamy’s fertility and connection to the land is encoded in those moments when bursting with milk after the birth of her twin sons, she “would go out and squat near the mango tree when it was dark and nobody could see, and with a slight pressure of the fingers she would let the milk flow into the rich earth” (63). And yet, these are not unproblematic moments in the novel, for while the logic of male ownership is rebutted and ruptured by Sellohamy’s tacit, visceral connection to the land, these are also moments that bring to life in the narrative a powerful image of the “motherland,” an image that has historically instrumentalized “women” in the service of a nationalist symbol of “woman” as mother/goddess.31

31 Much work has been done on the uneasy relationship between nationalism and feminism. Tanika Sarkar in a conversation with Urvashi Butalia says: “[w]omen will always be incomplete national subjects. This is because a nation is a territorial concept. Land is central. Yet women often, and most women in India certainly, have no right to land. These two things, home and land, will never belong to them” (Butalia). As Anne McClintock also points out, “[m]ale nationalists frequently argue that colonialism or capitalism has been women’s ruin, with patriarchy merely a nasty second cousin destined to wither away when the real villain expires. Yet nowhere has a national or socialist
Sellohaym’s portrayal, however, resists the citizenship drives of a nationalist utopia. Although her marital docility and silence mimic processes of silencing that women suffer in patriarchal systems, the narrative carves for her an equal space in nurturing her own eco-logical ethic of land-use that contrasts starkly with Podi Singho’s violent and sexual craving for owning land. Food is another mode by which Wijenaike encodes marital amity and discord (and in the allegorical framework of the novel, pointing also to national amity and discord) and contrasts Podi Singho and Sellohamy’s attitudes to ideal citizenship. Dissanayake and Nichter have closely studied the ways in which Wijenaike’s novels present a richly wrought “context of native sensibility” (116) through “subtle kitchen politics” (117), images of cooking and serving of food as metaphors for nurturance and growth. A significant part of the novel, in fact, is taken up with food – with details of cooking rice, fish, the descriptions of kinds of rice and fish, ways of making sambol curry, etc. Indeed, Podi Singho’s is the narrative of what he will do when he owns his own piece of land – an indefinitely deferred project of what he will extract from the land, how he will sow and till and reap:

Savagely, he began to plan what he would plant. He would make a bed for yams here, he decided, and a bed for chillies there. He would grow as he had never grown these things before, and this time he would not attempt to sell what he had grown. No, this time everything would be for his own use, potatoes, yams,

revolution brought a full feminist revolution in its train. In many nationalist or socialist countries, women’s concerns are at best paid lip service, at worst greeted with hilarity. If women have come to do men’s work, men have not come to share women’s work. Nowhere has feminism in its own right been allowed to be more than the maidservant to nationalism” (5).
brinjals, everything. He dug the hoe with force into the soil. Everything he produced would belong to him alone. His and his alone. (110)

A considerable portion of the novel rebuts this proprietorial dream by its focus on the minutiae of Sellohamy’s quotidian life, which is also connected to land, but is not ruled by it. Hers is the narrative of sharing and utilizing the products of toil and labour, and unlike her husband, of her enjoyment of it: “She always enjoyed a harvest; not because it was change from the weary routine of cooking and cleaning, or because it gave her a chance for friendly mingling with the women. To her a harvest meant life. She loved it because it brought her fulfilment . . .” (17).

Needless to say, Podi Singho never cooks or serves food, but Sellohamy does and it is through her cooking and serving food that the novel marks those ways by which she resists and shows her dissent to her husband, her children, and to the demands of docile citizenship. Soon after their marriage, Sellohamy shows her love for her husband by adding precious sugar to his tea (13) and not hers, by keeping the best piece of fish for him (15), thus presenting a face of the ideal Sinhala wife that Wickramasinghe extolled in his idealized portrayal of Matara Haminé, the lady of the walawwe. But Podi Singho’s growing obsession with owning land and his friendship with Rappiel Appu enrages Sellohamy, who forbidden by the codes that doom a good wife to silent suffering, finds in cooking and serving food a space to register protest and mark dissidence. When Podi Singho brings rice through dishonest means, Sellohamy expresses her anger tacitly:

And the next day he brought home three measures of rice and she took it in silence. It was not the wife’s concern to ask from where the rice came. But somehow she could not bring herself to look upon it as good rice, even though the
grain was polished white and smooth and round like pearls. And when she washed it she did so without her usual care, so that when it was cooked it was full of stones that made Podi Singho curse every time he bit on them. (146)

Again, when she wants to show rebellion, she chooses to show it through food and by abjuring the usual practices of wifely and motherly devotion:

She pursed her lips proudly. She could be cold and hard too. She sat down and waited until they had finished dishing out their own curries. Then instead of waiting until Podi Singho had finished eating, she took out her plate and dished herself a large portion of rice and a good piece of fish. Then she sat down and ate it heartily, sucking loudly at the fishbone. Today she would dare show her anger. (246)

It is significant that by the novel’s close Podi Singho comes to understand and partake of Sellohamy’s work and life-ethic. The tragic death of his daughter Isabella Hamy becomes the fulcrum of a changed existence. As in Woolf’s novel where the death of one of his daughters provides the moment of Silindu’s anagnorisis, in Wijenaike’s narrative, Podi Singho finds an outlet for his depression after Isabella Hamy’s death “in the soil [where they bury Isabella Hamy’s ashes] beneath the same mango tree where her elder brother lay” (299). In his tending of the tree, Podi Singho rehearse at first his old violent ways, fanatically loving the tree and the small piece of land: “The tree became an obsession. Nothing must harm the virginity of the young mangoes, nothing must make them fall before their time. . . . And Sellohamy seeing this fever, this madness gripping him, could do nothing but watch helplessly” (299-300). When Podi Singho finally learns of Rappiel Appu’s treachery, his anger and humiliation are reminiscent of Silindu’s mute
rage in Woolf’s novel, and in the fierce confrontation between Podi Singho and Juanis, Rappiel Appu’s right-hand man, is rehearsed some of the climactic force of Silindu’s murderous revenge upon Fernando and Babehami. But Wijenaike’s novel does not re-create Woolf’s sensational finish, for her primary focus throughout has remained on Sellohamy and her transforming and interventionist role in the life of Podi Singho and, by extension, of the village and nation. Chastened by the death of his daughter, and aware of Rappiel Appu’s villainy, Podi Singho is finally reconciled with his wife and older son Upasena and weans himself away from his obsessive interest in land:

No more would he sit and guard the tree. Now he knew the tree had a strength of its own . . . . [H]e took up his long neglected hoe and began to cut a new bed for green chillies. As he worked he looked about him like a man returned to his own small compound after many years elsewhere. Now he knew that for the rest of his life he would work on the small plot of earth, planting a few chilly trees here, a few yams there. Yet, as he looked about him, he saw though he had neglected this small compound of his no weeds grew on it; that new beds had been cut and already new heads of onion stalks were pushing their heads through the earth.

(318)

This kind of a Bildungsroman-like trajectory in Podi Singho’s life provides poetic closure to the novel’s chief intrigue but also functions as a denudation of his spirit, reinforcing the old stereotype of the fatalistic villager: “Gone were his dreams of a tiled roof and a brick wall for his old age. And yet his heart no longer wept over broken dreams” (318). This, however, is not the novel’s ending: Upasena’s news of “land for those who want it” (319) rekindles in Podi Singho the old desire: “A new hope, a new life
was being born within him. . . with his son’s faith in him, he knew he could send his old roots into the new soil without fear of their dying. He could clear and plant with new life four or even five acres of land given him” (319).

The government promise of land appears at the novel’s horizon, a reward as it were for Podi Singho’s learning his lesson, and the novel’s contrivance of a happy ending based on the vision of a new utopia once the old one has soured is certainly a problematic one. As Salgado notes, in holding forth for Podi Singho’s family land as a reward (after all, it is a “gift’ from the government), the novel “openly acknowledges the ways in which internal colonisation is naturalised, adopted land indigenised, made native and ‘tied to blood’” (63). Podi Singho’s reconciliation with the government project (once Rappiel Appu’s treachery in not procuring for Podi Singho and his family the government land he had promised he would has dawned on him) and corresponding reconciliation with his wife thus “serves to justify this government policy of Sinhala resettlement and internal colonisation” (Salgado 63).

