Feminine In/Auspiciousness in Indian Literature in English

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
University of Toronto

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2015

Abstract

In this thesis I seek to theorize the complex and shifting meanings of ‘auspiciousness’ and especially ‘inauspiciousness’ in twentieth and twenty-first century Indian literature in English. Anthropological scholarship on the subject demonstrates that these concepts are closely associated with, as Veena Das puts it, “events involving life and future” on the one hand and “events involving death and the termination of a future” on the other (144). At the same time, through the concept of Shakti, in/auspiciousness is closely tied to the feminine and to ‘feminine’ people. This means that certain people are associated with the creation and furtherance of life while others are tied to death, disease, and catastrophe. While many scholars have discussed the crucial role played by the ‘auspicious’ wife (and by the ‘inauspicious’ widow) in the construction of Indian nationalism, previous to my own work scholars of literature had not yet carried out any sustained interrogation of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness as they operated in literary texts.
By doing so in this project, I was able to trace how, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, certain highly influential novelists instrumentalize a widow’s destructive inauspiciousness to smash open the social world and to inaugurate a bourgeois Indian modernity. In the process, though, these authors rationalize, domesticate, and modernize auspiciousness and, to some extent, inauspiciousness. By making widow characters directly and individually responsible for negative events, these authors efface the ways in which these characters are always already inauspicious (i.e. they efface a more traditional, ontological understanding of a widow’s inauspiciousness).

Inspired by a tremendously insightful article by M.S.S. Pandian on the subject of caste, I argue that these novels continue the exclusion of widows into modernity while relegating the true reasons for their exclusion to a traditional past (outside the new national culture). This has the effect of silencing these characters – denying them an accurate vocabulary with which to speak of their exclusion – and also of squashing and containing the danger attached to them as ontologically inauspicious. In order to counter this powerful containment, I argue, novelists writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries multiply the vocabularies they use to represent these inauspicious figures. These authors reinvent mythic and/or popular motifs, blurring the ‘traditional’ with the ‘modern’. They layer stories told primarily in the realist mode with myth, folktale, the gothic, and the grotesque to question the nature of the ‘real’. And, ultimately, they reinvest their inauspicious characters with power – the power to destroy things, to break down the social order, and, therefore, sometimes, to reinvent themselves and others.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding this project with a Doctoral Research Grant. I would also like to thank the School of Graduate Studies, the Asian Institute, and the Indo-Canadian Advisory Group for generous funding to cover the costs of my research trip to India.

I would like to thank my committee members Professor Mary Nyquist and Professor Victor Li for all their good advice and helpful suggestions during the writing of this project. To Professor Li, a special thank you for shepherding me so kindly through the final difficult stage. I would also like to express my enormous gratitude to my supervisor the late Professor Chelva Kanaganayakam for so many thought-provoking and challenging conversations. His tremendous wisdom and patience helped me to continuously see the project anew and push through intellectual hurdles. Along with so many others, I am deeply saddened by his untimely passing.

Without the support and friendship of my colleagues at the University of Toronto this project would not have been possible, so thank you to Jay Rajiva, Sundhya Walther, Philip Dickinson, Kathleen Ogden, Stephanie McAllister and Alexandra Rahr.

Finally, a million thank yous to my wonderful husband Senwung Luk whose generosity and intelligence were invaluable to me as I worked on this project.
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I have used phonetic spellings for all words in South Asian languages, here, using italics where appropriate. I have used other transliterations and diacritical marks only when I am directly quoting from a source.
Introduction
Theorizing In/Auspiciousness

Although concepts of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are important aspects of everyday life for many people in South Asia, the body of scholarly work on the subject is comparatively small. In anthropology there is an important cluster of articles on the subject, growing in recent years, slowly but surely. In other disciplines, however, political science, history, and literature, to name a few, the concepts surface quite regularly but are never the objects of direct and sustained interest in themselves. This strikes me as particularly unfortunate, since the axis of in/auspiciousness provides a particularly dense field in which to explore questions of individualism, subject-hood, agency, citizenship, gender and sexuality.

I want to begin this introduction with a brief overview of the work on in/auspiciousness that has been done in other fields in order to get some sense of the cluster of concepts that fall under this terminology. While these definitions give us a starting point, I want to emphasize the fluidity of the concepts and the fact that they may be understood quite differently by people with different cultural backgrounds and life experiences (rural vs. urban, more or less Western educated etc.). Like so many aspects of culture, these terms are not dead categories that are accepted and understood the same way by everyone; they are dynamic fields, which people actively negotiate and manipulate, and, of course, sometimes even ignore altogether. In my own project I trace the ways in which auspiciousness and inauspiciousness have been actively shaped and redefined by authors for their own artistic, social and ethical purposes. So in the rest of the introduction, I
outline the chapters that follow as a sort of roadmap for the directions my own research has taken me in, a roadmap for the different definitions I have found in these artistic works. And I articulate the logic of the (roughly) chronological order of the chapters.

Scholarly work in English on the concepts of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness falls into two main categories: 1) Anthropological studies explicitly concerned with the uses and meanings of sets of words in South Asian languages which are translated into English as auspicious/inauspicious. These studies began around the mid 1980s, and approach the subject in very different ways (different regions, different groups of people, different methodologies etc.). 2) Work done in various fields (especially history, political science and literature) on Indian nationalist discourses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This scholarship doesn’t take the concepts of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness as direct and explicit objects of study, but these terms nevertheless surface repeatedly, and so it is possible to learn a great deal through careful reading of this (quite extensive) body of work.

**Anthropological Scholarship**

Anthropologists writing in the mid 20th century tended to mention in/auspiciousness in passing while examining other subjects of interest. It wasn’t until the 1980s that Veena Das, Frederique Appfel Marglin, T.M. Madan, and several others began to examine the concepts in a more direct and in-depth fashion (especially in relationship to the axis of purity/impurity). They saw immediately that in/auspiciousness was intimately related to the flow of time. Madan claims that while *suddha/asuddha* (translated as purity/impurity) can inhere in animate beings, *subha/subha*
(auspiciousness/inauspiciousness) usually relate to events (combinations of particular people at particular times in particular places): “intersection[s] of the trajectories of cosmic forces, symbolized by moving planets and flowing rivers, and human lives” (13). Veena Das, meanwhile, argues that in textual explanations of domestic rituals (in the Garuda Purana, Krityakalpataru of Bhatta Sri Laksmidhara, and Antyeatisamskara of Narayanabhatta), it becomes evident that while purity and impurity are linked to states of boundedness or liminality respectively, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness “refer respectively to events involving life and future, and events involving death and the termination of a future” (144).

More recently John Gray has argued that auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are “practices of emplacement in space and time” (73). He argues, in other words, that while the temporal element to understanding in/auspiciousness is crucial, so is the spatial one. He traces in detail the ways in which, following the dictates of the Vastu Shastras (ancient texts on architecture and design), Nepali Chhetris (members of the Kshatriya or warrior/ruling caste) work to ensure auspiciousness when they build homes for their families. Each stage of the construction of the home as well as the inauguration and inhabiting of the house must take place on days and at times which are conducive to the well being of the family –as ascertained through a reading of the owner’s birth chart (79). At the same time, however, a great deal of attention is paid to the space of the house itself. The house must be properly aligned with respect to the eight cardinal directions and the deities associated with them (77). A family priest should ascertain whether or not the site is compatible with the owner’s prosperity and if it is, he must ascertain the best location for the house on the site (80-1). A series of rituals follow to allow for the
happy coexistence of the family and the deities on the site. A Bhumi Puja is performed to placate Bhumi Deuta (the earth deity) (81-2). The house must be positioned in such a way as to avoid annoying the nag (snakes with powers over rainfall and water) who live in the earth under the house (82-4). A Jag Puja is performed to drive out ghosts or other inauspicious beings who may be lurking around the site and to make the newly built foundation “into an auspicious mandala” (84-5). Finally, when the house is complete, a procession circumambulates it and enters it to perform a Rudri Puja—the consecration of the new house. The procession is led by a female calf (the incarnation of Laxshmi), followed by virgin girls, the family priest and eventually the rest of the members of the household (87-8).

Despite Madan’s argument, early on, that in/auspiciousness doesn’t inhere in people, what becomes immediately evident in reading through the literature is that both in its spatial and in its temporal dimensions, in/auspiciousness is closely tied to femininity (hence the female calf and the virgin girls entering the new house first). Suchitra Samanta points out that one of the Bengali words denoting ‘auspiciousness’ or well-being is mangal, derived from the Sankrit root, mang or ‘to go, move’ (55). Based on

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1 Melinda Moore and E. Valentine Daniel have done similar work in Kerala and Tamil Nadu respectively. Neither Moore nor Daniel is focused explicitly on auspiciousness, and neither engages with the other work on auspiciousness as Gray does. It is clear, however, that in their discussions of the building and locating of houses they are dealing with the opening up and protecting of auspicious spaces. It is unclear in all of these works what the relationship is between the purity of these spaces and their auspiciousness: these spaces are quite obviously pure as well as being auspicious (the houses are built, to give just one example, with the kitchens and puja rooms deepest into the house, farthest from the door and the outside). It is unclear if their auspiciousness is derived from and/or dependent on their purity. Sara Dickey analyzes purity and auspiciousness (although once again, she doesn’t explicitly discuss auspiciousness and inauspiciousness) in middle- and upper-class homes in urban South India by studying the attitudes of homeowners towards their domestic staff. She argues that the entrances and exits of these (often lower caste, lower class) workers cause a great deal of anxiety. Minna Säävälä, meanwhile, argues fascinatingly that new middle-class families (often from lower caste backgrounds) emphasize the auspiciousness of their houses as a way of attempting to gain entrance to middle-class status while skirting questions of purity altogether.
her field work among Bengali worshipers of Kali, Samanta writes that “desiring someone’s well-being is expressed as ‘may you experience mangal’, meaning, ‘let your movement in this world be uninterrupted, without obstruction” (55). The divine embodiment of this well-being, or unobstructed movement, for these devotees of Kali, is ‘Shakti’ “since by her very nature the goddess, as complementary to the quiescent god Shiva in the Tantrik world-view, is seen to move all things to life, thought and action” (55). Samanta continues: in the earthly realm this quality is manifest in the sumangal the “harbinger of well-being” or the married woman (who is seen as carrying, both socially and biologically, the potential for motherhood and hence the furtherance of life (62). Amangal, on the other hand “suggests […] a condition of powerful danger, often in terms of death, disease, and general catastrophe. Hence it suggests discontinuity, interruption and obstruction of the propitious flow of life and its undertakings” (55).

In her study of the devadasis of Puri, Frederique Apffel-Marglin argues that while a wife is auspicious, she is always in danger of becoming inauspicious, since she could, at any time, become a widow. She writes:

Auspiciousness and inauspiciousness speak of fertility, birth, growth, decay and death. These are processes which unfold in time. They are the manifestations of a certain type of power which in this work is identified with the word Shakti. Shakti is essentially a female power, engendering both life and death in its temporal unfolding.

(21)

Apffel-Marglin contrasts this, perhaps somewhat too sharply, with the im/purity axis which, she argues, has to do with hierarchy (especially of caste), with maleness (as
opposed to femaleness), and with stasis and order (as opposed to movement and transformation) (21). Minna Säärälä concurs in arguing that “auspicious/inauspicious does not appear to be a hierarchically ordered binary opposition but rather a transformative principle, a continuum, unlike purity and pollution” (234). And yet there are those, at the two ends of the spectrum, who seem to be more or less static in their states of in/auspiciousness. Devadasis, although they are more and more uncommon in India and their positions have fallen into disrepute, seem formerly to have embodied a permanent state of auspiciousness. Widows, on the other hand, are viewed by many as permanently inauspicious.

Apffel-Marglin carried out her study of devadasis between 1975 and 1981, almost a century after the “anti-nautch campaign” began the process of dismantling the institution and criminalizing the devadasis themselves. She writes explicitly that she was attempting to reconstruct how devadasis would have been employed and understood in their social context before the colonial campaigns against them effectively destroyed their way of life (12). Her study, then, is a (somewhat problematic) historical reconstruction. But it does provide us valuable insights into ways of understanding

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2 Jonathan Parry cautions against too rigid a reading of any of the concepts of purity/impurity, or auspicious/inauspicious. He points out that these are “fuzzy concepts” that are defined largely by “prototypical instances” (“The Hindu” 269). He goes on to argue that the two sets (im/purity and in/auspiciousness) often overlap and seem to affect each other (“The Hindu” 275-7).

3 The practice of dedicating young girls to temples has become almost non-existent in contemporary India due to colonial campaigns against it. European travellers and officials considered devadasis to be prostitutes, and wrote scathing condemnations of the traditions surrounding them (Apffel-Marglin 5). This affected English-educated Indians, and at the end of the nineteenth-century a group of these elites started what came to be called ‘the anti-nautch campaign’ (Apffel-Marglin 6). Eventually, through the efforts of Rukmini Devi Arundale and others, the traditions of dance that used to be the province of devadasis were ‘rehabilitated’ and translated into ‘Indian Classical Dance’ – a form which is largely practiced by the respectable daughters of upper middle class families (Purkayastha 257, Apffel-Marglin 2).
auspiciousness that do not conform to elite, bourgeois nationalist constructions. While devadasis are impure, argues Apffel-Marglin, --because of their unorthodox sexual lives -- they are deeply auspicious. Indeed they are called mangala nari or ‘auspicious women,’ and they sing mangala gita, ‘auspicious songs’ (18). She compares this to a girl’s puberty rite which is considered impure but auspicious (a girl at puberty is impure because of menstruation, but the ceremony is highly auspicious) (19). Numerous other examples of impurity coexisting with auspiciousness exist –Säärälä points out, for example, that the birth of a child is both impure and auspicious (234). Devadasis are safe in their auspiciousness, Apffel-Marglin writes, because they are married to the Lord (Jagannatha, in the case of her study). As a result of this marriage, they embody the auspiciousness of the married woman, and yet they can never become widows, because their husband cannot ever die (46). The devadasis Apffel-Marglin met were also barred from having children (for Apffel-Marglin this is for the same reason, that giving birth would enter them into the earthly cycles of birth, growth, decay, and inevitable death) (295). Apffel-Marglin’s broader argument is that the relation between the devadasis and the king (and earthly rule) is a very close one, and that the rituals the devadasis engage in (sometimes of a sexual nature) are designed to maintain the auspicious (i.e. peaceful and prosperous) rule of the king (and therefore the life of the kingdom and its people).

The widow, on the other hand, seems to symbolize a state of more or less permanent inauspiciousness, but the meaning of this is profoundly ambiguous. If a wife is auspicious because she is actively involved in the processes of creating and sustaining life, a widow is denied this position or this capacity. As Apffel-Marglin puts it: “The status of the wife as a life –and line –maintainer, in other words as an ahya (since
Brahmin widows cannot remarry, her becoming a widow means that she terminates being both a life and a line maintainer), is constantly underlined” (55). The fact that the widow is no longer seen as maintaining life is marked by a number of customs surrounding food. In Puri, Apffel-Marglin argues, widows are not allowed to cook food, and they aren’t permitted to participate in auspicious life-cycle ceremonies (54). Among the Havik Brahmans, says Apffel-Marglin, this prohibition against widows cooking is even more stringent: in this community “widows seem to be hated and feared as poisoners” (54). This aligns with the most extreme understanding of the inauspiciousness of the widow. In this version, the widow is inauspicious because she is somehow responsible for the death of her husband. Or, perhaps, to put this more accurately, the widow is revealed as inauspicious at the death of her husband (but she must have already been so in order to bring about his death). Teskey-Denton writes that beyond an official, textual understanding of the position of the widow, popular opinion often paints her as a witch who has brought about her husband’s death (43). Appfel-Marglin writes that “[t]he inauspicious widow who is believed to poison her relatives [literally and/or figuratively] is the obverse of the auspicious wife who feeds her relatives” (211). Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes that the widow’s (presumably pre-existing) inauspiciousness is believed to be the cause of the “death of a male member of the household,” and that the ascetic lifestyle she is expected to take up is a form of “lifelong atonement” for her involvement in this death (Provincializing Europe 118). Elsewhere Chakrabarty refers to widowhood as an “absolute state of inauspiciousness in a woman (who has brought death to a member of the brotherhood)” (Habitations of Modernity 106).
The widow’s inauspiciousness, then, covers a great deal of ground and is deeply ambiguous. At the broadest level, the widow seems to simply stand in for the inevitability of death, disease, destruction in the world—she is the sign of this reality (just as the wife is the sign of the potential for creation, increase, prosperity, health). Her own direct participation in the bringing of death, disease, and destruction is open to question. For some, the widow seems to be directly responsible for killing her husband (a view of the widow as a witch or a poisoner suggests this understanding). Others see the widow as responsible for his death in a more indirect fashion; her bad karma or her own sins in this life have produced a cosmic imbalance or retribution on the patriarchal line. Lucy Carroll refers to the widow as “an inauspicious being whose sins in a previous life had deprived her of her husband, and her parents-in-law of their son, in this one” (79). For still others, the widow isn’t responsible for the death; she is just its marker, its symbol.

As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four, there is another group of people who are closely associated with the axis of in/auspiciousness in anthropological scholarship, namely hijras. According to Serena Nanda, while hijras generally dress as women and refer to each other using women’s names and female pronouns (xiv), they tend to self-identify as a third gender category (neither men nor women) (15). Many of them are born with male sex organs (xx), and traditionally they undergo a religious emasculation ceremony which is understood as a rebirth into a new life under the special protection of Baluchara Mata (their own particular Mother Goddess) (Nanda 26). It is this close association with the Mother Goddess that renders them deeply auspicious, and they often perform at auspicious ceremonies such as marriages and the births of sons. They are also viewed with considerable fear and suspicion, however, because they are able to curse as
well as to bless. So while they are potentially auspicious, they are also potentially deeply inauspicious (Nanda 5-6).

**Scholarship on Nationalist Discourses:**

While, as I suggested above, this category of scholarship operates quite differently from the anthropological work I have just been outlining, certain similarities do appear. In this body of scholarship, too, in/auspiciousness is closely associated both with spaces (especially with the dichotomy of inside and outside) and with femininity (especially the auspicious wife and ‘new woman’). In both *The Nation and its Fragments* and “The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman’s Question,” Partha Chatterjee has famously outlined the ways in which an ‘auspicious’ inside or domestic space came to be distinguished, in anti-colonial, nationalist rhetoric from a dirty, dangerous, Western dominated outside space. He writes:

> The discourse of nationalism shows that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner. The material domain, argued nationalist writers, lies outside us—a mere external that influences us, conditions us, and forces us to adjust to it. Ultimately, it is unimportant. The spiritual, which lies within, is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential. (*The Nation* 120)

And while this ‘inside’ space of the home was posited as the truest, most authentic instantiation of national culture and spirituality, it was, in fact, quite a new version of domesticity, very different from tradition.
In “The Invention of Private Life,” a fascinating exploration of Sibnath Sastri’s autobiography, *Atmacarit* (1918), Sudpita Kaviraj points out some of the ways in which this new domesticity was radically different from its traditional forebears. Many young men of Sastri’s generation were moving into cities to work as salaried professionals, and, unlike the generation before them, they generally took their wives with them. These young couples, then, often lived in relatively luxurious circumstances in their own homes; they could decorate things to their taste and they could spend time in “each other’s unobstructed company” (105). Kaviraj points out just how different this was from living in a joint family structure; in the traditional paradigm there was an “ethic of conjugal shame” in which it was considered selfish for spouses to pay too much attention to each other in the company of other people, just as it was considered selfish for a woman to pay more attention to her own children than to those of other members of the family (105-106). As couples moved out on their own this expectation fell away, and since a man’s wife was often his only companion and advisor far from his ancestral home it became advantageous for him to have an educated one who could speak to him and have opinions about things (106).

Thus a form of intimacy developed between married men and women living a modern life, driven by material circumstances of sharing occupational experience and ideological power of rationalistic doctrines of autonomy, assisted by the moral imagination of romantic novels. Many marriages did not start as romantic, but were made so retrospectively. (106)
As is already clear, this new domestic space is closely associated with an auspicious ‘new woman,’ one who was to be educated in the bourgeois ideals of “orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility” (Partha Chatterjee “The Nationalist” 247)). Once she had internalized these feminine ideals, they became a kind of shield that allowed her to leave the confines of purdah and venture out into public without fear or suspicion (Chatterjee “The Nationalist” 247). Chatterjee goes on to argue that:

As with all hegemonic forms of exercise of dominance, this patriarchy combined coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion. This was expressed most generally in an inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes: the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother. Whatever be its sources in the classical religions of India or in medieval religious practices, it is undeniable that the specific ideological form in which we know the Sati-Savitri-Sita construct in the modern literature and arts of India today is wholly a product of the development of a dominant middle class culture coeval with the era of nationalism. (“The Nationalist” 248)

This auspicious new woman was, then, both a competent household manager and a self-sacrificing goddess!

This new woman was, of course, clearly distinguished from other types of women. Chatterjee points out that her formal education was meant to separate her from Western women (whose educations resulted in a loss of spiritual virtues), women of an older generation (who had no access to formal education) and women of the lower orders (who were believed to be “culturally incapable of appreciating the virtues of freedom” (“The
The latter two distinctions were particularly important, and closely related, because, as Sumanta Banerjee argues, in previous generations women had shared significant cultural practices that cut across class and caste. She writes that in the early nineteenth-century women enjoyed many of the same entertainments because they shared certain idioms and folkloric traditions, but by the end of that century *bhadralok* (‘respectable’) women had been taught to cultivate different tastes (130). When *bhadralok* women still remained inside their own homes, working women “(like *naptenis* (women from the barber caste who used to decorate with *alta* [red liquid] the feet of andarmahal women), sweepers or singers)” were often the only sources of information about the outside world these women had (Banerjee 129). But over the course of the nineteenth century respectable men began to see working women and their cultural forms “doggerels and poems, songs and theatrical performances” as a “pernicious influence” on their own wives and daughters (Banerjee 128). Formal education for respectable women both allowed them access to the outside world through different means and also taught them to look down on these ‘lower class/caste’ artistic forms.

While this excellent scholarship gives us some sense of how auspiciousness was constructed by nationalists in terms of domestic space and in terms of respectable wives, it raises many more questions than it answers. Clearly understandings of auspiciousness must have shifted quite radically at this time (at least among upper caste/class elites) in order to render auspicious a kind of domesticity and a kind of femininity that hadn’t even existed before. And what actually makes these wives ‘auspicious’? In what does their auspiciousness consist? Perhaps even more importantly, why is there very little discussion of inauspiciousness in this literature? While there is a vast body of
scholarship on widows and the debates surrounding widows at the turn of the twentieth century, this scholarship generally does not discuss widows explicitly as inauspicious.\textsuperscript{4} It does not analyze their positions/choices/options etc. in the context of inauspiciousness but focuses, rather, on the ways in which they became, as Lata Mani puts it, the “ground” of contention between British colonizers and nationalist elites (117). Does this mean that widows were not seen as inauspicious by these nationalist elites? Or if they were inauspicious, what did this mean in this context? And to take the questions one step further, what about the other ‘other’ women –those women who were emphatically not auspicious wives i.e. women of the older generation, lower caste/class women, performers etc? Were these women inauspicious? And if so, how? And finally, what about more recent constructions of gendered in/auspiciousness? How do they coincide with or resist or reinvent these concepts? What are the complicated relationships between the kinds of definitions we find in the anthropological scholarship and this (seemingly quite different) set of definitions in nationalist discourses?

In my own project, I set out to analyze how gendered in/auspiciousness manifests itself in the context of literature, to see if I couldn’t begin the process of coming up with certain limited answers to these questions. Reading literary texts, though, does not give us a transparent window on culture or on the lived experiences of actual people, and I didn’t want to approach these artistic works as if they did. This is not an anthropological or ethnographic study. And the texts I examine are not \textit{reflections} of social life. What I wanted to do was to explore the relationship between literary \textit{representation} and these

\textsuperscript{4} See for example Lata Mani’s “Contentious Traditions,” Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak” or Inderpal Grewal’s \textit{Home and Harem} (1996).
questions. Specifically I wanted to examine if and how authors working outside the ‘real’ world in the artifice of fiction, in a landscape of words, might contribute to shifting the meanings of some of those words -- auspiciousness and inauspiciousness -- in the anti-colonial, nationalist period and how this work of redefinition might continue in our own day.

Outlining my Project:

I find that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries certain highly influential novelists instrumentalize a widow’s destructive inauspiciousness to smash open the social world and to inaugurate a bourgeois Indian modernity. In the process, though, these authors rationalize, domesticate, and modernize auspiciousness and, to some extent, inauspiciousness. By making widow characters directly and individually responsible for negative events, these authors efface the ways in which these characters are always already inauspicious (i.e. they efface a more traditional, ontological understanding of a widow’s inauspiciousness despite the fact that this traditional understanding remains built into the fabric of the novels.) Inspired by a tremendously insightful article by M.S.S. Pandian on the subject of caste, I argue that, effectively, these novels continue the exclusion of widows into modernity while relegating the true reasons for their exclusion to a traditional past, which they do not acknowledge or take responsibility for. This has the effect of silencing these women — denying them an accurate vocabulary with which to speak of their exclusion — and also of squashing and containing the danger attached to them as ontologically inauspicious.
In order to counter this powerful containment, I argue, novelists writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries multiply the vocabularies they use to represent these inauspicious figures. Some of these authors return, in part, to a ‘traditional’ vocabulary; I use scare quotes here very consciously to indicate that these are not ‘authentic’ returns to tradition, but complex reinventions of certain mythic and/or popular motifs. These contemporary authors also layer stories told primarily in the realist mode with myth, folktale, the gothic, and the grotesque. In many cases they depict their inauspicious characters (no longer solely high caste widows) as overtly ontologically inauspicious, and the danger these characters pose becomes not just a reason for oppression and exclusion, but also a form of power. These characters have the power to destroy things, to break down the social order, and, therefore, sometimes, to reinvent themselves and others.

In mingling realism with myth etc, these novels question the nature of the ‘real.’ They break down the binary opposition between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ that their literary forebears tacitly uphold. They also break down the binary opposition between auspiciousness and inauspiciousness insisting that the inauspicious is always imbricated in the auspicious and vice versa. And yet, where they uphold the ontological status of in/auspiciousness, and they depict this ontological feature as inhering in certain people and not in others, they are bound to patriarchal distinctions between people based on gender and sexuality. Too often these texts come up against the flexibility of hierarchies and of patriarchies. And the liberating potential in these texts is disappointingly circumscribed by these underlying hierarchical and patriarchal binds.
Since I was all too aware of the connections between the patriarchal constraints these novels seemed unable to shake off and the history of the novel in India, the connections, in other words, between these patriarchal constraints and literary form, in my last chapter I turned to drama to see if the very different form of plays might offer us a different way of understanding auspiciousness and inauspiciousness. What I discovered was that these plays manage to turn the gaze around; they insist that we look back at ourselves, as chorus, as audience, as mob, as social order. Inauspiciousness, destruction, violence, they seem to argue, inhere in perverse social systems not in individual people. It seems to me that these playwrights are inaugurating another vision of in/auspiciousness, here, a new vision for a rapidly changing new century.

In Chapter One, I look at Bengali novels because a tradition of novel writing emerged very early in Bengal, and these early Bengali works were disproportionately influential on later writers. Furthermore, Bengal, and specifically Calcutta as the capital of the British Raj until 1911, was a hotbed of anti-colonial unrest, and Bengalis were also, therefore, disproportionately influential in producing certain kinds of nationalist discourses. These early nationalist moves are clearly on display in the novels I look at here. In these texts, inauspiciousness becomes a lens through which to explore new kinds of anxieties and fears, new forms of governance, and new understandings of personhood and agency. It also becomes a way of effectuating a shift from romance to realism and a way of inaugurating an Indian modernity. Specifically, I argue that in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Krishanakanter Uil* (*Krishanakanta’s Will*) and *Bishabriksha* (*The Poison Tree*) as well as in Rabindranath Tagore’s *Chokher Bali* (*Sand in the Eye*) a widow’s ambiguous inauspiciousness is used to break down household
order, but this destruction allows the household to be remade in a modern mode – centered around the newly-minted bourgeois citizen-subject couple. The widow’s inauspiciousness, in other words, while still coded as negative, actually makes social change possible (a social change that is written as necessary, if painful, in the novels). The widow herself, however, is not allowed any share in the new national space she has been instrumental in creating, and she is either killed off or hastened off to the holy city of Kashi (also called Benares or Varanasi) for ascetic seclusion.

The deeply ambiguous role of the widow in these novels, I go on to argue, is also closely allied to shifting constructions of sympathy during this transformative period. The reader’s relationship to the widow allows for the opening up and the subsequent containment of sympathy. The very ambiguity of the widow’s inauspiciousness at the beginning of the novels (she is, perhaps, just the victim of bad luck) makes her a figure for the precariousness of social roles; she reminds readers that, if they are women, they too could become widows, and if they are men, they could easily lose their class position in the precarious economic conditions of British colonialism and end up destitute like widows. But over the course of the novels, the meanings of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness shift. By the end, auspiciousness is rewritten as the bourgeois discipline of self-government; the wife is an educated and disciplined household manager whose primary concern is the common good. And inauspiciousness is newly coded as a lack of self-discipline, an overly passionate investment in short-term desires. This literary sleight of hand effaces the fact that the novel has characterized the widow as inauspicious from her earliest appearance, not only following her sexual indiscretion. Nonetheless, readers are made to feel that they no longer need to fear the precarity of
their own social positions; as long as they are disciplined, they will never be subject to the destitution of the widow. In this way the readers’ sympathy for the widow is carefully contained, and the threat posed by the widow is contained as well.

In Chapter Two, I pick up the thread with another widow character, the riveting Nanda Kaul in Anita Desai’s 1977 novel, *Fire on the Mountain*. Desai’s protagonist is an elderly woman at the beginning of the novel, and she is directly shaped by early twentieth-century nationalist discourses of femininity since her upbringing took place under the British Raj, and her married life was lived in the aftermath of the Partition. Desai portrays the constructions of femininity I explored in my first chapter as deeply oppressive, claustrophobic, and totalizing in their reach. Nanda Kaul seeks liberation from the crushing patriarchal constraints that have defined her married life by taking up an ascetic lifestyle in her widowhood, and, while this attempted escape is a dismal failure on a realistic level, it is less so if we read the novel in gothic and mythic modes. By layering the inauspiciousness of the widow over the auspiciousness of the (male) ascetic –specifically the model here is Shiva --Desai enacts a violent fantasy of total destruction that wipes out the hated patriarchal world and clears the way, perhaps, for something entirely new. Desai, in other words, takes up the narrative move used by Bankim Chandra, Tagore and others, of instrumentalizing the widow’s inauspiciousness for purposes of social change, but rather than keeping this change carefully contained, she aligns it with the world-ending power of Shiva in his role as the destroyer and in doing so posits the hope for a truly radical new start.
In Chapter Three I explore a new start of a very different kind. In her novel, *Jasmine*, I argue, Bharati Mukherjee constructs a more popular, less middle-class/domesticated vision of inauspiciousness; her protagonist, Jasmine, is, originally at least, a Punjabi villager who is told in her early childhood that she is fated to be a widow and an exile. She does, indeed, become a widow, and she does emigrate to the United States. And yet, as in Desai’s novel, this widow’s inauspiciousness becomes a form of power. The trail of destruction the protagonist leaves behind her, seemingly the inescapable workings of her evil fate, blurs seamlessly, here, into an American mythology of regeneration through violence. And Mukherjee brilliantly interweaves Indian and American myths; captivity narratives, for example, blur with the story of Kali slaying the Buffalo Demon. What is classified in Jasmine’s Punjabi village as a tragic ‘fate’ becomes instead a manifest ‘destiny’—a glorious conquest of America.

In Chapter Four I examine two more diasporic novels that construct the diaspora in ways fundamentally distinct from Mukherjee. Written roughly twenty years after Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and Anand Mahadevan’s *The Strike* (2006) inhabit a much more fully globalized world (despite the fact that *Sea of Poppies* is, of course, a historical novel). Both novels are largely set in and around India, but their constructions of emigration, the nation, and the diaspora are much more fluid. Both of these novels are solidly postmodern (if I can use a somewhat paradoxical expression); they are part of a recent trend of writing about hijras as figures for a kind of Indian/globalized postmodernity. Hijras, who are part of a very long-standing mixed-caste, mixed-religious community in the sub-continent, often identify, as I mentioned above, as neither men nor women, and are, therefore, quite well-suited to postmodern
analysis and fictional depictions. As I have mentioned above, hijras are also considered both extremely auspicious and potentially deeply inauspicious. In this chapter, I argue that the powerful hijra figures in these two novels help to inaugurate a postmodern space by allowing other characters and, indeed, the reader to see the world differently; they smash open the modern constructions of caste, gender, and sexuality by redefining what is ‘real’ and what is ‘illusion’. The hijra’s curse (i.e. the destruction or prevention of ‘auspicious’ heteronormative marriage and childbearing) is rewritten as the hijra’s blessing (i.e. the creation of a wide-open future unconstrained by the bourgeois, modern rigidities of householdership). And yet these hijra figures open up this space not so much for themselves, as for the elite male protagonists. These novels, in other words, follow, disappointingly closely, the template laid down by the novels I examined in Chapter One. While the world the novels inaugurate is a postmodern one (hybrid, dynamic, fragmented etc.) rather than a modern one, the instrumentalizing and then disposal (more or less) of the in/auspicious characters is very similar. This move, then, begs the question, just how different is this postmodern space and for whom is it liberating?

Finally, I see Chapter Five as a kind of coda to the project. By examining a couple of fairly recent English-language plays, Mahesh Dattani’s *Tara* (1990) and Anupama Chandrasekhar’s *Free Outgoing* (2007), I am able to explore the important relationship between performance and in/auspiciousness and also to contextualize my work on fiction more fully. Because plays bring together in one actual room both characters/performers and audience members, they allow for types of social negotiation that are impossible in fiction; the threats posed by feminine/feminized bodies cannot be contained in drama in
the same ways that they can be in fiction because those bodies are actually present in all their irreducible physicality. But of course, this presence cuts both ways in that these bodies are subject to a very real disciplinary gaze in drama. It is the presence of actual bodies, it seems to me, that makes dramatic performance so ambiguous. Unlike in fiction, performance itself takes on in/auspiciousness in the plays I examine. I have described, at the beginning of this Introduction, how certain (female) performances, namely those of temple dancers or devadasis, were once closely associated with auspiciousness. In this chapter, I trace how in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the rise of realistic drama across India, female performers found themselves at the centre of hard-fought nationalist battles. These actresses were often seen as deeply ambiguous; they performed the roles of auspicious heroines (models of the ideal Indian woman), but they were themselves deeply inauspicious (lower caste/class women who displayed their bodies in public, often seen as a threat to respectable families as the seducers of respectable husbands).

I go on to argue that Mahesh Dattani rethinks this nationalist relationship between in/auspiciousness and performance. His story of conjoined twins can be read both in a realistic mode and in an allegorical mode; in the latter interpretation, the twins become a figure for a new understanding of the creation myth of Ardhanarishvara. In its many traditional versions this myth supports patriarchal visions of male and female social roles and is tied to a view of auspiciousness that is based on heteronormative biological reproduction. But in rethinking the myth Dattani decouples auspiciousness from this limited patriarchal ideology, and reimagines it as closely tied to performance instead. For Dattani, in other words, performance is the primary locus of life-giving creativity. In
doing so he pushes back against the pervasive sense of suspicion associated with
(especially feminine) performances in the nationalist period. But even more than this, he
radically reimagines the whole structure of national social life. For Dattani it is a rigid
hetero-sexism coupled with a violent insistence on a binary division of gender that is
profoundly inauspicious. Inauspiciousness, in other words, inheres in the social order
figures like Tagore and Bankim Chandra helped to inaugurate. Auspiciousness, on the
other hand, lies in a radically different recognition of social life that recognizes duality,
dynamism and play.

