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Speaking Voices in Postcolonial Indian Novels from Orientalism to Outsourcing

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ABSTRACT

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said identified how the Westerner “spoke for” and represented the silent Orient. Today with the burgeoning call-center business with India, it seems that the West now wants the Orient to speak for it. But is the voice that Western business requires in India a truly Indian voice? Or is it a manipulation which is a new form of the silencing of the Indian voice? This dissertation identifies how several Postcolonial Indian writers challenge the silence of Orientalism and the power issues of the West through various “speaking voices” of narratives representative of Indian life. Using Julie Kristeva’s abjection theory as a lens, this dissertation reveals Arundhati Roy as “speaking abjection” in *The God of Small Things*. Even Roy’s novelistic setting suffers abjection through neocolonialism. Salman Rushdie’s narrative method of magic realism allows “speaking trauma” as his character Saleem in *Midnight’s Children* suffers the traumas
of Partition and Emergency as an allegorical representation of India. Using magic realism
Saleem is able to speak the unspeakable. Other Indian voices, Bapsi Sidhwa, Khushwant Singh,
and Rohinton Mistry “speak history” as their novels carry the weight of conveying an often-
absent official history of Partition and the Emergency, history verified by Partition survivor in-
terviews. In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry uses an anthrozoological theme in portraying issues of
power over innocence. Recognizing the choices and negotiations of immigrant life through the
coining of the word *(dis)assimilation*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s writings are analyzed in terms of a
“speaking voice” of (dis)assimilation for Indian immigrants in the United States, while Zadie
Smith’s *White Teeth* “speaks (dis)assimilation” as a voice of multiple ethnicites negotiating im-
migrant life in the United Kingdom. Together these various “speaking voices” show the power of
Indian writers in challenging the silence of Orientalism through narrative.

INDEX WORDS: Postcolonial, Orientalism, Narrative, Abjection, Ecocriticism, Trauma, Magic
Realism, Carnivalesque, History, Anthrozoology, (Dis)assimilation, Assimilation, Edward Said,
Arundhati Roy, Julia Kristeva, Salman Rushdie, Robinton Mistry, Kushwant Singh, Jhumpa La-
hiri, Zadie Smith
SPEAKING VOICES IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN NOVELS FROM ORIENTALISM TO OUTSOURCING

by

BARBARA J. GARDNER

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Georgia State University

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, my husband Frank, my children and their spouses, and all my grandchildren for their patience, support, and understanding over the twenty-three years of my educational pursuits which started out to be one class a semester “just for fun.” It turned out to be so much more, and I certainly could not have done it without their support.
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my work schedule at your law firm around each semester’s class schedule both during my undergraduate as well as graduate studies.

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Introduction

A foundational text in the discussion of postcoloniality is Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Said identifies how the western world “spoke” for and represented the Orient, while the Orient was kept silent to maintain and allow this position of power for the westerner. In Said’s *Orientalism*, he gives a brief history of these phenomena he identifies and describes. He says,

> [t]aking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.

(21)

An important point of Said’s concept of Orientalism is that in the western literature written about the Orient, the west “spoke for” the Orient, thus controlling/containing by negating the Orient’s own voice. He says of Flaubert’s Egyptian courtesan that “she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her” (6). The courtesan was silent. Because of the ethnocentricism of Europeans, “Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined”(207), as “silent shadows to be animated by the Orientalist” (208). “The Orient” was a consistent, static entity of study. Within a quotation by Gertrude Bell (“in all the centuries the Arab has bought no wisdom from experience”), Said recognizes denegation with the use of “the Arab” “such as to wipe out any traces of individual Arabs with narratable life histo-
ries” (229). Instead, according to Said, what was absent in contemporary Western culture was “the Orient as a genuinely felt and experienced force” (208).

Against this static view of the Orient, Said recognizes the pressure of narrative: “Narrative asserts the power of men to be born, develop, and die, the tendency of institutions and actualities to change” (240). Said identifies the “complex dynamics of human life” as what he calls “history as narrative.” (247). Speaking of literature, Said says,

one of the striking aspects of the new American social-science attention to the Orient is its singular avoidance of literature. [. . .] What seem [sic] to matter far more to the regional expert are “facts,” of which a literary text is perhaps a disturber. The net effect of this remarkable omission . . . is to keep the region and its people conceptually emasculated, reduced to “attitudes,” “trends,” statistics; in short, dehumanized. Since an Arab poet or novelist [. . .] writes of his experiences, of his values, of his humanity [. . .], he effectively disrupts the various patterns [. . .] by which the Orient is represented. A literary text speaks more or less directly of a living reality. (291)

Said ends his study of Orientalism by saying “Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience” (328) and that he desires to see a challenge to the worldwide hegemony of Orientalism with his book as a contribution to this challenge.