Conclusion

At first reading, one might find little to link Wickramasinghe’s construction of an ideal Sinhala womanhood in Gamperaliya with Wijenaike’s creation of an embattled rural womanhood in TWE. And yet, the women, separated by class, function within a larger universe of Sinhalese ethnonationalism where their construction upholds “the sacred, inviolable borders of the nation” (Jayawardena and de Alwis x). In the works of both writers, the nationalist rural utopia of a Sinhala-dominant, Buddhist collective reveals itself to be a gendered space of unequal and ideologically loaded representation.
And yet, Sellohamy is a more agentic creation than Nanda and Matara Haminé who are imagined “within the terms of a sufficient modernity” (de Mel 59) and provide, in the main, a refurbishment of ideal feminine docility. Where the latter participate in and endorse the policing of the feudal moral order of the Muhandiram’s household, Wijenaike’s novel is the story not of Podi Singho’s ownership of a waiting piece of the earth but of Sellohamy’s unrelenting struggle to carve a small space for herself and her family independent of the logic of land ownership. In terms of narration as well, there is a significant difference between the two novels that speaks to the differing agendas of the authors. Gamperaliya resorts to paratextual ethnographic commentaries that prescribe codes of moral behaviour even as they purport to describe what is already present in the Ceylonese village, thereby producing the “reality” it then shows as fact. Such construction allows Wickramasinghe to create in the novel a vision of rural Ceylon ordered on the principles of Sinhala-Buddhist doctrines that he himself valued most and that provided for his time a template for anticolonial resistance and reclaiming Ceylon’s lost honour. Wijenaike in TWE, in contrast, rarely abandons the omniscient third-person voice, creating in the space of her novel a moving picture of women’s circumscriptions within the discourse of utopian nationalisms. Such strategy has invited criticism for its alienation from the ‘real’ village: “Wijenaike has surmounted, to an extent, the barriers between her personal position as an upper-class, urban woman and the village . . . [but she] is distanced from, and external to, village life. She does not really know or care about the village” (Goonetilleke 254-55). While it is conceivable that there is a kind of essentializing at work in Wijenaike’s novel, it is, of course, open to question what it means to “really know” anything. Sellohamy does not toe the line of ideal Sinhala
femininity but she does present a picture of an ethical womanhood that trenchantly questions the a priori of much male-authored nationalism whose chauvinism and extremism marginalizes and discriminates, in different ways, against other minorities as well.

Wickramasinghe’s homotopian imaginary, which, in time, was to lend sustenance to such Sinhala extremist ideals in the 1980s as Gunadasa Amarasekera’s jatiya chinthanaya (“nationalist consciousness”), appears only on the horizon of Wijenaike’s novel, arriving at the very end of the novel when the dream of land ownership has already soured for Podi Singho. Like Gamperaliya, TWE also ends on a note of reconciliation and the reinstatement of family values (that Salgado reads as an endorsement of ethnicised governmental policy), but such an ending is asserted rather than naturally wrought, and the resort to the governmental project of a faraway utopia (conveyed only in the final three pages of a 322-page novel) remains unconvincing and contrived. Indeed, the best part of the novel subtly but effectively undoes the logic of the ideal utopian nation centered on the unquestioning rural citizenry of peasants like Podi Singho and Rappiel Appu who, driven by their craving to own land, can be made dupes of state power and policy. Sellohamy’s recalcitrance in being co-opted into the paradigm of the ideal Sinhala woman (as Matara Haminé might well be imagined) is, in this light, an important moment of dissidence from the larger rhetoric of male chauvinist nationalism as well as an implicit comment on the grim underbelly of the Sinhalese utopia. The appeal of such a utopia, its ability to appear as a primordial, indeed even sexual, need to “strike root,” is at the heart of the Sinhala ethnonationalist configurations of the ideal village and the ideal citizen. That vision inheres also within the novel in its conflation of land and woman,
ownership and marriage, and in Upasena’s enthusiasm for the new land that the
government promises. Such a utopia is, however, already internally fraught, and in the
more convincing portrayal of Podi Singho’s disaffection with the dream of owning land,
suggested within the novel as a kind of maturation, and in the construction of
Sellohamy’s ethical and eco-logical womanhood, Wijenaike compresses a tacit critique
of the nationalist utopia.
Chapter 5

Rethinking the Binary: Rural Heterotopia

In Chapters One to Four, I argued that the construction of religious utopia in twentieth-century South Asia (of Hindu ram-rajya in India and the Buddhist dharmadipa in Sri Lanka) and the literary cultures they influence (that in turn also shape them) reproduced highly codified controlling mechanisms that were actually a form of authoritarianism and repression. Such essentializing visions (literary or otherwise), playing down plurality, sought to construct illusory unities on the basis of an erasure of differences. At their best (and most patronizing), majoritarian religious discourses reproduce what Dipesh Chakrabarty in Habitations of Modernity terms a “deafness to the call of the other” (147); at their worst, these become propaganda committed to “the politics of ethnicity” (136) that in turn creates such historical flash-points as the 1947 Partition and the 1983 riots between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. In twentieth-century India, the Gandhian program of swaraj, as Richard Fox and others have shown, became (mis)translated into an essentialized vision of free India, a national utopia recast, despite enormous religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity, as a modern-day Hindu ram-rajya. As I discuss in Chapters One and Three, such political assembling allowed for unity in the face of a colonial oppressor, but created solidarity on lines of ethnicity and religion that became problematic for the post-colonial nation. For as Chakrabarty says with regard to Bengali literary nationalist culture that emerged in the nineteenth century and intensified in the wake of Gandhian swadeshi movement (1905-08):
[There is] a fundamental problem in the history of the modern Bengali nationality – the fact that this nationalist construction of home was a Hindu home. It is not that the Muslim did not share any of this language . . . [but] Hindu nationalism had created a sense of home that combined the sacred with the beautiful. And, even though this sense of home embodied notions of the sacred, it was not intolerant of the Muslim as such. The Muslim – that is, the non-Muslim League Muslim, the Muslim who did not demand Pakistan – had a place in it. But the home was still a Hindu home, its sense of the sacred was constructed through an idiom that was recognizably Hindu. (135-6)

This is an observation that might well be applied to majoritarian Buddhist literary culture in Sri Lanka and its encapsulationist stance towards Tamil culture. In Sri Lanka, a specifically Buddhist past and tradition has provided to the Sinhalese majority a powerful national imaginary, one that has, however, marginalized the ethnic others within the nation and led to deep divides among the nation’s diverse people.

In twentieth-century South Asian literatures focussed on the village and the rural in particular, postcolonial projects of national reconstruction tended to deploy and capitalize on the vocabulary and discourse of majoritarian Hindu and Buddhist religious utopia. As Surinder Jodhka argues, “the village was a central category in the nationalist imaginations and there was a virtual agreement on the fact that it represented the core of the traditional social order” (3344). It is in such a light that I read Raja Rao’s Kanthapura (1938) and Martin Wickramasinghe’s Gamperaliya (1944) as presenting the literary faces of utopian discourses in pre-Independence South Asia (1947 in the case of India and 1948 for Ceylon), where a focus on the village and the representation of a resilient rural
collective projected a powerful anti-colonial counternarrative but also effected an internal homogenization that bolstered “a politics of ethnicity” (Chakrabarty 136). I have argued for a need to separate this kind of writing from conceptions of utopia and the utopian that can still be meaningful for multicultural collectivities, and I have proposed that the terms homotopia and homotopian be used to understand the essentialist imperatives of writing such as Kanthapura and Gamperaliya. On the other side of homotopia, as it were, are the examples I consider of Leonard Woolf’s The Village in the Jungle (1913), Punyakante Wijenaike’s The Waiting Earth (1966), and O. V. Vijayan’s Legends of Khasak (1969), where dystopic visions (impelled by varying agendas – British modernist in the case of Woolf, feminist in the work of Wijenaike, and Malayalam modernist in Vijayan) present a critique of the homogenizing impulses of utopian fictions. While Rao’s debut novel reworks Gandhian politics and attempts a form of literary swaraj for Indo-Anglian fiction (till then, a largely unremarkable and derivative tradition), Wickramasinghe’s novel (also his literary debut), responding to the exigencies of anticolonial politics in Ceylon at the time, was a paean to a lost feudal order and an implicit riposte to Leonard Woolf’s (in)famous 1913 novel set in the Ceylonese village, the only colonial novel to feature Ceylon and the Ceylonese in a major way. The homotopia created in Rao’s and Wickramasinghe’s novels were challenged by later writers, by Vijayan in Khasak and by Wijenaike in The Waiting Earth, who wrote with different agendas in mind, but whose novels presented an important counter-argument to imagining in the rural an inviolable sanctuary for nationalist unity. Wijenaike’s bleak novel explores, from a feminist perspective, the grim underbelly of nationalist utopia premised on possession and land control, and foregrounds the ironies inherent in the dream of autarky that the nation-state
sells its gullible (male) citizens. In the protagonist Podi Singho’s violent lust for land, whose constant thwarting leads to the novel’s central tension, Wijenaike compresses a tacit critique of 1950s and 1960s land acquisition and redistribution policies of the Sinhalese government. Such critique stems from the recognition of the flawed nature of the utopian illusion – the government’s golden promise of land to Podi Singho is ironic since he and his family will never quite be complete owners and will always stay beholden to state and law – and of the marginalization of women from postcolonial registers of citizenship and social rights. This critique is not, however, extended to a fuller appreciation of the social and ethnic engineering underlying such state interventions in public life, of the specifically anti-Tamil ideology that motivated such policies in the resurgent nation-state where an increasingly strident Sinhala nationalism was becoming dominant and hegemonic. Vijayan’s Khasak is also in its own way a significant text: its iconic status in Malayalam literature stems largely from its stylistic innovations in the language, but I argue that in translation too, the novel warrants special attention because of its radical departure from the escapist/compensatory homotopian visions of the isolated village towards a genuinely – or as Karl Mannheim might say, concretely – utopian narrative in which the village, imagined within a rubric of the Islamic sacred, consciously eschews Hindu utopian teleologies. Khasak’s conceit, so to speak, lies not only in the inversion of Hindu into Muslim, offering a fundamental departure from the “standard” Indian rural novel that was overwhelmingly Hindu in its construction of home/nation, but also in the artifice that Vijayan succeeds in showing lies behind constructing nations and homes on the bases of (exclusionary and essentializing) religion. Unsurprisingly then, Khasak’s only utopian space – the village school sponsored
by the state – is imagined by Vijayan as inadequate and inconsequential, while true education and self-consciousness is forged in those heterotopic spaces that are outside the pale of urban/nationalist modernity: the forest, the carnival ground, the toddy shop, and the village well. In its critical stance on nationalist politics and in its emphasis on the rural as a field of play for various ideological positions, Khasak anticipates the recent work of Michael Ondaatje (Anil’s Ghost, 2000) and Amitav Ghosh (The Hungry Tide, 2005), in whose novels there is a more explicit attempt to understand the heterotopic potential of the rural, and where narratives of individual and collective action partake in neither a national/utopian teleology, nor a dystopic vision of the nation’s death. Read together, one may see how these later novels decenter the rural-urban binary by taking the village out of the prefabricated paradigms of nationalist utopia/dystopia and by refocusing narrative attention upon individual actors and the exercising of ethical, ecological choices. This is the idea behind rethinking the rural as outside of the binary of utopia and dystopia and, by following and nuancing Foucault, as a heterotopic space.