Finally, I argue that Chandrasekhar works through the ambiguities of (female)
performances in the Internet age. The play showcases the deep sense of threat that a
conservative patriarchal order locates in the bodies of young women. This patriarchal
order, in the play, has an almost hysterical fear that young women might merely perform
respectability, play the role of good daughters while actually being something else
altogether. Ultimately, though, the play manages to reverse the disciplinary gaze onto the
crowd, the audience, the mob, the social order itself to suggest that the dangerous
performance is to be found here (not among the women characters). It is the people who
make up the mob who are performing moral indignation and outrage while they are
actually sexually excited by these ‘dangerous’ young bodies. It is this deep-seated
middle-class hypocrisy about sexuality that is ultimately the source of violence and
destruction in the play. It is this hypocrisy, here, that is the ultimate locus of
inauspiciousness.
By examining literary representations first around the turn of the twentieth century and then, roughly, around the turn of the twenty-first century, I hoped to see how these authors were working to redefine the meanings of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness and how this work shifted over time across political and literary movements. What I discovered was a complicated, multifaceted vocabulary of power that resisted the distinction between tradition and modernity in order to present an alternative to the depiction of the inauspicious victim who is excluded, controlled, killed-off. Working, as they do, in fictive spaces, these literary authors are able to present us with worlds that look remarkably like our own but in which the terms have been slightly twisted to reveal whole new ways of imagining life. By shifting the meanings of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, sometimes quite subtly, these authors, I argue, allow us to question the kinds of lives that can and cannot be lived, the real and the unreal, the possible and the impossible.
Partha Chatterjee has famously described the ways in which nationalist discourse created a (tacitly upper caste but ostensibly universal) national ‘inside’ space symbolized by ‘auspicious’ Indian womanhood. This newly created domestic space was neither ‘traditional’ nor merely derivative of European privacy; it was a new domesticity for the nationalist ‘new woman.’ Within this new domestic space, a new brand of domesticated feminine auspiciousness came into being, which consisted of an easy overlap between a vision of the wife as modern citizen subject and as goddess of the household. As Chatterjee puts it, the ‘new woman’s’ modern education was presented as “a personal challenge for every woman, thus opening up a domain where woman was an autonomous subject” (*The Nation* 128-9):

> Education […] was meant to inculcate in women the virtues –the typically bourgeois virtues characteristic of the new social forms of ‘disciplining’ –of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting, hygiene, and the

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5 For a fascinating exploration of how an un-domesticated/bourgeois version of auspiciousness fails to align so neatly with modernity, see Satyajit Ray’s 1960 film, *Devi*, based on the short story by Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyya. In this film, the wife as goddess of the household paradigm gets turned on its head, when the father-in-law has a vision of his new daughter-in-law as Kali the very un-domestic Goddess. Her very modern, city-dwelling husband is horrified by this turn of events and tries to convince her that she is not, in fact, Kali, but simply his wife who should come live with him in Calcutta. But the film seems to want to examine a different vision of auspiciousness (a less modern one, perhaps), in which it is always, inevitably paired with the possibility of the inauspicious and in which it is more ontological than epistemological. This auspiciousness is clearly beyond the purview of individualist, secularist notions of agency.
ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world. (*The Nation* 129-30)

These bourgeois virtues of ‘disciplining’ both the self and the household as a whole were coupled with the expectation of a deep sense of spirituality: women were expected to maintain spiritual observances and family cohesiveness that men were no longer able to, while also maintaining purity in dietary matters (*The Nation* 130). This combination created, in the minds of nationalists, the perfect goddess of the household. She was still dedicated unstintingly and unselfishly to the preservation, continuance, and prosperity of her husband’s family, (although, crucially, this also extended to the creation and continuance of the nation as a whole) but her new knowledge rendered her better able to bring about good results. The ‘femininity’ and ‘auspiciousness’ of this new woman was now a matter of will and agency and could, therefore, be a kind of fortress in itself, no longer seen as completely vulnerable to external attack. Women were, then, no longer expected to keep *purdah*, and could “go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programs, and in time even take up employment outside the home” (*The Nation* 130).\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Chatterjee’s very influential argument has received its share of criticism. Himani Bannerji, for example, in her article entitled “Projects of Hegemony: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies’ ‘Resolution of the Women’s Question,’” argues that in his eagerness to present Indian modernity as not merely derivative of European modernity, Chatterjee sacrifices the possibility of autonomous personhood for women and ends up supporting a deeply patriarchal, traditionalist, ethnic vision of nationalism. It seems to me, however, that Chatterjee delineates the ways in which the ‘new patriarchy’ allowed a Hindu nationalist elite to subjugate women in new ways. I do not read Chatterjee as sympathetic to this misogynist nationalist stance. Another important criticism comes from Sumit Sarkar in *Writing Social History* where he argues that *Subaltern Studies* (of which Chatterjee is a part) is overly invested in “cultural, discursive” models of domination to the exclusion of a close attention to “socio-economic” understandings (84). Sarkar is certainly right that economics ought not to be excluded from understandings of structures of domination. On the subject of inauspiciousness, good work has been done to track some of the economics surrounding widow persecution, such as the correlation, during the colonial period, between high rates of *sati* in Bengal.
Inspired by an argument made first by M.S.S Pandian and taken up by Toral Jatin Gajarawala about caste, I argue that while the ‘auspicious’ is Brahminized and domesticated and given pride of place in this new bourgeois Indian modernity, the ‘inauspicious,’ as such, is banished from the realm of the modern. In “One Step Outside Modernity” M.S.S. Pandian argues, following Partha Chatterjee’s formulation, that, in the colonial period, elite upper caste discourse divided the ‘spiritual,’ ‘traditional,’ ‘Indian’ domain of the home and the private sphere, from the ‘material’ domain of the outside world governed by colonial forces. In doing so, he goes on, they annexed ‘national culture’ to themselves: i.e. they characterized all of ‘Indian tradition’ as essentially their own high caste, elite culture, thereby delegitimizing all other cultural communities within the nation. Crucially, this move also had the effect, as Pandian puts it, of “deligitimiz[ing] the language of caste in the domain of politics by annexing it as part of the cultural” (1737, italics in the original). He writes: “It is only by unsettling the boundaries between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, could the lower castes (and women) contest the logic of exclusion inherent in the so-called national culture and talk caste in the colonial public sphere” (1737). Pandian argues that those who did work to ‘unsettle the boundaries’ and who insisted on talking caste in the domain of politics were often attacked as playing into a colonial strategy of ‘divide and conquer.’ At the same time active efforts were made to translate the language of caste into the language of modernity so it could be spoken of in a way that legitimized it without acknowledging it as such. He argues that innumerable books were published in the early twentieth century that rewrote untouchability as a question of hygiene, while certain influential thinkers,
including Annie Besant, argued that the caste system was simply a structure of division of labour. “With the end of the colonial rule,” Pandian goes on to state, “the ambivalence towards the modern exhibited by the Indian nationalist elite during the colonial period withered. Now it is modernity on the terms of the ‘nation’ itself” (1737). In other words, the ‘national culture’ developed during the colonial period becomes, also, the ‘Indian modern.’ Since, as we have seen, this ‘national culture,’ is essentially upper caste, elite culture, lower caste, and the language of caste itself, are now relegated to a space outside ‘modernity.’ Pandian puts it this way: “It is evident that Indian modern, despite its claim to be universal – and of course, because of it – not only constitutes lower caste as its ‘other’, but also inscribes itself silently as upper caste. Thus, caste, as the other of the modern, always belongs to the lower castes” (1738).

It is for this reason, Pandian argues, that R.K. Narayan can write an entire autobiography, mentioning his (upper) caste status only twice in passing, while most autobiographies written by people of lower castes are explicitly opportunities for exploring the problem of caste (1735). Gajarawala, picking up this argument, writes that a similar phenomenon occurs in novels, especially the modern Anglophone novel. She argues that the language of caste gets buried, and therefore distorted, in the language of class, in these novels written, largely, by elite upper caste Indians living in India or in the diaspora.

While I don’t, in any way, wish to suggest an equivalence between caste and questions of in/auspiciousness, I do think there is a very useful comparison to be made here with the way in which the novels I examine in this chapter, written by and for elite audiences, domesticate and annexe to this elite audience, and thence to the ‘modern’ the domain of the ‘auspicious,’ while relegating the ‘inauspicious’ to the realm of the pre-modern or to
a realm ‘outside’ modernity. There is also a very useful comparison to be made in the way that the nationalist discourse in these novels rewrites ‘inauspiciousness’ in the language of modernity: specifically suggesting that the widow characters have caused trouble because of their own choices and their own behaviours. This translation into the rationalized language of modernity distorts the meanings of inauspiciousness by hiding its ontological basis, and it justifies the continued mistreatment of people who are tacitly understood to be always already inauspicious.

This banishment of inauspiciousness from the nationalist construction of the modern Indian nation has also led, it seems to me, to scholarly neglect of the concept. By focusing explicitly on the concept of inauspiciousness, here, I hope to recapture some of its complexity. Through a reading, first of Bankim Chandra’s *Bishabriksha* (*The Poison Tree*) and *Krishanakanter Uil* (*Krishanakanta’s Will*) and then of Tagore’s *Chokher Bali* (*Sand in the Eye*), I will trace how the widow’s inauspiciousness, the destructiveness she trails in her wake (variously defined), is actually put to use to inaugurate social change; the widow actually brings about the new domesticity and the new bourgeois couple who inhabit it. The widow, then, somewhat surprisingly, is possessed of an almost revolutionary power, here. But by the end of these texts, she must leave, exit the text and this new space of modernity bringing her inauspiciousness with her. Her power to effect more social change, in other words, is effectively foreclosed. 

Both Bankim Chandra’s 1873 novel *Bishabriksha* and his 1878 novel *Krishanakanter Uil* stage a kind of fall from idyllic innocence into an incipient modernity. The form and

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7 I am working with translations of *Bishabriksha* and *Krishanakanter Uil* by Marian Madden and S.N. Mukherjee and of *Chokher Bali* by Radha Chakravarty.
style of the two novels mirror this position on the cusp of modernity, as the stories are equal parts allegorical romance and realist novel. The agent of this fall, in both cases is a beautiful young widow. The effects of the fall, however, and the spaces that open up on the other side of it are quite different in the two novels, and, in fact, the novels seem to be exploring positive and negative outcomes respectively.

When Kunda, a young girl who will shortly become a widow, first sets eyes on the household of Nagendra and his wife Suryamukhi she is filled with awe:

At the sight of Nagendra’s residence, Kunda was speechless. She had never seen such a large establishment. It had three outer buildings and three inner ones. Each building was like a palace. By an iron gateway one entered the principle outer building, which was surrounded by high, painted iron railings. Having entered, one passed along a fine, grass-free well-made red path. On each side of the path, a paradise of cows, was a plot of earth filled with soft new grass. In these were circular beds made beautiful by blossoming trees with flowers and leaves of all hues [….] (23)

It is immediately clear that the place is not only a paradise for cows, but for people too. While Nagendra is clearly wealthy, this wealth is presented as a natural outgrowth of a well-run system, pleasing to the Gods; it is not the result of greed or tyranny. Everything in the household is organized for efficiency and for beauty. Everything and everyone is in their proper place. And yet danger lurks in this marvellous place, and it lies specifically in its very beauty and innocence. Our narrator argues, counterintuitively, that “Untroubled happiness is the foundation of misery; without previous unhappiness,
stable happiness does not develop” (107). This is the case, our narrator writes, because with perfect happiness a person never learns how to “control the mind” (106); it is only through education that this control comes, and “I am not speaking only of education by the teaching of a guru; it is the heart’s suffering which is the best education” (106).

How, then, could Nagendra learn such control? “God had put him on this earth in possession of all happiness. Graceful form; untold wealth; healthy body; wide-ranging intelligence; amiable character; faithful, affectionate wife: all these rarely fall to the lot of one person. They had fallen to Nagendra” (106-7). Nagendra inhabits, in short, the ideal household, as does his wife Suryamukhi. And yet, they were both born into all this perfection. They didn’t have to work for their positions; they haven’t been tested or tried as individuals. Their positions, at this point, could be largely ascribed to mere luck, mere accident of birth. In order for them to achieve “stable happiness” they must prove themselves, prove that this paradise is not a mere accident, but an outcome of their own excellent characters. Only then can they be said to be truly worthy Brahmins.

The fall from innocence that the widow occasions, then, is a step away from mere aristocratic privilege into a truer kind of Brahminness—a leadership based on virtue and responsibility. As Julius J. Lipner writes,

for Bankim the Brahmin was required to discharge responsibilities, not to enjoy entrenched privileges. The Brahmin found himself, on the cusp of a new era, socially and ritually privileged by the weight of tradition. This was not his personal achievement for which he could claim credit. He was to use this privileged position, therefore, to discharge the responsibilities of leadership in society for
the good of all. He was to do this in a spirit of selfless
service (niskām karma). (17)

The encounter with the widow character, in this novel, then, is a kind of education for the
householder couple. It dislodges them from positions of ease and happiness through
inherited wealth and privilege, into positions of self-conscious and disciplined
responsibility for the good of others. In short, it is a transition from an idyllic but
vulnerable tradition into a stable and solid bourgeois bhadralok modernity.

The widow’s inauspiciousness, the destructive potential upon which the plot of the novel
depends, is split here and divided across two separate characters. On the one hand is
Kunda, the beautiful daughter of an impoverish Brahmin, and on the other is Hira, the
also beautiful (but, we are reminded continuously, very dark) daughter of a Kayastha
who works as a housemaid in Nagendra’s household. Kunda, like her benefactors
Nagendra and Suryamukhi, is a paragon of innocence—but her innocence is even more
extreme and therefore even more dangerous. She is an exaggerated, and intensified
version of their gentle receptiveness and seems to symbolize this one (near) fatal
weakness of the household. She is perhaps a vision of the perfect wife taken to extreme
and therefore troubling levels. She is a blank, nothing but a mirror, a sponge for soaking
up the needs and personalities and desires of others. It is this very sponge-like
receptiveness that makes her dangerous. We can see how she endangers the household
by entertaining contaminating influences when she gives a hearing to Haridasi Vaishnavi,
ostensibly a female mendicant ascetic, but in fact a male Brahmin alcoholic filled with
lust and harboring unsavory designs on Kunda herself. He sings lusty songs which drive
off the respectable members of the household but Kunda “stayed. The reason for this
was that Kundanandini had understood nothing of the substance of the songs” (56).

When Suryamukhi and her sister-in-law see Kunda in a tête-à-tête with the Vaishnavi, they think “how sinful Kunda is” (56), but it is clear to the reader that she is totally unable to recognize danger or to sniff out deceit. She is so innocent that she cannot even understand references to inappropriate or sexual acts. She becomes, ultimately, the vessel or the puppet for the other widow character, Hira, who, as a non-Brahmin maidservant, is made to take on all the malicious qualities associated with widowhood. She is filled with lust (indeed she ends up dying slowly riddled with a sexually transmitted disease), and her jealousy leads her to maliciously plot the destruction of the household. Hira encourages Nagendra’s attraction to Kunda and uses her to foment conflict between husband and wife.

When Nagendra ultimately marries Kunda, Suryamukhi leaves to become a beggar ascetic and the household falls into utter disarray. In his grief and guilt Nagendra soon

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8 The presence of an outsider within the women’s quarters is somewhat of a fraught situation in 1873. As Sumanta Banerjee has carefully documented, and as I have mentioned in my introduction, by the end of the nineteenth century women’s popular culture was becoming increasingly unacceptable in upper-class/caste Bengali households. Before that period, (lower caste) women performers often came into the inner parts of the household and interacted with the women. Indeed, such women were often a major source of information about the outside world for these upper-caste women (Banerjee 129). “Often stark and bitter in expressing the plight of women in a male-dominated society, the poems and songs popular among the lower social groups were, at the same time, tough, sensual or bawdy, in an idiom specific to women” (Banerjee 131-2). The bawdiness of Haridasi Vaishnavi’s song can be linked to this tradition. As Banerjee points out, however, by the end of the nineteenth century most “bhadralok women had been taught to cultivate different [more chaste] tastes” (130). And Vaishnavite women were hounded out of elite homes (154). Clearly Bankim’s Suryamukhi and Kamalamani have learned to be horrified by Haridasi Vaishnavi’s songs. This Vaishnavi figure might be seen here, also, as a double of the widow herself (before we learn, of course, that she is in fact a he). As Krupa Kirit Shandilya points out, many Bengali widows became Vaishnavis (following in the footsteps of the great Vaishnavi Saint, Mirabai). Because such women were sometimes forced into prostitution, they were often associated with sexuality and danger. This is also where the Bengali and Hindustani words for prostitute come from: baishya or vaishya (Shandilya 34).

9 Bankim seems to have a particularly low opinion of maidservants. In Krishanakanter Uil, he writes: “a house which has no maidservant has no deceit, no falsehoods, no quarrels and no dirt; the goddess called maidservant is the creator of these four evils” (191).
follows her, and the destruction is complete. Luckily they eventually find each other again and return to put things to rights, ready and willing to accept Kunda, the second wife, into the newly reestablished household. But Kunda proves resistant to the ‘education’ they have both received. In a chapter entitled “The Simple-hearted and the Snake,” Hira, eager to enact one last revenge, tells Kunda about a poison she keeps in a little box, and Kunda, thinking that her husband has forsaken her forever, steals it and commits suicide. Her death, equal parts suicide and murder demonstrates her unfitness to be part of the household (since it proves once again that her innocence is too dangerous and that she hasn’t learned anything from her troubles), and it also, of course, conveniently banishes this weakness from the household once and for all. Hira, as I have mentioned, also dies shortly thereafter. The heteronormative, monogamous couple are now much more fit for “stable happiness.” They have fallen from their state of innocence, but are now more able to recognize the dangers that might assail their household (conniving maidservants, cross-dressing alcoholics, beautiful young widows etc.), and protect against them. They have also proven their metal and character through trials of sickness and hunger on the road, and they have returned to take up their responsibilities as rulers of their vast estate, an obvious stand-in for a nation-to-be.

As I have suggested above, *Krishanakanter Uil* takes up the other possible outcome of this testing. As in the beginning of *Bishabriksha*, the family estate, and especially the protagonist Govindalal’s part of it, in this second novel is also idyllic, reminiscent of paradise on earth, and the protagonist himself seems a perfect outgrowth of this enchanting place:
On the other side of the tank was Govindalal’s flower garden, where myriads of flowers bloomed in cluster on cluster, row upon row, on every branch and every leaf; white, red, yellow, blue, large and small. Some had honey bees on them, others bumble-bees, their buzzing too was attuned to the kokil’s song. The breeze was bringing the strong scent of the blossoms across the tank, which too was attuned to the call of the bird. There, in the shade of a flowery grove, stood Govindalal himself; his thick black hair fell in curls over his shoulders, golden brown as the champak flower, and a flowering creeper swayed over his tall figure, more beautiful than a tall flowering tree. (193)

And yet it is clear from the outset that some Brahmins and sons of the household are not worthy of this inheritance. In the very beginning of the novel, Haralal, Krishnakanta’s eldest son threatens to marry a widow in an attempt to force his father to give him a larger share of the estate, and Krishnakanta disowns him instead. From this early moment, then, a widow’s inauspiciousness is already associated with disinheritance, and being unfit to take up one’s Brahminly responsibilities of leadership and rule. But this association and outcome are played out more fully through Govindalal and Rohini.

Rohini, a young Brahmin widow, falls in love with Govindalal, and when she realizes that her love is hopeless she drowns herself in the tank next to his garden. But in a scene that combines the transgressions of the Bible’s Eve and Shelley’s Dr Frankenstein, Govindalal brings her back to life. As in The Poison Tree, the young widow here is positioned as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. Govindalal breathes into her mouth to resuscitate her, and the temptation is presented like
this: “Who would blow into those plum-like red lips which were still full of nectar, a pitcher full of intoxicating sensual desires, like poison” (221). As he stands in his Edenic garden he is presented with this dangerous red fruit, and when he places his lips against hers, he begins his ultimate fall from innocence. The moment is marked by his wife Brahmar who, in another part of the house, unaware of what is transpiring in the garden, “trying to hit a cat with a stick, hit herself on the forehead instead” (222).

But as I have already suggested, this moment of Govindalal’s loss of innocence is also comically Frankenstein-esque. Govindalal blows into Rohini’s mouth for “two or three hours,” while the gardener raises her arms up and down over and over (222). It is clear that this is a perversion of the order of nature; Rohini’s rightful place is with Yama, god of death. Indeed, Govindalal’s wife Brahmar, the text’s presiding saint, encourages her to kill herself, even going so far as to suggest the time, place and means of doing so (217). The world that follows Rohini’s reanimation from the dead is, unsurprisingly, an unnatural and perverse one. Govindalal is himself disinherited – once again marking his unfitness for Brahminly leadership. And when Govindalal and Rohini leave and set up house together, instead of creating anything approaching a respectable, Brahmin

10 In Biskabriksha, too, Bankim suggests that the widow really ought to be dead. Kunda is on the point of suicide on multiple occasions, and the text treats her inability to carry out her wish to die as a failing. The first time she is on the point of death, she has a vision of her mother who encourages her to come join her and the rest of her dead family members. When Kunda draws back from doing so, “a slight frown of displeasure appeared on her mother’s compassion-bright yet serious face” (12).

11 This representation of the widow as always already undead, or a kind of ghost is repeated in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s Srikanta. There the child widow is sold to a prince by her mother, and when her mother returns to her native village she tells everyone that the child has died. The widow Rajlakshmi’s entire later life is a kind of second life, a return from the dead. The hero, Srikanta’s meeting with her for the first time since childhood, is closely associated with the night he spends at the cremation ground around the same time (listening to the voices of the dead). In this novel, incidentally, the widow’s inauspiciousness does not destroy an older order to create a bourgeois householder couple, it instead prevents the protagonist from becoming a householder in order that he might become an artist!
household, they inhabit a den of vice. In fact, as Krupa Kirit Shandilya states, “Rohini is transformed from a respectable, upper-caste woman into a pleasure-seeking tawaif [courtesan] who associates with a Muslim man” (47). When a friend of Brahmar’s father comes to seek out Govindalal, he finds him lounging with Rohini who is learning music from the master Danesh Khan. It is not terribly surprising, then, that Govindalal gives the ultimate proof of his unfitness for leadership and his inability to govern his own mind, when, in a fit of grief and rage, he murders Rohini.\(^{12}\)

Rohini here is the anti-Brahmar, the anti-wife. While Brahmar produces happiness and prosperity, Rohini brings about destruction, even death. A household run by Rohini is one, necessarily, of pain, contamination, and eventual violence. Just as Kundanandini is associated with the contamination of maidservants, travelling performers, and tricky drug-addled men, Rohini is associated with the contamination of Muslims (and the lives of degradation and sexual license Bankim has them stand in for. The widow’s inauspiciousness, here, effects a fall from an idyllic traditional innocence, into modernity. It is clear that not all Brahmins will be fit to take places of leadership and responsibility within the modern nation, but those who are fit will be those who are educated and disciplined. They are aware of the dangers posed by the lower orders (the lower classes, Muslims etc.), and must learn to protect their households (and the nation) against their destructiveness. They will be respectable bhadralok couples like Nagendra

\(^{12}\) One widespread nationalist explanation for the mistreatment of women in 19th century Hindu India, as Uma Chakravarti points out, was that this ‘barbaric’ conduct was a product of “the Muslim Interregnum” (37-8). Bankim’s novel does have the quality of a kind of allegorical tale of the downfall of a golden age of Hindu innocence into a degraded present presided over by Muslims.
and Suryamukhi, not mere inheritors of privilege but leaders whose traditions and educations have fit them for rule.

I want to turn now to a reading of Rabindranath Tagore’s *Chokher Bali* to trace how this motif shifts and expands in this later work. Written roughly thirty years after these two novels by Bankim, Tagore’s novel is significantly more realist in style and characterization. I will do two parallel readings of the novel here to grasp the full complexity of the widow’s role. In the first, I trace how the widow transforms the householder couple into modern citizen subjects, disciplined and ready for self-rule. In the second, by tracking the workings of sympathy in the novel, I argue that the text also seeks to discipline the reader and turn him or her into a citizen subject as well. Once again, though, the widow here remains, herself, outside this space of modernity; her only role, by the end, is a self-annihilating asceticism that cuts her off completely from social life.

While eminently likeable and ultimately good-natured, Mahendra, Tagore’s chief male protagonist here, is set up as a kind of spoiled child. Indeed, he seems to reflect late 19th and early 20th century Bengali stereotypes of ‘modern,’ read Western, young people. His father is long since dead, suggesting the destruction of an older, traditional social order. We are told repeatedly in the early pages of the novel that Mahendra has been overindulged by his mother: “Like a baby kangaroo that lives in its mother’s pouch even after birth, he had grown accustomed to the shelter of his mother’s protective care. He depended on her for all his needs, be it food, entertainment, rest or leisure” (Loc 110). Mahendra is explicitly infantilized here; far from being an independent, individual, he is
“a baby kangaroo.” And yet his power in the household is virtually complete: “his desires were unchecked. He could not tolerate the pressure of other people’s expectations” (Loc 120).

He doesn’t have an arranged marriage, indeed, he refuses the match his mother makes for him. Instead he enters into marriage “impulsively” (Loc. 165), with the destitute orphan niece of his beloved aunt. But this marriage is explicitly characterised as the continuation of Mahendra’s infantile rule over the household. His new wife, Asha is a blank slate with no moral vision of her own. As her aunt puts it to Mahendra: “‘She is a young girl, an orphan with no mother to guide and train her –what would she know of right and wrong?’” (Loc 398). And she readily falls under Mahendra’s spell, partaking with him, of spoiled ease: “Shedding the bashfulness and awe expected of a new bride, she basked in the glory of being a fortunate wife, unhesitatingly ascending the throne at her husband’s feet” (Loc. 386). Indeed, if anything, Mahendra’s marriage makes him more spoiled and unworthy to rule the household than ever before. He gives up studying and spends all his days lounging with his wife (and half-heartedly attempting to teach her to read and write), while, for her part, she leaves the house work to her mother-in-law and does the same. The result of this overindulgence is that Mahendra fails his exams and the two love-birds drive his mother to the extreme step of showing her displeasure by going on an extended visit to her birthplace. When they are left on their own their incompetence to run a household becomes painfully evident:

Things were in such disarray in all the rooms that nothing could be found when required. One day, Mahendra’s surgical instrument was banished to oblivion in the garbage
after being used for chopping vegetables, and his notebook, having served its purpose as a hand-held fan, now rested in the ashes of the kitchen. (Loc 647)

When Mahendra’s mother, Rajalakshmi, returns she brings with her Binodini, a young and beautiful widow (she is also the woman Rajalakshmi had originally chosen for Mahendra). Binodini is educated, performs household duties with skill and devotion and becomes the favourite of everyone in the household. But before long her own selfish passions utterly destroy the last remaining tie that holds the household together. She seduces Mahendra, and he abandons his wife and mother to follow Binodini.

The text hints at older, more popular understandings of the widow’s ‘inauspiciousness,’ in, for example, the climactic confrontation between Binodini and Rajalakshmi (who is also, after all, a widow):

‘Pishima, we belong to the tribe of witches,’ retorted Binodini, unperturbed. ‘I was not aware of my own powers of seduction, but you recognized them; you, too, were not quite aware of your own artfulness, but I saw it. There must have been some magic; the art of illusion must have been called into play, or else this could never have happened. I cast my spell, part knowingly, part unbeknownst to myself. You, too, laid your trap part deliberately, part unconsciously. Such is the customary behavior of our tribe, for we are witches.’ (Loc 2660)

Binodini agrees to her own role in the breakdown of the household, but she also accuses Rajalakshmi here –specifically of plotting for the destruction of her son’s marriage out of (semi-incestuous) jealousy. This reading of the widow’s inauspiciousness as semi-
conscious witchery continues to haunt the text, as does, to a lesser extent, the suggestion that Binodini’s widowhood was inevitable (and therefore that the death of her husband is somehow attributable to her). When Mahendra first hears that she has been widowed he says, facetiously, to be sure: “‘Thank goodness I didn’t marry her,’ […] ‘Had my wife been widowed, I wouldn’t have survived an instant’” (Loc 131).

And yet the text itself seems to endorse a more limited psycho-sexual explanation for the widow’s inauspiciousness. Binodini wrecks destruction in the household because she is a young and beautiful woman who has unfulfilled sexual longings. The inauspiciousness that she embodies comes to stand in for all ‘disordered’ sexuality—all sexuality that is not tethered to a strong sense of duty and obligation and isn’t in the service of some greater social good. Her extremely lucid and terrible understanding of the ultimate emptiness, and indeed the claustrophobia and contempt, at the heart of her relationship with Mahendra reveals Tagore’s vision of this kind of human relationship:

In this dark hellhole, this bed of slime and mire that was the degraded condition of their life, torn between contempt and desire, a monstrous daily conflict would inevitably ensue. […] The agony in her heart, this tiny, confined dwelling, and the incessant pressure of Mahendra’s desire—contemplating all this, Binodini shuddered in terror. (Loc 3590)

But this is only the more extreme version of the love that had previously ruled the lives of Mahendra and Asha. The same gnawing sense of meaninglessness and emptiness: “As a flower plucked from a tree gradually droops and shrivels, love that avoids the harsh
realities of practical life cannot thrive on its own resources. Asha, too, began to secretly notice that a jaded, weary note had crept into their constant togetherness” (Loc 628).

Binodini’s inauspiciousness, then, like that of Bankim’s Kundanandini, is an intensified and enlarged version of the flaw at the centre of the household. Binodini, by intensifying these selfish passions and embodying them, also draws them out (like a poison), transforms them, wipes the slate clean, and sets the stage for a very different kind of household, purged of this undertone of unease and danger and ready to march confidently into a national future. By drawing Mehendra away from Asha, Binodini shatters their (selfish) attachment to each other and leaves the household in ruins. Rajalakshmi takes to her bed in a dire illness and Asha is left utterly bereft. But Binodini’s love and lust shifts its focus and settles on Mahendra’s friend Bihari, ensuring that she doesn’t ever consummate her relationship with Mahendra. Instead she literally draws out his lust and desire (pulls it out of him, again, like a poison), leaving him, ultimately, exhausted and empty, awakened, disenchanted:

> After the exuberance of a violent emotion, there is a sense of exhaustion; the tired heart then wants to temporarily distance itself from the subject of its emotion. During this emotional ebb tide, all the concealed mire of the riverbed lies exposed; what had earlier seemed enchanting now appears distasteful. Today, Mehendra was unable to understand why he had degraded himself in this fashion. (4058)

Mahendra returns to his ailing mother and his aggrieved wife a changed man. But Binodini has yet more work to do. She is now not only burdened with her own
unfulfilled and unacceptable desires, but also those of the entire household –primarily Mahendra’s unrestrained willfulness, but also the uncontained passion of Asha and Rajalakshmi for Mahendra. In true ascetic fashion, she then transforms this sexual energy into ascetic power –i.e. she transmutes this inauspicious, dangerous energy, into a higher, purely spiritual, form of auspiciousness. In refusing Bihari’s (rather tardy) marriage proposal, Binodini transforms her earthly love and lust into unselfish desire for the greater good. She tells him: “You secretly work for the good of others: grant me responsibility for one of your undertakings, and in fulfilling it, I shall count myself among your devotees” (Loc 4166). But ultimately, Bihari makes it clear to her, the best she can do for the good of others is to stay away from them, devoting herself to the ascetic’s life in the holy city of Kashi. She leaves at the end, taking with her all the tension, jealousies, and desires she has embodied throughout the text.

Binodini has learned the hard way how to discipline herself. She learns to recognize her own passions and to bring them under control by transforming them into selfless (and sexless) devotion to the greater good. In this way she has become something like a modern subject. And yet, it seems to me that her position is merely parallel to that of a subject. She cannot be a true subject because she is banished from all social life at the end –she has no place in the national life. Dipesh Chakrabarty and Susie Tharu both argue that the widow is the first, or the ideal ‘subject’ in Indian modernity. Tharu argues, in “The Impossible Subject: Caste and Desire in the Scene of the Family” that “[t]he widow […] is vidhava –without husband –and consequently in need of sympathy and protection, but also of regulation and governance. Widow stories therefore are invariably also historical engagements with questions of political order and citizenship” (189).
Chakrabarty suggests a similar relationship between the widow and political subject-hood when he claims that the widow may have been a source of fascination for early Indian novelists specifically because she provided an automatic case of a conflict between the individual and the social order. “[T]he unrecognized desires of the widow” writes Chakrabarty, “represented a case of complete subordination of the individual to society.” And, therefore, “[i]n the widow one could see the expressivist subject clamoring for (self-) recognition” (Provincializing Europe 133). But Chakrabarty goes further than Tharu in following up on this thesis. He outlines the development of the modern subject in European theory from the eighteenth century, in which the struggle between the individual and society takes place externally, through the nineteenth century, where this struggle is internalized:

The birth of the modern subject in nineteenth-century European theory required a conflicted interiority where reason struggled to bring under its guidance and control something that distinguished one subject from another and that at the same time was different from reason. This was the (initially) conscious and (later) subconscious world of passions, desires, and sentiments that make up human subjectivity. (Provincializing Europe 130)

Chakrabarty argues that a similar trajectory took place in portrayals of widows in nineteenth century Bengal. He writes that early reformers such as Vidyasagar didn’t conceptualize the widows they sought to help as possessed of agency –they were simply young bodies who posed a threat to respectable marriages, but novelists like Bankim Chandra, Tagore, and Saratchandra, turned these widows into true subjects who
struggled valiantly with their own passions and learned, eventually, to master them \((Provincializing Europe 133)\).

While I agree with Chakrabarty and Tharu that the widow is at the centre of debates about subjectivity and indeed that she must learn to ‘govern’ her own passions, I argue that her primary role is to turn other people into modern subjects, especially the heteronormative householder couple. As we have seen, previous to the arrival of Binodini, Asha and Mahendra are incapable of properly running a household or putting checks on their own feelings and desires. They spend their days canoodling while other members of the household are forced to pick up the slack. They are explicitly incapable of self-rule and discipline. Binodini, as I have suggested already, arrives on the scene as an embodiment of selfish passion writ large and this destroys the last remaining remnants of household order or harmony. But their encounter with the chaos wrought by Binodini, teaches them a lesson they won’t forget, and when Binodini leaves, she takes with her all the dangers associated with passions, leaving behind a disciplined and well-run household, purged of selfishness and newly dedicated to the common good. In the absence of her doting husband, Asha has been forced to nurse her ailing mother-in-law and learn how to run the household efficiently. She has also, it is worth noting, found time to take her studies more seriously and can now read and write well. She also learns, crucially, how to bring her own feelings under control. In order to forgive and forget the wrongs done to her, her aunt counsels her: “You must try with all your heart, inwardly and outwardly, to preserve the appearance of having forgotten. Begin with outward appearances first; then you will be able to forget inwardly, as well” \((Loc4322)\). Through a regime of rigid adherence to the efficient and proper running of the household, and
proper service toward its members, in other words, the appropriate feelings will be generated of themselves, and the inappropriate feelings (jealousy, rage, resentment) will wither. Mahendra, for his part, has undergone a similar transformation. Upon his return he realizes with a twinge that he is no longer the undisputed god/tyrant of the household. “Having temporarily left his niche, Mahendra had returned to find that his place in the household was no longer the same.” If his desires and actions contravene the greater good, he will not be obeyed (as happens immediately when he tries to enter his mother’s room and Asha refuses to allow it). And he too must devote himself to the greater good. He, also, must learn to discipline his whims in the service of others. He tells Bihari, “If I don’t steer my life onto the path of karma – the pursuit of my designated work and sacred duty – then one of these days, I must surrender to world-weariness” (Loc 4399). And so a plan is devised: “My friend, Bihari, I am trained in medicine. Please involve me in the work that you have begun. Chuni has become such an expert housekeeper that she will also be of great help” (Loc 4399). Disciplined and reconstructed they can now all devote themselves to the greater good in Bihari’s charitable projects. They are newly-minted citizen-subjects ready and willing to take up the work of the nation-to-be.