Said assuredly proves his thesis, but today there is a very ironic situation in terms of the country of India and the thesis of Said’s book. Today, instead of desiring silence on the part of the Orient, the western world seems to be rushing to the doors of the Orient—to India in particular—to have the Orient now speak for them. Today, in the United States, when you call about a problem with some business account, instead of speaking to someone in the United States, you
will most likely be speaking to someone in any number of eastern (Oriental) call-centers. According to a 2006 CNN news report, 85% of all outsourcing contracts are with India (Bhatnager). Also in 2006 Reuters published results of a survey that indicted that New Delhi is the “most attractive city in the world” for outsourcing. The next six slots were also filled by Indian cities—Bangalore, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Pune, Chennai, and Kolkata. So, when “Megan” answers your call from the United States about a credit card bill, you very likely could be speaking to “Nalini” in Pune.

Also, in the publishing business, after the phenomenal success of Arundhati Roy’s first novel The God of Small Things (and her phenomenal million-dollar advance), publishers “descended on India” in what William Dalrymple writing in The Observer called “a major publishing feeding-frenzy” seeking new Indian authors. One of the reasons for this “feeding-frenzy” is that today Indian novels seem to dominate bestseller lists, and, in particular, the esteemed Man Booker Prize list. (Roy won the award in 1997.) The prize was awarded to Salman Rushdie in 1981 for Midnight’s Children, which in 1993 was designated the “Booker of Bookers” as the best novel to win in the first twenty-five years of the award and then “The Best of the Booker” in 2008 for the best novel to win in the forty-year history of the award. Several Indian writers have been on the short-list of potential winners, and in 2006 Karim Desai, the daughter of Anita Desai, an Indian writer who previously had two of her own books on the short list for the Booker Prize, won the esteemed award. The most recent Indian winner (2008) was Aravind Adiga for his novel The White Tiger.

Indian movies also seem to garner strong interest to the extent that the Indian-written, India-filmed Slumdog Millionaire was nominated for ten academy awards in 2009 and won eight,

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1 Desai’s winning text is her second novel, The Inheritance of Loss.
2 In Custody (1984) and Fasting, Feasting (1999)
the most for any movie of 2008, including the prestigious award for Best Picture of the year. Other Indian-made movies also have won great viewer coverage. Mark Lorenzen, in his study of “Bollywood,” made up of film and media companies in Mumbai, India, writes, “Producing roughly 1100 films annually, double that produced by USA, India is the world’s largest film producer. Bollywood, with an estimated 3.6 billion tickets sold globally in 2001 (compared to Hollywood’s 2.6 billion), is arguably one of the world’s most prolific cultural clusters” (Introduction).

Based on this proliferation of Indian outsourcing call centers and the success of Indian novels and movies, it seems that, instead of silence, the West is now expecting something quite different from the East. Instead of silence, the West now desires speaking. But what does this speaking really mean? Does this speaking carry the same power that Said identifies as the westerner’s when he spoke for the Orient? Are the hearers of these voices hearing truth and an honest portrayal of the Indian voice? Within this speaking, is there any residual of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’O calls the “colonization of the mind”? Peter Morey says that “in relation to our central concern with narrative and power, [...] the issue once again becomes one of narrative as resistance” (162) This dissertation looks to today’s Indian texts that do counter Orientalism through narrative. Where Orientalism failed to identify with human experience by silencing the Oriental, the many Indian texts today represent personal narratives, challenges to the hegemony of Orientalism, thus giving “voice” to human experiences of Indian people.

This dissertation will challenge the silence of Orientalism with the identification of various ways of speaking within contemporary Indian novels. I will identify four types of “speaking voices”: abjection, magic realism, (dis)assimilation, and, since much of postcolonial writing deals with absences and a loss of voice causing a loss of history for the colonized, of special im-
importance is the recovery of lost history through a voice “speaking history.” Although I will be concentrating on one primary type of speaking within each chapter and the primary novel(s) within that chapter, it must be understood that these various ways of speaking will cross over into other chapters/novels. For example, although the primary discussion of Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* will be an identification of Roy “speaking” abjection, it is obvious that Roy also uses magic realism when the child Sophie Mol does a cartwheel in her coffin (8).