**Heterotopia and Anil’s Ghost**

In the only article I know of that considers Michael Ondaatje’s novel from the particular perspective of the heterotopic, Victoria Burrows combines an exegesis of Foucauldian heterotopia with trauma theory in order to understand the connections (and lack thereof) between experiencing and representing postcolonial crisis, a connection that she understands through Foucault’s idea of propinquity. As Burrows puts it, “Foucault’s heterotopology... or the theory of heterotopia, adapts well to a reading of Anil’s Ghost because it offers a new way of thinking both about postcolonial othering in time and
space, but also, and perhaps more importantly, a new way of conceptualising the othering of postcolonial trauma within trauma theory” (166). While Burrows explores well the latter aspect in the article, it is to the former that I turn my attention, in part, because a crucial form of “postcolonial othering” that the novel presents is not “othering” at all. If Othering describes the process by which difference is codified into opposition, then the processes by which the characters in Anil’s Ghost come to recognize the Other within themselves and the self in others indicates a process quite opposite to “othering.” Indeed, one might call the forces at work in the novel a form of “selving,” – or the construction of a composite Self in which difference is envisioned not as an unbridgeable chasm but as “a sort of mixed, joint experience,” with the mixing, to adapt Gayatri Spivak’s words on strategic essentialism, scrupulously made visible.

The novel is as much about the problems in the formation of a nation as it is about the besieged nature of self-formation: at the centre of the narrative are the torn lives of Anil, Sarath, Palipana, Ananda, Lakma, Gamini, and Gunasena, among several others, that require repair and rebuilding. This cannot be anything but a political act and yet, in Anil’s Ghost, Ondaatje, who has been charged with not being political enough in his writings about Sri Lanka, seems to suggest that the only true way of being political in the “sudden lightning of politics” (170) is to create moments of “still” self-consciousness, sheet anchor moments that will enable a “precise focus of thought” (176). The novel creates for its various characters such moments of inwardness that challenge dominant conceptions of the individual’s public roles, what s/he must speak, what his/her duty is, and where s/he must do it. I want to focus on three such moments of rupture-transformation that involve Anil, Palipana, and Sarath, and that present different aspects
of the novel’s heterotopic imaginary, an imaginary that is distinct from the homotopia of nationalism (Sinhala or otherwise) but that is still vitally connected to the utopian project of the “education of desire.”

Ondaatje’s vision of redemptive transformation at the novel’s end has brought him brickbats and praise, but it is also clear from the programmatic repetition of the themes of linkage and negotiation that Ondaatje sought to find not simply a solution to the plot, but a resolution. As I will discuss in the next section, Piya’s role in Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* is vital to the utopian spin he ultimately creates for the heterotopic function of Lusibari’s rural collectivity. In her decision to stay in Lusibari and work for local and global awareness about the state of river dolphins in the Sundarbans, Ghosh presents an implicit paean to the theme of the return of the diasporic prodigal. It is a theme that raises its head explicitly in Ondaatje’s novel when, in the opening pages, Sarath mocks Anil’s visit to Sri Lanka after 15 years of being away as “the return of the prodigal” (10) and she denies it right away. Anil bristles at the implications of “return” and a flashpoint on this theme emerges once more when, after saving Ananda’s life, Sarath tells her she should stay on in Sri Lanka and “not be here just for another job” – a taunt to which Anil replies in some anguish: “This isn’t just ‘another job’! I decided to come back. I wanted to come back” (199).\(^1\) Homecoming and the connected themes of belonging and not belonging are obviously ideas with some appeal, especially for

\(^1\) Interestingly, the paradoxes and frustrations of return do not bother Piya as much as they do Anil – this may well be a function of a different time and place: five years after *Anil’s Ghost*, a variety of novels by expatriate Indians (Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* is a paradigmatic example) and films (Ashutosh Gowariker’s suggestively titled *Swades* had enormous success among the non-resident Indian diaspora) have dealt with the theme of return to India. Invariably, such writing and cinema has invoked the need to re-commit oneself to the nation, its people, and typically, its villages.
transnationals like Ghosh and immigrant writers like Ondaatje (a Burgher who was born in Sri Lanka but migrated to Canada in the mid-1960s), and in some ways, the return of Anil to Sri Lanka is, indeed, a kind of vicarious homecoming for the author in whose previous works, with a couple of notable exceptions, Sri Lanka has featured in shadowy ways. However, Anil finds on her return that she is a misfit – her past celebrity as a successful swimmer embarrasses her; her memories of a native childhood are fragmented. She makes the predictable gestures of finding old ayahs but avoids relatives who might remember her family or her, thereby favouring one kind of familial memory – personal, immediate – over another kind – based on ties of blood or kinship. Her past of failed loves and fragmented friendships keeps intruding upon the story of her life and work in Sri Lanka, so much so that a reviewer writes, “Anil’s Ghost should have been two books: one about the conflict in Sri Lanka, one about Anil in the West” (Champeon par. 15).

This cloven textual imaginary is, however, deliberate and succeeds in making Anil’s outsiderly gaze upon Sri Lanka something to be itself looked at (and here, Ondaatje’s emphasis in the narrative on mirrors and mirroring is a powerful instance of Foucauldian heterotopia) and contextualized within the larger frameworks of home and the world, of belonging and not-quite.

The trope of return is a vital structuring principle in both Anil’s Ghost and The Hungry Tide because it allows for the construction of narrative perspective: Anil and Piya occupy interstitial spaces for they are insider-outsider, native-foreigner, women-

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2 Running After the Family (1982) is set in Sri Lanka and is largely a personal memoir based on two trips Ondaatje made in the late 1970s. In 1998, Ondaatje published Handwriting, a collection of poems that “returns” to the place of his birth and early life. Neither work concerns itself, however, with the ethnic conflict in the country, focusing instead on different aspects of Sri Lankan culture and the writer’s personal memories of the place and people.
professionals, and the gaps and gulfs between these binarised identifications pave the way for their complex interaction with Sri Lanka and India. Anil’s return to Sri Lanka in the midst of a human rights crisis puts her firmly in a political and morally complicated situation, where support for the nationalist camp or the separatist side cannot but be problematic. The situation demands a different approach – it can no longer be aligned with the homotopian mode of valorizing one nation or with the dystopian mode of an unredeemable tragedy. Anil’s forays into various villages – to meet Lalitha, then Palipana and Ananda – enable the crafting of specific epistemic moments that transform the narrative in ways that one might call heterotopic. I want to draw attention briefly to a few such moments and the effects these have on the characters and on their relationships with each other.