To suggest, as Chakrabarty and Tharu do, that the widow is the first or preeminent citizen-subject in early Indian novels, is to efface the crucial differences between the widow and the householder couple. While all three must learn to discipline their selfish desires in the service of the greater good, the householder couple does so within the social order, the widow, may only do so by annihilating her social self, by renouncing any claim on a social life. In other words, her only available way of serving the greater good is by protecting the social order from herself. Her task is to walk out of the social
order, to leave the opening space of the nation, and to bring her inauspiciousness with her. On the earthly plane she can only ever be inauspicious, an embodiment of all the contingencies and uncertainties of a life lived in the flesh. If she were to have married Bihari, the text makes it clear, Binodini would have just brought shame upon him. And even if she were to have dedicated herself to the service of the poor in one of his projects (as Asha and Mahendra later do), Bihari tells her, she would just bring pain to his heart. Only by transcending the earthly plane and rising to a spiritual one can she regain auspiciousness.

The widow’s inauspiciousness, then, is crucial for its destructive and transformative potential, but once the citizen-subjects have come into being and the space of the nation has been opened up (with its population of those disciplined in the service of the greater good), this destructive and transformative potential must be ousted. We are left with a national space presided over by a newly domesticated auspiciousness, a secularized and rationalized auspiciousness. We are left with an auspicious woman whose beneficent characteristics do not (only) arise out of a cosmic future-oriented fertility and are no longer paired with a dangerous potential to bring about destruction and death. This auspicious woman is auspicious because she is an efficient housewife who knows how to feed her family to keep them healthy and to raise disciplined children. Her power is agentic; it is within her own hands. This new national space controlled and created by human will and agency, responsibility and discipline must always keep just out of sight all those excessive realities that belie this neat ordering. The wife’s ultimate and inevitable potential to become a widow must be masked and effaced. And the realm of inauspiciousness is banished to a space and time outside the nation, outside the modern.
I want to turn now to an examination of how sympathy for the widow functions in these early novels, and therefore how the reader him/herself is constructed, disciplined and rendered auspicious by the realist text. As Dipesh Chakrabarty spells out so well, the colonial and reformist discussions about the treatment of widows also inaugurated, in colonial Bengal, a discussion about the concept of ‘sympathy.’ Chakrabarty documents how the modern experience of sympathy first required the modern construction of the ‘general human.’ He writes:

It is as though a person who is able to see in himself or herself the general human also recognizes the same figure in the particular sufferer, so that the moment of recognition is a moment when the general human splits into the two mutually recognizing and mutually constitutive figures of the sufferer and the observer of suffering. (*Provincializing Europe* 119-20)

This capacity to recognize in the other (as well as in the self) this figure of the ‘general human’ is also, he argues, at the heart of modern subjectivity (119). He is not, of course, suggesting that there was no sympathy before the advent of modernity or, indeed, that people could not recognize others as fellow human beings. He is arguing, rather, that modernity inaugurates a transcendent, disembodied observer who relates to both himself and to others through the category of the ‘general human’ (119). While I fully agree with this evaluation, (and indeed this position is supported by numerous other scholars of sympathy), Chakrabarty collapses the crucial differences that remain and are re-written and reinforced in modernity between “the sufferer and the observer of suffering.” This allows him, as I have argued above, to suggest that the widow herself is the preeminent
modern Bengali subject, rather than suggesting, as I do, that the preeminent subjects are those who observe her suffering.

Following Audrey Jaffe’s masterful explication of the functioning of sympathy in Victorian realism, I argue, here, that the widow is the preeminent object of sympathy in early Indian realism because she embodies the fear of a catastrophic loss of social identity – the underlying fear in modernity that social identity might be arbitrary, might have no ontological basis. Her inauspiciousness is the sign of this anxiety, but by transforming her inauspiciousness into a case of (sexual) passion that can be disciplined, early Bengali novels banish this fear and re-inscribe rigid social identities (now read as chosen, earned, and agentic). The modern subject is born, not so much in the experience of sympathy, as in sympathy’s containment.

In Scenes of Sympathy, Jaffe argues that the fallen woman, Ruth, (in the novel of the same name) “embodies anxieties constitutive of Victorian middle-class identity: the fear that respectability is a masquerade, that the individual self is already and inevitably fallen – that, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have put it, in the construction of bourgeois identity, an ‘underground self’ has ‘the upper hand’” (81). She goes on to write that those who feel sympathy for this character are exposed to the terrifying ambiguity at the heart of the concept of the ‘general human’: “These scenes dramatize not Adam Smith’s general idea of sympathy – the imagining of the self in the other’s place – but rather a fear of sympathy’s reversibility, as if the other’s identity might too easily become one’s own (83). The effects of feeling sympathy, in other words, are dangerous, even potentially revolutionary. Feeling sympathy for the other involves a potential realization that the
other’s identity (of suffering, destitution, social exclusion etc.) could easily become one’s own, indeed it bears with it the fear that one’s own identity of middle-class respectability is a mere performance, a representation, without any essential or ontological underpinnings. Although the structures of social identity are quite different in the Indian context, the modern experience of identity insecurity, and the modern fear that social identity might be a mere masquerade are certainly present in these early novels.  

Sudipta Kaviraj points this out, when he argues that Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s oeuvre betrays an obsessive worrying over the categories of wife and mistress. Through a reading of Pasupati and Manorama in *Mrnalini* and of Upendra and Indira in *Indira*, Kaviraj argues that Bankim is making an artistic “enquiry into the ontology of social relations,” and that this enquiry ultimately “shows, far from having objective attributes (and despite being made in heaven) [a marriage] is a social construct –in fact, of a particularly vulnerable texture” (*The Unhappy Consciousness* 13).

The figure of the widow in Bengali (upper caste) society is a particularly eloquent encapsulation of the fragility of marriage as a construct and of the insecurity of social identity more broadly. A woman’s social identity is entirely defined through her relationship to her husband. Without him she experiences an absolute loss of social

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13 My argument here is that sympathy depends on the possibility of the reversibility of social identities (i.e. the fact that a wife can at any time become a widow, or that a man can become destitute). This sympathy, it seems to me, finds its limit at caste, because caste, despite some protestations to the contrary, is still seen as having an ontological basis in reality. A Brahmin may lose his income and become destitute, but he doesn’t, thereby, become an ‘untouchable’ (whose very name marks him as ontologically separate). As Gajarawala points out, Premchand attempts to trouble this line somewhat in the subplot of Matadin and Siliya in *Godaan* when Matadin undergoes a forced ‘conversion’ to Dalitiness, but ultimately this story seems to reinforce the absolute separation between Brahmins and Dalits more than anything else (52). Gajarawala goes on to make an excellent point that sympathy for the Dalit character in this story can only be experienced through her gender (not through her Dalitiness). In other words the reader can sympathize with her only as a downtrodden woman, not as a Dalit (52).
identity (the life she lives as a renunciant exposes this total loss –she now has no place in
the social order). The figure of the widow both for those women inside the text (in this
case, Asha) and for those outside it (the female readers) stands in for this underlying
reality. A woman’s social identity is deeply precarious –she is always a mere heartbeat
away from widowhood. This uncomfortable closeness between the wife and the widow
is made very clear in Tagore’s novel. Asha and Binodini are, in many ways, doubles of
each other. Binodini might easily have been Mahendra’s wife (if he had followed his
mother’s plan for him), and in many ways she acts as his wife throughout her stay in the
house: she is the one who performs the bulk of the household work, cooking, cleaning,
arranging for his laundry to be done and catering to his mother. Both Binodini and Asha
are fatherless and penniless before their marriages (emphasizing even more the
precariousness of their dependence on their husbands). And both might have married
Bihari. Finally, Asha and Binodini, switch places, to some extent, in the novel. When
Mahendra leaves to chase after Binodini in the west, Asha is left in a position parallel to
widowhood. And the final erotically charged scene between Mahendra and Binodini is,
of course, parallel to the wedding night.

And yet the widow doesn’t just become the object of sympathy for women. The widow
also represents the total loss of an economic, i.e. class position. In a wealthy household,
a widow can fall from living a life of ease and comfort to performing the chores of a
maidservant as a destitute dependent of her relatives. In colonial India where the

14 Premchand’s short story “Widow with Sons” traces this total loss in the character of Phulmati, who
doesn’t recognize, at first, that her social identity has completely evaporated on the death of her husband.
The story ends with Phulmati’s drowning – the final stage in her progressive path from mistress of the
house to absolute nothingness.
economy was often extremely volatile, the fear of economic ruin was very real. Colonial India, and Bengal in particular, suffered a series of devastating famines over the course of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. These were caused and exacerbated by a number of factors – ranging from ecological devastation to the arrangement of infrastructure to export resources from the country rather than distributing them within it, to the continued exporting of food-stuffs during the famines (Bagchi 164). Another explanation, however, lies in that colonial economies were used as buffers to reduce the shocks on England’s own economy as it consolidated its industrial capitalist system (Bagchi 167). This left colonial economies, like those of India, fully exposed and vulnerable to these shocks. Although wealthy elites in Calcutta weren’t exposed to these shocks in the same devastating ways as rural communities were, they were vulnerable to the economic domination of British corporations over the economy and to British racial discrimination. Rajat Kanta Ray points out Tagore’s own protestations against this situation:

‘Manchester and Birmingham, indigo planters and tea planters, are now the king. The Chamber of Commerce is the King.’ That is why, wrote Tagore, there was so much white animosity towards natives, so persistent an attempt to repress the development of the nation’s potential. That, he saw, was why ‘we are being chased out of engineering colleges, being dismissed from offices, being hindered in learning medicine, being secretly deflected from acquiring the knowledge of science.’ (22)

Calcutta elites were mostly (but not completely) excluded from the major trading houses of the city, and from involvement in the major industries of the region (Ray 20). So they
were often dependent on government jobs and rents in order to support their families. While many zamindari families were extremely wealthy (like Tagore’s own – his grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore was known as an extremely efficient, if not generous, zamindar), the system of land holding was extremely complicated and got more so over the course of the nineteenth century and many small-scale gentry complained bitterly that they were being squeezed by colonial rent legislation (Ray 52-54). Those who worked for the government were even more directly dependent on the British and, therefore potentially insecure. This economic dependence (and its parallel shadow of female dependence on males within the household) is showcased, argues Sudipta Kaviraj, in Bengali fiction of the time, particularly that of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee:

Bankim gestures often in his novels, to the abjectness of the babu, his utter inconsequentiality in the office world of British administration, a world which he can give out to be his only by dissembling. For this babu, this sovereign rationalist master within his household, is a Muciram Gud in his office. He can hide his social subalternity only on condition of the woman’s domestic subalternity, on condition she does not know anything about the world outside. (The Unhappy Consciousness 10)

The degrading racism and economic dependence that was a constant part of life in colonial Calcutta is carefully excised from Tagore’s novel, but the possibility of economic ruin nonetheless shadows its characters. When Mahendra leaves his home to follow Binodini, he gets a taste of what life is like for those without his economic privileges. When he first visits her at the apartment, we get the following description:

“Pampered by his mother, he had always been accustomed to items of luxury – punkahs
and expensive chowkis and sofas; in the new household, the absence of these things became sharply apparent in the darkness of evening” (Loc 3183). In some ways, their (brief) life together puts him, oddly, in the widow’s shoes. His burning passion for sex, and perhaps even more importantly, for love from Binodini is consistently denied—and he is met with only contempt and repulsion. He feels unneeded and unwanted (Loc. 3915). And, once again, we are reminded that he has great difficulty adjusting to a nomadic life without the luxuries of home: “This manner of travel did not appeal to Mahendra. He found it hard to bear any hindrance to his comforts. [...] By nature, he was not resourceful enough to explore and improvise ways and means to get things done” (Loc. 3915). The text also consistently draws attention to the large number of impoverished Brahmins both in Calcutta and in Bengal more generally. Bihari has taken in a young Brahmin boy whose family is too destitute to care for him (Loc 2733), and at the end of the text when Asha and Mahendra pledge to devote themselves to one of Bihari’s good works, it is to his medical centre for Brahmins living in poverty that they go: “a garden estate for the treatment of poor bhadralok, genteel but hard up” (Loc. 4393). Rajalakshmi wills a village given to her by her father-in-law to the same cause.

As an early twentieth-century Bengali reader of this novel, then, either man or woman, the widow’s inauspiciousness—the danger and tension that surround her, is closely linked to this underlying fragility and precariousness at the heart of social identity—all could so easily be lost! The sympathy that readers feel for the widow is an acknowledgement of the likeness between themselves and her. And yet, as I suggested above, this sympathy doesn’t go unchecked. At the beginning of the novel Binodini is associated with a generalized sense of tension and danger (her loss of father and husband plus the sexual
danger she somewhat unwittingly poses to the householder could all be lumped into this). But over the course of the text, this generalized danger clarifies into conscious, malicious intent. By the time she leaves the house with Mahendra she is fully conscious of what she is doing. She knows that she desires love and sex. She knows that she feels only contempt for Mahendra. She knows that she resents Asha and thinks of her as stupid and undeserving of the love and desire showered on her. By the end her position at the centre of the “tumult” is of her own making. There is even the suggestion, and many readers interpret the text this way, that Binodini cannot marry Bihari at the end not because she is a widow, but because she has disgraced herself with Mahendra. This reading demonstrates the full transition the text has taken into modernity. Binodini’s loss of social position, according to this reading, is not the result of her being a widow but the result of her failure to manage her passions.

While the text, through the widow, opens up our fears of the fragility of social identities, then, it also, ultimately, assuages these fears. Wives no longer see themselves in Binodini’s shoes, because they, after all, would never chase after someone else’s husband. And husbands needn’t fear a catastrophic loss of economic position, such as that suffered by the widow, because, they, after all, do not let their reckless passions get away with them –they are careful household managers. And if they aren’t, they might be after reading the text! Once again, the text creates modern citizen subjects, not only within its pages, but also beyond them. The widow’s inauspiciousness (as a figure for all those fears and tensions underlying the precariousness of social identity in modern life) is redefined as agentic, under her own disciplined control. If she is left destitute and alone, then this must be understood in terms of her own behaviour, her own choices. Our
sympathy for the widow, then, acts as a modern disciplinary technique, a mode for consolidating and solidifying the very social identities whose precariousness have allowed us to feel sympathy for her in the first place.

The widow’s unruly inauspiciousness (with a constantly shifting set of meanings) brings about very significant social changes in these novels. The widow, in other words, is possessed of a dangerous, even revolutionary power. But once she has inaugurated modernity, she must step aside. Her power is rationalized and contained, her exclusion justified through the modern language of choice and discipline.
Chapter Two
Burning Down the House, the Book, the World in Anita Desai’s Fire on the Mountain

Anita Desai’s brilliant 1977 novel, Fire on the Mountain is an apt starting place for an examination of the workings of in/auspiciousness in more recent Indian fiction. This novel is the beginning of a more contemporary conversation that is later picked up by Bharati Mukerjee and others about the fictional and literary possibilities of inaugurating new worlds through in/auspicious destruction. Desai’s take on these possibilities is very dark indeed; her novel sometimes seems entirely despairing of any meaningful social change taking place. And yet, her novel is also a spark that sheds some light on the state of affairs for women at this historical moment and that passes the torch of resistance—in a fairly explicit intergenerational metaphor—to a younger generation. Desai begins her novel by positing a sort of utopian space for her protagonist, Nanda Kaul. Kaul is a widow, and she is depicted as a renunciant ascetic. But while the oppressive possibilities of this positioning for a widow are never far from view, Desai, nonetheless, at least at first, suggests a very different reading of this positioning, one in which Kaul’s renunciation of social life frees her from social hierarchies and puts her on a level with any other powerful ascetic. In fact, she is explicitly linked to Shiva himself. To put this another way, Desai experiments, at the beginning of her novel, with translating Kaul’s inauspiciousness as a widow into the auspiciousness of the ascetic God (we have seen in the previous chapter how a widow, like Binodini, might be rewritten as auspicious if she renounces all claims on social life). Over the course of the novel, however, this utopian
space is repeatedly encroached upon, not least by Kaul’s own internal patriarchal
demons, and the power associated with it is consequently diminished, even erased. At
the same time, Kaul’s great-granddaughter, Raka, gains in understanding, and she seems
to take over her great-grandmother’s power gradually. She, too, is closely tied to Shiva.
Raka, however, does not open up any kind of space; on the contrary, she rejects not only
all social life, but also all existing forms of space, all existing discourses, even, I argue,
Desai’s book itself. She wants to burn down, to destroy, the whole world. This, the
novel seems to be saying, is the only way for there to be real change. A younger
generation must reject what has come before them; they must see the spaces and
discourses of an older generation in all their tortured complicity, and forge something
entirely different, drawing, nevertheless on the anger and the power of these older
women. Ultimately, then, Desai doesn’t translate the widow’s inauspiciousness into a
relatively politically non-threatening auspicious asceticism, she layers the powerful
destructive potential of inauspicious characters over the world-destroying power of Shiva
to bring about a deeply troubling clean slate.

The novel, I argue, accuses itself of this tortured complicity while also positing the
potential for something different. It does so, at least partially, through a careful
interweaving of different literary modes. While Chelva Kanaganayakam and Fawzia
Afzal-Khan have pointed out the productive tension in Desai’s work between the realist
and mythic modes, I would argue that in Fire on the Mountain Desai puts into productive
tension a much broader range of modes than just these two. She slams a modernist
grotesque up against romantic orientalism, and she uses the gothic in any number of
combinations with the realist and with the mythic. These modes are themselves rooted in
patriarchal social constructions, and with any use of a single one of them, it might be more difficult to see beyond these constructions, but by combining them in unexpected ways, playing them off against each other, Desai draws attention to the construction of her own narrative, marks out its own complicity, and gestures towards the hope of a different kind of discourse.

I will begin with an examination of Kaul’s tentatively utopian position as renunciant ascetic. The novel opens with a description of Nanda Kaul that links her to Shiva in his ascetic form. She stands quietly among the pines high in the Himalayas, “grey, tall and thin” fancying that she can “merge with the pines and be mistaken for one” (4). “She ask[s] to be left to the pines and cicadas alone” (3). Her position in the mountains among the pines and her reclusive, renunciant desires immediately link her to the Shiva who lives high in the mountains, wanders the pine forests and meditates alone. The description of the approaching postman continues the symbolism: Kaul looks down the hill onto his “honest bull back” and she thinks of him as “A bullock man” (3). Shiva, of course, rides a bull, but this bull also becomes a gatekeeper at many Shiva temples and an intermediary between devotees and the God himself. The image of this “bullock man” standing just beyond Kaul’s gate and bringing her requests from the outside world, then, is clearly not accidental.

Kaul’s powerful position is not purely mythological, however. There are numerous real-life women who follow in the footsteps of Shiva as ascetics, and this mythic symbolism has its realist component. As Lynn Teskey Denten shows, although there is no support

15 Unlike in many of her other books, Desai has avoided giving her female characters the names of goddesses here. Instead she has chosen, no doubt purposely, to give them androgynous names.
for female asceticism in the *Dharmashastras*, there is considerable belief in the righteousness of female ascetics in the *laukik* (worldly or popular) imagination, and the *Vedas* (which predate the *Dharmashastras*) contain examples of ascetic, and renunciant women of various kinds. As a result, many women *do* follow periods of discipleship and formally renounce the world to live as ascetics just as their male peers do (6-7). Technically speaking, Arti Dhand argues in her reading of the *Mahabharata*, there is no hierarchy of any kind beyond renunciation. Giving up the world entails giving up its hierarchies of gender and of caste. And Teskey Denton points out that some women live very independent lives as ascetics. Since there are no independent orders of female ascetics (as there are, for example, in Christianity, Buddhism, and Jainism) (Teskey-Denton 104), many female ascetics live in ashrams with their male counterparts, participating in the same rituals, respected in the same ways, and enjoying freedom of movement as their male counterparts do (Teskey-Denton124). And like Nanda Kaul, many of these women are widows (Teskey-Denton 124). It is not even unheard of for such female ascetics to be considered the avatars of gods. Anandamayi Ma, a powerful ascetic who runs an ashram in Benares, is usually considered to be a manifestation of Kali or Durga, but there are those who believe she is a manifestation of Krishna (Teskey-Denton 131). For a powerful female ascetic (who is also a widow) to be considered the manifestation of Shiva, then, is not entirely beyond the realm of possibility in late 20th century India.

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16 This is not equally possible all over India. Teskey Denton carried out her study in Benares and most of the women ascetics she encountered there were from Bengal and Nepal where asceticism for women is considered more acceptable than in many other places. Teskey Denton writes that female asceticism is particularly rare in Southern India.
At the same time, the other side of this utopian space of asceticism is never entirely obscured here. As Kanaganayakam points out, “What gives the novel its particular resonance is that it is both a rehearsal and a parody of the Hindu notion of sanyasi, with gender guilt, and history being included within this framework to problematize it” (21). The interplay of realist and mythic readings of Kaul’s asceticism allows her position to be seen as one of immense power and one of terrible vulnerability at the same time. The bare events of Nanda Kaul’s life suggest not so much tremendous power as they do consistent and continuing patriarchal oppression. These facts tend to be addressed in the realist mode in the text. She was married to a man who didn’t love her, had numerous children she didn’t relate to or like, and is now an elderly widow living with one servant far from family and friends. We suspect and eventually discover that she is in this small mountain home not entirely by choice, but because her husband being dead, her family no longer has any use for her. In this reading she is not so much an ascetic, who has chosen to renounce the world of the householder in search of liberation, as an unwanted social and financial burden who has been cast out of the world of householdership to fend for herself in the mountains.

As we have seen already in this project, although high caste widows from traditional households may be expected to live an ascetic lifestyle, wearing plain white saris, eating very sparingly, and minimizing direct physical and social contact with others, they are usually not considered to be possessed of the power and auspiciousness of (male) ascetics. In fact, as Teskey Denton points out, there is no such thing as a female ascetic in the sastrik (textual, Brahminical, orthodox) worldview (4-5). According to this view the ashrama system (the four life stages), does not apply to women—they are only
eligible for the householder stage as wife and mother. They cannot participate in the celibate stage of studentship (*brahmacarya*), which presages householdership, and they cannot participate in the final renunciant stage. Nor can they choose asceticism as a lifestyle and take vows of lifelong celibacy or renounce the world earlier in life (Teskey-Denton 4-5). This prohibition stems from the belief, supported by the *Dharmashastras* that owing to the processes of menstruation and childbirth, woman is innately impure. Moreover, she is inherently sinful (*adharmik*), that is, she has no natural inclination to *dharma*. Woman is thus not an appropriate candidate for sacred knowledge: she is ‘without a mantra’ (*amantravat*). That is, she is unfit to hear and pronounce the sacred Sanskrit formulae (*mantra*) essential to orthodox religious practice. Being sinful and without a *mantra* poses an insoluble dilemma: ‘being sinful, a woman is *amantravat*; being *amantravat* she cannot purify herself of sin; she therefore remains sinful all her life.’ (Teskey-Denton 25)

Her only acceptable role is as a wife where her *adharmik* nature can be strictly controlled and her dangerous passions can be channeled:

> Marriage is a sacrament lasting for a woman’s lifetime: even after his death, her husband remains her god, she must be strictly celibate, and her daily life should demonstrate continued remembrance of him. Because the widow’s regime is designed to eliminate all passion, she is prohibited from indulging in any activity that is believed to be sensually arousing. (43)
Her ascetic lifestyle, then, does not mark her out as auspicious and powerful, but
inauspicious, even polluting. As we have seen, widows are quite often associated with
improper sexuality and prostitution, and they are even sometimes held responsible for
their husbands’ deaths and shunned as witches (Teskey-Denton 43). If we read Nanda
Kaul’s position through this lens of utterly disenfranchised widowhood, we cannot help
but see her asceticism as one final unwilling capitulation to patriarchal norms after a life
of service to husband and family. This reading of her ascetic position takes over more
and more as the novel progresses.

In this way levels of myth and realism shade into each other in Desai’s depiction of Kaul
making for a complex, contradictory portrait that shades from mythologically powerful
toward ever greater levels of physical and emotional vulnerability over the course of the
novel. The impossibility of Kaul continuing to inhabit the powerful utopian space set out
for her in the first pages of the novel stems from both external and internal sources. On
the one hand, while the social world has rejected her, it continues to make demands on
her time and attention: her family members still expect her help when a crisis arises, and
she is forced to take in Raka. On the other hand, her inability to escape the social world
is partly internal – she simply doesn’t know how to think and behave beyond its
conventions. Her struggle to cast off these conventions is figured through the heavily
freighted symbol of her house, Carignano. This little house in the mountains is
repeatedly contrasted with her marital home, which is associated almost exclusively with
her husband. As Arti Dhand points out, a woman’s housekeeping duties are
representative of her devotion to her husband himself and the constant attention and care
she owes him. Dhand writes that “all domestic acts performed by a woman may be
construed as acts of _sevā_ to the husband. The household thus becomes an extension of the husband’s body, his person, and deserves the same painstaking attention as his own personage” (162). This conception of the house as an extension of the husband himself is evident in Desai’s novel. Nanda Kaul thinks of the house where she spent most of her life as utterly inextricable from her husband. It is “his house” (18), the place where she bore _him_ sons and daughters, where she always wore silk saris because _he_ insisted she do so, where she was constantly entertaining _his_ guests and instructing _his_ servants (17-18). She thinks of this house as a place where she almost ceased to exist, her ideas and feelings and needs utterly eclipsed by his. _Her_ house, on the other hand, is an extension of her own body. It is immaculately clean and sparse like her own grey silk-sari clad body. And “Like her, the garden seemed to have arrived, simply by a process of age, of withering away and an elimination, at a state of elegant perfection” (31). Her sense of self and her house are so tightly linked, in fact, that when she imagines Raka coming to stay with her, she conjures up a painful picture of “their opposing thoughts colliding in the dark like jittery bats in flight” (35). Here the space of the house becomes the space of Kaul’s own consciousness, invaded by materialized outside thoughts. This equation between houses and bodily selves is a well-known trope in Indian ascetic traditions; as Dhand points out, the body is often symbolized as a house, a house which must be abandoned along with all the ideological baggage it contains: “structure, security, stability, order, domesticity, ritual, sexuality, procreation” (156). It is for this reason that the first stage of becoming an ascetic is often that of leaving the home, becoming homeless (Dhand 156). Obviously Kaul has already left her marital house, but her
connection to this new house indicates a lingering attachment to and engagement with social convention and expectation.\(^{17}\)

Kaul thinks to herself that the house “seemed so exactly right […] for her, it satisfied her heart completely. How could it ever have belonged to anyone else? What could it possibly have been like before Nanda Kaul came to it? She could not imagine” (5). This thought is immediately followed up by a description of the past life of the house itself. But there is a strange slippage in the text in this section, a move that seems almost like a mistake. The postman is approaching the house as Nanda Kaul thinks this question, and the description of the past life of the house is written as if it were in his mind. By the end of the description, however, these thoughts have transferred back to Desai’s central protagonist: “Then Nanda Kaul stopped to muse upon the Misses Hughes for a while” (9). While other critics (Kanagnayakam among them) have argued that Kaul is implicated in the colonial violence that has taken place in her house through her own position in the ruling elite and her telling of orientalist tales, no one has analysed the oddly feminine aspect of this violence. I would argue that not only is Kaul implicated in this violence, but that these wild gothic tales are, at one level, her own repressed violent fantasies, haunting her imagination just below the level of her consciousness (which, as we have seen, is pictured as the house itself). The odd textual slippage, allows us to see how Kaul professes ignorance of these dark fantasies and projects them outwards onto others.

\(^{17}\) The symbolism of houses is far-reaching in the novel. In fact, Raka is associated with a pair of houses. But, being a more successful ascetic figure than Kaul, she is associated with a house that has burned to the ground leaving only ghosts and ashes, and a house which was never completed.
Lucie Armitt, in her fascinating study of the 20th century gothic, argues that unlike in early 19th century gothic novels, which were often set far away in foreign countries, the 20th century gothic tends, more and more, to be set in one’s own, seemingly safe and normal house (80). And the halls of these gothic houses are, of course, also the dark and divided halls of the protagonist’s mind (48-9). The colonial history of Nanda Kaul’s house fits just such a story of haunted houses. Unlike what we might expect to learn about the inhabitants of a hill station house in the colonial period, the violence that pervades the halls of Carignano is almost exclusively female in origin. Mavis, the wife of a pastor, repeatedly attempts (and fails) to murder her husband (7); Miss Appleby, whose “temper was famous,” “once not only thrashed the gardener for planting marigolds […] but climbed onto his back and whipped him around the garden” (7-8). Miss Lawrence’s life mirrors that of T.E. Lawrence. And Miss Jane Shrewsbury “poked a fork into her cook’s neck” (9). The imagery in these stories is clearly gothic, and the narrator seems to revel in the mixture of rage and witch-like scheming these women exhibit. The one story in which the house itself engages in violence is told with a distinct sense of satisfaction, even humour:

… one day, during a terrific thunderstorm […] The entire roof […] was lifted off the square stone walls and hurled down the hill as far as Garkhal where its sharp edge sliced the head off a coolie who was trying to shelter beside a load of stacked wood on the roadside. Eventually the roof was replaced –but not the coolie’s head […] (6)

This tone of excess and of mocking satisfaction is perfectly suited to fantasies of revenge for a life of stifled passions and daily slights. The witch-like qualities of these women
even recall patriarchal terrors of the widow as witch. Nanda Kaul symbolically inhabits Mavis’ bold murderous psyche: poisoning her husband’s tea, and raising the kitchen knife above his sleeping body ready to plunge it into him, and yet, even in her wildest dreams she cannot bring herself to actually kill him. It is Mavis who dies a violent death, while her husband outlives her by many years and dies peacefully in his bed of natural causes (7). In the rest of these fantasies, Kaul’s murderous revenge is diverted sideways to people who are as powerless, or even more powerless than she is. She lashes out with Miss Appleby and Miss Jane Shrewsbury at servants; she even ‘blows her top,’ so to speak, and decapitates a “coolie.” Even children are not safe from Kaul’s misdirected fantasies of furious vengeance: Colonel Macdougall’s wife, we are told, watched her seven children die, one by one. Although she is not said to be responsible for these deaths, her gaze across the valley to the cemetery on the other side is bleakly terrifying (6). And, after all, Nanda Kaul admits that her children are “alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them” (145). And she feels “anger,” “disappointment” and “loathing” after reading her daughter’s letter (16), a woman she describes spitefully as having “dedicated her life to the cultivation of long, glossy hair” (14).

18 Although Carignano is very much Nanda Kaul’s house, then, and is clearly differentiated from her marital home, it continues to be haunted (as is Kaul’s own subconscious) with a violence that struggles to cast off hierarchical social norms and reinstates them instead.

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18 Interestingly enough, it seems that Nanda Kaul’s suppressed gothic fantasies are not all violent in nature: “a vivacious Miss Weaver and a reputedly promiscuous Miss Polson” once entertained “the Tommies” at Carignano during carefree summers during the war when everyone in Kasauli “jigged and romped with an unknown abandon” (9). Kaul seems to be keeping alive a sexual longing, for bodily satisfactions which have been closed to her since long before the death of her husband (when she discovers his affair she insists that he sleep in another room).
Nanda Kaul’s dream of renunciation is interrupted by the arrival of Raka. The space of renunciation is, at least in some important ways, closed off to her by this new, insistent social responsibility. And yet it is clear from the pages that follow that she is not capable of a meaningful, life-affirming interaction with others either. Even though Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das are all women, their interactions with one another are so infused with patriarchal social discourses and expectations that they cannot seem to reach one another—they are cut off from genuine friendship by this masculine language, which is itself always already laden with male (sexual) violence. This male domination of language is evident from the very beginning with the arrival of the postman. As Kanaganayakam points out, the postman’s approach is described in threatening phallic sexual terms: “The sight of him, inexorably closing in with his swollen bag, rolled a fat ball of irritation into the cool cave of her day, blocking it stupidly” (qtd. in Kanaganayakam 95), and he is symbolically, here, the bearer of social language in all its many forms: “letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries” (3). The arrival of these words, then, becomes a sort of male sexual assault on Kaul, and this violent patriarchal view of language and social life continues throughout the text.

Kaul’s relationship with Raka is infused with a similar kind of violence, but this time the shoe is on the other foot. Although Kaul decides at first that she will ignore her great-granddaughter, she is unable to do so, and she finds herself more and more drawn to the girl. Her attempts at friendship with Raka, however, are misguided, even tragic. Her overtures are explicitly Romantic orientalist and colonial in style and the child is (rightly) bored and annoyed. Kaul tells Raka stories of her father’s adventures, which she herself has partly invented, partly plagiarized from *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Kaul
ventriloquizes this doubled male adventurer, describing vast hunts, for crocodiles, or “with falcons and sometimes with packs of dogs that were as large as asses, for musk deer whose musk is sold to traders for silver” (84). He takes note of natural resources such as “turquoise and coral, silver and gold [… ] ermine and sable [… ] clove trees [… ] and ginger and cassia” (84), and he collects: “He bought Tibetan horses with clipped tails […] he collected scrolls, bronzes, carpets” (84). This masculine acquisition of knowledge, natural resources, and cultural artefacts is a standard colonial trope, and the fact that Nanda Kaul uses these stories in an attempt to befriend Raka indicates that she doesn’t know how to socialize without domination. This is the only language she knows. Kaul essentially attempts to colonize Raka here, to draw her into this imaginary life inside her own mind. But the attempt is a dismal failure. The story ends with Kaul’s description of how these objects, so painstakingly collected by her father, were “scattered” to various family members in various parts of Britain’s former empire, lost to Nanda Kaul as she has lost everything else. The final words of the chapter are a retreat into a kind of nihilistic asceticism: “Both gazed at the Buddha, sole survivor of that splendour, looking as though the holocaust around him was less than the dust to him” (85).

Nanda Kaul’s inability to reach out to Raka without a patriarchal attempt to control her is figured in the text as a sort of placeless restlessness for Kaul. The more desperate Kaul

19 The imagery of ‘scattering’ and loss, the use of the word ‘holocaust,’ and the note of despair in this passage (and indeed throughout the book) need to be seen in historical context to be fully understood. The lifetime of someone like Nanda Kaul would have spanned the mass displacements and the genocidal violence of the Partition (1947) and the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan (1971). The book itself was most likely written largely during the Emergency (1975-77) when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi took authoritarian control over India and committed untold human rights abuses (illegal detentions and torture of prisoners, forced sterilizations, destruction of slums and displacement of their inhabitants etc.)
becomes to make Raka listen to her, the more the child attempts to escape her stories. “Raka backed away from her, embarrassed, dubious,” we are told, but “Nanda Kaul began quickly to talk” (98). As this achingly sad scene plays itself out in the garden, overhead “The green glassy sky was full of rooks, searching for a resting place, wheeling in circles, cawing and calling to each other, somehow incapable of settling down for the night” (98). This restlessness and lack of a resting place is clearly Kaul’s own condition, kept always outside circles of love and recognition by her own patriarchal education.

This sense of Nanda Kaul’s placelessness is reinforced through the depictions of the two other placeless or ‘homeless’ women in the text. Raka’s own ‘home’ life, her experience of the social world, has been so relentlessly dominated by male violence that it has blasted any longing she may have had for such a life into dust. This becomes all too clear in the scene when Raka sneaks out of her room to watch the people at the club from the safety of the shadows. Her horror of male sexuality and her own potential future life as wife is immediately apparent: “Raka [was] afraid of being seen by these newly hairy young men with their long awkward limbs that seemed unsynchronized and unhinged by youth so that there was something more alarming about them, to her, than in the wails of the jackals or the sudden rattles of the nightjars in the darkness” (67-8). This budding male sexuality appears deranged to Raka, a kind of madness (“unhinged”).\(^{20}\) The young men are puppets, terrifyingly uncanny. The fact that the scene takes place at the club, where young people would go partly for the purpose of finding an appropriate mate, exaggerates further the effect of Raka’s total outsiderhood. The parodic play that follows

\(^{20}\) As we will see, Raka is seen by others as mad or insane, but here Raka reverses the terms of patriarchal definitions of ‘sane’ and ‘insane.’
clarifies this depiction of the young men as puppets, whose limbs are wild, perhaps controlled by others. All social life is depicted here as a grotesque misogynist theatrical performance where language and masculinity are one and sex is the same as death.

A woman with a bucket on her head laughed inside it so that it was like a cooking spoon rattling in an empty pot. A figure in black answered her call and sidled up and bowed. When he straightened, Raka saw the skull and cross bones in white upon his chest. He had a scythe tucked under his arm and it glinted and shot off bolts of lights when he raised it and chopped off the woman’s bucket head. Under her dishevelled hair her pink throat opened wide and she laughed in bubbles of blood. The bucket clanked across the floor and came to rest at Raka’s foot. Her toes shrivelled. (69)

The passage opens with an image of the woman’s head as hollow and echoing, her voice devoid of life-giving nutrients. She has no resources of her own. She is, quite literally, an empty vessel waiting to be filled. The figure in black is death, of course, but also Man; wielding a phallic scythe he assaults the woman leaving a gaping pink wound “under her dishevelled hair,” a wound which is both mouth, and sex. Her sex, a symbol of her castration, of her lack of a phallus, is linked here with her mouth, a symbol of her speechlessness, her lack of access to words. Her only voice, the “bubbles of blood” are the gory signs of her dramatic silencing. Her severed, empty head rolls across the floor as a kind of contagion from which Raka shrinks.

For Raka this is social life, it is ‘home’ life. Watching the play forces on Raka her memories of her parents:
Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse – harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother’s being squelching and quivering [...]. (71-2)

Here again male violence is associated with words, with the control of language – the “flood of rotten stench” that emerges from her father’s mouth is also “hammers and fists.” And Raka and her mother are reduced to a deafening silence, their defences, their rebuttals, or responses leaking away in “weakening” bodily fluids, urine, blood, wet jelly. Raka’s response to this onslaught of male violence is ominous: to dry up, to cultivate silence and motionlessness: “Her eyes darkened, as if with a secret she would not divulge. She was no longer the insect, the grasshopper child. She grew as still as a twig” (72).

The arrival of Ila Das at Carignano provides yet another exploration of social life and language as always already implicated in male violence. This version, though, is even more far reaching. It implicates both the text itself and the reader. Das, unlike Raka, is desperate to participate in the patriarchal social world. Her desire to belong, and her exclusion from that world are perhaps best encapsulated in the scene that Kaul remembers from their childhood when Das attempts to recite “The Boy Stood on the
Burning Deck.” Das has carefully memorized every line of this colonial fable of male honour and sacrifice, but when she attempts to recite it, teachers and students alike conspire to silence her: “she had to bottle up that voice with a hiccup and sit down, fizzing and burbling impotently, her hands in her lap, while others muttered and floundered through a parody, a pretence of the verse” (112). Das is fully prepared to live the life set forth by the verse: the boy of the title stands on the burning deck waiting for his father to tell him to save himself, but his father, being dead below, utters not a word, and the boy dies with the ship:

With mast, and helm, and pennon fair,
That well had borne their part—
But the noblest thing which perished there
Was that young faithful heart.

The boy dies heroically, a symbol of loyalty, obedience and manly honour. Ila Das is prepared to sacrifice herself in the same way, and yet the patriarchal social order that admires the boy rejects Das, silences her, leaves her “impotent” and “burbling.” Her voice seems to be both the cause and the effect of her social exclusion—it is the sound of a lifetime of being stifled.

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21 The poem has been the subject of numerous parodies poking fun at the colonial, patriarchal values that it promotes. One particularly rich version copied by Martin Gardener in Best Remembered Poems goes:

The boy stood on the burning deck,
The flames 'round him did roar;
He found a bar of Ivory Soap
And washed himself ashore.

The colonial obsession with hygiene as it was linked to both moral stature and race is particularly evident here.
Yet the depiction of Ila Das is, as the previous paragraph suggests, not simply the pathetic image of an oppressed and unfairly excluded woman. Das is a figure of what Bernard McElroy calls the ‘modern grotesque.’ Like all other forms of the grotesque, McElroy points out, the modern grotesque often showcases people who are animalistic, whose bodies are distorted or deformed: “The most pervasive effect of such animalism and corporeal degradation in grotesque art,” he argues, “is to direct our attention to the undignified, perilous, even gross physicality of existence, and to emphasise it by exaggeration, distortion, or unexpected combination” (11). The effect of this emphasis on the corporeal is, on the one hand, the terror that comes with the recognition of physical vulnerability (12) and on the other hand, the laughter which is a celebration of the vitality and exuberance of that physical life (15). The combination of these two elements, terror and laughter, vary enormously in different versions of the grotesque to very different effect. In Desai’s novel, we start out with a version that leans toward the funny and the playful:

Nanda Kaul’s hands rose involuntarily to her ears under the loops of white hair, as she recalled those tea-parties and the appalling, the unendurable sounds made by little Ila Das, pigtails bouncing jollily on her back, as she tinkled on the piano keys as if rummaging amongst a bagful of china, hogs’ tusks and clapping dentures, her voice raised like a tom-cat’s in battle, yowling ‘Darling, I am growing old! Silver threads among the gold...’ (112)

The blending of human and animal forms so common in the grotesque is evident here in the young Ila Das’ tom-cat yowling, and there is a dark undertone of the vaguely witchy
or demonic in the image of the bag of “china, hogs’ tusks and clapping dentures,” yet the overall effect is more hilarious than terrifying, and we are left with the sense of a young girl with tremendous reserves of energy and vitality.

The balance between terror and laughter shifts dramatically over the course of Ila Das’ appearance in the novel, however, and by the time of her last walk home she is depicted in progressively more and more fragile forms: “like a little owl that had ventured out at the wrong time of day” (136). As it gets dark, she “skip[ped], goat-like, over [a] cowpat” (139), almost falling in, and she is followed constantly by people and animals who mock, condescend, and threaten her. “Summer visitors at the Alasia Hotel” think she is the village mad-woman and are vaguely pleased by the authenticity of their experience, (138-9); school girls double over with laughter at the sight of her (136); “jeering urchins” dog her steps, and she is waylaid by “marauding langurs” (139). In short, “The way was full of hazards, full of hazards” (139). Her exaggerated movements and the ridiculous excesses of her entourage are still irresistibly funny, but now the precariousness of her existence is also terribly real to the reader.

In the modern grotesques, says McElroy:

Man is usually presented as living in a vast, indifferent, meaningless universe in which his actions are without significance beyond his own, limited, personal sphere. The physical world of his immediate surroundings is alien and hostile, directing its energies to overwhelming the individual, denying him a place and identity even remotely commensurate with his needs and aspirations, surrounding him on every side with violence and brutalisation, offering
him values that have lost their credibility, manipulating and dehumanising him through vast, faceless institutions, the most ominous of which are science, technology, and the socio-economic organization. (17)

This is the world that Ila Das inhabits. She is surrounded constantly by packs of young boys and monkeys mocking her and throwing obstacles in her path. Every possible source of financial security has slipped through her fingers, and the world she was raised in and educated to participate in no longer exists. Her own identity as pampered daughter of an elite family is shattered beyond recognition. And the values that were instilled in her are grotesquely inappropriate for the life she lives: she thinks of the one man who is kind to her as “some hairy, half-dressed shopkeeper” (139), and she clings to memories of a younger Nanda Kaul living a life Kaul herself loathed and resented. Das is rejected over and over again by a social order that distorts and crushes people. Even science and technology show up to threaten her when she is trampled in the dust just outside the Pasteur Institute (a place, we have been previously informed, “smelt [like] dogs’ brains boiled in vats, of guinea pigs’ guts, of rabbits secreting fear in cages packed with coiled snakes, watched by doctors in white” (49.).)

The conflict, McElroy argues, between the protagonist and this hostile, alien world, is heightened by “The protagonist’s own grotesqueness” which “may result from the attack made on him by the outside world, or it may be the expression of his inner perversity; more often it is both” (18). Das, it seems to me, combines these elements as well. She is rendered grotesque by a life of stifling rejection, but she is also deeply perverse which contributes to her deformity. She clings desperately to the forms and values of a social
order that has done nothing but abuse and scorn her from the day of her birth. She is indeed the boy on the burning deck, too obtuse and stupid to save herself from the sinking ship and the flames. The protagonist of the modern grotesque then, says McElroy, is not so much “alienated man” as “humiliated man,” a man who recognizes himself as “abject and contemptible” yet clings to his sense of self because it is all he has left (22). This perversity and grotesqueness, finally, exaggerates the difference between self and other rendering the protagonist utterly alone and unable to respond to others. Ila Das then, like Nanda Kaul and Raka, is shut off in a world of her own unable to reach out to people in any fruitful way.

McElroy writes that through both the protagonist and his or her attackers, the modern grotesque exposes, as Hannah Arendt has so aptly put it, “the banality of evil”: “Huge atrocities are committed not by monsters but by mediocrities. The evils of the world arise not from satanic grandeur but from the millionfold repetition of shabby vices, most of which boil down to greed and stupidity” (McElroy 18). This exposure, it is crucial to note, takes in the reader as well. The uncomfortable combination of horror and laughter in the modern grotesque relies at least partly on Schadenfreude, and Desai’s quiet move from the mostly funny to the mostly terrifying sneaks up on the reader and implicates her in the Schadenfreude demonstrated by the “jeering urchins.” We are so used to laughing at Das, and the lightly mocking tone used to describe her encourages the reader to laugh at her beyond the moment at which her terrifying vulnerability becomes apparent, beyond the moment when we would ordinarily feel pity. The realization of our own enjoyment at her expense, then, brings the horror home in an intensified way.
The tone continues to darken as Das makes her way home and as the last rays of sunlight fade from the sky. By the end of her journey, the tone is one of almost parodic gothic, all of the dark, repressed tropes of the gothic are present, but the last lingering remnants of laughter remain in the narrative voice. Das is truly frightened now and she pictures her homecoming in the following comforting terms:

At the thought of the lamp flowering into light in her dark hut, at the thought of the cows comfortably mooing and chewing in the lean-to next to her, she stopped under the looming rock, caught her breath and narrowed her little eyes with pleasure, with relief. (142)

The description is reminiscent of a fairy tale—the soothing rural sounds of the cows, the blooming of the light in the frightening dark. And like so many fairy-tales the undertones suggest the titillating potential danger associated with a young girl’s awakening sexuality: the “flowering” of the lamp in her hut effaces Das’ age and deformity. Her attacker, too, is described in fairy-tale gothic terms, he is a figure of evil, a demonic form cloaked in darkness: “a black shape detached itself from the jagged pile of the rock […] she saw, in the cold shadow, that it was Preet Singh, his lips lifted back from his teeth, his eyes blazing down at her in rage, in a passion of rage” (142-3). The deeply troubling titillation of the gothic, the hints of blooming female sexuality and the association of that sexuality with violent ‘deflowering’ remain undertones of the passage at this point.22 But the tone abruptly shifts to a completely realist one, exposing the body

22 This hint of the violation of a young girl superimposes Preet Singh’s two victims one over another. Das has angered him, after all, by attempting to intervene in the marriage of his 7 year old daughter to “an old man” –a man more than old enough to be her father (130). Preet Singh’s sale of his daughter for “a bit of land and two goats” is likened to incestuous rape here (130).
of Ila Das and, in the process, exposing the reader’s own complicity with the violence that we have been titillated by:

[...] he left the ends of the scarf, tore at her clothes, tore them off her, in long, screeching rips, till he came to her, to the dry, shrivelled, starved stick inside the wrappings, and raped her, pinned her down into the dust and the goat droppings, and raped her. Crushed back, crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken, still and finished. Now it was dark. (143)

The stark horror of this end is almost unbearable. Leeched abruptly of any hint of titillation or gothic grandeur, the moment stands in all its horrifying yet banal cruelty, and, in the silence that follows, our previous laughter comes back to haunt us.

The abrupt shift to the realist mode at the end of this passage increases the sickening horror of the moment because it breaks the fourth wall, if I can draw in a dramatic term, and implicates both the text itself and the reader in the violence we are suddenly so reluctantly witnessing. The abrupt shift in mode and in tone makes us aware that we are dealing with a representation, and that different descriptions of the same event can have radically different effects. It makes us aware, in short, of the text as text. We recognize, at this moment of rupture, that the author, too, is implicated in the patriarchal violence that our characters cannot escape. If, as I have argued, Ila Das and Nanda Kaul, and even Raka are unable to communicate truly with one another because the very words they use, the very structures of their thinking are always already infused with patriarchal control and violence, we realize here that the discourse of this text, too, is implicated in this violence. Our author cannot relate to her characters without violence just as they cannot
relate to one another. It is possible then, at the risk of over dramatizing the point, to see Preet Singh himself as patriarchal discourse, male violence writ large, which the author cannot help but inflict upon her characters. The reader too, as I have suggested above, is implicated in this cycle, or at least this reader is. I happily followed along, laughing at Das and finding a dark and secret pleasure in the danger she faces, until this abrupt shift, when I was forced to look myself in the face. The trap of patriarchal discourse is dramatically widened, then, at this moment. It is not only in the dark world of the novel, our author is clearly wanting us to note, that women are imprisoned in patriarchal discourse, it is also in our world, the ‘real’ world that exists outside and beyond the novel. We may, like our author, be able to see the trap, become aware of our complicity, but this doesn't mean we can necessarily find our way around it.

The implications of the totalizing reach of patriarchal discourse are more fully explored in the symbolism of the fire that burns at the end of the text. This fire can, and should, be read in at least three modes if it is to be understood in its full range of meanings, but at the most basic, and perhaps the grimmest level, the fire can simply be read in the realist mode. Desai is careful to string together the series of events that result in the fire in such a way as to render them psychologically and physically realistic. She even tells us how

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23 Fawzia Afzal Khan argues that Desai’s use of realism is meant as a reminder of the moral responsibilities her characters have toward the community and toward other people. She even goes so far as to claim that Ila Das is raped and murdered as a result of Nanda Kaul’s failure to offer her a room to stay at Carignano (81). Afzal Khan argues that Kaul is so drawn to aestheticized myth that she ignores her social responsibilities, but this reading ignores the fact that social responsibilities have become meaningless for Nanda Kaul specifically because they are totally circumscribed by patriarchal discourse and male violence. Afzal Khan doesn’t recognize the patriarchal barriers that stand between the characters and, ironically, she re-inscribes these patriarchal expectations herself when she blames Nanda Kaul for the actions of a murdering rapist. Throughout her reading of Desai’s oeuvre, Afzal Khan holds Desai’s female characters responsible for the tragedies that befall their loved ones, a move that comes dangerously close to the popular patriarchal tropes of blaming a woman for the death of her husband or holding her responsible for the death of her children.
Raka steals the matches while Kaul and Das are still chatting at the gate (131). A young girl, abused and neglected by her parents, rejected by her great-grandmother and guardian, sees the social world as a fundamentally harsh and violent place, and her dislike of that world builds in her to a simmering resentment and despair. As we have seen, after the play that she witnesses at the club, “There was something flushed about her thin invalid face […] She grew as still as a twig” (72). And later on, when she is forced to listen to Nanda Kaul and Ilia Das chatting about old times: “It made her ache for the empty house on the charred hill, the empty summer-stricken view of the plains below, the ravine with its snakes, bones and smoking kilns—all silent, and a forest fire to wipe it all away, leaving ashes and silence” (120). If Raka lights the fire partly out of anger and despair, she also does so, seemingly, out of simple childish fascination and an inability to fully understand the consequences of her actions. She is terribly excited by the previous forest fire; unable to sleep she spends most of the night going back and forth to the window looking at the eerie light the fire produces in the sky (76-77). And she is drawn by the strange quality of the silence that reigns the following day and the film of ash that the fire deposits on everything (77). But she seems to see the wiping out of the fire as symbolic, a relief that will allow for a quiet new start. She doesn’t picture her own death or the death of her great-grandmother; she doesn’t imagine the real impact of her actions. She is, after all, a child, and a largely unsocialized child at that, a child who has never been taught even the basics of acceptable or dangerous behaviour.

Keeping with a realist reading of the fire, Nanda Kaul becomes a kind of sati at the end of the novel. Not, of course, in the mythological sense in which the sati burns with the truth and virtue of her devotion to her husband and through her sacrifice earns them both ...
a reprieve from the trials of rebirth. But rather in the sordid realist sense that there is no place for a woman whose usefulness to the patriarchy is finished. Her attempts to redefine herself as a powerful ascetic fail because her family members still expect her to take on a nurturing role with respect to her great-granddaughter. But her attempts to care for that great-granddaughter also fail as a result of the patriarchal discourse she can’t help but use to communicate with her. The space she inhabits, then, is not so much a place as an absence, a negative, an emptiness, defined always by what it is not (not her husband’s house, not the freedom of the genuine ascetic, not a place of nurture for her great-granddaughter and her old friend). The widow must die by fire, then, because she no longer has any role to play, she no longer has any place to be.

This realist reading, however, only brushes the surface of the fire’s range of meanings. A second way in which to read the end of the novel is as a sort of metafictional gothic revenge fantasy in line with Nanda Kaul’s misdirected fantasies of revenge, but this time with more radical implications. Although I do not know if Anita Desai ever read or was influenced by Jean Rhys’ rewriting of Jane Eyre, Wide Sargasso Sea, it seems to me that the end of Fire on the Mountain mirrors the end of Rhys’ text in several interesting and important ways. And regardless of whether there is any direct influence, I think that reading Desai’s novel alongside that of Rhys is a useful intervention. In Rhys’ text, Antoinette, Rochester’s mad and imprisoned first wife, recounts the story of her own slide into insanity and death in progressively more and more incoherent prose. She seems to channel her former nanny Christophine’s powers of obeah (or voodoo) at the end of the text in order to become a kind of witch. She says: “I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of a tablecloth and I saw flames shoot up. As I ran or
perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped. There was a wall of fire protecting me” (123). Her final fiery escape from the attic is the gothic revenge that she takes on Rochester for imprisoning her within marriage and within his house.

It is important to note, however, that Antoinette doesn’t simply burn down Rochester’s house, the place of her imprisonment; she also symbolically burns down Charlotte Brontë’s book, *Jane Eyre*, another place in which she is imprisoned. Antoinette refers to Rochester’s mansion as “This cardboard house where I walk at night” (118), and when she thinks about snowy winter’s days in England, she imagines “Torn pieces of paper falling” (70). This England is *made out of paper*; its only materiality is the bound sheets of paper that make up Brontë’s novel. Antoinette inhabits Brontë’s England, Brontë’s house, the world of Brontë’s book. The burning at the end of Rhys’ text, then, although it results in Antoinette’s death, of course, is still a form of liberation; through it, and through Rhys’ text itself, Antoinette escapes the imprisonment of Brontë’s world.

The fire at the end of Desai’s novel operates similarly on two levels of revenge, but the effect is even darker than in Rhys’ text, and the liberating potential is even more faint. Raka, like Antoinette, and indeed like Nanda Kaul, is associated with dark and mysterious, seemingly witchy, forms of power. I will talk about this imagery in more detail in the final section of this chapter, since these witchy associations are closely tied to Raka’s mythological positioning, but at moments Desai seems to depict Raka explicitly as a madwoman and a witch. Raka is fascinated by the Pasteur Institute, where, as we have already seen, she thinks that “dogs brains [are] boiled in vats” (49).
She is drawn to the ‘blood-red’ ravine, to jackals, to vultures. And Raka, once again like Antoinette, is connected to madness. She returns again and again to the burnt house on the hill, and she is mirrored by the one-time owner of the house: “It was burnt down in a forest fire and she went mad and was taken to the lunatic asylum with her arms and legs tied with rope” (53).

No one ever came here but Raka and the cuckoos that sang and sang invisibly. These were not the dutiful domestic birds that called Nanda Kaul to attention at Carignano. They were the demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka on to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade, and skeletons kept in beds of ash on which footprints of jackals flowered in grey. (90)

In this moment, madness seems to be the only escape from totalizing patriarchal power (the contrast between the “demented birds” and “the dutiful domestic birds”), the only escape from systems of meaning that define themselves as ‘rationality’ and patrol their own boundaries with violence (Raka’s predecessor, the madwoman, is forcibly dragged away to an asylum). As Raka runs off, the caretaker mutters ominously: “‘The crazy one,’ […] ‘The crazy one from Carignano’” (91).

As we have already seen, Raka seems to light the fire partly out of revenge for a life of suffering and neglect. And like Rhys’ Antoinette, Raka burns down a house that traps her in patriarchal discourse, a house that is also a book. The mountainside is repeatedly referred to as extremely dry and dusty during this time of the year, before the monsoon has swept up the length of the subcontinent. Ila Das even says at one point: “I hardly dare light a match for fear it will all go up in flames” (130). But this extreme dryness is
mirrored by Kaul and Das themselves, who seem almost to be made out of paper. They have both yellowed with age (18,112). Kaul thinks of her own life as “a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again” (30). And when Das first arrives at Carginano she is described as “fluttering up over the gravel like a bit of crumpled paper” (112). We have seen how both women cannot escape the pull of patriarchal discourses, so on one level this papery-ness may refer to the way in which they are defined by discourse, in the same way that Nanda Kaul’s invented stories of her childhood come partly out of The Travels of Marco Polo, which she is careful to hide from Raka.

But this does not go far enough. It is clear that if they appear to be made out of paper, they are in fact made out of paper: they are only characters in a novel, Desai’s novel itself. We have seen how Desai implicates her own text in this discourse, how she accuses herself of relating to her characters in the same way that they relate to one another. Unlike in Rhys’ novel, where Antoinette burns down Rochester’s house and the book Jane Eyre, the book that Raka burns down at the end of this novel is not only The Travels of Marco Polo, but Fire on the Mountain itself. Only at the moment of its own incineration, it seems, can this novel have any liberating potential. The fire itself, and the silence that lies beyond it, beyond the book, suggest the faintest hope of freedom. This moment of annihilation is foreshadowed within the novel itself during one of Raka’s adventures:

Here she stood, in the blackened shell of a house that the next storm would bring down, looking down the ravine to the tawny plains that crackled in the heat […] She raised
herself onto the tips of her toes—tall, tall as a pine—stretched out her arms till she felt the yellow light strike a spark down her fingertips and along her arms till she was alight, ablaze.

Then she broke loose, raced out onto the hillside, up the ridge, through the pines, in blazing silence. (91)

She stands in the “blackened shell of a house.” She, herself, is the spark, the flame that burns it down. And afterwards, beyond the ‘house’ that, as I have argued is also a book, there is only a “blazing silence,” a place beyond words where freedom might be imagined, a place where a woman might truly “break loose.”

This marginally liberating, gothic vision of the fire at the end of the text runs parallel to yet another reading, this time, a mythological one. I argued in the introduction to this chapter that as Nanda Kaul’s ascetic power fades over the course of the text, Raka’s rises to take its place. Raka’s symbolic links to Shiva multiply as the story moves forward, but she is associated with asceticism from the very beginning. When she first arrives at Carignano we learn that she looks much like an ascetic. She has been very ill for a long time, and, as a result she has a “shorn head” and her body is “bony, angular, and unaccommodating” (40). We also quickly learn that she repudiates social expectations and the performances of social life. Raka, we are told, “had no part” and “owed no attachment” to “the safe, cosy, civilized world” (91). Instead, “it was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her” (91). Shiva, in his fierce form as the destroyer (who is also closely associated with Yama, god of death), is said to live in cremation grounds, surrounded by the burned bones of the dead and by scavenging jackals. Those who worship this fierce form of the God also frequent cremation grounds.
and draw *tantric*, taboo power from their proximity to the dead. Raka is repeatedly associated with bones, ashes, and death. She is drawn to the ravine outside the Pasteur Institute where she finds “bones and the mealy ashes of bones” (48), where “people have seen ghosts” (44), and where the jackals congregate.

Shiva often wears serpents for his jewellery and for his sacred thread. In many images of the God, a serpent circles Shiva’s neck and shoulders and another loops around his middle. The snake around Shiva’s waist is generally said to represent *Shakti* or *kundalini* power (a corporeal or libidinal force). Just as Raka is drawn to jackals, so too does she seek out snakes, and her encounter with a giant rat snake in the text is clearly linked to *kundalini*:

> Once she came upon a great, thick yellow snake poured in rings upon itself, basking on the sunned top of a flat rock. She watched it for a long while, digging her toes into the slipping red soil, keeping still the long wand of broom she held in her hand. She had seen the tips of snakes’ tails parting the cracks of rocks, she had seen slit eyes watching her from grottoes of shade, she had heard the slither of scales upon the ground, but she had never seen the whole creature before. Here was every part of it, loaded onto the stone, a bagful, a loose soft sackful of snake. (49)

Even for those not familiar with *kundalini*, the image of the coiled snake here is clearly associated with tremendous force: words like “thick” and “loaded” give a sense of the tremendous heft of the animal. And the second word also contributes to the sense of the snake’s coiled, barely contained energy, mirrored by Raka’s own extremely kinetic/dynamic, yet still, posture. But the link to *kundalini* makes the nature of this
power much clearer. The term ‘kundalini,’ literally meaning ‘she who is coiled,’ refers to a form of corporeal energy that is believed, by some practitioner of meditative yoga, to lie coiled on the sacrum at the base of the spine (Subramuniyaswami 751). It is often pictured as a sleeping serpent. As the yogi learns to harness this power, it climbs up sushumna nadi (near or inside the spinal column), through the various cakras (centres of energy) resulting in ever higher levels of mystical experience, until it reaches the Sahasrara at the top of the head which is Nirvikapa Samadhi, or enlightenment (Subramuniyaswami 751). The fact that Raka has only seen parts of snakes before this, and the progressive, vaguely exciting, unfolding of more and more partial images of snakes, toward the full realization of this complete snake also suggests Raka’s growing knowledge, her growing recognition of her own kundalini power.

In my view the form of the text itself reflects this coiled power. Desai’s novel is organized around a tense and constantly unstable principle of threes. The book has three sections, which set up a precarious balance: “Nanda Kaul at Carignano,” “Raka comes to Carignano,” and “Ila Das leaves Carignano.” The book has three primary characters, whose personalities and desires create a similar, tentative balance but in reverse: While Raka “comes,” she is, in fact, desperate to escape all forms of social life, even Carignano itself (91). Ila Das, on the other hand, although she “leaves,” desperately wishes she could stay (141). Nanda Kaul, meanwhile, is held in tension between these two positions. Raka’s arrival and Das’ departure are both deeply distressing for Kaul, and there is a sense of constant uncomfortable motion and adjustment despite the tentative balance the book maintains. The novel multiplies these sets of precarious, tense threes: Nanda Kaul, her husband, and his mistress; Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ram Lal (who
becomes Kaul’s rival for Raka’s affections); Ila Das, the grainseller, and Preet Singh; Preet Singh, his daughter, and her future husband; Preet Singh, his daughter, and Ila Das etc.) In Shaivite symbolism, the number three is of deep significance. Shiva’s weapon, the trishula, is a trident which “symbolizes God’s three fundamental Shaktis or powers – icchā (desire, will, love), kriyā (action) and jnāna (wisdom).” (Subramuniyaswami 844).

The phenomenal world itself, meanwhile, is composed of three different ‘strands’ or ‘qualities,’ called the gunas: “sattva: Quiescent, rarified, translucent, pervasive, reflecting the light of Pure Consciousness. –rajas: ‘Passion,’ inherent in energy, movement, action, emotion, life. –tamas: ‘Darkness,’ inertia, density, the force of contraction, resistance and dissolution” (Subramuniyaswami 727). It is not productive to attempt to align the three main characters in Desai’s novel to the three gunas, or to Shiva’s Shakti powers in any direct one to one comparison, but the tense relationships between these three characters do give the text its own internal force, its own driving energy. And Ila Das’ death catastrophically upsets this tentative balance of threes, setting the world spinning out of control and leading to the destruction that is wrecked in the final pages.

The symbolism of Raka as a sort of Shaivite ascetic or as Shiva himself comes together in a (somewhat irreverent) depiction of Raka as Shiva in his Nataraja manifestation. Desai stages Raka in the iconic Nataraja pose dancing with one leg raised with an elliptical backdrop of flames. In the scene when Raka sees her first forest fire, we get the following description: “She pointed to a copper glow that outlined the shoulder of a hill in the east, then bloomed rapidly into the evening sky, a livid radiance in that cinereous twilight” (74). With this eerie, fiery glow behind her: “Shivers ran through her, zigzag,
leaving streams of sweat in their wake. Hugging herself with bone-thin arms, she stood on one leg, then the other, waiting” (74). The zigzag of her shivers recalls the characteristic dynamism of Shiva’s body in his dance pose with one arm and one leg slanted across the front of his body, and her raised leg suggests his, raised to signify transcendence or liberation (Subramuniyaswami 770).

The symbolism of the Nataraja pose is rich and dense. Shiva dances on the body of the demon *Apasmara purusha* who represents ignorance, and his dance therefore partly signifies the victory of knowledge, truth over ignorance (Subramuniyaswami 770). Raka’s growing power, too, is posited as a victory of truth over illusion. She sees through patriarchal discourse and is repelled by the ways in which Nanda Kaul and Ila Das operate within it. The fire at the end of the text is closely linked to this truth and the burning away of illusions. As Raka lights the fire, her great-grandmother recognizes her complicity, perhaps for the first time:

> It was all a lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Her father had never been to Tibet […] Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen –he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children –the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice –she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. […] And Ila had lied, too. Ila, too, had lied, had tried. (145)
And yet, as we have seen, the text itself is also complicit with this patriarchal discourse, and the truths posited within it are, therefore, always provisional, partial. This is best illustrated, perhaps, by taking another look at Nanda Kaul’s death as a kind of ironic or inverted sati. Lindsey Harlan argues that “the sati, whose very name is cognate with sat, referring to the ‘real’ or the ‘true’ not only sees transcendent truth but also literally embodies it” (119). Harlan goes on to explain:

> Through her many sacrificial actions she performed as a devoted wife, she has built up sat […] which inheres in the blood. This sat, as it accumulates, acts like a fuel that generates heat and fervour […] when the sat-saturated woman learns of her husband’s death, the theory goes, the sat ignites a fire inside, which eventually causes her body to ignite on the funeral pyre. (124)

It is possible to argue, then, that Nanda Kaul is ‘saturated’ with the truth at this moment, with a truth diametrically opposed to the patriarchal vision of ‘truth’ traditionally associated with the sati’s sacrifice. The fire, which is lit at the same moment as Nanda Kaul’s realization, is also the igniting of that truth, the visible form of that truth in the world.

Yet the fact remains that the ‘truth’ that Desai depicts here is delivered in the same package, the same idiom, as the patriarchal ‘truth’ of the sati’s sacrifice conventionally understood. Just as a woman must die as an illustration of that patriarchal truth, so, too, does Desai sacrifice her own protagonist. Just as she sacrifices Ila Das to Preet Singh, here she consigns Nanda Kaul to the flames. Again, the text points out its own complicity, by its use of the extremely problematic sati motif.
In one final reading of the fire, however, the flames transcend all of these layers of male violence, of revenge, and of complicity. Nataraja, as well as symbolically trampling ignorance holds the fire of destruction in his upper left hand. The dance itself that he performs is a violent and dangerous force that destroys the whole world, and wipes out weary perspectives, attitudes and behaviours. It is this total destruction that Desai pictures at the very end of her novel, a nihilistic destruction that encompasses all social life, plants, animals and the novel itself. “Down in the ravine, the flames spat and crackled around the dry wood and through the dry grass, and black smoke spiralled up over the mountain” (146).

Desai, like Tagore before her, connects the worldly inauspiciousness of the widow with the other-worldly auspiciousness of the world-renouncing ascetic. But for Tagore the widow’s inauspiciousness is transformed into the ascetic’s auspiciousness, and this allows him to conveniently shuffle the widow offstage, out of the realm of the modern, and it allows him to contain her power. Desai, on the other hand, layers the widow’s inauspiciousness over the ascetic’s auspiciousness (i.e. she is never purified of inauspiciousness), and this move is designed to suggest a greater power for the widow, possibly even a cosmic power. Fire on the Mountain suggests this power by giving the ostensibly realist story mythic and gothic undertones –Kaul is both a sort of witch and a figure for Shiva. And yet, the novel recognizes the ways in which the widow, and indeed the novel itself, are constantly hemmed in by patriarchal thinking, discourses, domination. And it draws our attention to these patriarchal complicities using a careful blend of realist, romantic and grotesque modes. In order to get around this, ultimately, the novel shifts the in/auspicious power of the widow to a younger generation, to a figure
so un-socialized, so anti-social, perhaps, that she is untouched by these discourses. This in/auspicious power is equated, here, with the world-destroying power of Shiva. And the book ends with the total annihilation I have just detailed. And yet, there is still the tiniest glimmer of hope that another world might be possible. Shiva’s dance is, after all, not just *tandava*, the violent dance of destruction, it is *ananda tandava*, the dance also of *ananda*, ‘bliss’ (Subramuniyaswami 834). Shiva’s dance is both the end of the world, and its beginning—it is creation and destruction at once. Perhaps Raka’s fire, too, can operate this way, both as a terrible destructive force, and as a possible new beginning.
Chapter Three
Inauspiciousness and a New Manifest Destiny in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*

Bharati Mukherjee’s novel, *Jasmine*, written twelve years after Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*, captures some of the same claustrophobia Desai has so masterfully depicted. Mukherjee’s protagonist, like Desai’s, consistently feels trapped and stuck, hemmed in by patriarchal relationships and expectations. But unlike Desai’s sophisticated (and wrathful) resistance to patriarchal discourse (and recognition of her own complicity in it), Mukherjee’s novel tells a very problematic tale of liberation through emigration. As Inderpal Grewal has pointed out, Mukherjee reproduces, in many ways, the well-trodden path of a certain phase of Asian-American immigrant women’s writing in which the protagonist passes from incarceration in the East to freedom in the United States (“Becoming American” 63). While I am in no way an apologist for what Mukherjee does in this novel, as will become clear over the course of this chapter, I do think that the criticism of the novel thus far has failed to take into account its impressive interweaving of Indian and American nationalist mythologies and the ways in which this interweaving allows us to see both mythologies in a new light.

I argue in this chapter, that the inauspicious fate of Bharati Mukherjee’s protagonist, Jasmine, here, coincides with a new vision of American Manifest Destiny. Jasmine is told at the beginning of the novel that she is fated to be a widow and an exile; she is branded inauspicious, in other words, from the outset, but rather than opposing that fate or proving it false, Mukherjee rewrites it as a new postmodern Manifest Destiny. Once
again, in other words, Mukherjee transforms her character’s inauspiciousness into a form of power. The protagonist is ‘destined’ for a glorious conquest of America, which requires, as it did for her colonial and settler forbears, a tremendous amount of violence—violence figured as absolutely inevitable. The destruction wreaked by her inauspiciousness, then, is rewritten as the ‘necessary’ violence of American history. As in Desai’s novel, Mukherjee is careful to keep the surface of her story realist, and yet this realism is consistently broken into by myths, and the cosmic forces of fate or destiny hang heavily over all the events. Jasmine lives through a series of patriarchal romances, Indian and American: the love of the Indian ‘new woman’ for her Nehruvian husband, an American captivity narrative, a Western romance of cowboys and homesteaders. But in each case she explodes out of these marriages/partnerships. She is, after all fated to be a widow, and destined to be free. In the process she leaves a trail of dead or broken people behind her. Ultimately I argue that the final tale of the novel, which we glimpse as our protagonist rides off toward California, is a postmodern fantasy of capitalist accumulation thinly disguised as a family romance.