The meeting with Lalitha, Anil’s Tamil ayah when she was growing up, constitutes a profoundly personal moment transformed irrevocably by the political, for while Lalitha and Anil can meet after all the years across ethnic divides, the presence of Lalitha’s granddaughter, suspicious and taciturn, is a signal of the changed times, of a past that cannot be recreated. The meeting occurs in the first weekend of her visit when Anil still defines her identity firmly in Western categories: woman, scientist, diaspora. The meeting with Lalitha is remarkable for the contrast it creates with the climactic scene in the novel when Anil presents her evidence of Sailor’s identity3 and the circumstances

3 “Sailor” is the name Anil and Sarath give to the remains of a body they find in a grove of monks in Bandarewela, a government reserve, and that does not date from prehistoric times as the other remains do. Sailor is thus a contemporary who must be accounted for and in whose identity Anil foresees a clear path to indicting the government for its brutality against the Tamils and its repressive policies in general. The quest to find Sailor’s identity is the plot of the novel but, as is quite usual in an Ondaatje novel, a *bricolage* effect makes the narrative anything but a straightforward quest fiction. The
surrounding his death, and where she is quite literally the sole voice of a dangerous truth in a room full of military and government officials. It is this moment of Anil’s courage and identification with Sri Lanka that causes Sarath who has, unbeknownst to her, been watching her in the room, to decide to do something: “Sarath in the back row, unseen by her, listened to her quiet explanations, her surefootedness, her absolute calm and refusal to be emotional or angry. It was a lawyer’s argument and, more important, a citizen’s evidence; she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, ‘I think you murdered hundreds of us.’ Hundreds of us. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally us” (272-3). In a manner quite uncharacteristic of one who “travels in mid-river, always” (89), Sarath decides to protect himself and Anil. He publicly discredits Anil’s findings (Sailor’s skeleton has gone missing, so that Anil’s “proofs” appear to be without any credence) but in the process, saves her life and ensures that Sailor’s remains (now identified to be those of a toddy tapper, Ruwan Kumara, assassinated by government forces for being a rebel sympathizer) are restored to her. For his treachery, Sarath is murdered but not before he has smuggled out to Anil a tape recording of the events in the room and his own testimony. When Anil finally hears his voice through the tape recorder smuggled inside the skeletal cavity of Sailor’s ribs, it is quite literally a heterotopic moment when the disembodied voices of two actants in a civil war coalesce and confirm for Anil those hidden stories she had attempted unsuccessfully to uncover. Sarath’s voice is “very clear and focused” (284) and brings home to Anil the novel is part-memoir, part-Bildungsroman, part-detective story, part-travelogue – all of which makes it difficult to pin down the work’s (and its creator’s) political standpoint.
validity of his earlier stance on situated truths: “Clarity is not necessarily truth. It’s often a form of simplicity . . .” (276).

Anil’s meeting with Lalitha takes her into one of Sri Lanka’s villages for the first time in the novel – a journey she will recapitulate several times in her quest to find Sailor’s identity. A second journey occurs when Sarath takes her to meet with Palipana, a new quest that takes Anil into the heart of Sri Lanka’s rural cultures. In the Grove of the Ascetics, “a forest monastery, twenty miles from Anuradhapura” (84), Palipana, Sarath’s teacher and mentor, now growing blind, lives with his amanuensis Lakma, his adolescent niece who, having witnessed the murder of her parents at 12, went into a shock from which she had begun to half-emerge only in the sanctuary of the Grove and under the care of Palipana to whom she herself ministered. These acts of quotidian community help create in a remote space inside the jungle where they live a mutually redemptive existence, allowing for a shared healing. In Anil’s fleeting (re)connection with Lalitha, and eventual connections with Ananda and Sarath (men with whom she feels she can never have anything in common), the novel turns its face away from “postcolonial othering” towards the theme of negotiating difference, of selving, a theme that also features in a pivotal way in Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*.

Both the utopian and the dystopian modes are available as choices within Ondaatje’s novel: the *walawwa* where Ananda works to recreate Sailor’s face is a two hundred year-old building that (rather suggestively?) belonged to five generations of a Wickramasinghe family and seems to stand for a past age beyond reclamation. It is described as “a hidden, accidentally discovered place, a *grand meaulnes*” (201) and its remoteness from the rest of the village makes it a profoundly heterotopic space, as Anil
herself understands: the house with a sand garden and trees that invaded the space between the village and the walawwa created within this “location of refuge and fear” a heterotopic zone of contact between “private woe” and “public story” (203). Indeed, the tracing of Sailor’s identity – a political quest that would provide evidence indicting the Sri Lankan government – is for all the characters involved a profoundly personal journey to different kinds of truth. When Ananda recreates Sailor’s identity in the likeness of his own wife, Sirissa, who has been missing for several years, it is a grotesque, tragic climax that foregrounds the utterly dystopic spirit of the times: Anil weeps in anguish for there is “no resolving here” (186). It is in such moments of “mad logic” (186) that Ondaatje suggests that a transformation through art can provide catharsis: Ananda, whose movements until he completed the recreation had been frenetic, mad, drunken, even destructive, reaches out to Anil: “He moved two steps forward and with his thumb creased away the pain around her eye along with her tears’ wetness. It was the softest touch on her face . . . . This was a tenderness she was receiving” (187). Such “transformation” is, of course, double-edged: on the one hand, there is in the recourse to artistic catharsis the great danger of depoliticization, of being removed entirely from the field of play; on the other hand, however, there is in the unrelenting experience of the trauma of violence the even greater risk of a kind of political aphasia in which the very vocabulary of resistance can become lost. Lakma’s and the Guatemalan mother’s muteness are two visceral instances within the novel of the ways in which the trauma of violence, in the absence of a transmuting and cathartic agent, can literally erase one’s voice.
Palipana’s career as anthropologist/academic foregrounds, in a different way, the impossibility of remaining always committed to one cause or side. Indeed, Palipana’s rise and decline reflects the political rise and fall of the discourses of nationalist utopia in Sri Lanka: we learn, “the epigraphist Palipana was for a number of years at the center of a nationalistic group that eventually wrestled archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans” (79). His fall from academic grace is caused by his publication of a series of interpretations of rock graffiti that were, however, never found and were revealed by one of his protégés as a hoax. Palipana had “discovered and translated a linguistic subtext that explained the political tides and royal eddies of the island in the sixth century,” but no one had been able to find the runes he had written about. Palipana’s “gesture” was widely taken as a trick on the academy and he became a pariah. The narrative, however, suggests that Palipana might, indeed, have come to question the very nature of the science he represented and to distrust those very etchings on runes and tablets on which he had come to base his expertise and which, by extension, were tied so intimately to Sri Lanka’s Sinhala past and nationalist image:

. . . most of his life he had found history in stones and carvings. In the last few years he had found the hidden histories, intentionally lost, that altered the perspective and knowledge of earlier times. It was how one hid or wrote the truth when it was necessary to lie. He had deciphered the shallowly incised lines during lightning, had written them down during rain and thunder . . . . The dialogue between old and hidden lines, the back-and-forth between what was official and unofficial, . . . an illegal story, one banned by kings and state and priests, in the interlinear texts. These works contained the darker proof. (105; my emphasis)
Palipana’s trick renders him a traitor to the nationalist cause and he finds himself, quite literally, on the other side of the nation: the counter-homotopian, counter-nationalist meanings he discovers in the “interlinear texts” speak of the provisionality and contingency of human systems of knowledge, a treacherous argument in a country struggling with questions of nationhood and identity. To not see in black and white is to collapse whatever notion of truth-value one lives by, and to destabilize all that one has staked one’s life on. There is no “side” Ondaatje wishes to vindicate: the Tamil militants in the North or the Sinhala insurgents in the South or the government. All are implicated in the horror that is Sri Lanka of the 1980s and ’90s. The novel is replete with graphic encounters with the evils of nationalist fervour, irrespective of the side one fights on: the crucified Gunasena, the traumatised Lakma, Sirissa, Sarath, and the nameless bodies that are the casualties of an undocumented war.

Towards the close of the novel, two antithetical events are described: one, the assassination of President Katugala, that is symbolic of “the fragmentation of community and public space, and . . . the collapse of official narratives” (Davis and Lee 100); and two, the murder of Sarath and the discovery of his body by his brother Gamini, who in an act of “pieta between brothers” lovingly cleans up the tortured corpse and finds in the post-mortem ritual a closeness with his brother he had never had while the latter had been alive (288). Gamini’s remembrance of his brother and his recognition that they were indeed closer than he had thought parallel Anil’s memory of the Guatemalan mourner at the novel’s opening, and in his and Anil’s tacit promises to the dead “to never forget,” Ondaatje seems to hint that “the contemplation of suffering is both an aesthetically
powerful experience and one that moves the witness to act politically” (Davis and Lee 100).