Critics of Mukherjee’s novel, especially feminist critics, have consistently worried over the mixture of agency and passivity that characterizes the protagonist. Erin Khue Ninh, for example, argues that Mukherjee uses Jasmine’s beauty to mystify her agency, rendering her more palatable to an American patriarchy. She writes: “the immigrant woman in general is seen as possessed of a ‘hyperagency’ that must be diffused if she is to be assimilated” (154). On a slightly different but related note, Kristen Carter-Sanborn argues that:
Jasmine’s syncretic adaptation of sacred Hindu and secular American beliefs collapses under the weight of what it must support: an impossible negotiation between destiny and opportunity, between unwilled necessity and the willed, private revolution of the ‘self-made man.’ (585)

She goes on to claim that even at moments when Jasmine appears to be engaged in direct, willed action, the language used is strangely passive, making her appear, over and over again like “the object of transformation” rather than its subject (587). In setting up what is essentially a deeply problematic binary between Hindu fate and American agency (and the division of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ this implies), Carter-Sanborn’s claims are, perhaps, the easiest to critique of this school of thinking about the novel, but all of these scholars, in insisting on agency have failed to recognize what is really at play in the novel, namely, desire. Mukherjee seems uninterested in agency. What she is interested in is the complexity of desire, which can be both agentic and non-agentic. Rather than setting up an opposition between agency and fate, which these critics insist on imposing on the text, Mukherjee sets up Jasmine’s inauspicious fate, her desire, and her American destiny as one and the same, all working in tandem. She resists, in other words, classic distinctions between the worlds of ‘tradition’ and of ‘modernity.’ Perhaps unsurprisingly none of the critics of the novel have considered the complicated relationship between inauspiciousness, desire and agency in Indian literary history, but more surprisingly these critics have also not, in any direct and explicit way, taken into account the American belief in destiny (which is, after all, only the optimistic younger brother of fate). I hope to draw out these complexities in my own argument.
From very early in her life, when she is still living in India, Jasmine is linked to unruly desire. Her first romance, with her husband Prakash, is explicitly figured as her entrance into Indian bourgeois modernity in the mode I have traced in my first chapter. Prakash, we are told “wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman” (77). As Maureen Markel points out, while Jasmine thinks of her new husband as a man who encourages ‘independence’ and ‘self-reliance,’ a man who believes that “love [is] letting go” (qtd. 126), she also compares him to Professor Higgins suggesting at least some awareness that he is completely remaking her in the mould he prefers: “reshaping her values, her likes and dislikes, her desires, beliefs, the very person she is. […] [D]espite his liberal views, the relationship he develops with his new bride is one of continuous control” (Markel 126). The only sign of resistance Jasmine betrays to Prakash’s efforts at turning her into a ‘new woman’ is her continued desire for a baby and, less explicitly, for sex. Jasmine repeatedly tells her husband that she wants to get pregnant to which he responds: “‘We aren’t going to spawn! We aren’t ignorant peasants!’” (77). She is unconvinced by his arguments. On what is obviously a closely related note, the text suggests that their sex life is either non-existent or unfulfilling, stifled: “I think now that he was afraid of hurting me, afraid of embarrassing me with any desire or demand. ‘Jasmine, Jasmine,’ he would whisper in the anguished intimacy of our little room, ‘help me be a better person.’ And I did. I bit him and nibbled him and pressed his head against my bosom” (79). This ‘anguished’ scene of intimacy is remarkably similar to the sex scene between Jane and Bud when we are told: “What kills me in this half-lit bedroom is the look of torture, excitement, desperation on Bud’s face
as he watches me” (36). In both scenes Jasmine is asked to perform a service for others, and her own desires are squashed.

If Jasmine’s ‘feudal’ desires stand in opposition to Prakash’s modern disciplinary tactics during their marriage, they are also closely linked to his death and the subsequent events that free her completely from his control. On the one hand it is clear that Prakash dies because of Jasmine’s evil fate, because, in other words, of her inauspiciousness. She hopes that they will be able to get out of India ‘out of God’s sight,” where “all fates would be cancelled. We’d start with new fates, new stars” (85). But, of course, this doesn’t happen quickly enough and their fates catch up with them. On the other hand, though, Jasmine explicitly associates Prakash’s death with her own unruly desires and considers it her fault. Prakash is killed in a terrorist attack by the Khalsa Lions and specifically by Sukhwinder, one time friend of Jasmine’s brothers, who considers “all Hindu women whores” (65). But Jasmine thinks of herself specifically as the target of the attack. She says: “I failed you. I didn’t get there soon enough. The bomb was meant for me, prostitute, whore” (93). The text seems to suggest that Sukhwinder has actually recognized a kind of truth about Jasmine (her aching sexual desires that make her a secret ‘whore’). It is her ‘whorishness’ that results in the death of her husband.

It is clear, here, that, as was the case in earlier texts, such as those I looked at in Chapter One, a widow’s inauspiciousness is explicitly tied to her unruly desire. And, as in the

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24 As Inderpal Grewal and others have pointed out, Mukherjee’s portrayal of the violence in the Punjab is deeply problematic. Grewal reminds us that Mukherjee doesn't provide us with any political reasons for the violence or any real sense of history or context. As a result, she argues, while the Hindus in the novel come off as “cultured and kind,” the Muslims and Sikhs appear only as rapacious terrorists (“Becoming American” 66).
earlier texts, this desire is both destructive and *necessary* for the movement of the plot and for bringing about social change. There are, however, a couple of significant differences. One is that this desire/inauspiciousness is not simply flattened into a rationalized, agentic, purposeful series of acts that lead to destructive outcomes for others. It remains deeply ambiguous, cosmic. And the second, of course, is that this desire does not lead to the widow’s ultimately containment. It is very closely tied up with Jasmine’s emigration to America and her subsequent destiny.

The relationship between Prakash’s death and Jasmine’s unruly desire becomes more evident in the crucial scene between Jasmine and Half-Face. I read this interlude in the novel as heavily influenced by captivity narratives, following a very similar form and grappling with similar preoccupations. In the most common reading of captivity narratives, as Christopher Castiglia has pointed out, they tell the story of an innocent (white) woman taken captive by New World ‘savages’ or ‘demons’ – representatives of the vast American wilderness (23). On one level, Jasmine’s encounter with Half-Face is figured very much in this manner. Half-Face is explicitly demonized. Just before he rapes her, Jasmine thinks: For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human. Half-Face was from an underworld of evil” (116). In case we were tempted to overlook this explicit dehumanizing description (this person is, after all about to rape her), it is worth keeping in mind that Jasmine has lived through a terrorist attack that killed her husband, and she never suggested that Sukhwinder was not human or was ‘evil.’ Mukherjee also associates the encounter with Half-Face and Half-Face himself with a dark and terrifying wilderness. “Beyond the fence” surrounding the hotel, we are told, “was woody blackness” (110). And before she gets out of Half-
Face’s car, she says: “The mangled side of his face came at me, like a bat in a night-black forest” (110). Mukherjee even goes out of her way, during this scene, to depict Jasmine as a fragile, naïve girl, a depiction that doesn't square with what we have known of her up to this point (121). Mukherjee seems momentarily invested in conforming to the classic captivity narrative’s portrayal of the woman as helpless, without agency, and utterly unable to bring about her own escape.

Like her puritan forebears, then, Jasmine is taken captive by an American ‘savage’ upon her arrival on the continent, but the nature of this ‘savagery’ is very different from the puritans’ visions of demonic ‘others.’ Mukherjee has given us a twentieth-century version of America’s shadow side. Half-Face is a Vietnam vet, and he seems to stand in for the brutal violence of American imperialism (although he is as much its victim as its perpetrator, a fact which Mukherjee never really acknowledges). From its earliest introduction, in the novel, America is a land of opportunity which is haunted by gruesome violence, waste, destruction. Here is Jasmine’s first sight of the country:

The first thing I saw were the two cones of a nuclear plant, and smoke spreading from them in complicated but seemingly purposeful patterns, edges lit by the rising sun, like a gray, intricate map of an unexplored island continent, against the pale unscratched blue of the sky. I waded through Eden’s waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs. (107)
The ‘intricate map’ the smoke seems to sketch out evocatively suggests a colonial excitement for ‘discovery’ and conquest. And, of course, the mention of Eden recalls early European romanticism about the Americas. But the looming cones of the nuclear plant and the ‘waste’ insist on the environmental and human catastrophes that have also been the touchstones of American history.

And yet, as I have suggested already, the violence that underlies the opportunity in Mukherjee’s depiction of America is figured as necessary, inevitable, a fact which becomes more evident if we examine the other levels of similarity between Jasmine’s encounter with Half-Face and captivity narratives. As Richard Slotkin has famously argued, within the symbolism of the captivity narrative the ‘demonic’ or ‘savage’ other also represents the deepest, darkest, most sinful aspects of the captive’s own erring soul. The captive, usually a woman, must fight off this sinful nature in order to be redeemed by Christ and be rescued by her community. The testing of her soul is usually figured as “the temptation of Indian marriage and/or the Indian ‘cannibal’ Eucharist. To partake of the Indian’s love or of his equivalent of bread and wine was to debase, to un-English the very soul,” to succumb to original sin and one’s own animal nature (Slotkin 94-5).

While Slotkin goes on to argue that the narrative was also preoccupied with the guilt and shame of having betrayed one’s forefathers in emigrating to America (98-99), Christopher Castiglia suggests a more evocative reason for feelings of guilt and disloyalty (at least for our purposes here): namely the fact that ‘captivity’ at the hands of Native Americans often allowed white women to see more clearly how they were always already ‘captives’ in their own homes, at the hands of their own husbands, within their own native patriarchal order (19). Castiglia writes: “Captivity momentarily released
white women from the ontological determination their home cultures relied on to
naturalize positions of ‘superiority’ and ‘depravity,’ of ‘strength’ and ‘vulnerability’” (7).

But Mukherjee interweaves American national mythology, here, with the Hindu stories
of the Goddess Kali. And by reading Jasmine’s experience of (American) captivity via a
couple of very well-known Kali battles, we can see how Jasmine’s encounter with Half-
Face becomes an encounter with the self’s own ‘savage’ side. Jasmine, though, does not
resist the temptation of this ‘sinful’ side of herself (what I have called, previously, her
unruly desire) – on the contrary she eats the ‘savage’s’ black Eucharist, takes on his
violent nature and rids herself of the ‘captivity’ of her marriage. In one very well-known
Kali battle story, Durga is trying to fight the demon, but is unable to defeat him because
each drop of his blood that she sheds turns into another version of himself (indeed his
name is a combination of ‘rakta,’ meaning blood or red and ‘vija,’ meaning seed
(Dallapiccola). In desperation Durga calls on Kali, or transforms into her; Kali drinks the
demon’s blood and devours all the little Raktavijas (Kinsley 118).
Kali, though, is also prone to dancing fiendishly on the battlefield after she defeats her demon enemies, and, in perhaps her most famous manifestation as Daksinakali, she gets drunk on the blood of her enemies and is on the point of destroying the whole world herself. In order to prevent this dire outcome, Shiva (her consort), lies down on the battlefield, and, mistaking him for another demon, she puts her foot upon him. She is only pacified when she realizes her mistake (Kinsley 130). It could be argued that in drinking the blood of her demon enemies, Kali has taken on some of their demonic qualities in this story. Patriarchal authority is restored, here, when Shiva manages to pacify his consort, but the famous iconography of Kali standing on Shiva with her bloody tongue dangling out suggests a distinct anxiety about the possibility of her killing her
husband. Indeed Shiva lies surrounded by the corpses of Kali’s victims, and blurs with the demons Kali slays in the story.

In Mukherjee’s masterful (if politically troubling) blending of the captivity narrative with these two very famous Kali stories, Jasmine, like Kali, figuratively drinks the blood of her demon enemy (or in captivity narrative terms, she eats the ‘black Eucharist’ and succumbs to the temptation of her own ‘sinful’ nature). After Half-Face rapes Jasmine, she goes into the bathroom with the intention of killing herself, or as she puts it “balance[ing] my defilement with my death” (117). She thinks, in other words, of committing sati, but then she changes her mind. The slicing of Jasmine’s tongue is clearly meant to recall Kali’s “lolling tongue, grotesquely long and over-sized” (Kinsley 126), which, as Kinsley writes, along with her “sunken stomach, emaciated appearance, and sharp fangs” suggests that she is “ever hungry” (126). Jasmine/Kali then slaughters the ‘demon’ Half-Face, but, as in the Kali iconography, the demon is closely tied to the husband here. She says: “for the second time in three months, I was in a room with a slain man, my body bloodied. I was walking death. Death incarnate” (119). In some sense, it is her own bloodthirstiness (or her unruly desire) that has led to the deaths of both Half-Face and Prakash. And, indeed, the first act she undertakes when she leaves the hotel room confirms that this interlude has freed her once and for all from her husband. Once again instead of committing sati, she has a sort of second cremation for Prakash – putting the heavy suitcase she has been carrying of his last remaining belongings in a trash barrel and lighting them on fire (120). She ends the chapter by suggesting a brand new beginning: “I buttoned up the jacket and sat by the fire. With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel
to the highway and began my journey, traveling light” (121). While Jasmine has killed ‘the demon,’ then, she has also, in a sense, become him – she has followed his advice to “always travel light” (114). To put this another way, she has succumbed to her own deepest, darkest desires, killing off her husband and setting herself free for a new life.

If, as I have suggested above, Half-Face’s ‘savagery’ represents not only Jasmine’s secret desires, but also the devastating violence of American imperialism, Jasmine’s encounter with Half-Face provides us with a sort of road-map for the book as a whole. Jasmine wants both to resist this imperialism (in its racist opposition to her presence) and to own it, to become it, to inhabit it (in her fulfilling of her own violent western expansion and manifest destiny). By remembering that these unruly desires are also figures for Jasmine’s inauspicious fate, we can also see that this imperial violence is figured as ‘fated,’ or destined to happen, necessary, inevitable.

Later in the novel, Mukherjee figures her protagonist in yet another classic American narrative – the Western. As Carmen Faymonville points out “Mukherjee’s incorporation of the Mythical West is predominantly worked out in the novel through allusions to the […] novel, Shane” (255). Jasmine has read the novel as a child in her native Punjab (Mukherjee 40), and her adventures in Iowa follow very much in the mould of the hero of that Western tale. The novel deals with the conflict not, for once, between cowboys and Indians, but rather between cowboys and homesteaders. Homesteaders are expanding into the territory loosely controlled by a cowboy named Riker and his gang of gun-fighting toughs. Needless to say, Riker doesn’t appreciate this change and he tries to drive them off with harassment. When this doesn’t work, he hires an assassin to goad
them into fighting and getting themselves killed. Shane is the gun-fighter with a heart of
gold who falls in love with one of the homesteader families and is ultimately forced to go
back to his gun-fighting ways to protect them from Riker and his gang. At the beginning
of the novel, Shane has had enough of his wild freedom and wants nothing more than to
settle down. The novel makes much of the fact that Joe, the central homesteader, was
married on Independence Day, trading in his own ‘independence’ for something sweeter
and more meaningful: love, family, community. The central romance here is
undoubtedly that of the homesteader, the family farmer, the agrarian heartland. And yet
this romance cannot be achieved, in the novel, without killing off those who came before,
and by having Shane do this work, the novel both valorizes and renders necessary the
(otherwise antisocial) violence of the cowboy and frees the homesteaders from having to
get mixed up in it themselves.

Like Shane, Jasmine is a dangerous outsider who swoops into town and inserts herself
into this heartland romance. Like Joe and Marian in Shane, Bud and Karen are figures of
the best the heartland has to offer. They are solid and brave, intelligent and resourceful.
And as in Shane, the narrative, here, sets up a conflict between the two sides of the
protagonist: the cowboy and the farmer. Bud says Jasmine is “Calamity Jane. Jane as in
Jane Russell, not Jane as in Plain Jane” (26). For Bud she is explicitly a kind of outsider
cowboy figure like Calamity Jane or like Jane Russell in The Outlaw, but, Jasmine
claims “Plain Jane is all I want to be” (26). She prefers to think of herself as a stolid
farmer’s wife, loyal, hard-working, ultimately conservative. And yet, of course, Shane
cannot be Joe, cannot live Joe’s life. He is “branded” with his past as a killer and must,
ultimately, kill again. The same is true of Jasmine. If Shane must carry out the violence
that is ‘necessary’ to the transition from a wild frontier of cowboys to a settled community of farmers, Jasmine must embody the ‘necessary’ violence of a transition from an agrarian economy to the freewheeling, rapidly shifting economy of late-stage capitalism.

As in her previous incarnations, Jasmine is depicted as violence incarnate in this section of the novel. Karen says to her “Last night I dreamed that Baden was hit by a tornado. I don’t have to ask a shrink to know that you are the tornado. You’re leaving a path of destruction behind you” (205). And, once again, this destruction is the result of her inauspiciousness, her unruly desire, and the inevitability of her American destiny. Jasmine explicitly points out the connection between the attack on Bud’s life and her inauspiciousness, when she says: “Bud was wounded in the war between my fate and my will. I think sometimes I saved his life by not marrying him. I feel so potent, a goddess” (12). Her inauspiciousness is such that anyone she marries will die, so simply by refusing to marry Bud, she is able to keep him alive (although she also, thereby, brings about a nearly fatal attack on his life).

And yet, as in previous pairings, her desire is in line with her inauspicious fate here, even if it is opposed to her will. Although she may ‘will’ herself to be Plain Jane, her desire resists this role. Once again, as in her marriage to Prakash, she is described as stifled, parched, repressed. I have mentioned already how sex with Bud is tied to sex with Prakash, in its ‘tortured’ sadness (37). But Jasmine also describes her body as a kind of dried out farmland longing for rain and rejuvenation: “On nights like this, with a full moon beating down like an auxiliary sun, the farmers say you can practically hear the
corn and beans ripping their way through the ground. This night I feel torn open like the hot dry soil, parched” (38). Jasmine likens herself, here, to the ‘hot dry soil’ of the heartland itself. And we know that there has been a devastating drought there for some time, driving farmers into bankruptcy and even to suicide. Jasmine’s own stifled bodily longings, then, are explicitly tied to the stagnation of the mid-west. It is as if the earth itself were longing for the change that is coming. And there is a change coming. And once again this change is presaged by what is figured as ‘necessary’ violence:

Something’s gotten out of hand in the heartland […]

Last week in Dalton County a farmer dug a trench all around his banker’s house with stolen backhoe equipment. On TV he said, ‘Call it a moat of hate.’

Over by Osage a man beat his wife with a spade, then hanged himself in his machine shed. (155-56)

All of this violence, is, of course, in the same category as Darrel’s suicide (he is on the point of bankruptcy) and the attack on Bud: Harlan shoots Bud because he is his banker. Jasmine’s own personal desires, for a different life, for an escape from Bud and Elsa County, and her ‘inauspicious’ fate that decrees the deaths of her husbands, blur, here, with the ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’ of an entire country, of an economy. The “Elsa County Mental Health Center consultant” says, “The drought’s a catalyst, it’s not the problem” (155). The problem is something broader – a shift away from farming to a different, much more diverse economy. Jasmine is a whirlwind inaugurating a painful but important (and ‘inevitable’) transition both for herself and for everyone else.
If the whole novel has been leading inexorably, from slaughter to slaughter, toward Jasmine’s fate or ‘destiny’ – a destiny now fully tied up with that of America itself, what is this destiny? What is the final romance that everything has been leading to? Du leaves us a hint when he goes off to California (leading the way towards this ultimate ‘destiny’). In his messy room, alongside “solar calculators” and an “electronic chess set,” Jasmine discovers a Scrabble board “with only two words, ‘deliquesce’ and ‘scabrous.’ Laid out by imaginary players. […] They are clues, but to what? Shadowy road signs for a phantom Columbus?” (225). The implication, here, is, of course, that Jasmine is herself a kind of Columbus discovering a ‘new world’ by following the ‘shadowy road signs’ Du has left behind. Once again there is a strong implication of Jasmine being intimately intertwined in the ultimate destiny of the Americas. But the words themselves can tell us something somewhat more specific. ‘Deliquesce’ derives from the Latin deliquescere, meaning “to melt, dissolve, disappear” (“deliquesce”), which is what Du has, in fact, done – he has disappeared from their lives; his role as the adopted son of Jane and Bud Ripplemeyer has dissolved. And, indeed, the novel suggests that this is a crucial skill, one that Jasmine also possesses – the ability to disappear, to dissolve, and then to rise again in another form, another life.

But the second word, ‘scabrous’ is even more evocative. It recalls us to the novel’s epigraph from James Gleick’s Chaos: “The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined.” (n.p.). The ‘new geometry’ that Gleick is describing is clearly aligned with the ‘new world’ Jasmine is about to ‘discover.’ And it is worth delving a bit into Gleick’s explorations of chaos theory in order to get a better
handle on the type of postmodernity Mukherjee is imagining. In order to explain this ‘new geometry’ (called fractal geometry), Gleick uses the example of a coastline. He writes that before fractals we used Euclidean geometry, which is based on perfect geometrical shapes like circles and straight lines. He points out that if you measured a coastline using a yardstick, you would obviously get a somewhat smaller number than if you measured it using a foot-long ruler, which would be smaller again than what you would get if you measured it using a device of a single inch (95-6):

Common sense suggests that, although these estimates will continue to get larger [as your measuring device gets smaller], they will approach some particular final value, the true length of the coastline. The measurements should converge, in other words. And in fact, if a coastline were some Euclidean shape, such as a circle, this method of summing finer and finer straight-line distances would indeed converge. But [Benoit] Mandelbrot found that as the scale of measurement becomes smaller, the measured length of a coastline rises without limit, bays and peninsulas revealing ever-smaller subbays and subpeninsulas –at least down to the atomic scales, where the process does finally come to an end. Perhaps. (96)

This recognition that Euclidean geometry doesn’t actually describe the world we inhabit led Mandelbrot to radically rethink the way we ascribe meaning to things. Here is the longer version of the passage that Mukherjee uses for her epigraph:

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25 It is worth noting that Mandelbrot, the inventor, or perhaps discoverer, of ‘fractal geometry’ took the word from the Latin adjective “fractus, from the verb frangere, to break. The resonance of the main English cognates –fracture and fraction –seemed appropriate” (Gleick 98). The concepts behind this new way of understanding the world, then, are always already tied up with breaking things apart.
Clouds are not spheres, Mandelbrot is fond of saying. Mountains are not cones. Lightning does not travel in a straight line. The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined. The understanding of nature’s complexity awaited a suspicion that the complexity was not just random, not just accident. […] Mandelbrot’s work made a claim about the world, and the claim was that such odd shapes carry meaning. The pits and tangles are more than blemishes distorting the classic shapes of Euclidian geometry. They are the keys to the essence of the thing.
(94)

The meaning, in other words, was not to be found by eliding the ‘pits and tangles’ and seeing only the Euclidean shapes, but rather in the ‘pits and tangles’ themselves.

Mukherjee, I argue, takes this scientific/mathematical discovery and gives it a philosophical and political valence. In a modern vision of culture, the ‘scabrous,’ the ‘pits and tangles’ are simply the anomalies to the ‘smooth,’ Euclidean shape of culture, anomalies that can be safely ignored in ascribing meaning or measurements. But in a postmodern reading, it is the supposed anomalies –the scars, the marks, the breaks that show us “the essence of the thing.” Jasmine herself is identified as “scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns” on the very first page of the novel (3), this in comparison to her sisters’ ”butter-smooth arms” (4). While Jasmine appears to be the outsider, the anomaly—it is her we have to watch if we want to get to the bottom of things. This is even clearer in the American context of the rest of the novel. Jasmine and Du are seen by many Elsa county residents as foreigners, and yet, it is clear, they are the very ‘essence of the thing’
we call America. Jasmine says: “Once upon a time, like me, [Du] was someone else. We’ve been many selves. We’ve survived hideous times. I envy Bud the straight lines and smooth planes of his history” (214). While the seeming agrarian authenticity of Elsa County might define the Euclidean shape of America for some people (the “straight lines and smooth planes” of its history), it has always really been about the ‘pitted, pocked, and broken up’—the ‘survivors’ like Jasmine and Du (226). These are the heroes of the postmodern romance Mukherjee sketches out.

When Jasmine drives off into a California sunset at the end of the novel, she is entering a network of association, pleasure. The ‘family’ she is joining, of Taylor, Duff, and Du, is not composed along the patriarchal lines of law or blood. They have different cultural and religious backgrounds, are of different races, and speak multiple languages. Duff and Du are both adopted, and, of course, Jasmine loves Taylor and he loves her. And yet, lest we be entirely taken in by the seeming racial and gendered progressiveness of this postmodern dream, it is important to note that what chiefly defines the terms of this network is capitalism. This is a world in which children can be acquired for a price; Wylie and Taylor purchase Duff from her young mother in return for a college education (170). It is also a world in which boyfriends can be ‘returned’ like an unwanted knife-set. In her days in New York, Jasmine learns to be adventurous by buying things: “I sent away for it. First came a Japanese knife set. Then a radio-controlled Lamborghini” etc. (186). But she needs help in figuring out what to do with all this stuff, and Taylor comes to the rescue: “He wrote on a package in thick marking pen RETURN TO SENDER. That’s all you need to do, he explained. If something gets too frightening, just pull down an imaginary shade that says RETURN on it and you can make it go away” (186). When
he later comes to pick her up from the house where she has been living with Bud, the novel explicitly recalls this moment:

\[
\text{Just pull down an imaginary shade, he whispers, that's all you need to do. I remember the thick marking pen in hand printing a confident RETURN on packages of books, records, knife sets I'd thought I wanted. The cord feels dusty. (239-40)}
\]

From Taylor’s perspective, one Jasmine agrees with here, she can simply ‘return’ her life with Bud, indeed, she can ‘return’ Bud himself now that she no longer wants him. To be perfectly clear, I do not wish to jump on the patriarchal bandwagon and accuse Jasmine of heartlessness for leaving Bud, quite the contrary, but to boil down a complex affective situation into a simple business transaction, as Mukerjee does here, is to engage in a dangerous capitalist fantasy in which the commodification of human beings renders social life less oppressive. 26

26 Other critics have pointed out the ways in which Jasmine’s romantic relationships are a kind of ladder to better and better socio-economic status. Carmen Faymonville, for example, argues that: “Making the metaphorical move from east to west, Jasmine, an illegal immigrant, becomes characterized as a 'gold digger’ out for the Gold Rush that coined the capitalist expansion of American economic history in a different time” (254). And yet, I think that what Mukherjee is doing here is significantly more interesting and complex than simply giving us a romanticised portrait of a ‘gold digger.’ The economics of the relationship a ‘gold digger’ and the man she is with (I will stick with the heteronormative example, here) are fairly straightforward. The woman herself is, in many ways, the commodity, the money and gifts the man showers on her the price of her being with him. There is a profound economic realism to this exchange—a full recognition of the patriarchal nature of the social order, which commodifies women and makes it much easier for men to be big earners. What Mukherjee does, it seems to me, is quite different. Rather than acknowledge the deep imbrication of capitalist exchange with patriarchy (as the above relationship does), she mystifies it by making Jasmine the purchaser (rather than the commodity that is purchased). Jasmine ‘returns’ Bud as if she was the one who purchased him. This move effectively mystifies the real power imbalance that would pertain in a relationship like this one, if it were a simple capitalist exchange, a relationship where the man has all the money and the woman none (and not only no money, but very precarious earning potential given her illegal status). It covers over the reality that Jasmine is only able to leave Bud because she now has another man to support her. By completely mystifying the real imbrication of patriarchy and capitalism, (the fact that capital is unevenly distributed across the genders), Mukherjee is able to imagine capitalist exchange as a simplistically liberating force for her protagonist.
The combination of a celebration of racial and gender diversity alongside a celebration of capitalism as liberating gives us a convincing portrait of what Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have called ‘imperial’ thinking. In their book, Empire, they argue that we are no longer living under modern forms of sovereignty defined by nation states and old colonial or neo-colonial relationships; we are now transitioning into what they call ‘imperial’ rule which is a kind of global capitalism freed from the boundaries and binary oppositions imposed in modern sovereignty. This new kind of power, which they call “postmodern sovereignty,” thrives on precisely the kinds of “hybrid and fragmentary subjectivities” (138) also celebrated by so many postmodern and postcolonial theorists, just as it thrives on the breakdown of “the boundaries of the ruling powers” and on “uncontrolled international movements and flows” (142). Hardt and Negri point out how the postmodern celebration of racial, gender, and sexual diversity can be made to blend seamlessly with the aims of transnational corporations in Empire:

When one looks closely at U.S. corporate ideology (and, to a lesser but still significant extent, at U.S. corporate practice), it is clear that corporations do not operate simply by excluding the gendered and/or racialized Other. In fact, the old modernist forms of racist and sexist theory are the explicit enemies of this new corporate culture. The corporations seek to include difference within their realm and thus aim to maximize creativity, free play, and diversity in the corporate workplace. People of all different races, sexes, and sexual orientations should potentially be included in the corporation; the daily routine of the workplace should be rejuvenated with unexpected changes and an atmosphere of fun. […] The task of the
boss, subsequently, is to organize these energies and differences in the interest of profit. (153)

While Hardt and Negri overstate their case here (U.S. corporations are still deeply racist and misogynist as even they acknowledge), they nonetheless make an important point. Multiplicity, diversity, hybridity, are not inherently liberating by any means. Or as Hardt and Negri put it: “The global politics of difference established by the world market is defined not by free play and equality, but by the imposition of new hierarchies, or really by a constant process of hierarchization” (154).

If Mukherjee’s novel works to break down certain race and, to a lesser extent, gender hierarchies, it solidifies the most fundamental hierarchy of all in American capitalist history: the one between those who win and those who lose. As in earlier tales of Manifest Destiny, Mukherjee’s vision creates ‘inevitable winners’ and ‘inevitable losers’—those who conquer the continent and come out on top, and those who are violently swept aside by history. By layering Jasmine’s inauspiciousness over her American Manifest Destiny, Mukherjee acknowledges and endorses the violence at the very heart of the American nationalist mythology. As she has throughout her novel, Mukherjee rather gleefully ends the text by pairing Jasmine’s explicitly stated desire: “I am […] greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (241) with the shadow of violence and destruction in the form of a tornado: “rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud” (241). In once again insisting, in this final scene, that Jasmine’s inauspiciousness is synonymous with her desire, Mukherjee ultimately, and I think perniciously, suggests that the violence of American history is the necessary, the inevitable outcome of wanting more as if the whole world were a cruel zero sum game.
To return to the broader implications of Mukherjee’s move, here, within the context of the Indian literary history I am tracing in this dissertation as a whole, the novel effectively recaptures a more popular, more cosmic, in some ways even more ‘traditional’ vision of a widow’s inauspiciousness here that resists the containment of elite nationalist discourse on the subject. By laying the protagonists inauspicious ‘fate’ over an American Manifest ‘Destiny,’ Mukherjee also resists the sorts of divisions between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ that are suggested by Kristen Carter-Sanborn: a Hindu ‘tradition’ of blind faith contrasted with an American modernity of ‘self-reliance’ and agency. Mukherjee insists on drawing out an American belief in ‘destiny’ that many Americans do not see as in contrast with agency or ‘self-reliance.’ And she blends this destiny very smoothly with a ‘traditional’ Hindu concept of inauspicious ‘fate.’ ‘Tradition’ and ‘modernity’ cannot be so easily disentangled here.

And yet, while these moves are empowering for Mukherjee’s protagonist, they are so at the cost of endorsing a violent American imperialism and rampant capitalist expansion (whose patriarchal realities the novel never fully acknowledges). This is, perhaps, not the most hopeful picture of a postmodern resistance to the modern restrictions we saw imposed in Chapter One.
In this chapter I move away, somewhat, from my focus on inauspicious women to examine a couple of very recent novels that engage with gendered inauspiciousness through feminized characters. In both cases these characters were born biologically male but have undergone a spiritual and bodily transformation that has feminized them. And both characters have taken on a complicated in/auspiciousness as a result. In both cases, I argue, this androgynous or third-sex figure is primarily of interest through his/her relationship to an elite male protagonist. And the in/auspiciousness of these figures is, therefore, primarily of interest, in the novels, in its effects on these protagonists. In this way, although they are dealing with characters who have not figured in any significant way in earlier novels, they are also following a much older narrative pattern—one laid out for them by novelists like Rabindranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. In both novels, I argue, these in/auspicious figures ‘curse’ the protagonists of the novels to fall out of the respectable role of householder (husband, father, continuer of the family line), but this ‘curse’ is actually a blessing that opens up the possibilities for a different kind of life, that opens up freedoms and potential previously unimagined and impossible.

In that they are capable of both cursing and blessing, these characters are both deeply auspicious and profoundly inauspicious, and they are like hijras in this respect, (although only one of them is actually a hijra). The word ‘hijra’ comes from the Urdu, and is a masculine noun suggesting, as Serena Nanda puts it, “as does the word eunuch, a man
that is less than a perfect man” (15). But hijras in India generally reject this idea of a ‘lack’ and self-identify as neither men nor women but a third gender category (Nanda 15). 27 They do, however, go by female names and use female pronouns to refer to one another (Nanda xiv). Hijras are a community of people who generally live on the margins of Indian society, but their community is quite a structured one and has a long history within Hinduism (and Islam) in India. 28 Traditionally (or perhaps more accurately, theoretically) hijras were meant to be born as hermaphrodites and, many people still believe today that the hijra community has a right to claim babies born with indeterminate sex organs (Nanda xx). The reality, though, is that the vast majority of hijras are born with male sexual organs, but self-identify as hijras when they are in their teens and join the community voluntarily (Nanda xx). 29

The traditional role of the hijra community is a religious, and specifically an ascetic one. Like many communities of ascetics in India, social relationships within the community are organized around the bond between the guru (or teacher) and the chela (or disciple) (Nanda 43). Hijras generally refer to their gurus as mothers and this lays the ground-

27 Hijras do also self-identify as hijras despite the fact that this word doesn’t really capture how they generally seem to understand themselves.

28 The history of the relationship between the hijra community and Islam is a fascinating one. Although their traditional religious role as intermediaries for the Mother Goddess is clearly a Hindu one, many hijras are Muslim, and there is a long and deep connection to Islam in their community organization. The original founders of all seven hijra houses were Muslim, and all the national leaders of the community are Muslim to this day. Many hijras who are not Muslim say that they plan to become Muslim and that they keep the fast of Ramadan (Nanda 41). Nanda speculates that this respect for Islam might stem from the privileges accorded to eunuchs in the courts of Muslim princely states (42), but she acknowledges that it might also just stem from a long standing syncretism within the community: “In his historical study of hijra land rights, Preston (1987) notes that because the hijras drew on all sectors of society for their membership, their community was characterized by religious and communal syncretism as they ‘borrowed rather freely from the cumulative social backgrounds of those who joined’” (qtd. Nanda 42).

29 This, of course, isn’t the case for all hijras; Nanda writes that several of the hijras she met where raised as girls and only joined the community when they failed to begin menstruating (18).
work for a network of other family bonds: the guru of the guru is grandmother, the other
disciples of the guru are sisters etc. (Nanda 47). Through their gurus, hijras are initiated
into one of seven ‘houses’ (not a place, but more like a lineage or a clan), and decisions
in the community are made in *jamats* – meetings involving the local representatives of
each house (Nanda 39-40). The community is organized in quite a hierarchical fashion,
and a hijra’s guru often (but not always) has a large measure of control not only over her
spiritual development but also over her livelihood, and many of her daily activities
(Nanda 44).

Hijras are closely associated with the Mother Goddess, and especially with Baluchara
Mata (their particular Mother Goddess). They are not considered full members of the
hijra community (at least not by orthodox standards) until they have undergone the
emasculcation ceremony which they refer to as *nirvan* (Nanda 26). As is suggested by the
name, this ceremony is viewed as a rebirth, a liberation from the position of an impotent
man into a new life as a hijra (Nanda 26). Crucially, this new person is blessed with the
power of *Shakti* (Nanda 26). It is for this reason that hijras traditionally perform at
auspicious ceremonies such as marriages and births (especially of sons). With the special
power bestowed on them by the Mother Goddess, they are able to bless the newly-weds
or the new-born son with fertility and prosperity. On the other hand, however, they are
also able to curse those who refuse to pay them for their services or who turn them away
(Nanda 5-6). By raising up their saris to expose their genitals, they curse onlookers with
impotence and infertility (Nanda 7). As Nanda writes, “Although hijras have an
auspicious presence, they also have an inauspicious potential. The sexual ambiguity of
the hijras as impotent men –eunuchs –represents a loss of virility, and this undoubtedly is the major cause of the fear that they inspire” (6).

It is also important to note that while their traditional role is an ascetic one, a very large number of hijras make a living by prostitution (either as a supplement to their income as ceremonial performers and mendicant beggars or as their sole source of income). Despite its prevalence, however, it is still seen by many in the community as ‘deviant,’ and it no doubt affects the way members of the community are seen by those outside of it (Nanda 53).

In some ways, then, hijras contain within themselves, within one person, the dichotomous in/auspicious potential of both the wife and the widow –the possibility of blessing others with children and grandchildren and the prosperous continuance of their family lines, and also the possibility of cursing others with an end to their family lines. In this way, they are, as our narrator puts it in Mahadevan’s The Strike, “simultaneously revered and reviled” (Loc 2263).