The emphasis, then, on the need to conceive of new paradigms for a multicultural, postcolonial Sri Lanka is filtered through the almost programmatic repetition of the disenchantment of the novel’s major characters with authorized truths and official histories. This does not, however, translate into a siding with the rebels or the insurgents but into a recognition that the price for the abandonment of self-reflexivity, of the consciousness of one’s connections over and above the differences, can be very great indeed. In the *walawwe*, Ondaatje describes Anil, working with Sarath and Ananda, as “citizened by their friendship” (200) and it is to this affiliation that she remains true (despite her British passport and Western perspective) in the climactic scene where she presents her findings. There is, however, a price to be paid for not toeing the line of nationalist truth-making, and Anil’s disappearance from the narrative after the scene at the Armoury building where she presents her evidence, and the refusal to involve her in the narrative’s close are all signs of Ondaatje’s disinclination to supply a social remedy for Sri Lanka’s problems. The novel’s ending goes back in some ways to the heterotopic imaginary that prompted its opening: the final scene where Ananda at the *netramangala* ceremony of the Buddha draws the statue’s eyes provides one half of a parenthetical closure along with the opening scene (that is conveyed in italics) where Anil recalls a mourner in the “killing-fields” (not unlike those of Sri Lanka) of Guatemala (5). Both scenes have explicit recourse to Foucauldian formulations of heterotopia (cemeteries) and utopia (mirrors) suggesting the profoundly imbricated ways in which these ideas circulate in contemporary South Asian writing. The cemetery is, for Foucault, “strange . . . a place
unlike ordinary cultural spaces” (“Of Other Spaces” 18), for it bears the trace of those who no longer exist really. In the novel’s opening scene, the Guatemalan woman, whose trauma Anil witnesses and remembers, mourns for the bodies of her loved ones that were never found and in “the grief of love on that shoulder,” the woman carries on her physical body the trace of loss. In contrast, Ananda has found some kind of closure in sculpting Sirissa’s face on to Sailor’s skull. In the beautiful last paragraph, where Ananda finally “sees the world anew through eyes alive to the beauty of the world and sees his place in it” Ondaatje creates, as Burrows notes, “a vision of propinquity” (176) made possible by the mirror he holds in his hand as he completes the eye of Buddha:

Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. There was a seduction for him here . . . . The birds . . . flew through the shelves of heat currents. The tiniest of hearts beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart. In the heights she loved and in the dark she feared.

He felt the boy’s concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world. (307)

It is this kind of selving, a construction of the composite self based on an understanding and negotiation of difference, that Foucault, using the example of the mirror, conceived of as at once utopian and heterotopic:

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does
exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (“Of Other Spaces” 17; my emphasis)

**Heterotopia and The Hungry Tide**

I discussed in the introduction to this thesis a few elementary features of Foucauldian heterotopia that might paradoxically help us understand some of the utopian imperatives that drive the fiction of such writers as O.V. Vijayan, Krishna Sobti, Michael Ondaatje, Amitav Ghosh, Tissa Abeysekera, among others. Heterotopia’s foremost impulse is to unsettle – literally – and reorder spaces and categories, a quality powerfully visible in textual heterotopia, for works of literature are spaces too, poetic and political, self-consistent and engaged, topical and transcending. The novel is, in this sense, a particularly heterotopic genre, capable of combining the different imperatives of poetry and prose and of bringing heterogeneous ontological spaces into strategic textual alliances. Foucault’s words hold true with regard to the novel form as itself heterotopic,
as having “the curious property of being in relation with all of the other sites, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relationships designed, reflected, or mirrored by themselves” (11). In this light, The Hungry Tide can be read as encoding at least three kinds of heterotopia that I want to discuss in some detail. But before that, a brief summary of the novel might aid us in seeing its narrative form and content more clearly.

Ghosh’s novel is centered on three characters: Piyali (“Piya”) Roy, an Indian American cetologist whose particular field of expertise among marine mammals is in the habitat and behaviour of freshwater river dolphins of the great waterways of Asia – the Indus, the Mekong, the Irawaddy, and the Ganges; Kanai, the very epitome of a modernizing India, a translator and expert in six languages whom Piya employs for her work in the Sundarbans; and Fokir, an illiterate boatman who earns his living by fishing for crabs, and is the subaltern figure whose native knowledge of the tide country contrasts with Piya’s scientific, technology-driven ways, and whose own misfit life and tragedies are testament to “his place – or lack of place – in the scheme of things as determined by state authorities in Calcutta and New Delhi” (Mondal, Amitav Ghosh 18). What provides the surround to these characters is the account of “a forgotten incident in the history of post-colonial India”: the Morichjhāpi massacre of 1979 “when the state authorities first barricaded, and then unleashed terrible violence on, a group of refugee settlers who had originally been displaced from the tide country on the other side of the border with Bangladesh by the war for its independence in the early 1970s” (Mondal, Amitav Ghosh 18). Fokir and Piya, with Kanai as translator, embark upon various journeys into the Sundarbans, especially into those gullies and creeks where Fokir, who has spent all his
life in the region, has spotted river dolphins. There is, in the course of these journeys, a mutual exchange of knowledges between the three characters as each acquires an understanding of the other’s ways of living and being. Kanai comes to read his uncle Nirmal’s diary and sees how he, Nirmal and Nilima, his wife, are connected to Fokir, a man with whom he (as well as Nirmal and Nilima) can otherwise share little. Fokir and Piya, even without Kanai’s aid, hit upon a way of communication and understanding that is premised on their shared love for dolphins and the natural life. On one such research trip down the river, a big storm causes flooding and Fokir and Piya, separated from Kanai and others, become marooned, and Fokir is killed by an uprooted tree trunk floating in the storm waters. Piya survives and decides to stay back in Lusibari to continue her research by involving the locals and Nilima’s Badabon Trust.

So, in what ways is *The Hungry Tide* a heterotopic novel? I suggest that Ghosh’s work presents a departure from configurations of the Indian village as utopian or dystopian not only by creating in the rural a critique of national utopia but also by investing in it a capacity to counter the bureaucratisms of official policy with local and subaltern forms of ecologically sustainable civic agency. By doing so, the novel also renews its faith in the core humanist ideas of progress, collective effort, and individual agency. Indeed, by connecting this kind of a global theme with the rural, the novel signals its difference both from narratives that marginalize the rural or subsume it within the nation and also from a postcolonial literary position of anti-humanism that assumes all forms of humanism are Westernism in disguise. Instead, Ghosh recasts the Indian village in a new light by locating in rural life at least three kinds of heterotopic possibilities: territorial, textual, and social.
A geographical/territorialized heterotopia subsists in the very setting of the novel in the Sundarbans, the swampy marshland that physically connects India and Bangladesh. The choice is strategic for it powerfully shows the permeability of national borders, despite the attempt by nation-states to affirm the rigidity of those borders. Like Woolf’s Beddagama inside a relentless jungle in Ceylon, Lusibari ekes out a precarious existence at the very edge of land and sea. Here again, Foucault is relevant: in the final paragraph of “Of Other Spaces,” he moves from terrestrial to non-terrestrial and interstitial spaces:

Brothels and colonies are two extreme types of heterotopia, and if one considers, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is self-enclosed and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from bank to bank, from brothel to brothel, goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why, from the sixteenth century until the present, the boat has been for our civilization not only the greatest instrument of economic development . . . but also the greatest reserve of imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage replaces adventure, and the police the pirates.

Indeed, Ghosh imagines the entire island-village as a floating ship: “at low tide, when the embankment, or bādh, was riding high on the water, Lusibari looked like some gigantic earthen ark, floating serenely above its surroundings. Only at high tide was it evident that the interior of the island lay well below the water. At such times the unsinkable ship of a few hours before took on the appearance of a flimsy saucer that could tip over any
moment and go circling down into the depths” (31). This first look at the island and the village is framed through Kanai’s narrative of his travels between New Delhi, Calcutta, and Canning (to a lesser extent) – metropolitan points of reference, and literally, terra firma – thus contrasting with Lusibari’s geographical fragility, its closeness to the dangers of sea and wild life, and its remoteness from the civic guarantees of the city and the nation. The focus on the fragile lives of people in the Sundarbans recalls the dystopian setting and theme of Woolf’s novel where the locals, particularly the profoundly marginalized veddahs, are also shown as trapped between national policy (or the lack of it) and natural dangers. A crucial difference between the two works, and one that sheds light on their differing agendas, lies in the mechanisms of local agency that the novels portray: where Beddagama’s essentialized passivity allows Woolf to build a case against the Empire, Lusibari is Ghosh’s example of how motivated citizens can overcome state apathy and create communities that function on the basis of shared labour and local production.