As I previously mentioned, however, only Radha, in The Strike is actually a hijra. Ghosh’s Baboo Nob Kissin is a Vaishnava devotee who is in the process of being transformed into his (female) guru Taramony. As such he references a very different set of historical, spiritual and social positions and would not ordinarily be associated with the complicated in/auspiciousness of a hijra. It is my argument, however, that Ghosh has elided these differences in his novel for his own narrative purposes. Baboo Nob Kissin seems to be inspired by what Kumkum Sangari calls the “‘feminization’ of worship” in certain schools of Bengali Vaishnavism. In this bhakti practice the humble nature of the
worshipper in the face of Krishna is likened to the adoration the *gopis* (cowherd girls) shower on Krishna as cowherd. In some sects this “feminization’ of worship” was enacted in a physical, bodily transformation, as Vern Bullough writes:

The Sakhibhava, a form of Vaishnavism, held that only the Godhead, Krishna, was truly male, and every other creature in the world was female and subject to the pleasures of Krishna. […] Male followers dressed like women, affecting the behavior, movements, and habits of women, even including menstruation. During their imitation menses they retired and abstained from worship. Many of them made themselves eunuchs, and all were supposed to permit the sexual act on their persons (playing the part of women) as an act of devotion. (267-8)

Although he was not a member of the Sakhibhava sect, one ‘feminized’ ascetic was enormously influential in the 19th century Bengal that Ghosh depicts in his novel – namely, of course, Sri Ramakrishna. During part of his career he was the priest at the Kali temple at Dakshineswar (just outside of Calcutta), and his worship was largely centered on Kali, but during one phase of his mystic experiences he took up the worship of Krishna. As Parama Roy puts it:

As a practitioner of the *madhura bhava* [the attitude of the mistress] of Vaishnava discipline of Dakshineshwar, he assumed women’s clothing and jewellery, as well as the feminine speech and behavior of the female devotee Radha. This discipline apparently reached its apex when Krishna revealed himself to him and merged in his body. (97)
Ramakrishna’s mysticism appears to have been a source of some anxiety among the respectable Brahmin families of Calcutta. Christopher Isherwood wrote of Ramakrishna’s Vaishnava practice that “[his] latest sadhana caused a whole series of scandalous rumours” (qtd. Roy 98). And Partha Chatterjee argues that “in the public postures of the Bengali intelligentsia to this day, its relationship to Ramakrishna has been both uneasy and shamefaced” (“A Religion” 65). And yet Ramakrishna was also a guru to a very large number of bhadralok young men, and he was revered as a saint by much of the community. The ‘feminization’ of worship in the Bengali schools of Vaishnavism and Ramakrishna’s feminization do not appear to have been associated with inauspiciousness, certainly not any more than asceticism itself is associated with a complicated reverence mixed with suspicion.

For his novel Ghosh needs a different set of resonances. He wants the egalitarian philosophical underpinnings of certain Vaishnava schools, but he also wants a figure who is more directly in opposition, more openly dangerous to the Brahmin elite than someone like Ramakrishna was (Ramakrishna was in some ways a radical, but he also went out of his way to court bhadralok disciples, and he was virulently misogynist in many of his teachings). In order to accomplish this, Ghosh gives us a feminized Vaishnava devotee but endows him with the dangerous associations of a hijra.
Adventure on the High Seas: Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*

Amitav Ghosh’s novel *Sea of Poppies*, the first in a projected trilogy about the opium trade in the 19th century, ends on the dramatic note of an escape at sea: a tiny craft with a motley group of (male) rebels disappears behind a swell while lightning splits the sky. But the final image of the novel is of those left standing on the deck of the mother ship, midwives of the escape (and indeed of all the novel’s many other escapes), a trio of witches like Shakespeare’s ‘weyward sisters’ but here embodying the nightmares of both a colonial British society and those of a Brahminical Hindu elite.

I argue that these ‘weyward sisters’ both symbolize and inaugurate a world of ceaseless transformations, a fantasy of hybridity after Homi Bhabha’s heart, where the relentless abundance and excess of human life refuses to be contained within society’s restrictive categories (whether those be the categories of British colonialism or of a Brahmin, nationalist elite), and a sheer playful exuberance consistently overwhelms the workings of power. As in the other texts I have examined in this project the story is told in a superficially ‘realist’ mode, but can only be fully understood through ‘traditional,’ popular beliefs in curses and witches and through a recognition of certain religious practices, in this case those of Vaishnava devotees. Of course, as with the other novels, Ghosh shifts and rewrites these beliefs and practices for his own purposes, merging them seamlessly into a kind of postmodern boy’s adventure tale. Also in line with the other texts I have examined here, the ‘inauspiciousness’ of these characters is written as a destructive power, but unlike in the other texts, this destructive power is coded not only as necessary but also as entirely positive – the capacity to break open oppressive social
structures, to smash oppositions of caste, race, gender etc. and to leave people free to fall in love with or to befriend or build communities with whoever crosses their path.

Of these three, the most interesting to me here is Baboo Nob Kissin, the Vaishnava devotee in the process of transformation into his (female) guru Taramony. But I do want to briefly discuss the positions and roles of the other two, Paulette, and especially Deeti. Paulette is mostly the nightmare of a virulently racist, class ridden British society. She is, essentially, the white woman gone native. She considers Jodu (a fatherless working class Muslim) her brother, and ‘passes’ for an indentured labourer during her voyage on the Ibis. She is ‘inauspicious’ then, mostly from a British colonial standpoint (rather than in the South Asian constructions of inauspicious women that I am examining in this project). But Deeti is a classic case of the inauspicious widow—a woman whose inauspicious widowhood is compounded by a failed sati and a subsequent escape and remarryage with a Chamar (one of the Dalit castes). And yet her inauspiciousness predates any of these events (as we have seen a woman’s widowhood is often seen as the sign of her inauspiciousness not its cause). We are told very early on that: “Her prospects had always been bedeviled by her stars, her fate being ruled by Saturn—Shani—a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence, often bringing discord, unhappiness and disharmony” (28). This cosmic inauspiciousness is associated right away with Deeti’s status as a visionary: “Such was the colour—or perhaps colourlessness—of her eyes that they made her seem at once blind and all-seeing. This had the effect of unnerving the young […] to the point where they would sometimes shout taunts at her—chudaliya, dainiya—as if she were a witch” (5). Her witchy inauspiciousness is visible on her face, but it is also a sign of her special powers of sight.
Powers, we learn, that allow her to ‘see’ Kalua, to look him in the face (as opposed to her husband, for example, who believes it would be terrible luck to look directly at Kalua since he is a Chamar (4)). These visionary powers, of course, also vouchsafe her a vision of the Ibis itself (8), the place where she, with the aid of Paulette, will forge an unlikely community. From the beginning, the two of them decide together that: “From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship siblings –jahazbhais and jahazbahens –to each other. There’ll be no differences between us” (328). And Deeti quickly becomes the bauji of this new community, consistently resisting the oppressive power of Captain Chillingworth, Mr Crowle, and Subedar Bhyro Singh.

Deeti’s almost-sati is the first in a series of events in which Ghosh neatly reverses the values of auspicious/inauspicious. From a traditional perspective, sati is a deeply auspicious act, perhaps the most auspicious act a woman can commit. Through this ultimate and total sacrifice of herself in the name of her husband/deity, a woman can free both herself and her husband from the prison of worldly life. To fail to follow through on a planned sati, however, can bring shame, dishonour, and humiliation on the husband’s family and is therefore deeply inauspicious. Kalua, of course, rescues Deeti from her husband’s funeral pyre (thereby subverting the colonial rescue fantasy of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ as Spivak has famously put it (“Can the Subaltern Speak”). And yet Deeti experiences this event as her own death, and, like the sati of tradition, on the other side of this death is a wonderful freedom: “she had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny” (164). Deeti’s deeply subversive and inauspicious act of failing to follow through on her sati and of running
away with an ‘untouchable’ man is rewritten here as partaking of all the miraculous auspiciousness of the ‘true’ sati. Liberation from the prison of earthly life is rewritten here, not as transcending an earthly world of illusion, pain and servitude into heaven, but of entering a space beyond social constructions—a life-affirming liberation from the prejudices and hatreds of the social world. Deeti doesn’t simply enter this miraculous space herself, but, as I have already mentioned, along with Paulette, she helps to foster an environment where others can be persuaded to enter it too.

Ghosh’s depiction of Baboo Nob Kissin stages a similar reversal of the meanings of the auspicious and the inauspicious. Despite (or, as we shall see, perhaps because of) his clownishness, Baboo Nob Kissin is very closely tied to the novel’s most deeply held ethical/moral underpinnings. Nob Kissin is a Vaishnava bhakti devotee, and the novel is invested in the anti-caste discrimination, sometimes even anti-patriarchal egalitarianism of the radical branches of this school. In the Bhagavata Purana, the most important sacred text of the Vaishnav schools, it is quite clear that Brahmins are in no way spiritually superior to those of a lower caste, and women are not spiritually inferior to men. This is radically different from the Vedas, in which women and Sudras have no access to direct spiritual liberation, and whose only religious acts consist in serving their husbands or upper caste men respectively. In fact, many believe that women, Sudras and the poor more generally are better suited to a bhakti spiritual life and are more likely to achieve liberation since they are less likely to suffer from the arrogance and pride that go along with power and wealth, characteristics which can prevent a true spiritual devotion from developing. They may also be better at the unstinting service to the deity so crucial to this spiritual path. Thomas J. Hopkins quotes from the Bhagavata: “He is truly the
favorite of Hari for whom there is no pride attached to the body because of either birth and actions or because of varna, asrama, or jati (8). In fact, as Hopkins argues “[i]t is implied that the conflict between wealth and devotion is so great that only a poor person can be a true follower of bhakti” (15). And Krishna declares: “I gradually remove the wealth of him whom I favor; then, when he is destitute of wealth and distressed with difficulties, his own kindred abandon him” (qtd. in Hopkins15). This is the way Krishna wins such followers.

The unstinting all-absorbing love a devotee feels for Krishna is very often imaged as the love a woman feels for a man. Sometimes this is couched in the conservative discourse of the pativrata woman who subsumes all her own desires and needs in favour of those of her husband. More often, however, as I have mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, this all-consuming adoration is imaged as the more controversial and potentially subversive love of the (married) cowgirl Radha for Krishna. As Kumkum Sangari puts it: “The ‘feminisation’ of worship is […] foregrounded in Bengal Vaishnavism wherein ‘The essential nature of all men is that of a gopi’” (1537). This feminizing of the devotee’s passionate love and longing is associated in the tradition both with the relative prevalence of female saints, and also with the prevalence of feminized male devotees. In Taramony and Baboo Nob Kissin we, of course, get both of these in Sea of Poppies.

It seems to me that the thinking of one Vaishnavi saint is particularly useful in understanding the ethical stance of Ghosh’s novel. Mirabai, a Rajput princess and widow

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30 In Kabir, for example, Kumkum Sangari writes, the natal family is figured as this world (and therefore an illusion) while the marital family is the next world for which the devotee/bride longs. Along the same lines, Kabir figures the self-sacrificing, self-forgetting devotion required of the devotee as sati—the self-immolation of the wife/widow in devotion to her husband/god (1547-8).
in the sixteenth century incurred the wrath of her husband’s family when she chose to leave the family home, wander the roads, and dance her passionate devotion to Krishna. Sangari explains that Mirabai rewrites the concept of *maya* in her many compositions: “From being a cosmic illusion emanating from creation or from god, it becomes more a set of conventional beliefs and attitudes, familiar and patriarchal encumbrances, which prevent the meeting between the self and god” (1469). Maya, in other words, for Mirabai does not necessarily constitute all of earthly life, but is specifically the ‘illusion’ of social constructions. We have seen this already with Deeti – the way in which her ‘sati’ allows her a ‘liberation’ from the imprisonment of the world or of *maya* and this liberation consists of the falling away of social prejudices and hatreds. This drama of ‘liberation’ from the *maya*/illusion of social constructions is enacted again through Baboo Nob Kissin, but Neel is the one who is ultimately ‘liberated.’

As I have argued, although a (feminized) Vaishnava devotee like Baboo Nob Kissin wouldn’t ordinarily be considered inauspicious, Ghosh seems to associate him here with the double-sidedness of the hijra figure (with the power, through the Goddess) to both bring fertility (and bless the patriarchal line with prosperity) or bring infertility and disaster onto the patriarchal line. Nob Kissin, after all, brings about the utter destruction of the family of the Raja of Raskhali – the shaming, and ultimate imprisonment of the Raja himself and the loss of the family estate. It is his idea, we are told, that Mr Burnham should charge Neel with forgery in order to get his hands on Neel’s estate. After all, thinks Nob Kissin: “the Rajas of Raskhali were well known to be bigoted, ritual-bound Hindus, who were dismissive of heterodox Vaishnavites like himself: people like that needed to be taught a lesson from time to time” (199). And, indeed, it is
the Baboo’s idea to get an affidavit from Elokeshi – the evidence that swings the trial against Neel (199-200). And yet this ‘fall’ from wealth, prestige, and ritual purity is figured not as inauspicious, but as profoundly auspicious. We are told that the monsoons arrive just before his first day in court – a very good sign, and “the Raskhali estate’s court astrologer determined that the date of the hearing was extremely auspicious, with all the stars aligned in the Raja’s favour” (200).

Ultimately, like the devotee who enslaves himself to Krishna in order to achieve freedom from *maya*, Neel’s imprisonment frees him from the *maya* of caste bigotry, and to a certain extent the *maya* of male superiority. Neel is himself (at least briefly) feminized during his imprisonment: when he arrives at Alipore jail, “someone caught hold of the end of his dhoti and gave it a sharp tug. The garment spun him around as it unraveled, and somewhere nearby a voice said: …‘Now here’s a real Draupadi…clinging to her sari…”” (264). The moment, of course, recalls the story in the *Mahabharata* when the Pandavas are defeated and humiliated in a game of dice with the Kauravas, losing their wife, Draupadi, in one final desperate wager. Dushasna, a Kaurava brother, attempts to disrobe Draupadi by unraveling her sari, but Krishna miraculously intervenes to prevent this final humiliation. Ghosh’s allusion to the story here emphasizes Neel’s newfound powerlessness with regard to his physical self. Like a wife, he no longer truly possesses his own body, and must submit to the vicissitudes of external power.31 This reference is followed by an interaction that makes this loss even more explicit:

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31 The moment also draws a connection between Neel and Deeti, who is compared to Draupadi by her mother-in-law: “It’s a fortunate woman,” she says, “who bears the children of brothers for each other…” (36).
The touch of the orderly’s fingers had a feel that Neel could never have imagined between two human beings – neither intimate nor angry, neither tender nor prurient – it was the disinterested touch of master, of purchase or conquest; it was as if his body had passed into the possession of a new owner, who was taking stock of it as a man might inspect a house he had recently acquired […].

(266)

The ‘house’ of his body no longer belongs to him (and can be put to use by others), and yet, somehow, he must continue to inhabit it.

Neel also experiences a loss of caste during his tenancy in the Alipore jail, but once again this ‘loss’ is rewritten as a deeply auspicious awakening to a world beyond social prejudice. When he is forced to use a sweeper’s tools, we get the following description:

Closing his eyes, he thrust his hand blindly forward, and only when the handle was in his grasp did he allow himself to look again: it seemed miraculous then that his surroundings were unchanged, for within himself he could feel the intimations of an irreversible alternation. In a way, he was none other than the man he had ever been, Neel Rattan Halder, but he was different too, for his hands were affixed upon an object that was ringed with a bright penumbra of loathing; yet now that it was in his grip it seemed no more nor less than what it was, a tool to be used according to his wishes. Lowering himself to his heels, he squatted as he had often seen sweepers do, and began to scoop up his cell-mate’s shit. (298)
The sweeper’s tools have been associated for Neel, throughout his life, with the most loathsome impurity (as indeed have the sweepers themselves, of course). To touch such tools, and to put oneself in the actual position of the sweeper would be to overturn the order of the cosmos and to invite calamity. But when Neel actually touches them, they are revealed as simply objects, and his conception of the order of the cosmos begins to evaporate.

Both Neel’s feminization and his loss of caste are steps in a process that lead him toward the care and service of others. As in the Bhagavata’s explanation, quoted above, of how Krishna’s followers must first be humbled before they turn to him, Neel has lost his estate, wealth, prestige, followers, and family – only in this state does he learn to serve (rather than be served). I don’t mean to suggest that Ghosh is invested in a Vaishnavite belief in the divine, but rather that he is engaging with a general Vaishnavite ethics of care, service and compassion toward others. As Hopkins puts it:

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\text{The Bhagavata considers the poor and miserable as objects of compassion, not as persons who are reaping a just reward for past sins. [...] Devotees are reminded to show generosity and to recognize that ‘the pleasing of Visnu is when all the distressed, the blind, and the pitiable have eaten.’ Not only is compassion in individual acts encouraged, but bhakti religion itself is considered an act of compassion on the part of the Lord. (19)}
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Neel discovers, when he cradles and bathes his stinking and very ill cell-mate, that there is even pleasure to be had in the service of others, that serving others seems to be connected to loving others: “was it possible that the mere fact of using one’s hands and
investing one’s attention in someone other than oneself, created a pride and tenderness that had nothing whatever to do with the response of the object of one’s care […]?” (300). An affection for his cell-mate is born, in other words, in his service toward him – and this affection and eventually friendship sustains them both throughout their imprisonment.

It is ultimately Baboo Nob Kissin, with his complex inauspiciousness (rewritten here as auspiciousness) who has brought about this transformation in Neel from a wealthy and arrogant zamindar to a man reduced economically but enlarged ethically and morally, a man newly capable of real intimacy with others. And the Baboo realizes this himself, when he sees Neel for the first time on board the Ibis, he thinks: “it was like mid-wiving the birth of a new existence,” and this realization makes him well up with maternal tenderness toward Neel (356). He explicitly decides to free Neel from his imprisonment, an act which he sees as a spiritual liberation in the manner we have already discussed – a liberation from ‘illusory’ social constructs. This ‘liberation’ is, in turn, linked to his own ‘liberation’ in the form of his transformation fully into his guru Taramony: “Now that Taramony’s presence was fully manifest in him, it was as if he had become the key that could unlock the cages that imprisoned everyone, all these beings who were ensnare by the illusory differences of this world” (461).

In Baboo Nob Kissin, in Deeti, and also in Paulette, who tells Zachary “What if it is the world that is a duperie, Mr Reid, and we the exceptions to its lies?” (459), we get three ‘inauspicious’ and feminine characters who are rewritten as auspicious midwives of liberation. They are characters who miraculously see beyond the divisions of caste, race,
and gender that modern power holds so dear, and in doing so, they operate to open the eyes (and the cages) of others. In many ways, the world that they inaugurate is the world of Ghosh’s novel itself. This is a world in which colonial power, and indeed elite nationalist power (as it is foreshadowed and embodied in men like Neel) always already contains the seeds of its own undoing, a world in which the excesses, the transformations, the dynamism of human life resists containment in categories, structures, and binaries. This is the world, as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn point out, of Homi Bhabha’s ‘Third Space’:

“a willingness to descend into that alien territory…may…open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between…that carries the burden of the meaning of culture… It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this ‘Third Space’, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.” (qtd. 73-4)

This is a world in which hybridity and transformation are ‘true’ and empowering in and of themselves, a world in which the torsions of modern power can always be escaped through transformation. It is a world in which modern power, depending as it does on binaries and hierarchies, is itself, in many ways, an ‘illusion.’
It is, in short, a postmodern fantasy world, a world of what I will call ‘play’ deeply influenced by the genre of boys’ adventures stories. If Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, despite the roughly two centuries that come between them, can both be said to stage fantasies of modern British colonial power, *Sea of Poppies* stages the answering postmodern, postcolonial fantasy. Both Defoe and Kipling articulate compelling fantasies of global domination, but Ghosh gives us a fantasy of freedom—a world where there can be no mastery, where selfhood and life experience are endlessly renewable, a place where trauma leaves only the faintest of traces.

Defoe’s Crusoe is (justly) famous for his compulsive listing, a practice which, as Wolfram Schmidgen rightly points out, is closely tied to ‘place making’ to the creation of the island as a bounded, knowable, orderly place (28). Schmidgen writes that Crusoe’s compulsive trips to the wreck and his listing of the objects that he finds there and brings back to the island with him eventually lead to an enormous and undifferentiated heap: “the list reveals its kinship to the complete disorder indicated by the ‘confused heap of goods’ into which it literally decomposes once its contents hit the unoccupied and therefore […] ‘vacant’ space of the island” (27). But Crusoe then sets about organizing and categorizing these goods:

I made large Shelves of the Breadth of a Foot and Half one over another, all along one Side of my Cave, to lay all my Tools, Nails, and Iron-work, and in a Word, to separate every thing at large in their Places, that I might come easily at them; I knock’d Pieces into the Wall of the Rock to hang my Guns and all things that would hang up. So that had my Cave been to be seen, it look’d like a general Magazine of
all Necessary things, and I had every thing so ready at my 
Hand, that it was a great Pleasure to me to see all my 
Goods in such Order, and especially to find my Stock of all 
Necessaries so great. (68-9)

By organizing his goods, he puts himself in control of his own space, not only that within his actual cave, but also that of the island itself. His clearly organized store of tools and guns ready him for using the island’s plant and animal resources to his benefit, and this newfound organization clears his thoughts and depressive misery to such an extent that he is able to begin writing –keeping records, engaging in history. This mastery over goods and language is clearly a prerequisite for mastery over lands and peoples: Crusoe subsequently turns the island into his own personal paradise and, upon the arrival of Friday, immediately names and masters him.

Ghosh picks up Crusoe’s penchant for list making to a very different end. Far from being a potentially dangerous and disorienting stage on the way to order, control, and mastery, Ghosh’s lists are ends in themselves: ‘confused heap[s] of goods’ that cheerfully celebrate indiscriminate mixing and excess. Not only are the items not organized into clear categories, but the objects and the words that ostensibly represent them take leave of each other, playfully wandering off in different directions. Take this list of goods taken on by the Ibis just before it leaves the shores of India once and for all:

The reprovisioning was quickly done, for the schooner was soon besieged by a flotilla of bumboats: cabbage-carrying coracles, fruit-laden dhonies, and machhwas that were filled with goats, chickens and ducks. In this floating bazar there was everything a ship or a lascar might need: canvas
by the gudge, spare jugboolaks and zambooras, coils of istingis and rup-yan, stacks of seetulpatty mats, tobacco by the batti, rolls of neem-twigs for the teeth, martabans of isabgol for constipation, and jars of columbo-root for dysentery […] (368)

Ghosh’s use of numerous different languages and different seafaring pidgins and slang means that most readers (if not all) cannot actually ascribe objects or commodities to many of the words listed—so we end up with a series of wonderfully evocative sounds shadowed by objects our imaginations furnish of themselves (each different reader following her own imaginative inclination). The lists themselves slip and slide out of our mind’s eye, out of our hands, resisting any urge a reader might have to picture the ship as a vessel perfectly equipped and organized and heading out to master the seas.

This effect of the ship, not as a well-run machine, but as a motley and excessive collection of people, animals, and objects is emphasized moments later in the text, when the Captain gives his little speech. He says that now that they are going out to sea his word is the one and only law (and he cracks his whip to emphasize his already quite dramatic point). But the result of this is not awed silence and order but rather a seemingly irresistible tide of disorder. It is not so much a rebellion (which would suggest agency, conscious decision-making and choice), but an explosion of movement that seems to rise out of nature, out of existence itself, out of an irrepressible magic: a middle-aged man is drawn irresistibly toward the nearby island and makes a break for it throwing himself into the waves, guards frenziedly flail about, and “a flock of squawking hens and roosters descended upon the deck” (372).
Like Defoe’s Crusoe, Kipling’s Kim is learning how to control places and people but his methods are more theatrical. Like Crusoe, Kim must learn how to categorize and classify objects: he learns, at Lurgan Sahib’s house how to classify jewels by name, quality, and weight (205). He also learns how to classify people, by “face, talk, and manner” (207). But most importantly Kim learns how to tell the difference between what is ‘real’ and what is ‘false,’ what is ‘true’ and what merely appears to be true. In a classic scene, Lurgan Sahib smashes a jar, and tells Kim, while holding his shoulder, that the pieces of the jar are coming back together again. Kim sees this happening at first:

So far Kim had been thinking in Hindi, but a tremor came on him, and with an effort like that of a swimmer before sharks, who hurls himself half out of the water, his mind leaped up from the darkness that was swallowing it and took refuge in –the multiplication table in English! (202)

Kim distinguishes, here, between the ‘reality’ –a rational understanding of what is happening, and an ‘illusion’ created by Lurgan Sahib. Crucially, his ability to distinguish is linked to his English language skills, and, tacitly to his Englishness. Two things are happening here: 1) the ability to distinguish between ‘truth’ and ‘illusion’ is coded as an English characteristic which fits them for rule. 2) Kim must learn to inhabit his own Englishness (i.e. be ‘true’ to himself, know who he ‘really’ is) in order to understand other people, discover who they ‘really’ are, see through their disguises and deceptions.

Ghosh’s task, of course, is precisely to reverse this formula. In the world of his novel, there is no ‘real’ identity which can be disguised or exposed –each identity is as ‘true’ (or
as false) as the last. Zachary is not a ‘black’ passing for a white one—he is a black man and a white man at once. When Deeti boards the Ibis and is asked to give her name she gives her own personal name since no one has ever called her this at home anyway—she is both Kabutri-ki-ma (mother of Kabutri) as she is called in her village—and Deeti—there is no question of disguise or deceit. Baboo Nob Kissin is not a man who begins to dress like a woman, and nor is he, as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn claim, “religiously and personally deluded” (73). He is both himself, and, as time goes on, more and more Taramony.

Indeed, it seems to me that, in Baboo Nob Kissin, Ghosh has coopted the one character in Kipling’s *Kim* who remains a source of consistent anxiety to the modern forms of power Kipling so enthusiastically promotes—namely Hurree Babu. In an era when the Indian National Congress was already meeting and when an independence movement was already taking shape in Bengal, Kipling has his Bengali character Hurree Babu express anti-colonial sentiments:

He became thickly treasonous, and spoke in terms of sweeping indecency of a Government which had forced upon him a white man’s education and neglected to supply him with a white man’s salary. He babbled tales of oppression and wrong till the tears ran down his cheeks for the miseries of his land. Then he staggered off, singing love-songs of Lower Bengal, and collapsed upon a wet tree-trunk. […] When he presented himself again he was racked with headache—penitent, and volubly afraid that in his drunkenness he might have been indiscreet. He loved the British Government—it was the source of all prosperity
and honour, and his master at Rampur held the very same opinion. Upon this the men began to deride him and to quote past words, till step by step, with deprecating smirks, oily grins, and leers of infinite cunning, the poor Babu was beaten out of his defences and forced to speak—the truth. (238)

And yet, of course, the Babu means exactly the opposite of what he says here. He is pretending to be aggrieved against the British so that he can find out what the Russians and the French are planning. He pretends to be a rebel in order to spy for the British, in other words. “—[T]he truth” at the end of this passage, is the very opposite of the truth.

Or is it? There remains something threatening about Hurree Babu. His duplicity, and his facility as a spy are so perfect that he remains a source of potential anxiety. He not only fools the Russian and the Frenchman, he also fools Kim himself. When Kim and the lama are resting at the house of the talkative old woman, Kim is introduced to a ‘hakim’ or traditional doctor who he doesn’t recognize until he says: “Mr O’Hara? I am jolly glad to see you again” (219). It is, of course, Hurree Babu. He says to Kim very tellingly: “‘Ah ha! I told you at Lucknow—resurgam—I shall rise again and you shall not know me” (219). The Babu has the capacity to be reborn, to rise again repeatedly in different shapes; he is so totally and perfectly changed that he is utterly unidentifiable even to Kim’s piercing eyes.

Kipling takes pains to reduce the possible threat posed by Hurree Babu in the mind of the reader. He turns him into a clownish British stereotype of Bengali manhood: deceitful, pudgy, effeminate, weepy, and easily frightened. He is, in short, the exact opposite of Colonel Creighton—the dignified, honest, rational, manly British representative of
Empire. And yet Hurree Babu’s capacity for reinvention is such that we can never be sure if this is who he ‘really’ is or if he is just playing another role for another purpose. With the rise of the INC shadowing the novel historically, it is impossible not to see Hurree Babu as a sign of Kipling’s own lingering anxieties about the future of the British in India. We are left feeling, along with Kim himself after the babu has deceived him: “He chewed leisurely upon a few cardamom seeds, but he breathed uneasily” (219).

Ghosh’s Boboo Nob Kissin, it seems to me, is Kipling’s Hurree Babu reborn and reinvented for a postmodern age. He, too, is clownish (indeed, he is much funnier than Kipling’s version), and he too, in his effeminacy, his portliness and in his cunning, is a racist British stereotype of Bengali manhood. But perhaps most importantly, he too is a shape-shifter, capable of total transformation. Here, though, as I have been arguing, Baboo Nob Kissin is not a shadowy sign of all that fails to be contained in modern British colonial structures of power, he is the fully articulated, wonderfully exaggerated symbol of this failure of containment – not only of British colonial structures of power, but also, as I have argued, of Brahminical, elite, Indian nationalist structures of power too.

And yet, and yet… Within Ghosh’s thrilling postmodern fantasy of constant change, endless dynamism, ceaseless proliferating excess, some uncomfortable echoes of modern power dynamics remain, and Ghosh repeats some of the narrative manoeuvres of his forebears to problematic effect. Firstly, of course, Baboo Nob Kissin, like his colonial forebear, Hurree Babu, is to some extent merely the laughable sidekick of a more dignified, more masculine character. A more compelling parallel, though, might be to
the early Bengali novels I examine in the first chapter of this project. Is Baboo Nob Kissin, like the widow in those early novels, merely used for a specific function and then hurried offstage? Is Ghosh more invested, here, in Baboo Nob Kissin’s liberating effect on Neel than he is in Baboo Nob Kissin’s own transformation and liberation? And if so, can the postmodern world that Baboo Nob Kissin helps to inaugurate, here, be so very different from the one inhabited by Bankim Chandra’s Kundanandini or Tagore’s Binodini?

To answer these sticky questions, I want to trace Neel’s position in the novel through the lens of the label Ghosh, and his jailors give him, that of a “forgerer” (269). Of course, we know that Burnham’s accusation of Neel, and the charge of forgery are simply trumped-up so that Burnham can get access to Neel’s strategically located estate. And yet, at the same time, the novel seems to suggest that Neel is a forgerer, that this is an appropriate label for him. It is a label that shifts meaning over time. On the most straightforward level, the one signified by the legal case against him, a forgerer is someone who pretends to be someone else, someone who signs someone else’s name. And Neel does sign Mr Burnham’s name. We know that this is an agreement between Neel and his father before him and Mr Burnham, but this nonetheless suggests the ways in which Neel has subsumed his own individual identity, on the one hand to the princely elites (his father), and on the other hand, to the colonial powers that be (Mr Burnham). This is another way of showing how Neel remains, at the beginning of the novel, in thrall to caste and colonial bigotry despite his view of himself as a free thinker.
But being a forgerer, or in its more recent manifestation, a ‘forger’ has other meanings. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a forger is also “A maker or framer (of something material or immaterial); an author or creator” (“forger”). And a person can also ‘forge’ bonds or friendships with other people. Given its original meaning of ‘forging’ metal –or melting metal in order to weld different pieces together, the ‘forging’ of human bonds also suggests tremendous heat or pressure and very tight connections. It is this other type of ‘forgerer’ that Neel becomes on board the Ibis –both a forger of human connections and a creator or framer of stories. As Heilmann and Llewellyn point out, at the moment when Neel remembers the Bhojpuri that he spoke with Parimal as a child, he recovers a “cultural memory” that allows him “to communicate with, and thus become accepted as part of” the community of girmityas (75). More than this, though,

it also confers upon him the power of storyteller as he recounts the origins of the Ganga Sagar Island they are in the process of passing, an ancient foundation myth which offers the diffuse group of ‘girmityas’ (indentured workers) a communal rite of passage as they leave familiar geographies and their old lives behind. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 75)

Heilmann and Llewellyn go on to argue that Neel finally forges, here, a “community which respects him, for the first time, for his wisdom rather than his family lineage” (75).

Neel, like Mahendra and Nagendra before him, has emerged from the trial of an encounter with ‘inauspiciousness’ a new man, his own man. He is no longer a leader of his household (and of the state-to-be) because of his caste and lineage alone, but because of “his wisdom.” Although ‘the community’ here is radically different from the one
envisioned by Tagore and Bankim Chandra, this is, after all, a motley community of misfits, widows, peasants, and low caste outlaws, and yet, in that it is clearly a community that suggests Indianness and India (at a moment in history when no such country existed yet), to make Neel, the Brahmin and former Raja, its historian and storyteller is certainly a troubling echo.

Perhaps this echo is best read as an inadvertent shadowing of the text by all those things that it insists on keeping offstage. If fantasies of modern colonial power like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Kim* must carefully contain all those elements that resist perfect categorization, and if narratives of nationalist power like *Chokher Bali* and *Bishabriksha* must hurry offstage the widow whose ‘inauspiciousness’ cannot be admitted into the rationalized realms of the modern, then Ghosh’s fantasy of postmodern freedom must hide the reality that human beings are marked; they cannot ceaselessly shift and transform because they are regulated by norms and by violence that cannot always be escaped. Once again Neel’s status as a ‘forgerer’ can help to expose what Ghosh works so hard to keep just out of sight. Neel is tattooed as a ‘forgerer’ when he first comes to the Alipore jail, but we soon learn that the godna-wala or tattooist is an old dependent of Neel’s father, and in his loyalty to Neel he waters the ink so that the tattoo will last only for a few months (269). This is just one of innumerable examples of where Ghosh explicitly resists the ways in which people are marked by their lives and by the societies they inhabit. Neel is meant to be marked permanently here –branded a criminal and an outcaste forever, but Ghosh cannot stand this marking and must make it temporary. And yet people are marked. The prejudices we swallow distort us, the traumas we suffer dog
us throughout our lives scarring us permanently, to pretend otherwise is to engage in wishful thinking. And what powerfully attractive and compelling wishful thinking it is!

To return us, then, to the final, powerful scene of the book where I began this reading, perhaps we should not lose sight of the fact that while the five male rebels float away from the Ibis, escape the tyranny of Mr Crowle and Subedar Bhyro Singh, the three ‘weyward sisters’ remain on the deck—heading to an uncertain future. And given the fact that, as numerous scholars have pointed out, the system of indenture was in many ways “a disguised form of slavery” (Heilmann and Llewellyn) it is a future that certainly doesn’t automatically conjure up visions of postmodern play, transformation, hybridity, freedom.

**Outside the Ladies’ Carriage: Anand Mahadevan’s *The Strike***

Like Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Anand Mahadevan’s debut novel, *The Strike* (2011), uses an androgynous or third-sex character to inaugurate a world of transformation, change, shape-shifting for another character—here for the young protagonist, Hari. The crucial difference, though, is that for Mahadevan, this shifting postmodern world is not necessarily a romantic one presided over by exuberant, empowering play. This world is rather a mere set of potentials: the possibility of fulfilled desires, the chance for real change. But these possibilities are always dogged by their opposites—the reinscriptions of hierarchies in new guises, new kinds of cruelties and sacrifices. If this world offers the possibility of freedom, it is also a dangerous territory to be crossed with a great deal of care.
In the novel there are, to put it somewhat crudely, two reigning world-views: the first is presided over by Hari’s mother, Savitri, and is loosely associated with the protection afforded by the ladies’ carriage. The second is presided over by the hijra character, Radha, and is closely tied to the hallway of the train – where there is no protection, no privacy, and where all kinds of people move through and engage in all kinds of activities. These two sets of spaces are purposeful analogues of the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ spaces of elite, Brahmin, nationalist discourse, and they are, within the parameters of this elite world-view, also ‘auspicious’ and ‘inauspicious’ spaces respectively. But the ‘outside,’ or in-between space, here, is presided over by quite a different world-view, one that doesn’t recognize this dichotomy – one that offers Hari a kind of qualified freedom to be who he is.