A second kind of heterotopia is encoded in the very textuality of the novel – its multifarious narrative techniques (omniscient third-person, first-person, reportage, song), “double helix” format (Mondal, Amitav Ghosh 31) that alternates between the connected, but discrete, stories of its principal characters Piya, Kanai, and Fokir, and in the novel’s use of the seemingly monadic other-stories of secondary characters Nirmal, Kusum, Horen, and Nilima. Indeed, the novel is itself an archipelago of stories, connected

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4 See Chakrabarty (Habitations 130-131) for a stimulating discussion of the importance of travel by boat in Tagore and Nirad Chaudhuri’s encounters with the Bengali village in early twentieth-century India. The boat allowed for the construction of – what one may call – perspective, allowing for the evocation of an idyllic pastoral countryside but from a distance that was both physical and ideological.
tenuously by a loose, drifting order (“Ebb” and “Tide” being the two narrative halves of the novel) that emerges now and then, but in the main, exists *sotto voce*, framing the historiographic and critical material that speak of their own moment. More than any other work by Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* is about writing and textuality and draws attention to the ways in which language structures lived experience and memory. Through Kanai’s encounter with Nirmal’s diary that contains a first-hand journalistic account of the Morichjhāpi incident as well as Nirmal’s philosophic musings on Rilke, rural life, and national politics, Ghosh creates a visceral connection with an embattled past and history, a connection that is paralleled by Fokir’s song that has travelled through generations to him and his son. The comparisons between Nirmal’s diary and Fokir’s song present a case study of two kinds of textual heterotopia. Fokir’s song of Bon bibi, the local goddess of *athhero bhatir desh* or “the country of eighteen tides” (103), constitutes its own ideational *topos* within the novel, and for a large part of the narrative, remains unintelligible to Piya (and the reader). It is only when Kanai translates the song and its meaning that has accreted over generations and reaches back into myth itself, that the legend of Bon bibi unfolds and allows Piya to connect Fokir’s life with Kanai’s and her own: “‘Sing,’ she said. . . . Tilting back his head, [Fokir] began to chant and suddenly the language and music were all around her, flowing like a river, and all of it made sense; and 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” (360). The tension between knowing and not knowing is a key quality of heterotopia that occurs when there is, as Foucault puts it, “a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (“Of Other Spaces” 21). A
similar tension marks Nirmal’s eclectic musings in his diary, often rendered in a kind of
disarray that confounds Kanai and provides another example of a textual heterotopia,
whose function is to challenge the demand for regularity and stability in historical
recording. Indeed, the diary, like the island Lusibari, is an ephemeral, floating text,
constantly getting lost and recovered, much to Nilima’s and Kanai’s chagrin, and when it
is finally washed away by the waters of the flood, Kanai who has read all its secrets and
stories, pursues it no more.

A third kind of heterotopia inheres in the spatial and demographic (social)
dynamics of the village of Lusibari, a fictional construction (“Author’s Note” 401) whose
organizing principles are in fact quite utopian and recall Foucault’s description of
regulated colonies in “Of Other Spaces” (“Of Other Spaces” 20). Where the island in the
marshland exists in a kind of heterotopic relation to the two nations that share the
Sundarbans, the village also exists as a heterotopic space when compared to metropolitan
centres of power such as New Delhi and Calcutta. While Calcutta is no utopia, it is
apparent that both Canning and Lusibari are, in varying degrees, set in opposition to the
big city where “theatres like the Academy of Fine Arts and cinemas like the Globe”
thrive (105) and officers of the state effect policies whose reach, like that of the Empire
before them, goes as far as Canning and Lusibari. On a continuum of heterotopia,
Calcutta, Canning, and Lusibari occupy connected but separate places: Calcutta is the city
of commuter trains, tourists, and workers (1-3), the very centre of cultural and political
life, while Canning is a port on the river Matla and a mini-city in its own right, with its
overflowing bazaars, “a jumble of narrow lanes, cramped shops and mildewed houses”
(24). In contrast, the village Lusibari exists at the penumbral cusp of utopia and
heterotopia. Kanai recalls a conversation in his adolescence with Nirmal who gave him a history-lesson on Lusibari:

‘In 1903 [Sir Daniel Hamilton] bought ten thousand acres of the tide country from the British Sarkar . . . Gosaba, Rangabelia, Satjelia, . . . Andrewpur, . . . Jamespur, . . . Annpur, . . . Emilybari, . . . and Lusibari . . . . At that time there was nothing but forest here. There were no people, no embankments, no fields. Just kāda ar bāda, mud and mangrove. At high tide most of the land vanished under water. And everywhere you looked there were predators – tigers, crocodiles, sharks, leopards. [And then people came.] By the thousand, everyone who was willing to work was welcome, S’Daniel said, but on one condition. They could not bring their petty little divisions and differences. Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would live and work together. . . . ‘But what was the purpose of all this?’ said Kanai. ‘Was it money?’ ‘No,’ said Nirmal. ‘Money S’Daniel already had. What he wanted was to build a new society, a new kind of country. It would be a country run by co-operatives, he said. Here people wouldn’t exploit each other and everyone would have a share in the land. S’Daniel spoke with Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Thakur and many other bujuwa [bourgeois] nationalists. The bourgeoisie all agreed with S’Daniel that this place could be a model for all of India; it could be a new kind of country.’ (51-52)

When Kanai in childlike candour breaks Nirmal’s idealistic rendition with ‘‘And look what he ended up with . . . . These rat-eaten islands’ (53), he shocks Nirmal out of his utopian musings: “That a child could be so self-assuredly cynical came as a shock to
Nirmal. After opening and shutting his mouth several times, he said weakly, ‘Don’t laugh, Kanai – it was just that the tide country wasn’t ready yet. Some day, who knows? It may yet come to be’’” (53). This utopian imaginary on which Lusibari is based is significant, for it is the novel’s insistence on the village’s contemporary realness (its value as a heterotopic site) and its connectedness with the past (its utopian potential) that makes Lusibari so different from many other villages in twentieth-century Indian writing.

In Kanthapura, much colonial traffic of merchandise and cargo occurs but the deliberate focus on a few Brahmin families within the village eschews a concern with those without or with the flow of people and ideas into the village and the visceral, real changes such interaction invariably produces. As a result, the utopia that Rao imagines is really a kind of “homotopia,” a space where everyone is putatively the same (Hindu, Sanskritized). In contrast to Kanthapura, the island villages that make up the Sundarbans are constituted of settlers and refugees, and the constantly changing demographic creates continual changes in registers of social interaction and meaning. This flux is a vital element of the island village’s make-up and Ghosh ties up patterns of human migration with the rhythms of the waters and the cycles of natural life, thus suggesting that there is something elementally dynamic about the construction of such a rural collectivity. Piya’s and Fokir’s journeys into different regions of the mangrove swamps are evidence of the region’s dynamism (a far cry from the stereotype of an ossified, unchanging countryside), and it is significant that although these journeys are ostensibly about Piya’s quests for scientific knowledge about dolphin behaviour, the novel also suggests that, to both characters, these journeys mean implicitly more. For both of them, these journeys are like “pilgrimages,” as Kanai calls Piya’s wanderings in search of information (189). Indeed, similar journeys form the
core of this novel about migration and resettlement whose central narrative motif is the ebb (*bhata*) and swell (*jowar*) of the tides: Nirmal records in his diary Fokir’s mother, Kusum’s, tale of how she joined “a great march to the east” and of the story of dislocation of the coastal people of Bangladesh as they crossed the border into India illegally and were taken into settlement camps in the hinterland from where the deracinated and dispossessed joined forces to march back by foot to the Sundarbans: “rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood. Our fathers had once answered Hamilton’s call: they had wrested the estate from the sway of the tides. What they’d done for another, couldn’t we do for ourselves?” (165) Indeed, the Sundarbans is where historically the world has met its constituents: as Kanai recalls Nirmal’s words, “[t]his is after all no remote and lonely frontier – this is India’s doormat, the threshold of a teeming subcontinent. Everyone who has ever taken the eastern route into the Gangetic heartland has had to pass through it – the Arakanese, the Khmer, the Javanese, the Dutch, the Malays, the Chinese, the Portuguese, the English” (50). This is the globalized face of that vision of “rural cosmopolitanism,” as Oscar Lewis called it, that distinguishes Lusibari from those numerous narratives of twentieth-century imagination where the village appears shorn of a global connection, in tune largely with local realities or functioning within the binaristic paradigms of utopia and dystopia. Ghosh constructs this kind of a *presence* for Lusibari and the Sundarbans, gesturing towards these spaces as unique and important, whose histories need remembering and whose endangered present needs to be brought to world attention. In this sense, Ghosh’s attempt to focus literary and environmental attention upon the Sundarbans’ past and present is driven by the same impulse that lies behind Daniel Hamilton’s utopian dream in 1903 when he “created”
Lusibari (naming it after his daughter Lucy, *Lusì’r bari* or Lucy’s home): “a place where men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening” (53).

Despite surface similarities to “thousands of villages in Bengal,” Lusibari is organized on “a different and far from commonplace design” (37). The ordinariness of Lusibari’s rurality is belied by its proximity to annihilation by the waters that are staved off by “a single feature of its topography. This was its *bädh*, the tall embankment that encircled its perimeter, holding back the twice-daily flood” (59). It is this nearness to destruction that makes Lusibari an extraordinary enterprise and frames its quotidian life within the heterotopic. The village has a *maidan* (open ground) at its centre, flanked by “a jumble of stalls that lay unused through most of the week, coming alive only on Saturdays, which was the weekly market day” (37). At the other end of the *maidan* is the village school, a large sprawling building built by Daniel Hamilton in 1938, and which is the centre of the village’s happenings. The emphasis on the school recalls Vijayan’s *Khasak* but there the utopian space of the village is undermined by its ineffectiveness as a place for true education and Vijayan identifies other marginalized spaces (such as the carnival or the forest) as the site for the articulation of difference and the exchange of knowledge. In *The Hungry Tide*, the school encompasses many worlds: it stands as a visible reminder of Hamilton’s utopian dream of an egalitarian country and it is linked to the compound that houses the headquarters of the Badabon Trust, Women’s Union, and a makeshift guest house run by Nilima and Nirmal. This is a wooden building on two-metre tall stilts, and with a “compound [that] was among the most heavily trafficked in the whole island” (38). The elevation and distance from the other public spaces, the
school and the maidan, allow Nirmal and Nilima’s home to exist in “a warp of time” away from “the noise and bustle of the village” (38).