From the very first pages of the novel, Hari is seen to inhabit a space outside the ‘auspicious’ realms of Brahmin respectability. The novel opens with Hari wandering a railway yard by himself, having snuck away from his aunt’s engagement ceremony. Hari’s ‘outsider’ status is suggested immediately by the question put to him by a train conductor he runs into in the yard: “what are you doing here on such an auspicious occasion? You should be in the house eating sweets?” Hari, this opening implies, will not be participating in the ‘auspicious’ ceremonies that mark the life of a Brahmin householder. His absence or exclusion from such ceremonies is linked, right away, with physical desires. Here is the novel’s opening paragraph:

Hari’s original plan was only to pee on the tracks. But once the rivulet of yellow disappeared into the gravel bed, he pulled down his pants and sat on a rail. […] Hari liked
the feeling of the cold long rail against his skin. [...] It was in this half-naked state that the idea of climbing into the steam engine first presented itself to his mind. (Loc 92)

The sensual and forbidden (since it requires public nakedness) pleasure Hari experiences, here, foreshadows later ‘deviant’ desires in the text and inaugurates a set of complicated and subtle symbols that link Hari’s fascination with trains—and more specifically his desire to get into a steam engine—with his awakening homosexuality. The steam engine in question in this opening passage is called, we are told, “Raat ki Rani—Queen of the Night” (Loc 127), because it used to deliver the night mail. But this name suggests other associations through an intertextual allusion. A raat ki rani is a kind of heavily scented jasmine that blooms at night and is the central symbol in Mahesh Dattani’s groundbreaking 1996 play Night Queen about the difficult choices faced by gay men in contemporary India. The strong scent of the raat ki rani in the play suggests the beautiful and heady presence of homosexual desire and love that one of the characters tries, unsuccessfully, to repress and to shut out. Hari’s boyish attraction to the steam engine, then, suggests his own homosexual desire not yet conscious or acknowledged on his part.

Hari’s position outside elite Brahmin respectability and auspiciousness is also marked here with an ‘inappropriate’ class/caste connection. When the kindly train conductor suggests to Hari that he might grow up to be an engineer like his father someday, Hari resists, insisting that he wants, instead, to be a train driver (Loc 159), a lower class occupation.
Hari’s absence from auspicious respectability rapidly turns, in the text, into an active inauspiciousness. His ‘deviant’ desires not only exclude him from auspicious occasions, they also bring about tragic outcomes – his ‘deviance’ is a source of destruction for those around him. This becomes evident when Hari eats fish:

Hari cut out a small piece with the spoon and slid it into his mouth. The flavour of the seasonings and oil was delicious. When he went to bite the fish, however, the bones crunched and the flesh resisted in a strange and novel sensation. […] The novelty of the first bite aside, Hari ate ravenously, and the pile of thin white bones grew on his plate. (Loc 214)

The intense pleasure Hari feels from the taste and texture of the fish is coupled here with an eerie sense of foreboding. The ‘resistance’ of the flesh of the fish to Hari’s teeth, suggests the departed life of the animal, and the image of Hari devouring the entire fish creating a pile of bones is almost ghoulish. When his mother discovers him eating the fish she takes him home and forces him to vomit. But when his grandmother comes in to see what all the fuss is about she slides on the “slimy pool of his vomit”:

Hari stood up and leaned forward, forgetting his naked state but she slipped, skidding past him and her body fell away from him. The ledge of the square washing area arrested her movement and her head hit hard against the concrete floor. Hari winced as he heard the crack, like a coconut shell being smashed. Her glasses flew to the side and rested, quite broken, next to the drain amid the puddle of vomit and water. (Loc 324)
Once again, here, Hari is naked, suggesting, perhaps, not merely sensuality/sexuality, but more accurately here, an exposure—the revelation of what he really is. The violence of Hari’s grandmother’s death, the horrifying sound of her breaking skull, is compounded by the pathetic image of her broken glasses. But we might understand this as suggesting that what she has seen, i.e. Hari’s ‘nakedness’ has destroyed her. And, indeed, when Hari’s mother rushes back into the room moments later, Hari shouts guiltily “‘I didn’t do it” (Loc 324), suggesting, of course, that he did, in fact, do it. Hari’s mother clearly believes that his eating of the fish has directly brought about the death of his grandmother—that his ‘inauspiciousness,’ his deviancy, has killed his grandmother. The wording of the text at this point, it seems to me, suggests the same thing.

Once again, here, Hari’s physical desires, coded as they are as deeply ‘inauspicious’ and dangerous to those around him, are specifically linked to homosexuality. When he asks his grandfather about why he isn’t allowed to eat fish, his Kollu-thatha responds: “Eating animal flesh creates animal passions within the body,” and Hari wonders to himself “Then what of the fish bones that remain embedded in my throat? What other mischief would they concoct?” (Loc 873). Immediately following this question Hari turns his head to watch a group of young, naked sadhus frolicking in the water of the Ganges (Loc 883).

These early indicators of the dangerous, destructive potential of Hari’s ‘inauspicious’ sexual desires all, ultimately, lead up to the tragedy that takes place near the end of the novel. As I have suggested already, Hari’s attraction to trains and specifically to taking a ride in the locomotive, is closely tied, through the image of the raat ki rani in the
beginning of the novel with awakening sexuality. Near the end of the text this connection is solidified. Before the accident, Hari masturbates for the first time (to the image of the hunky film-star look-alike Mukund), and we get the following description:

Deep inside his pubis, body parts groaned and creaked from their first test run. He could sense the dull pain along the back of his testicles in tubes that he never knew existed, and which he had felt for the first time, and the rush of semen past them. (Loc 3411)

Hari’s ejaculation, here, is described in terms that suggest the movement of a train, and when he smells his fingers immediately afterward: “instead of the usual smell of commingled soap, lemon and salt from the musk of his thin pubic hair, he smelt rust and iron, bloodlike in its strength” (Loc 3411). The rust and iron once again suggest the train itself, but the blood suggests the bloodied corpses of the men Hari crushes under the wheels of the train.

Just as she has blamed his grandmother’s death on him, Hari’s mother thinks all the trouble that comes to the family as a result of the fateful train trip is his fault. She attacks him:

‘It’s because of this rascal, this demon-rakshasa that I bore in my own womb. He has brought nothing but misfortune upon us.’ She rained blows on her son and screamed at him. She slapped Hari, hit his legs, and clenching her fists, she beat him on his chest and arms. ‘Die, die. Why didn’t you jump in front of the train, at least then I could mourn you? Your wishes and actions are poison to us. Why don’t you die?’ (Loc 4148)
And although the male members of the family claim to disagree with her understanding of the events, the whole end of the novel suggests that Hari has been ousted from the bosom of the family. Because his mother’s wedding thali has been stolen, his parents retake their wedding vows, and they seem to be starting again, hoping to do better the second time around. Hari’s great-grandfather says to them “‘May you have lots of children, […] May they live long and flourish’” (Loc. 4408) almost as if they didn’t already have a child, almost as if he is wishing them new children, different children, better children. They seem to be starting again here without Hari. Once again, and even more explicitly, Hari’s exclusion is linked explicitly to the accident and implicitly to his sexuality. As he is hiding outside the house, he thinks to himself:

[S]ince the accident, everyone in the house had looked at him queerly, treating him with care and deference like one would an old man with brittle bones, whilst keeping their distance as though he carried a plague. Did he even want to return into the dark cold of his grandfather’s house? (Loc 4418).

His family members look at him ‘queerly.’ He has been forced outside into a space of queerness—heavily associated here with guilt, violence, destruction, in short, inauspiciousness.

Yet, even as the novel traces the association between Hari’s sexuality and inauspiciousness, it also suggests a very different possible reading. And, as I have suggested, this reading is opened up largely by Radha. The world that Radha inhabits, figured here as the space between the railway carriages, is a world in which things are not what they appear, and this is made quite evident when Hari first meets her. We get
an extensive description of her feminine charms: her slender arms, the way in which jasmines are braided in her hair, the drape of her sari. It is only when she speaks, and then claps, that Hari realizes she is a hijra:

Hari stepped back as he realized that she was a eunuch.
Her disguise perfect, he had failed to notice the man in the pretty woman. Here was a man more feminine than masculine, more dark than fair, more comely than muscular and despite all this, Hari found her rather pretty. (Loc2252)

Hari is quite disturbed by the jolt of realizing she is not a woman (and also perhaps by his interest in and attraction to her), and he responds with aggression. The narrative, focalized as it is through Hari, demonstrates this aggression: he immediately needs to slot her into another category. If she isn’t a woman than she is a man (a failed man). Her attire and behaviour are conceptualized here not as an identity but as a “disguise” – designed to delude, deceive, to hide the ‘truth’ of her maleness. This aggression quickly grows, and Hari thinks of her as a “bizarre wretch,” “impotent, castrated –her head filled with superstitious nonsense” (Loc. 2263). Once again, Hari and our focalized narrative insist on seeing her as a man who is lacking, a poor example of manhood. But Radha repeatedly resists Hari’s attempts to read her through his rigid categories. She responds to Hari’s aggression like this: “‘He speaks,’ she announced, looking around as if at an imaginary audience” (Loc 2252). This move positions Hari as an unwitting performer on a stage, a performer ironized by Radha, our new narrator. The audience, also us, the reader, is suddenly in an intimate huddle with Radha looking with interest and distance at Hari –eagerly anticipating what nonsense he will speak (nonsense because her comment
is so clearly sarcastic). After he finishes speaking, she comments “‘Maybe it was better before he started speaking’” (Loc 2263), once again addressing us directly, isolating Hari and dismissing his position. Radha, in other words, turns the tables on Hari here; he sees her as a kind of performer—a man in a woman’s costume, she is the object of his gaze and of his ideological positions, but she turns him into the performer, mouthing words that have been rendered hollow by her mockery.

Through her constant innuendo, Radha insists on revealing to Hari the world he hasn’t been able to see. She tells him that Mukund and Suman have had a sexual liaison in the train toilet, a fact which Hari finds difficult to imagine (“Mukund he could imagine slipping into dank toilets for a quickie in the style of a film personality but he just hadn’t thought that a woman like Suman would do something like that” (Loc 3371)). And, of course, she also makes his own attraction to Mukund explicit in his own mind: “You have been making eyes at him during this entire trip. You can’t keep from staring at him if he is around” (Loc3357). It is a combination of these two unexpected revelations that lead Hari to his own sexual experience in the toilets.

The postmodern world that Radha inaugurates for Hari is not one of ontological essences and of rigid categories (man/woman, auspicious/inauspicious) but of transformations, mimicry, rebirths. We hear, of course, of Radha’s own rebirth as a hijra. She doesn’t experience this, as Hari had originally imagined as a ‘castration’ but rather as “a new lease on life” (Loc 2947). Radha goes with Chinnamma (her guru) to a temple outside of Bhopal to enact the ritual, and while she is away, the Bhopal gas tragedy occurs. Her
closeness to danger and her ultimate survival affirm Radha in her belief that Devi has preserved her life, has, in fact, given her a new life (Loc 2947).

But there are other rebirths in the novel as well. One particularly important set of rebirths are those of MGR, the Tamil film star turned politician. MGR, his fan Joseph reminds us, is “thrice-born”: “MGR was born, then he was born again after the shooting, and then just two years ago, he had this paralyzing attack that could have killed him and he was born for the third time” (Loc2333). While Joseph suggests, here, that MGR’s status as ‘thrice-born’ simply has to do with the fact that he has survived two near-death experiences, it is clear that this status is also political in nature. Calling him ‘thrice-born’ is meant specifically to compare him to the ‘twice-born’ high castes. But while high caste males are twice born because they experience first a physical birth and then a spiritual rebirth into their traditional caste vocations, MGR’s three births suggest a proliferation of manifestations, the ability to return in different shapes and guises, to remake the self for different historical and political moments. And this is, to a certain extent, exactly what MGR was able to do.

M. Gopala Ramachandran was one of several enormously popular Tamil politicians who started out as film stars. For many years he was the head of the Tamil political party, the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam or Dravidian Progressive Federation). In the early days, the DMK was a radical part of the Dravidian Movement for non-Brahman uplift in Tamil Nadu (Hardgrave “Politics” 61). From the beginning the party consisted heavily of writers and actors and others in the film industry. The Tamil film industry itself had emerged out of the theatrical companies associated with E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker’s
Self-Respect Movement (Hardgrave "Politics" 61) and these early films were deeply invested in social reform, taking on the themes of widow remarriage, self-respect marriage (marriages performed without a Brahmin priest), the abolition of the zamindari system, untouchability and religious hypocrisy more generally (Hardgrave "Politics" 63). The DMK produced movies and advertised their own political wing in these movies, becoming enormously popular at the poles in the process (Hardgrave "Politics" 61).

MGR himself began acting at age six with the Madurai Original Boys Company and began his film career in 1947 (Hardgrave "Politics" 68). His films often consisted of a Brahmin villain and a lower caste hero who eventually overcomes all the obstacles to marry the villain’s daughter in a self-respect marriage (Hardgrave "Politics" 68). He was able to carry over this populist heroism into a political career. Hardgrave puts it this way:

Known as Vadiyar, (‘teacher’), Puratche Nadigar, (‘revolutionary actor’), and as Makkal Thilagam, (‘idol of the masses’), MGR is the symbol of hope for the poor in South India. He supports orphanages and schools and is always the first to give for disaster relief. […] He is seen as ‘one among the people,’ ‘the incarnation of goodness,’ ‘the poor man’s avatar’. MGR’s generosity is well advertised, for it is the grist of his fame. Every contribution to his philanthropic image is an investment in his continued popularity and following among the masses. (“Politics” 68)

As Joseph tells us in Mahadevan’s novel, MGR was shot, in 1967, by a fellow actor, M.R. Radha, who usually played the villain to his hero. At the time MGR’s popularity was waning, but he was able to use this convergence of film and real life to his benefit,
and he raised the fortunes of the DMK once again (Hardgrave “Politics” 69-70). This ‘second birth’ of MGR’s, in other words, was not merely the act of surviving an attempt on his life, but a canny political performance that deliberately blurred the lines between filmic fiction and historical reality. This was a profoundly postmodern rebirth on MGR’s part.

It seems to me that the novel subtly suggests that Hari, himself, goes through a kind of third birth as a result of this train journey (he has already undergone his Poonal (Brahmin initiation) ceremony and is, therefore, already twice-born). I have already argued that Radha opens up a new and different world to Hari, here. When she discusses her own rebirth with him she tells him that it was presaged by a train ride “just like this” one (Loc 2922). And after the accident Hari is compared to both the infant Jesus and to the infant Krishna (two other shape-shifters who are not what they seem). When DM Iyer is questioning the train driver as to what happened all he can remember is the name of the boy who caused the accident –Hari. Iyer’s response is:

‘What will you have me do with that name? Go and drag every child in Madras with the name Hari and parade them in front of you? Do you want to turn me into that demon Kansa and send out witches to hunt down this child? […] Or perhaps you would like me to turn into King Herod and murder every child in Madras?’ (Loc 4173)

He is, of course, referring to the ways in which King Herod tries to get rid of the infant Jesus by murdering all the infant boy children in his kingdom, and how King Kansa tries to eliminate Krishna but is unable to locate him among the cowherds.
In that hijras traditionally come to the houses of families with newborn sons, Radha’s presence can also be seen as marking Hari’s (re)birth. From the orthodox Brahmin perspective represented by Hari’s mother, Radha has cursed Hari: she has inaugurated him once and for all into a world outside the ‘auspicious’ realm of heterosexual householder respectability. By helping him to fully recognize his own desires, she has helped to bring Hari’s family line to an end (at least in the sense that Hari will most likely not bring a daughter-in-law into the house). And yet, of course, from Hari’s perspective, and from the perspective of the book more broadly, this is not a curse but a blessing. It is an opening into a different kind of life.

The suggestion of Hari’s likeness, in some limited ways to Krishna and to Jesus, and, of course, the important role played by MGR, also help us to see that the postmodern world Hari begins to recognize, through Radha’s intervention in his life, is not a world dominated by a traditional Brahmin patriarchy—it is a world where power is exercised in more complex, shifting ways. Jesus and Krishna, while being both ‘kings’ and Gods are also lowly working people (a carpenter and a cowherd)–their enormous power springs from the unlikeliest of places. MGR, of course, was seen by many of his fans in a similar light. His father died when he was three leaving the family completely impoverished (so much so that his two sisters and a brother soon also died) (Hardgrave “Stars” 101). And yet he rose to enormous power–both as chief minister of Tamil Nadu for many years, and, to many of his fans, as a divine being.

And yet it is crucial to point out that Mahadevan is in no way setting up this postmodern space as a good and just world where the poor and oppressed find justice and
opportunity. Quite the contrary, although it is not ruled over by a Brahmin patriarchy, power is not necessarily exercised justly, and the poor do not necessarily have a better shake. The novel carefully draws out how the potential for social change is not at all the same thing as the reality of social change. And it points to the ways in which postmodern forms of power can so easily be coopted and reintegrated into modern forms of power. This is, arguably, what ultimately happened to MGR. As Hardgrave points out, while MGR was a populist and was adored by lower caste/class people, his theatrical gestures of generosity did not necessarily result in concrete change in the lives of most poor people. As Hardgrave writes:

The films of the DMK today are unlikely to shock or pose a serious challenge to traditional values. The early plays and films of the Dravidian movement indeed had been revolutionary in content, but since the mid-1950s, the themes of social reform have been diluted in electoral compromise. Today, DMK films are less a catalyst to reform and revolution than a catharsis of counter-revolutionary tension release. Situations of structural conflict (landlord v. landless laborer; capitalist v. factory worker) are mediated through romantic love. Sex becomes a social solvent. Villainy is defeated—and perhaps, like MGR, the poor rickshaw man will be able to marry the rich man’s daughter. (“Politics” 74)

The novel very clearly suggests this loss of revolutionary potential in the rule of the DMK and especially in the leadership of MGR. During the unrest over MGR’s death, we get the following description of an MGR follower who immolates himself in his grief:
Beneath the statue of Mahatma Gandhi, founder of the nation and in whose memory the road was named MG Road, the immolated man danced and chanted. Around him, the circle of men cried as they chanted MGR’s name. Then he began writhing and screaming as the fire burned through his flesh. (Loc 3173)

MG Road and MGR clearly slide into each other in this passage. MGR, it is clear, has taken the road of Mahatma Gandhi—an important reformer and yet ultimately unwilling to take the radical steps necessary for real change in caste and gender hierarchies.

The novel, then, it seems to me, is quite realistic in its evaluation of new and shifting forms or postmodern power. At no point does the novel suggest that Hari’s entrance into this new kind of world is one that will result in good and happy outcomes for him or for those around him. It just suggests that the opening of this world offers the possibility of such outcomes where they could not exist previously. This does not mean that Hari couldn’t be responsible for reinscribing modern power relationships with those less privileged than himself (in terms of caste and class and indeed in terms of gender). The danger of this possibility continually haunts the text, in Hari’s snobbish disgust that Mukund can’t speak English, for example, in his behaviour toward Radha, and indeed in the accident itself. It can be read not, as Hari’s mother does, as a sign of his inauspiciousness, but simply as a sign of his class and caste privilege and the tremendously dangerous (if unwanted) power that he has over those less privileged. The novel ends with a joyful suggestion of Hari’s newfound world:

[Hari] sprinted to the crashing waves and flung himself into the cold waters of the bay. The noise of rushing water
and breaking waves filled his ears, the sea sapped warmth from his skin, his clothes floated on his body and for a buoyant moment, Hari felt completely free. (Loc 478)

And yet Hari’s freedom continues to be haunted by a responsibility toward those who have helped him to find his way there – especially by Radha. She is, after all, arrested after the accident.

Mahadevan’s *The Strike*, it seems to me, then, like Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, although perhaps more self-consciously so, is haunted by its own reactionary potential. In both novels, ‘inauspicious,’ feminized characters act as gatekeepers, guides into a postmodern world free of rigid, elite, Brahmin categories. How different is this, really, from the ways in which Bankim Chandra and Tagore instrumentalize inauspicious widows in order to inaugurate elite Brahmin modernity? Do Ghosh and Mahadevan liberate their (relatively) privileged male characters at the expense of those less privileged characters who do the liberating? Although they are both rich and complex novels, not reducible to this weakness, ultimately I fear, they do.
The novels I have examined in this project have consistently led me to think about the crucial role of performance in social life and the intimate connections between performance and identity. Anita Desai has her character Raka witness an amateur production at the local club that seems to turn all of social life into a grotesque and violent performance. And the more recent novels repeatedly work to break down the binary between performance and essence – celebrating the dynamism, and free-play of a postmodern world-view. Jasmine in Mukherjee’s novel of the same name is taught to ‘perform’ several different identities – Prakash trains her to be a ‘new woman,’ Lillian Gorden teaches her to walk and talk like an American – and it is partly her ability to shape-shift that allows her to achieve her American happy ending. All of the characters in Amitav Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies engage in ‘performances,’ which are ultimately shown to be just as real as the supposedly fixed identities they are hiding: Paulette, for example, ‘passes’ for ‘native,’ but, in a very real sense she is ‘native.’ In this way Ghosh insists on exposing the constructedness of these identity categories in the first place. The world of Mahadevan’s novel is similarly filled with ‘performers’ and shape-shifters. Radha, I have argued, inaugurates Hari into a world outside of fixed social and ontological categories, where people ‘perform’ their identities and can be repeatedly reborn. Since performance kept coming up in my analysis of in/auspiciousness, I realized that I needed to explicitly work through how performance and in/auspiciousness intersect, how they
are related to each other. I felt that to look at the matter head on, I needed to move away
from fiction and explore an actual performance genre. So as a kind of coda to this
project, I have included a final chapter on drama—a chapter that allows me to more fully
explore the connections between in/auspiciousness and performance I was already seeing
in the novels, to position these connections more fully in historical and artistic context,
and, I think, ultimately, to substantially broaden and deepen my analysis of the narrative
workings of in/auspiciousness.

While many of the issues and narrative moves I have grappled with throughout this
project remain similar in my analysis of drama, there is a key difference: performance
itself (before and beyond any narrative or character) is invested with in/auspiciousness. I
want to begin, then, with a brief exploration of the ways in which the in/auspiciousness
of performance is constructed in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century nationalist
discourses, and then I will move on to examine two more recent plays (written almost
twenty years apart) to explore how they seek to reconceptualize the ‘inauspiciousness’ of
performance for their own progressive ends.

In at least one well-known case, female performance was closely tied to auspiciousness
before the reformist movements of the late nineteenth-century reconfigured their social
roles; I am speaking, of course, of the case of the devadasis. As I have pointed out in the
introduction to this project, devadasis, in their traditional roles as temple dancers
dedicated to the Lord, were considered mangala nari or auspicious women (despite,
according to Frederique Apffel-Marglin, their acknowledged ‘impurity’ (19)). Apffel
Marglin argues that they are permanently auspicious, specifically because they are
‘married’ to the Lord and, therefore, can never become widows (46), but their auspiciousness is also closely tied to their complex roles in the socio-political order. Apffel-Marglin points out that their performances (and, indeed, their sexual activity) are closely linked to the prosperity of the kingdom (good harvests, plenty of rain, well-being) and the peaceful rule of the King (90-112). They are, she writes, the “harbingers of auspiciousness” for the entire realm (112).

Amrit Srinivasan and many others have pointed out how with the ‘anti-nautch campaign’ beginning in the late nineteenth-century, the devadasis were stigmatized as prostitutes, and their dedication to temples was outlawed. The disparity between the purity and auspiciousness of the devadasis seemed to be too much for these reformers, influenced, as they were, by Victorian values. Importantly, though, the dances themselves, newly purged of both the dancers and of sexual content, remained auspicious – in the new breed of bourgeois nationalist auspiciousness. With the revival of Sadir (the dance form practiced by the devadasis) as Bharata Natyam (Indian Classical Dance), elite (Brahmin) nationalists took over the dance. They rewrote the past to turn the devadasi into a pure, holy figure (who had only become degenerate, and a prostitute in recent times) (Srinivasan 257). And they then co-opted the dance for themselves:

By thus marking her off from the ‘living’ devadasi, they hoped to attract the right sort of clientele for the dance. The argument that without the attendant immorality the dance was a form of yoga – an individual spiritual exercise – abstracted from its specific community context permitting its re-birth amongst the urban, educated and westernized elite. (257)
This translation of the auspiciousness of the dance form from one which was intimately tied up with fertility, sexuality, and community, to one which was associated with elite Brahmin householdership and bourgeois spiritual practice is, of course, part of the broader shift in the concepts of in/auspiciousness I sought to trace in the first chapter of this project. Hanne de Bruin describes the shift this way in the context of the South Indian performance genre Kattaikuttu:

[T]he conceptualization of sacred power as an organic force represented by the sexually attractive and active Goddess has been marginalized in favour of a more male-oriented, ritualistic, and ascetic Brahmanic view. Non-Brahmin village rituals and ‘folk’ performances directed at the invocation and representation of sacred power, as a live, embodied, and sexually loaded presence acquired a negative connotation under the impact of modernization-cum-Brahminization. They came to be seen as anti-modern and irrational, the domain of the illiterate and uneducated, and as the subjects of potential transformation into the direction of the more prestigious Brahmin paradigm. (“Kattaikuttu Girls” 257)

The complexity of the relationship between performance and constructions of in/auspiciousness is even more acute in the case of theatre performers. Under the influence of English education, and seeking modes of nationalist expression, reformers and rebellious student-types began developing modern forms of Indian drama. Young men began writing anti-colonial plays, and they began experimenting with more realistic productions. This flourishing theatre scene caused a significant practical problem, however. In earlier elite dramatic forms men played the roles of women, but due to
increasing demands for realism, and in the face of colonial constructions of masculinity 
(that saw any kind of cross-gender behaviour as highly problematic) men playing women 
became less and less acceptable to audiences (Abarkar 89). Abarkar quotes an important 
theatre personality, Govind Tembe, to the effect that “at a time when the nation required 
strong men, this tendency to look effeminate was to be discouraged” (89). (This change 
happened, of course, at very different rates in different parts of the country –actresses 
were introduced in Bengali theatre, for example, much earlier than they were in Marathi 
theatre). Given the deep taboo against respectable women displaying their bodies to the 
eyes of all and sundry, the only women who could be found to act in these productions 
were women of the lower orders. As Rimli Bhattacharya puts it in describing the 
situation in Bengal:

[A]lmost every little girl who joined the theatre came from 
what were designated as a-bhadra (‘dis-respectable’) 
households, usually those of women abandoned by 
husbands or lovers, or widows without any source of 
support […] destitute kulin women, as well as poor women 
from the lower classes flock[ing] to Calcutta to make a 
living. (11)

While in the case of dance, the auspiciousness of the performance was maintained by 
replacing the bodies of the lower caste, sexually dubious devadasis with the ‘respectable’ 
bodies of Brahmin wives and daughters, in the theater, this neat substitution was 
generally not possible. The result was a profoundly ambiguous embodying of auspicious 
characters (i.e. mythological or nationalist self-sacrificing heroines) by inauspicious 
actresses. Minoti Chatterjee describes the situation like this:
The actresses foregrounded the women’s issues. With so much social reform and literacy drives centered around women, who but the actresses could put forth these issues squarely on the Public stage. But ironically these women were not Bhadra enough to be acceptable socially. What an enigma it might have been to portray the so-called ‘pure’ woman on stage, educate the audience in religiosity and social values in play after play, and yet remain on the margins of a nation in the making. (70)

These performances themselves, then, were at once both auspicious and inauspicious and this profound ambiguity caused no end of debate.

Nationalists of all stripes, conservative and progressive alike, sought to contain the threat posed by this profound ambiguity in lots of ways, and I will discuss some more of their disciplinary tactics in the next section of this chapter, but for now I want to briefly explore the working through of these anxieties in fiction.

In many ways stories about actresses in the early twentieth century align with the types of formal moves I traced in the first chapter of this project with regard to the widow. In that chapter I argued, most broadly, that in several novels of the period, the widow is responsible for creating the bourgeois, householder couple; she destroys their marriage and allows it to be remade on a properly modern footing. In the process, the auspiciousness of the wife and the inauspiciousness of the widow are rationalized, rewritten as agentic. Similarly fancy footwork takes place in stories about actresses, but there is the added complication that, at least in some cases, the (good) wife and the (bad)
other woman are the same person: the actress performs the role of the good wife, while also being a (bad) public woman.

In Premchand’s “The Actress,” for example, much like the widow characters in the Bengali novels I read in Chapter One, the protagonist, here, produces bourgeois citizen subjects. She does so very differently, however, by portraying the ideal woman on the stage. In her idealized depictions of Indian womanhood –she teaches women how to behave and she teaches men to love such women. Premchand’s story opens with Taradevi, the actress protagonist, finishing a triumphant performance as Shakuntala and winning the love of the “nobleman” Kunwar Nirmalkant Chaudhuri, OBE in the process. What becomes immediately apparent, however, is that Taradevi is not just performing the ideal woman, once she finds her one love, Nirmalkant, she is the ideal woman; her devotion to him is exactly the same as that of the ideal wife, and she is also educated, knowledgeable about the history and culture of India and self-disciplined, as a new woman should be. And, after all, the auspicious ‘new woman’ is explicitly a role that must be learned and performed through hard work and education. It is not supposed to be something that is simply intrinsic to women and nor is it a mere matter of luck (at least ostensibly), but rather an agentic set of behaviours that demonstrate an ability to govern the self and to nurture others.

The problem, of course, is what cannot be explicitly acknowledge, at least not in progressive nationalist discourse, namely that this auspiciousness is also in the blood –it is deeply tied up with family and with caste. So the actress, despite her perfect mastery of the ‘role’ of the respectable new woman, can never actually be the auspicious,
respectable wife of a man like Nirmalkant. The story solves its anxiety about how to get around this conundrum by having Taradevi deceive Nirmalkant about her age. He thinks she is younger than she is, and she realizes that she cannot marry him because “Love is truth, and truth and lies cannot live together” (111). As Nandi Bhatia puts it:

“I]n reflecting upon her decision to leave Nirmalkant, her thoughts seem to be focused […] on her own guilt about her age, which she had managed to hide through her make-up. Her ultimate decision to leave him then comes to be couched in the narrative of deception. This has the effect of glossing over the social circumstances of the actress who falls outside the norms of middle-class family life.”

(*Performing Women* 19)

What becomes evident if we parse the passage where Taradevi asks herself about the ethics of marrying Nirmalkant, is that what is wrong is not so much that she has deceived him, but something deeper, more essential:

[S]he wondered if she could make Kunwar Sahib’s life happy. Yes, certainly, of this at least she had not the slightest doubt, for there was nothing devotion could not accomplish. But could she deceive nature? Could the brightness of noon be found in the rays of the setting sun? Impossible! That vivacity, that swiftness, that sense of oneness and renunciation and self-confidence, the fusion of which is called youth – where was she to find them? So no matter how much she wanted to she could never make Kunwar Sahib happy. An old mare can never trot with the colts. (110)
The passage starts out by suggesting that when it comes to behaving like a good wife, there could be none better—her devotion is perfect. But the rest of the passage is somewhat less evident. Despite being able to ‘fool’ Kunwar into thinking he’s got the perfect wife, she’ll never deceive ‘nature.’ There is something more fundamentally amiss, biologically lacking. Ostensibly, at least, this is simply that she is somewhat older than he thinks she is, but I submit that the passage suggests a couple of things: one, that she might be too old to bear him children (thereby proving her inauspiciousness), and two, that ‘nature’ knows her true caste and/or the contamination of her blood with her possible previous sexual histories. The cruelty and venom of the final line suggests a kind of corruption: “An old mare” —beaten down, used up, no longer able to “trot with the colts”! It is in her essence, then, that she cannot make Kunwar happy, that she cannot be a good wife to him. While she has mastered the role of the good wife, she can never actually be one. Much like the widow, then, she must be quickly hurried offstage, and she too, explicitly like a widow, in a white sari and without jewellery, takes up the life of an ascetic, giving up, once and for all, any social role at all in the life of the nation-to-be (111).

While authors could imagine such outcomes in fiction, of course, actual actresses were not necessarily so readily or so fully purged of their threatening possibilities. They were generally kept out of respectable society, as their writings attest (like Binodini Dasi’s My Story), and their ambiguous in/auspiciousness was not necessarily a source of power or liberation for themselves (quite the contrary). And yet, as long as they performed on the public stage they could not help but raise questions and doubts; their inherent contradictions couldn’t but be a source of unease for a patriarchal social order so fixated
on a single vision of acceptable womanhood. It is this unease, these inherent contradictions, that prove so fruitful for the more contemporary playwrights I examine next. While these plays are very different from each other and were written almost twenty years apart, both, I argue, seek to explore this potentially dangerous and potentially powerful duality at the heart of performance.

Dattani’s *Ardhanarishvara*: Creativity, In/auspiciousness, and Performance in *Tara*

While Dattani’s play *Tara*, first performed in 1990 as *Twinkle Tara*, can certainly be read or watched as a realistic (if somewhat extreme) drama of middle class family life in India, the figure of conjoined twins that it sets up must also be understood allegorically. I argue, here, that the conjoined twins are an *Ardhanarishvara* figure (meaning ‘the Lord who is half woman’ this name refers to Shiva and his consort united as one being), and, as such, can fruitfully be interpreted as an exploration of creation and creativity broadly understood.
This exploration of creation and creativity is also very much an exploration of in/auspiciousness since, as we have seen repeatedly throughout this project, auspiciousness is closely tied up with the creation and furtherance of life while inauspiciousness is linked to destruction, disease, sterility and death. Dattani, I argue, rewrites several versions of the *Ardhanarishvara* myth, rethinking the patriarchal structures of in/auspiciousness, creativity, and social life that inhere in these stories. For Dattani, inauspiciousness does not inhere in individual people, but is rather a word for a perverse and violent social order. His play showcases how the violence of a patriarchal, hetero-sexist society gets abjected onto individual women. Crucially, he also decouples
creativity from biological and heteronormative reproduction opening up a space of auspiciousness that is not tied to rigid patriarchal gender and sexual ideologies.

The play tells the story of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan who are separated at birth through a series of complicated surgeries. The exact nature of these operations is not, at first, clear, and the plot is largely driven forward by suspense associated with a secret about these surgeries. We eventually discover, however, that the mother of the twins, Bharati, and their maternal grandfather insisted that the surgeries be done in such a way as to benefit the boy. The medical consequences of this decision, compounded by the guilt associated with it and the eventual revelation of the secret, destroy the family and lead to the death of the daughter and the mental disintegration of the mother.

The play is told from the perspective of Dan – the adult Chandan who has moved to London, become a writer, and dissociated himself from his past. He sits writing the play in the middle level of the stage, while below him, on the bottom stage level, the events play out. On a third level of the stage, above Dan, Dr Thakkar, the doctor who performed the surgeries, sits in a god-like position looking down on the action of the play and occasionally describing his own medical interventions.

The play is shadowed by the image of the twins in the embrace of their birth before they are, as Dan puts it “forced out… and separated” (325). This is an image that is repeated at the very end of the play, when Tara and Chandan seem to reunite as adults in a utopian, imaginative space conjured by Dan’s voice. The obvious beauty and wholeness associated with this image calls into question Dr Tahkkar’s claim that their separation was medically necessary, and hints, rather, that their separation was required by a social
order unable and unwilling to countenance the existence of what they are. Rosemarie
Garland Thomson, writing about real cases of conjoined twins argues:

So intolerable is their insult to dominant ideologies about who patriarchal culture insists we are that the testimonies of adult [conjoined twins] who say they do not want to be separated is routinely ignored in establishing the rationale for medical treatment (Dreger 1998b). In truth, these procedures do not benefit the affected individuals, but rather they expunge the kinds of corporeal human variations that contradict the ideologies the dominant order depends upon to anchor truths that it insists are unequivocally encoded in bodies. (26)

What they are, of course, is both two people and one person at once. As a figure not only for creativity but also for social life, they call into question the essentialized categories of man and woman (male and female), but they also do not collapse them into perfect unity. They hold open oneness and twoness, sameness and difference, integration and singularity in tense, dynamic balance.

This wonderful tension, as a new version of an Ardhanarishvara figure, manages to undermine much of the patriarchal bias that often adheres in the stories about this androgynous deity. I want to look here at a couple of narratives of Ardhanarishvara to explore, briefly, how Dattani’s powerful figure takes up various patriarchal tropes of gender and sexuality in order to mould them into new shapes. In the Siva Purana, Ardhanarishvara springs from the forehead of Brahma but since the two halves of the androgynous God are so close there is no procreative potential. So Brahma asks Ardhanarishvara to divide into male and female halves; he does so, allowing for creation
to continue (Kramrisch 201). In this paradigm, the phenomenal world comes into existence at the moment of division –with the creation of the Great Goddess –*Maya* (Kramrisch 202), and in the phenomenal world the progress of creation is predicated on essentialized heteronormative sexual union.