It is revealing that the novel’s end chooses to uphold Nirmal’s utopian dream: indeed, Piya’s meticulous plan to involve the Badabon Trust, Nilima, and the people of Lusibari to save the dolphins and their common island habitat is Ghosh’s figuration for the combined agendas of civic and ecological responsibility. The novel ends on a note not of accomplishment but of work begun, and there is a strong suggestion that this work involves a utopian project: utopian not in the sense of the unpragmatic or the impossible, but utopian in the sense that all actionable change comes with “the education of desire” (Levitas 196). A central theme of the novel is the clash among the global, the national, and the local, between government policies of conservation, on the one hand, the pulls of global capitalism that have often tended to disregard the need for sustainable and environmentally-sensitive development, on the other, as well as the impact of such policies upon local populations. Piya’s offer to Nilima to continue her research and preservation of the river dolphin re-draws the utopian horizon of a combined effort: “. . . I know I don’t want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it. If I was to take on a project here, I’d want it to be under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust, so it could be done in consultation with the fishermen who live in these parts” (396). The novel’s ending aggressively manoeuvres for a utopian closure to the events it has narrated: in an example of how scientific technology and local knowledge (the heuristic “West” and “East”) can connect, Piya’s Global Positioning System (GPS), the only equipment to survive the storm and flood, becomes a paean to Fokir’s insight and knowledge: “At the touch of a button the screen flickered on. Piya
tapped a key to access the memory. ‘All the routes that Fokir showed me are stored here. Look.’ She pointed to a sinuous zig-zag line that had appeared on the screen. ‘That was the route we took on the day before the storm. Fokir took the boat into every creek and gully where he’d ever seen a dolphin. That one map represents decades of work and volumes of knowledge. It’s going to be the foundation of my own project’ (398).

Lusibari is a created community (ironically, and perhaps in a deliberate departure from the stock images of British colonialism, its creator was a white colonist driven by utopian dreams) and its collective vision is shaped by the exigencies of the present as well as by its members’ lives and traditions. Fokir’s song, the village legends of Bon bibi, and the cultural life of Lusibari are as central to the narrative as Nirmal’s diary, Kanai and Piya’s metropolitan interlocution, and the theme of sustainable conservation and development. This makes the novel firmly entrenched in rural realities and sets it apart from those works where we have seen villages become stereotypes or fall into the aporetic traps of allegories. It is significant that Ghosh places Lusibari’s “beginnings” in historical time (indeed, in verifiably historical time – the modern colonial period and in the post-colonial times of cross-border migrations) even though in its cultural life, the village and its members project continuity with legends and mythical “origins” – a tension, perhaps a contradiction, that constantly colours the reader’s encounter with the village, a tension that is, in fact, encoded in the very imaginary of the village that invokes the utopian and the heterotopic simultaneously. I think here of the distinction Edward Said makes between beginnings and origins, “the latter divine, mythical, and privileged, the former secular, humanly produced and ceaselessly re-examined” (Beginnings xii-xiii). Said writes: “. . . [A] beginning is basically an activity which ultimately implies a return
and repetition rather than simple linear accomplishment . . . a beginning not only creates but is its own method because it has intention” (5). Said defines intention as “the appetite . . . intellectually to do something in a characteristic way – either consciously or unconsciously, but at any rate in a language that always (or nearly always) shows signs of the beginning intention in some form and is always engaged in the production of meaning” (12). In this sense, literatures are to be seen not “sequentially or dynastically” (10) but in a relationship of adjacency, “as an order of repetition and not originality”: “to the side of, next to, or between the bulk of” and not “in a line of descent” (13). Said’s notion of adjacency ties up in many ways with Foucault’s concept of propinquity, that principle whose shattering in Borges’s story about the Chinese encyclopaedia Foucault read in *The Order of Things* and later in “Of Other Spaces” as the veritable signature of heterotopia. Ghosh’s Lusibari exists, in the final analysis, not merely as a dystopian inversion of the ideal nation or the city, nor even as a model for the utopian Gandhian ashram (although it partakes of both), but as a heterotopic site of critique whose aims are as much “the education of desire” (Levitas 196) as the attempt to create a “beginning”: “[to] restructure and animate knowledge, not as an already-achieved result, but as ‘something to be done, as a task and as a search’” (Said, *Beginnings* 380).

**Conclusion**

*Anil’s Ghost* and *The Hungry Tide* share some startling affinities: in both novels, a significant part of the action occurs on boats and ships; quests and journeys form a central organizing principle in both novels; the protagonists are women, scientists, diasporic. Both novels are also centrally concerned with the theme of negotiating
differences: despite the vast disparities in background, upbringing, and cultures, the protagonists of both novels form an uncanny community in the heterotopic spaces of boats and ships and abandoned homes. Fokir and Piya’s friendship is forged on a boat which provides Fokir’s livelihood as a fisherman, while Anil and Sarath manufacture a laboratory on a now-derelict colonial ship called the Oronsay and in an aging walawwe, where they work together with Ananda to solve the mystery of Sailor’s death. Both novels recreate within these Foucauldian heterotopia – these floating colonies of boats and ships and deserted manors – new forms of collective consciousness and individual agency. The result is, as in Vijayan’s Khasak, a form of aesthetic re-enchantment: despite the mind-numbing tragedies and losses the stories present, there is also at work in these novels a very real attempt at communicative action and social change. One may argue it is only in the disconnected, unaccommodated spaces of boats and carnivals and manors and cemeteries that camaraderie may be conveniently imagined, but all three of these novels are impelled by a very real concern with individual lives, with natural spaces and ecologically far-sighted choices, and with a renewed commitment to lasting change. That they choose to site this awakened, re-enchanted sensibility in the village suggests the resurgent and resilient ways in which the rural continues to inform the literary imagination even in the twenty-first century. In this, the novels are remarkably different from the essentializingly utopian or dystopian ways in which much twentieth-century literature cast the South Asian village. The question of religious/ethnic divides becomes transcribed in Ondaatje’s and Ghosh’s novels as one of articulation and resituating of difference. Much in these novels remains unresolved: historical differences of religion, culture, and language cannot be erased by heroic individual choices, but they can be
negotiated, as Anil, Sarath, and Palipana, and Piya, Fokir, Kanai show. One might ask at what cost, for Sarath and Fokir die so that Anil and Piya can tell their stories, but in maintaining this tension between an individualist stance towards modernity and a more communal one, these novels engage the rural in refreshing new ways. In these novels, the rural is imagined not merely in opposition to the urban, the national, and the global (although there is that too), but primarily as a series of lateral relations. Hence, we find the acknowledgment of difference among the various characters, the recognition of their utter diversity, but also the will to negotiate those differences. As Hetherington argues, “this is the main principle of a heterotopia . . . they bring together heterogeneous collections of unusual things without allowing them a unity or order established through resemblance. Instead, their ordering is derived from a process of similitude which produces, in an almost magical, uncertain space, monstrous combinations that unsettle the flow of discourse” (43; my italics). Despite their differences, the small cast of characters in Ondaatje’s and Ghosh’s (and I would also say, Vijayan’s) novels succeed in creating within their (textual) spaces of encounter combinations that unsettle the flow of ideologies and discourses that keep them apart. One might aver, this demands a certain degree of monstrosity but it is a heroic, “decisionist” monstrosity, for it involves the commitment of individuals to visions (however utopian and remote) of community and belonging beyond the call of duty. Fokir’s and Sarath’s choices as well as Piya’s and Anil’s thus take on special meaning within this heterotopic imaginary. Questions of religious, cultural, and class differences do not vanish but recede in these works in order

5 To adapt a word from Chakrabarty (136).
to bring to the fore a renewed humanistic concern with the role of the individual in socially and ecologically responsible living. Such a renewed humanism (in spite of all its potentially attendant problems) is to be seen in both the novels: the turn away from the pastoral paradises of utopia becomes, in *The Hungry Tide*, a move towards a recognition of the fraught state of these paradises and the imminence of environmental disaster, and in *Anil’s Ghost* where Anil and Palipana’s encounter paves the way for a mutually edifying exchange of different knowledges and philosophies, Ondaatje points to the need, as Edward Said put it, to “live together in far more interesting ways than an abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow” (*Orientalism* xxii).
Conclusion