Dattani’s play, of course, undermines the heteronormativity of this position –his twins are brother and sister rather than husband and wife, and the division, or separation of the twins leads not to creation and creativity –life-giving potential, but rather to sterility, madness and death. This heteronormative essentializing vision, in other words, is not auspicious, here –leading to a wonderful abundance of life-- on the contrary, it is profoundly inauspicious –leading to violence, pain, suffering and death. Male and female, here, are not ‘naturally’ essential, separate positions, and to divide them, requires a complicated series of invasive surgeries –leaving them both broken and unwell. They are also left, as Dr Thakkar puts it, “completely sterile,” meaning, of course, that they cannot reproduce biologically. But it is clear that the play is more interested in a different kind of ‘sterility.’ Without Tara, Dan is unable to be creative –his days are taken up in fruitless, alcoholic writer’s block, and he repeatedly destroys everything he writes. The play ends with him tearing up what he has written over the course of the time we have been watching him, and repeating the exact lines that he has stated in the beginning: “My progress so far –I must admit –has been zero…But I persist with the comforting thought that things can’t get any worse” (379).

For Dattani, it seems, to force men and women into separate categories, to conceptualize them as totally distinct and to expect a man to kill off what is considered ‘feminine’ in
himself is to insist on a deadening, perverse, and violent social order. While heteronormative reproduction predicated on the essentialized positions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ is usually marked as profoundly auspicious (as we have seen throughout this project), Dattani rewrites it very explicitly here as inauspicious – cruel, violent and destructive.

Taking one step further, Dattani suggests, here, that the violence that is endemic to this perverse social order is then heaped onto women themselves, abjected onto the ‘feminine’. The inauspiciousness that inheres in the social order itself, in other words, is abjected onto women and the inauspicious woman is born. This is most obvious, in the play, in the case of Bharati, who, although she has clearly internalized patriarchal devaluation of girl-children and is certainly partly responsible for what happens to Tara, is made to bear the entire burden of a misogynist social order here. She is turned into the inauspicious woman par excellence – a woman who, rather than nurturing and sustaining her children and family, damages them permanently, does irreparable violence to them. Patel, a chillingly controlling man, who is verbally and physically abusive towards his wife, and who works hard throughout the play to force his children into male and female social roles, also manages to heap the responsibility for what happens to their children and to their entire family on the shoulders of his wife.

In one crucial scene, Tara, Chandan, and their young neighbour Roopa are inside the Patel home (on the first level of the stage), and Patel himself is just outside it talking to another neighbour (on the same stage level). Both the adolescents and Patel are spotlighted, highlighting their separateness and aloneness (Patel is talking to a neighbour
but the neighbour doesn’t actually appear on stage) as well as drawing attention to them as objects of our vision. The two conversations are going on simultaneously and the lines intersect, thus the conversations comment on each other in the audience’s ears.

Patel is talking about the health of his family members while Tara, Chandan, and Roopa are discussing a story that Chandan is hoping to write. Patel tells the neighbour “I don’t look well because I’m not…Frankly I’m worried…about her” (329). And this line is immediately followed by Chandan telling Roopa “I haven’t written any story about monsters yet” (329). The hanging and unidentified “her” at the end of Patel’s sentence, ambiguously shadows the “monsters” in Chandan’s. A few lines later Tara says “Yes, he is going to write a story –about me” (329), which is immediately followed by Patel: “She needs help. I am not so sure –maybe some kind of therapy…or counselling” (329). This suggests that the “her” Patel has previously mentioned (which is shadowed by ‘monster’) is Tara –his daughter, who has, after all, frequently been ill. He goes on to say: “Maybe I need some advice …or counselling. I don’t know…whether I am prepared for the worst” (329-30). But this is followed by Tara: “I am strong. My mother has made me strong” (330) –directly contradicting him. The spot then fades out on the teenagers, and Patel is left alone onstage, and the meanings of his words suddenly shift quite significantly:

“Maybe I’m expecting the worst. It may never happen –no. Things are getting out of hand. I must worry about her. Yes. I am worried –about my wife” (330). He appears to be worrying about Tara at first; he even admits that he might need some kind of professional help because he may not be able to handle what might happen to her. But as the tension of the scene builds and the back and forth between the two conversations emphasizes Patel’s lack of control (his claims are contradicted) he shifts tack and abjects
this worry (now grown too big for him) onto his wife. He isn’t worried about Tara, he is worried about his wife who is neurotic and “out of hand” – *she* is losing control; *she* is the one who needs professional help. Bharati is made to carry the neurosis and madness that Patel himself feels/displays here – he is, after all depicted on stage talking to himself (the ‘neighbour,’ as I mentioned, isn’t physically present). And when Patel’s ‘her’ shifts referent, Bharati is also aligned with the ‘monster’ who shadows that ‘her.’ She is also made to bear, not only the madness (over Tara’s condition), but also the guilt for it, and the violence that underlies it.

While Bharati is quite obviously made to carry the burden of patriarchal violence in the play, she is not the only one. Roopa, the young neighbour who comes to hang out with the twins, is also burdened with this responsibility. Roopa is depicted as a shallow, competitive, nasty gossip (a classic misogynist prototype), and yet her role is a complex one. We get some understanding of this complexity in the other half of the same scene I discussed above when Roopa first tells Chandan that she loves stories about “ghosts and monsters” (328). She suggests that he entertain them by telling them a story about “oglers.” Just one of many hilarious verbal slips on Roopa’s part, this transfer of ‘oge’ to ‘ogler’ is clearly significant. She goes on to say “You know, those monsters with one big eye in the middle of their foreheads,” and Chandan promises her that he will indeed put her in the story “As the ogler.” Roopa here is named the ‘ogler’ from next door, that monster with ‘one big eye in the middle of its forehead’ the creature who watches the destruction of the Patel family with such horrendous glee – in short she is us, the audience.
Roopa, and the offstage Prema and Nalini act as the chorus in Dattani’s play. As Michael Goldman argues: “There is always a chorus. […] the overriding fact is that a dramatic hero is always surrounded by a social group, actual or implied, who press upon him with extraordinary attention, extraordinary threat, just as the audience in the theatre does.” The function of this ‘chorus,’ Goldman argues is to channel the aggression of the audience:

In a way, the on-stage audience is not only a surrogate for the off; it seems almost to free us from any emotion toward the actor that might seriously disrupt the performance, from the violence we would ordinarily expect to feel if we were a potential mob confronted by a provocative stranger. In the theatre the potential violence of the audience, the destructive focus natural to any group is both aroused and appeased, but the play itself works to indulge it. We are not violent toward the actor (at least while his acting pleases). But it is violent; somewhere in every play something threatens to tear the principle character apart. (16-17)

Roopa, it seems to me, takes all of our own hostility and fear surrounding Dattani’s provocative figure of conjoined twins, and channels it in such a way that we ourselves can disown it, can distance ourselves from it (as Patel does his own misogyny). Roopa is left bearing all of this violence and nastiness on her own young shoulders. Once again the play demonstrates how the inauspicious destructiveness of a violent patriarchal social order is abjected onto ‘inauspicious’ women.
These two moves to abject onto female figures the violence inherent in a patriarchal social order build toward a single climax in the play—the moment I have already mentioned. Here Patel tells Chandan and Tara that Bharati chose to take Tara’s leg and attempt to give it to Chandan, once and for all abjecting the guilt and violence of this act onto his wife. Meanwhile, outside Roopa, whose hatred for the twins has built to a fever pitch, erects a sign that says “We don’t want freaks” once and for all ejecting the twins from the community of the chorus/audience (378). In this way, Bharati is made to bear all the responsibility for the surgical/medical violence done to Tara, and Roopa is made to bear the responsibility for the audience’s own feelings of violence and aggression toward the twins and especially Tara. She carries the burden of society’s own violence toward women and society’s own coding of conjoined twins as ‘freaks’.

This, then, is the inauspiciousness that Dattani’s play associates with the complete separation of men and women, the essentializing of male and female into completely different and separate categories. But not all narratives of Ardhanaśīrvarā manifest this kind of investment in a separation between male and female. In the Linga Purāṇa, for example, Siva, as Ardhanaśīrvarā, takes pleasure, through yoga, with his own other half and creates Vishnu and Brahma in this fashion (Kramrisch 205). Here there isn’t a clear essentialized division between male and female halves, the distinction is one of Shiva/Shakti. Shakti, refers, of course, to the ‘feminine’ dynamic energy or life force that underlies all of creation. It is possible to access this sacred power through the discipline of yoga: Shakti can take the form of kundalinī power which, as we have seen in Chapter Two, can rise up through the body of the yogin from a spot below the navel toward the bliss of union in the thousand-petaled lotus above the crown of the head.
(Subramuniyaswami 751). Here the creative energies of the universe are marshalled through the channelling of this ‘feminine’ cosmic power in an ascetic practice. While this conception of Ardhanarishvara is very interesting in its breaking down of male and female essentialisms it maintains its patriarchal bias. The ‘feminine’ here is conceptualized as simply a part of the whole (which is implicitly male – Shiva). Female persons are implicitly partial, where male persons are not. Even the name of Ardhanarishvara contains this built-in bias – ‘the Lord who is half woman.’ The Lord, who is whole, is male – here he just has a female part. The pronoun used for Ardhanarishvara is another indication of this bias – the androgynous God seems to be unanimously referred to as ‘he’. We can see this lack of equality even more clearly in other Puranas, in the Matsya, for example, in which Parvati merges into her husband’s body as a special reward or blessing for her (Collins 77). And it is this image that forms the basis of the ideal marital union, when the ‘auspicious wife’ becomes one with her spouse. As Ellen Goldberg, argues: “in the Indian nuptial ideal of ardhanari, the perfect wife or pativrata (like Parvati in the myth of Ardhanarishvara) becomes absorbed into half the man, that is, he does not become absorbed into her” (119). Dattani is very interested in this conception of the ‘feminine,’ and he certainly draws on Shakti power in the play. He also draws on the way this figure allows for the detaching of ‘feminine’ from a simplistic association with ‘female.’

But just as it has explored the violence that underpins essentialized notions of male and female (that lead to the othering and abjection of ‘the female’ and in turn actual women), Dattani’s play also stages the violence that can underlie the union of male and female (a union which is ultimately an extinguishing of the female in the male, the absorption of a
woman’s singularity, selfhood, difference, into a man). Once again, then, while the merging of the woman in the man is explicitly read as auspicious (most evidently in the ideal of *ardhanari*) by a patriarchal social order, Dattani rewrites it as deeply inauspicious, violent, destructive. Dan longs for his sister throughout the play, and yet his longing is tinged, from the very beginning, with a narcissistic desire to exploit Tara for his own gain. At the very outset, he admits: “To tell you the truth, I had even forgotten I had a twin sister. [...] Until I thought of her as subject matter for my next literary attempt.” (324). Dan reminds us repeatedly, in creepier and creepier tones, breaking in on the action taking place on the stage below, that *he* is the one framing the story, *he* is deciding who speaks and who doesn’t speak –ultimately, in other words, he has appropriated Tara’s voice. At the end of the play, he makes this perfectly plain: “Yes. [...] Like the amazing Dr Thakkar, I must take something from Tara –and give it to myself. [...] Make it my tragedy” (379).

In the absence of his living, breathing, sister with thoughts and ideas of her own, Dan reconstructs her as (simply) a part of himself –she becomes the *Shakti* to his Shiva –she is the energy or power he must learn how to channel in order to create. He suspects that “She was lying deep inside [him], out of reach…” (324). But the play draws our attention to the violence of this absorption of Tara. And once again, the way the play ends, with a repetition of Dan’s total lack of progress, and his destruction of what he has written, codes these attempts on his part as just as sterile, just as inauspicious as his attempts to separate himself completely from his past and his sister. These patriarchal visions are more or less explicitly depicted as deadening, unproductive –destructive of creativity and of life-giving potential.
The figure of conjoined twins, returning as it does, once again at the very end of the play, clearly presents us with an alternative to the deadening patriarchal violence we have witnessed throughout the production. This figure insists on an irreducible, simultaneous oneness and twoness. Tara and Chandan are both the same person (they are born as one body) and different people (their minds are, at least partly, separate) whose singularities cannot be denied or effaced. Only in this wonderful and incomprehensible balance can they remain healthy, creative, full of life, in short, deeply auspicious.

While Dan never succeeds in creating a work of art, his efforts are unfruitful, it is possible for the play itself (the production of Dattani’s play) to succeed. What is absent from Dan’s script, and indeed what is absent from Dattani’s script (if we read it in a book) is the actual performance—human actors/actresses moving through space on a stage. What is missing is (as Dan calls it) ‘craft,’ which is truly at the heart of how Dattani himself envisions the theatre: he tells Anita Nair: "I see myself as a craftsman and not as a writer. To me, being a playwright is about seeing myself as a part of the process of a production. I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium" (qtd. in Nair). While Dan’s script manages mostly to convey a sense of the twins as either two (violently—and fatally—separated) or one (Tara violently subsumed into Dan), the performance of the play embodies the complex tension between these two positions. The actor/actress is, after all, an excellent figure for the conjoindness of the twins—one body, two people.

The play seeks explicitly to foreground the productive, indeed, the auspicious duality of the actors, auspicious, that is, for Dattani. In repeatedly calling attention to his own play
as performance (by having Dan, as playwright, break in on the action of the actors below him on the stage), and in shadowing the play with the image of the twins in their conjoined state, Dattani brilliantly links form and content. For Dattani, the complex oneness and twoness of the actors, like the complicated conjoinedness of the twins is a beautifully creative state. But this duality is seen as more or less threatening (and more or less feminine) in both the Western theatrical tradition (beginning with Aristotle) and in ancient Indian performance theory and Sanskrit drama, and this pervasive suspicion pervaded modern Indian performance forms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; as I have argued above, the distance between the actress and her role was often read as potentially deeply inauspicious. By insisting on the productivity and life-giving potential of this complex oneness and twoness, it seems to me, Dattani seeks to resist these patriarchal disciplinary suspicions and rethink the meanings of auspiciousness.

Until recent years in the Western dramatic tradition there has been a persistent bias against performance. Aristotle seemed to conceive of performance as mere afterthought, a kind of frivolous addition to the real art of the text. He writes:

Spectacle, or stage-effect, is an attraction of course, but it has the least to do with the playwright’s craft or with the art of poetry. For the power of tragedy is independent both of performance and of actors, and besides, the production of spectacular effects is more the province of the property-man than of the play-wright. (41)

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32 Suspicion of performance continues to pervade many of the hybrid forms of drama to this day. See, for example, Susan Seizer’s excellent work on Special Drama in Tamilnadu.
Gay McAuley conveys the sense that this dismissive attitude to performance arises out of anxiety over all that which overflows the Symbolic Order, the law of the father, all that which refuses to be contained in rules, in language, and most specifically here, in the script: the ontological mystery of the actor (Is he himself or the character? Is it possible to be both? Where are the boundaries between the self and others?); the actor’s perceived immoral lifestyle (improperly controlled sexuality/bodies); and the fact that live performances cannot be fully controlled or predicted due to the wide range of people participating in them (4). That which overflows the Symbolic Order is, of course, as Julia Kristeva has so powerfully argued, the semiotic—the body of the mother, uncontrollable, excessive, leaky.

In Sanskrit drama, too, and ancient Indian theories of performance, the performer embodies a certain feminized threat, but this threat is handled, and contained, very differently. As Susan Schwartz writes: “Far from rejecting the body for its fallibility, Indian aesthetics celebrates its potential to express the transformative ability of its underlying divine nature. Artistic experience through the body may enable the attainment of the highest spiritual goals” (9). The performer, in other words, must learn to channel the powers of the phenomenal world, of the body itself: “The […] actor learns the techniques of breath/energy control known to animate (enliven) life-force energies, similar to forms of yoga and meditation. In South Asia the source of these energies is Shakti, the archetypal feminine origin of all that lives and breathes” (59). The force that the actor channels is Shakti, in rasa aesthetics, the feminine power that underlies the phenomenal world, the power of maya itself, of change, of physical vulnerability, of death.
But in *rasa* aesthetics this incorporation of the ‘feminine’ allows the performer not only to achieve some measure of control over this threatening ‘other,’ but to transcend it altogether. The practice of acting, of performance, like that of yoga, channels these feminine energies, powers, in order to effect a total transformation. Susan Schwartz writes that acting “requires, as do most of the spiritual and performing arts in traditional India, the suspension not of disbelief but of ego” (59). This suspension of ego in a yoga-like channelling of feminine life energies allows for the experience of union – what Schwartz calls “a taste (rasa) of liberation from the *maya* of existence” (20). In other words this is a fleeting, momentary, ‘taste’ of *moksha* “release from reincarnation, union with Brahman, at once eternal life in bliss and death of the individual ego” (Schwartz 11). To put this highly complex theory somewhat crudely, then, the threat posed by the actor’s channelling of (feminine) energies or by the actor’s presence as both himself and the character he is playing is extinguished in this theory by the collapsing of the ontological mystery – the actor becomes the character – they are one – there is no duality.

We can quite readily trace the workings of these two quite different patriarchal dramatic traditions in the nationalist debates over drama in India and specifically in the ways in which writers, acting teachers, and the play-going public sought to discipline the bodies of performers (most especially, of course, the bodies of female performers). On the one hand we see a tremendous emphasis on the written words of a script. Susan Seizer, speaking of a performer of her acquaintance in Tamilnadu, writes:

Drama was to be distinguished from [the] disordered world of extempore comedy primarily through its *scripting*.

Progress in Tamil drama, for Kalleswaran as for so many
of his era, was born of the improvements wrought by the disciplining hand that wielded that quintessential civilizing tool, the pen. Entextualization—the transformation wrought by encoding bodily practices in written texts—has become a key feature of artists’ attempts to classicize their art (and thereby enhance their social status) throughout South Asia. (57).

And others point out how many theatre-goers around the turn of the 20th century brought along scripts of the plays and read them as the actors spoke. This was clearly a disciplinary measure—bringing the performance in line with the script—making sure the living, breathing, performer was also held accountable to the words written solidly on the page.

On the other hand, of course, we also see forms of discipline that are more explicitly religious in nature—aligned with a vision of performance as closely allied with asceticism. Fictional and self-authored autobiographies of actresses at the time often emphasized the tremendous sacrifices (or tyag) actresses were required to make for their art. As Lata Singh writes, “The sacrifice required had to be like that of a mahayogi (great yogi)” (281). And actresses were often paid a salary commensurate with ascetic status. As Singh puts it: “Prabha Devi, despite having strong regard and respect for Girish Ghosh, left his theatre and joined another which offered her a higher salary. For three years she only got Rs 18 in Girish Ghosh’s theatre. Girish Ghosh would tell her that money was not important and it was tyag that was required” (286). Many social reformers even felt that the discipline of being an actress was strong enough to reform
women of bad character: Singh quotes from *Rangbhumi* a prominent theatre journal at the time:

If you start to learn some art it gradually makes you more self-controlled and the level of living rises. For example take acting. The efforts the student will have to put in the study, make one forget individuality and transmigrate to the different personalities and be one with them will surely have a positive effect both on his intellect as well as morals. A prostitute working on stage would begin to feel that she should be more sensitive to public opinion. And she would not be able to behave in any way that she wants. If she likes the stage work and an ambition seizes her to gain expertise in it and make a name she may feel like leaving prostitution. Whatever some puritans may say one can unreservedly say that those who offered to take the prostitute on the bandwagon of theatre and cast them in the mould have indeed done their mite in the betterment of mankind (278)

“Be[coming] one with” the characters she plays is, of course, crucial to any performer, but in this context it takes on a couple of specific disciplinary meanings. On the one hand, the actress, through sacrifice and ascetic disciplining of her own body might achieve momentary union with the character she is playing. At the same time, at a more mundane level, this discipline was meant to turn the actress herself into a good, self-sacrificing woman like the heroines she was portraying in the nationalist plays. This discipline, in other words, was meant to flatten the threatening, inauspicious duality between the ‘good’ character and the all too ‘bad’ actress. But it is the very fact that the
character and the actor can neither be flattened into one nor divided into two that Dattani celebrates, here, and depicts as productive, creative, *auspicious*.

Ultimately, it seems to me, Dattani has replaced the heteronormative, biological, patriarchal conception of creation and creativity represented by earlier versions of *Ardhanarishvara* with the figure of the performer in mid-performance. This creature, like the earlier *Ardhanarishvaras*, is both one and two but her/his creativity is of a different nature. In this process, Dattani rewrites the heteronormative patriarchal construction of creativity (i.e. reproduction premised on essentialized visions of male and female or the merging of the female into the male) as violent, destructive –*inauspicious*. And he confers a glowing productive *auspiciousness* onto his own conjoined performer figure. To put this another way, Dattani resists biological/organic and bourgeois heteronormative constructions of auspiciousness in favour of an everyday artistic construction –a vision of the constant play of self and other, sameness and difference, a play that is enacted both inside of each person and in our constant interactions and intimacies with the people around us. For Dattani, it seems to me, it is this play, these renegotiations and inventions of self, these mergings and emergings of people that are the basis of creativity, productivity, life. Finally, it is also this play, this negotiation that he posits as a new vision of social life, indeed of *national* life. In that the mother of the twins is called Bharati, a clear reference to Bharat Mata (or Mother India), Dattani is quite explicitly suggesting a new foundation for imagining the nation –one very distinct indeed from the bourgeois heteronormative family of Tagore or of Bankim Chandra.
Shameful Performances in Chandrasekhar’s *Free Outgoing*

Anupama Chandrasekhar’s somewhat underappreciated and brilliant play, first performed in 2007, takes place within the increasingly claustrophobic confines of a middle class family’s small apartment. Near the beginning of the play, we discover, along with her mother, that Deepa, the 15 years old daughter of the widow Malini, has been filmed having sex with her friend Jeevan in one of her school’s classrooms. Jeevan sends the video, on his cellphone, to a friend who forwards it on to several more friends, and before their horrified parents can do anything to stop it, the video has gone viral creating a perfect storm of public outrage, entertainment and real danger for those involved. Jeevan and his family make a hasty retreat to “Sir Lanka or Canada” (26), but Deepa is left to face the music. While the family, consisting of Malini, Sharan, her son and Deepa’s older brother, and the absent/present Deepa (she is locked in her room out of sight), try to deal with the fallout of the incident, a crowd gathers outside their building. We don’t actually see this crowd; we just hear them and see the consequences of their actions –broken windows, the family’s inability to get to the water lorry etc.

A disciplining social order is all-too present in the play, represented most tangibly by the enraged crowds outside the apartment, but also evident within all the characters including Malini and Sharan themselves. And, of course, this disciplinary gaze/violence is ambiguously associated with us, the audience as well, since we, too, are gathered outside the apartment watching the goings-on with fascination. This social order, I argue, constructs both Deepa and her mother Malini as inauspicious –the bringers of ruin on themselves and others, and this ‘inauspiciousness’ is closely tied up with deceitfulness,
performance, seeming to be one thing while actually being another. What the play manages to do, though, is to turn this disciplinary gaze around—to insist that it is the mob, the audience, the social order itself which is engaged in a deceitful and threatening performance. It is the patriarchal and hypocritical society itself which brings about destruction and violence.

Malini’s inauspiciousness is made evident, in the play, through a conversation she has with her son about why she has no relationship with her brother (and, indeed, the brother remains absent—he doesn’t help her in her time of need). We learn that Malini married a man of a different community against the wishes of her own family (29). She tells Sharan: “[My brother] said marrying your father would be a disaster” (32). And, indeed, after Malini’s marriage bad things do happen. Her husband dies young, and while no one ever suggests that this is Malini’s fault, the connection between her disobedience and this disastrous outcome hangs in the air. The fact of Malini’s widowhood, the absence of a husband and father is repeatedly associated in the play with the ruin the family now faces. Sharan whines that “If Appa were alive none of this would have freaking happened” (27). And the treacherous neighbour Kokila suggests that in the absence of a husband it is no telling what all sexual immorality is likely to reign. She darkly hints that Malini is a prostitute, and reminds her: “You may think that you are free to do whatever you want because you don't have a husband. But you must remember you have children” (42).

Malini’s disobedience, her decision to live her sexuality in ways considered unacceptable to her family is, of course, repeated in that of her daughter. The parallel is made explicit
in the text by the fact that the conversation mentioned above about Malini’s brother’s
cold-hearted abandonment of his sister is immediately preceded by a scene in which
Sharan cold-heartedly turns on his own sister shouting: “Tell her I’ll kill her. Tell your
little whore I’ll –kill her!” (28). And Deepa, like her mother, is closely associated,
throughout, with inauspiciousness.

It is evident in the beginning of the play that Malini sees her daughter as sure to bring
about a prosperous future for herself (and, therefore, in some sense for the whole family).
Deepa is a very good student; she plans on becoming a doctor; she is thoughtful,
responsible and obedient. She also symbolically helps to sustain the family, at least in
the beginning. The flow of water is a central preoccupation in the play. Since the crowd
outside prevents the family from accessing the water lorry, they have almost no drinking
water by the end of the play. The rapid diminution of their store of water is one of the
main signifiers of the family’s genuine danger: the fact that the crowd wants not only to
humiliate them and shame them publicly but also to do them actual physical violence.
The flow of water, or its terrifying absence, is, of course, also a potent symbol of the
family’s health and well-being. In the beginning of the play, we learn that (at least
according to his mother) while Sharan forgets to leave water aside for others, and is
recalcitrant about picking more up, Deepa is always diligent in doing so (6). This
strongly suggests that Deepa is the source of well-being for the family before the crisis.
This is, of course, not the traditional way of viewing daughters, a fact which is brought
home to Malini in the awful Kokila’s reproaches: she accuses Malini of “back[ing] the
wrong horse” in favouring Deepa over Sharan (43). But Malini’s extremely positive
vision of Deepa’s capacity to bring about a happy future is quickly turned on its head,
and she begins to see her as having brought about the family’s ruin. And, indeed, on the fateful day of the video, Deepa is late and fails to pick up the water (8). This power to bring ruin upon the family is explicitly linked to the inauspiciousness of the widow, in that Malini punishes her daughter in the way that a widow is punished – she cuts her hair, takes away her jewellery and makeup, and deprives her of food and water (21-22,44,47).

The rhetoric of the play, though, suggests something very interesting about the nature of the threat posed by Malini and Deepa, namely that it consists in the difference between the roles they play and what they are. Like Premchand’s Taradevi, it seems, these women ‘perform’ one thing, but society fears that they are, ontologically, something else altogether. The play begins with Malini selling a product called ‘Super Sparkler’ to her, by turns, pathetic and creepy colleague Ramesh. The powder is for cleaning jewellery, but Malini’s cheerful sales pitch makes its powers sound more existential: “The solution is reacting with silver now! It is cleaning years of dirt and oxidation” (4). Malini’s womanly ‘sparkle’ casts light in all the dark corners, scouring out the dirty and the dangerous. Ramesh confirms this image of Malini, saying “Cost accountant. Mother. Then this. Super Sparkler superwoman, I say!” (4). Malini has mastered the role of the good woman: she is bright and cheerful, a caring mother, and a good manager of money (Ramesh waxes poetic about her ledgers: “Tidy, numbers tally and everything is up-to-date” (4)). When the crisis hits, people begin to suggest that everything they have seen of her has just been one big performance, one big lie. As Kokila points out, a newspaper has reported that her “powder business” is “a front” for some sort of “unsavory” operation (42). Malini appeals to Kokila in the face of these vicious rumours with: “Kokila – you know me. You’ve known me since the kids were toddlers. You know I’m
not like that” (42). But Kokila remains silent, suggesting, perhaps, she doesn’t feel she knows Malini; she cannot know what is ‘real’ and what is ‘a front.’

This obsessive distinguishing between surface and depth, between performance and reality is even more pronounced in the rhetoric surrounding Deepa. It begins immediately. When Nirmala, the school principal, comes to tell Malini what has happened, she chides Malini, saying: “You don’t know your child all that well, do you?” (14). Once again there is the suggestion that things may not be what they appear, that Deepa might be quite different from what Malini imagined she was. But Malini refuses to believe that Deepa has actually had sex at school and begs Nirmala to take back the punishment she has meted out. She says this will ruin Deepa because “[people will] think she’s that sort of a girl. And you know she isn’t” (13). The phrasing here is key. Consistently throughout the play, people insist on talking about what Deepa has done not as an action, but as proof of an underlying state of being. It is not that Deepa has had sex, it is that she is “that sort of a girl,” or, as Nirmala says later, “a slut” (13,14). While Deepa appeared to be a brilliant, hard-working student, who was responsible and caring, she was really a ‘slut.’ Kokila encapsulates this view succinctly. When Malini tells her that Deepa “made a mistake” (i.e. she just did something she shouldn’t have done), Kokila responds ominously: “Telling a lie, adhu oru mistake. Or being rude. But this is more than a mistake” (40).

The construction of Deepa as ontologically different from the beloved daughter and promising young woman she appeared to be is furthered by frequent references to disease. In order to get time off work, Malini tells her coworkers that Deepa has
contracted measles, and this comparison between having had sex and a highly contagious disease suggests a corruption in Deepa’s very blood. Ramesh highlights this sense of corruption when he sympathizes with Malini, saying: “You must be anxious. How to get her married off if the marks don’t fade” (22). While Ramesh doesn’t know what is actually going on at this point, he is clearly suggesting that Deepa will be scarred for life—that the signs of her corruption will be visible for all the world to see. When Ramesh finds out what has actually happened, the rhetoric of disease becomes even more hysterical. He, helpfully, tells Malini:

It’s shocking. What she did, it’s not normal. Apparently, these are early indications of […] nymphomania. Really. It should be nipped in the bud. Yesterday on TV, a psychologist was saying that Indian teenagers are getting (Beat) active at a very young age. Apparently, it’s to do with their diet. It’s because they’re switching over from thayir saadam [curd rice] to pizza. (34)

In a conversation that would be truly hilarious if it weren’t so very serious, Malini responds that Deepa “eats thayir saadam every day” and Ramesh comes back with “Coffee perhaps? It’s known to have aphrodisiac properties” (34). But what is clear from this exchange is that one explanation for Deepa’s condition is a Western diet: the source of this ontological corruption is, perhaps, Western.

But as with her mother, what makes Deepa particularly threatening is her ability to perform the good girl. She is repeatedly associated, in the play, with the tools of the actress’ trade. As I mentioned above, Malini throws out Deepa’s: “lipsticks, nail polish, kohl, baubles” (21). But she is also linked to the stage itself, to the theatre, through a pun
on the word for the school exams: ‘the boards.’ Deepa, we know, has done exceptionally well on ‘the boards’ – but since this word is well-known theatrical slang for the stage, it also suggests that she has mastered the art of performance, of deceiving people before their very eyes.

The social order surrounding the family, then, in varying ways, is set up as disciplining Malini and Deepa with their gaze: they have seen through their compelling performances and exposed their dirty secrets. And, as I have suggested above, we, the audience, participate in this disciplinary gaze. We look on at the family, trapped in their apartment, and we judge them. We, too are fascinated, and as the temperature rises, we too, are excited. And, of course, we hope for a glimpse of Deepa. And yet, we don’t want to be associated with the mob outside the apartment, as Malini calls them: “All those people with bloodshot eyes and rough dirty hands” (49). Surely, we are a more respectable class of viewer!

But Malini’s brief speech at the end of the play begins the process of turning around the disciplinary gaze that has been so relentlessly focused on her and her daughter. Malini’s final words in the play are a performance that resists performativity in every way. Despite being repeatedly told to do so, she refuses to raise her voice or to look into the camera. She reads from a script, and she doesn’t move her body. While it could be argued that this is simply a capitulation to the expectation that she bear the signs of her shame and humiliation, I think this performance does something much more powerful. Both in words and actions, Malini’s performance shames her audience. Firstly while she accepts that what her daughter has done is wrong, and she takes personal responsibility
for it, she also resists the notion that what she did was anything other than a mistake. She refers to what Deepa has done as “an impulsive act” and an “indiscretion.” She refuses, in other words, to apologize for what her daughter is. These word choices, and her humble but firm suggestion at the end of her speech puts everything back into proportion: “I request all the people to kindly disperse and allow the normal passage of life” (52). These calm and firm tones, and her behaviour highlight the sensationalist hysteria of both those in the entertainment industry (like the TV hostess, Usha, whose behaviour contrasts so starkly to Malini’s in this scene), and those watching the program. It is also important to note that at this point, Malini is addressing us directly, we in the audience of the play have become identical with the audience of the TV show and can no longer comfort ourselves with our own superiority.

Usha’s tone in introducing Deepa immediately following Malini’s brief appearance, attempts to return us to the excitement of finally laying eyes on this mysterious girl. The social order has already constructed her as a performer – someone who is one thing while appearing to be another, and now we will finally get to see her perform! Usha suggests several ‘roles’ she might take on “femme fatale […] icon of feminism […] girl next door” (53). And we do, indeed, lay our eyes on a tour de force performance at the end of the play, but it isn’t Deepa’s; it is our own. The dramatic absence of Deepa at the end, which is immediately followed by the falling of the curtain and the rising of the house lights, turns our gaze once and for all back upon ourselves, the audience, the nation, the mob (all blurred into one at this point), and we find a consummate performer. We have been longing to lay our eyes on the dangerous, threatening creature at the centre of the
whirlwind, and that’s what we do, because that creature is the audience in the theatre and the mob outside the apartment.

The conservative, disciplining crowd evident in the play has constructed Deepa (and Malini) as threatening to the social order and even to the nation itself because they appear to be ‘good’ women but are really bad, (corrupt, diseased, ‘sluts,’ etc.). But what we realize when we are forced to look not at Deepa, but back at the crowd, is that the crowd itself is ‘performing’ one thing while ‘being’ another. Usha’s introduction of Deepa, the last words spoken in the play, make this abundantly clear. She says:

And now, to the highlight of the evening. We have with us a very special guest. She’s very young, only fifteen years old, but already she’s stirred the imagination of an entire nation. Is she a femme fatale or is she the next icon of feminism? Or is she simply the girl next door? Who is she? And why did she do what she did? Let’s find out. Please welcome, Deepa Harridas, India’s most-watched teenager… (53)

While, throughout the play, everyone who hears about what Deepa has done reacts with shock and outrage, and the entire crowd ‘performs’ moral indignation that a girl so young could do such a thing, Usha’s final words in the play, reveal the ‘reality’ behind this performance: frank sexual excitement sparked by viewing what is essentially child pornography. Usha refers to Deepa as “India’s most-watched teenager,” and when we remember that what everyone has watched is a video of her having sex, the chilling reality behind this flippant introduction becomes evident. A similarly dark note is struck with Usha’s statement that she has “stirred the imagination of an entire nation”—yes
indeed, she has stirred the imagination of an entire nation—the fantasist, pedophilic, sexual imagination of a nation. The threatening and dangerous creature at the centre of the hubbub, in other words, is ultimately the rank hypocrisy of a social order that is outraged by female sexuality while also being dangerously obsessed with it.

I have argued, in this final chapter, that nationalist social reformers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries located a profound ambiguity in the bodies, and in the performances of actors, but especially actresses. These actresses were both auspicious and inauspicious at one and the same time and so were their performances. In the more recent plays that I have examined here, Dattani and Chandrasekhar take up this ambiguity, this in/auspiciousness associated with performance and rework it for their own, quite different, purposes. For Dattani, I argue, the tense balance of oneness and twoness, the self and the other, character and actor that inheres in the body of the performer, is at the heart of all creativity and therefore all auspiciousness; it is just such a tenuous dynamic that makes all art possible, and indeed that defines positive, life-affirming modes of social life. In this sense this tense balance, this ‘conjoined-ness,’ offers an alternative vision of a national community as well. For Chandrasekhar, on the other hand, the profound ambiguity of performance takes on a much darker meaning. For her it comes to define the hypocrisy at the very heart of middle-class patriarchal social life. Crucially, though, both playwrights insist that in/auspiciousness does not inhere in the bodies of certain people, but rather in social systems themselves. Both authors characterize patriarchal social structures as deeply inauspicious—bringing about violence, destruction, even death.
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