At the time of writing this thesis, *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga was awarded the 2008 Man Booker Prize. The novel is a far cry from the utopian potential that Amitav Ghosh invested in the far-flung village communities of the Sundarbans where battles with natural disaster parallel those with state apathy, but where also, the village was the site for a renewed faith in engendering positive social change. Although Adiga has claimed that he was inspired in the writing of the novel by the examples of writers like Flaubert, Balzac, and Dickens, who “helped England and France become better societies” (Rediff, 16 October 2008, par. 1), the novel presents a one-sided approach to rural life and rehearses the fears of middle-class metropolitan Indians. The narrative shows the resilience of stereotypes of the village, this time from a new vantage-point of India’s transnational presence where the take of a “Slumdog Millionaire”\(^1\) on “India Shining”\(^2\)

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\(^1\) *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) was English director Danny Boyle’s multiple Oscar-winning film on the life of slum-dwellers in Mumbai. The central characters of the story are the urban poor of India and the film follows the rise of one such character through the usual suspects of India’s recent fame (or notoriety) on the world stage: call centres, Bollywood, quiz-shows, reality television, tabloid journalism, religious riots, and so forth. A prominent theme in the film is the attribution of a zesty, *amoral* (even immoral) energy to India’s rising underclasses, a theme that allows for a subversion of the pieties and hypocrisies of the official, educated, globalizing India. The film, despite its many strengths, is a good example of the continuing appeal of essentializing portraits of India, and in the film’s eventual retreat into kitsch, one sees very much alive the spectre of an Orientalized representation.

\(^2\) “India Shining” was the political slogan of the then governing Bharatiya Janata Party during the 2004 Indian general elections. The slogan encapsulated a general feeling of economic optimism in India after a bountiful monsoon in 2003 and as part of the largely-Hindu right-wing party’s attempt to promote India internationally. BJP eventually lost the 2004 elections and many editorials suggested that the slogan was partly to blame, especially considering issues such as rural poverty, urban unemployment, and rising inflation. The Congress Party became the biggest party in parliament after a campaign pledging to improve the plight of India’s poor. The negative assessment of the “India
shows up the grim underbelly of national development. The novel depicts the rise of Balram Halwai from acute rural poverty to becoming a chauffeur to a rich man in the city, to exercising finally his own entrepreneurship in Bangalore, the way for which is paved by his murder of his master. Rushdie-esque allegory and fable remain the primary impulse as the city-space of Delhi is configured as “Light,” and people appear in Halwai’s narration of his life-story as a series of unsavoury animals and birds, distinguished only by their (limited) function in the grand chain of exploitative being.

Halwai’s co-option into India’s new technological presence on the world economic stage appears to present a new trend in imagining the rural, but I would argue that this kind of work merely attempts an embourgeoisement of the rural, and is written from the removes of a firmly metropolitan perspective. Seen from this vantage, the rural is always the Other that when not to be laughed at must be feared, and in such works, the story of an antihero in a cutthroat culture rehearses the urban middle-class’s dystopic encounter with a village world it can neither comprehend nor ignore.

Only five years before The White Tiger, Canadian author Nirmal Dass wrote the City of Rains, where the central structuring principle is the now-familiar dichotomy between Western and Eastern cultures, and where the many contrasts between urban sophisticated France and pastoral Dhanoa rehearse proverbial configurations of the

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Shining” campaign was echoed after the election by former Deputy Prime Minister and a major BJP ideologue, L. K. Advani, who said the catchphrase was "not wrong... but not appropriate . . . . In retrospect, it seems that the fruits of development did not equitably reach all sections of our society.” (BBC <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3756387.stm>)}
utopian Indian village, seen through the sepia-tinted lenses of diasporic nostalgia. The Dhanoan idyll (the “cowbells, the stray dogs, the nightingales”) and its mystical ecstasies of a life untouched by technology and the flows of labour and capital that keep the rural firmly tied to the urban, national, and global, appears to be a deliberately essentialized evocation of a pastoral-utopian mode that has become a kind of shorthand in much diasporic writing. The novel asks a central question: “What does it mean to live in two worlds? Or even three or four?” (73), but in making rural India one world and urban France the other, it misses out on seeing worlds within worlds, the great internal complexity within rural and urban, East and West. Such diminution often insidiously re-enacts in new forms the kind of “epistemic violence” that goes into the “worlding” project of such narratives.

Clearly, then, visions of utopia and dystopia continue to appeal to authors working with the South Asian rural. But the pressures of conceiving utopia and dystopia through the paradoxes of a post-colonial, increasingly transnational, and globalized world order constantly impede these narratives, rendering the modes of pastoral or realism deeply anxious. And yet, is it possible to recuperate from these utopian or dystopian imaginaries any agential or positive vision of the rural? In other words, can we continue to speak of utopian visions that have not become “hijacked” by the forces of fundamentalism or extremist nationalist politics that bedevil India and Sri Lanka today? Is it possible to find a space for Gandhian utopia that works with the rural and does not subsume it within stereotype? These are not questions that can be answered with lasting certainty and, indeed, Adiga’s novel presents the appeal of imagining the failures of the nation-state and its constituent units, the rural and the urban, as utopian spaces, even as
Dass’s narrative shows how for the diasporic imagination, the trope of pastoral India, with its simple life unsullied by Western contact, remains a compelling, if unidimensional, springboard to understand the many complexities of urban, expatriate existence. *The White Tiger*’s recourse to the dystopic and the allegorical and *City of Rains*’ cathexis in an outmoded pastoral suggests that novelists continue to find the connections between the individual and the nation, the village and the city and the nation, deeply persuasive. And yet, one might say novels like *The White Tiger* and *City of Rains* do not do justice to the representation of either the rural or the national, for their focus, despite the authors’ stated intentions, remains on the fears and complexes of urban, middle-class Indians living in cities divorced from the complexities of rural life in an age of uneven global capitalism.

In contrast, a novel like Tissa Abeyesekara’s *Bringing Tony Home* (1998) suggests that an authentically or concretely utopian mode of representing the rural need not necessarily be homotopian or stereotypical or allegorical. Like *Anil’s Ghost*, here too, villages prove to be important heterotopic sites for the resituating of personal and national memory but with a vital difference. In *Bringing Tony Home*, Abeyesekara reworks the timeless genre of the *Bildungsroman*: a boy returns to his old home to find Tony, his beloved dog who was abandoned when economic circumstances forced the family to leave. The vision of a changed countryside within the larger rubric of a transforming nation-state appears through a kind of narrative circumlocution: mixing memoir and fiction, Abeyesekara focuses not on the life of the nation itself, but creates, in the distance between the Big House in Depanama and the poor one in Egodawatta (both primarily rural areas) the space for the exploration of an ethical subjectivity in late
twentieth-century Sri Lanka. Even as the child battles the decision to abandon Tony, the adult narrator struggles with the repercussions of a landscape transformed by competing discourses of territoriality, the struggle constituting a horizon that is always looming in the story but that is deliberately kept out: “[t]hen a few years, after the war disaster struck in the form of a financial implosion – now that’s another story” (5). As Kristianne Huntsberger says, “in the narrator’s mid-twentieth-century home of Ceylon, the stale breath of four decades of colonial rule is still discernable . . .[and locating an individual identity in a land focused on discovering itself is a daunting task” (“Book Review” par. 5). The child’s relationship with the mangy dog Tony becomes a kind of mirror (Foucault’s example of a utopia that is also heterotopic) that connects – but also keeps apart – his journey to save his friend and the narrator’s own story of maturation and memory.

As these works by Ghosh, Ondaatje, and Abeyesekara show, rural dynamics in India and Sri Lanka, when explored in fullness and complexity, often work away from the paradigms of utopian/dystopian, and national/marginal, towards an interstitial zone of contact and cohabitation and negotiation. The consciousness of an inescapably complex and multicultural collective fabric animates such emergent writing of the twenty-first century where there is, as I have shown, an attempt through heterotopia to recuperate and refashion utopian imperatives. My examination of O. V. Vijayan’s novel Legends of Khasak (1969) and P. Wijenaike’s The Waiting Earth (1966), along with the examples of the works of Ghosh and Ondaatje, illustrates the perils of assuming a rigidly linear or genealogical understanding of the rural in South Asian fiction as some Hegelian museum of ideas where one may “progress” from utopia to dystopia to heterotopia. The discussion
provides evidence, indeed, of the synchronicity of the utopian, dystopic, and heterotopic imperatives in South Asian fiction. In spite of dystopic situations that often arise out of the violence that maintains and polices the borders of national collectivity, there is common to the last novels I discuss – of Ghosh, Ondaatje, and Abeysekera – a tacit insistence on the utopian impulse for the “education of desire.” It is an impulse that, I think, also recalls what was radical and ecumenical in Gandhian thought, and combines it with the need for nurturing multicultural cosmopolitanisms that today’s complex and diverse societies demand. That these novels choose to situate this awakened, re-enchanted sensibility in the village suggests the resurgent and resilient ways in which the rural continues to inform the South Asian literary imagination of the twenty-first century.
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