Said ends his study of Orientalism by saying “Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience” (328). This dissertation looks to today’s Indian texts as narratives resisting the silence of Orientalism. Where Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, the many Indian texts today represent personal narratives, challenges to the hegemony of Orientalism, thus giving “voice” to human experiences of the Indian people, “speaking voices” of abjection, trauma, history, and (dis)assimilation.
Works Cited


Chapter One: Speaking Abjection: Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

In Edward Said’s foundational text on ethnicity perspectives, he identifies the role of the subaltern within Orientalist texts as that of a static, silent object acted upon by the dominant Westerner and acknowledges the need of texts to resist this image by giving voice where there previously was silence. Said writes “Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience” (328), but, confronting this failure, “[n]arrative asserts the power of men to be born, develop, and die, the tendency of institutions and actualities to change” (240). Peter Morey agrees with this analysis, writing that “in relation to our central concern with narrative and power, […] the issue once again becomes one of narrative as resistance” (162).

Resisting the static nature of the Orientalist character, narrative portrays the fluidity of changing circumstances and emotions of characters.

Julie Mullaney recognizes this use of narrative power as an act of intervention in Arundhati Roy’s writings on the female Indian pandit Phoolan Devi. Mullaney says that Roy’s writings “centered around the politics of authenticity, agency, authority, and responsibility in the representation of the ‘real’ life experiences and struggles of an individual” (9). She sees similar ideas in Roy’s fictional work. According to Mullaney, Roy’s writing in *The God of Small Things* “takes the critique [of static third-world women] to a new level” (11), delineating “not their false homogeneity […] but the range of options and choices, whether complicit, resistant—or both—to the dominant order which structures each of their individual life stories and their relation to the larger tessellations, familial, and cultural histories” (11). Roy, within her novel, writes of these options in life stories, giving voice to the common people in a world looking at Bigger Is—

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3 *Subaltern* is a term used to refer to the suppressed or silenced lower class. For a greater discussion of the implications of the term within post-colonial texts, see Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
sues (using Roy’s capital letters as a method of emphasis). Instead of emphasizing the importance of Bigger Issues, with her use of the word God “of” the “Small Things,” she suggests that “Small Things” are important in the grand scheme of individual lives, important enough to have their own god. These “small things,” these actions and emotions of daily life, make up the narratives of resistance to hegemonic Orientalist texts.

An interesting connection between Said’s indictment of Orientalist texts producing silent characters is a suggestion that Roy’s character Velutha, the God of Small Things, alludes to another character in an earlier Anglo-Indian text, E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India. Unlike a strictly Orientalist writer asserting a western dominance, Forster, because of his friendship with Indians, was more interested in giving voice to his Indian characters. (He starts his Howards End with the admonition to “Only connect …”, suggesting his belief in the importance of relationships.) Forster’s interest in the Indian voice is evidenced in A Passage to India, as Forster gives Dr. Aziz, a Moslem doctor and main character, his own voice and life story. Readers also learn about some of the idiosyncrasies of Dr. Godbole. But, although Forster does give voice to many Indian characters, there is one who remains silent, who suffers the lack of voice, but takes on the bearing of a god. In Forster’s novel there is a “God of Small Things” both literally and figuratively presiding over a world of Bigger Things. In the court room where issues of power and race and gender (the Big Things) are played out in the guise of Aziz’s trial on the charge of attacking Adela in the Marabar Caves, Mr. Das acts as judge in the court room, but above him and supposedly unmoved by these big issues is the punkah wallah:

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4 See P. N. Furbank’s E.M. Forster: A Life.
5 According to Hobson-Jobson, a punkah in Anglo-Indian colloquial language is a large fixed and swinging fan, formed of cloth stretched on a rectangular frame and suspended from the ceiling, which is used to agitate the air in hot weather. Wallah’s usual employment as affix to a substantive makes it frequently denote “agent, doer, keeper, man, inhabitant, master, lord, possessor, owner.” (Definition under “Competition-Wallah”
the first person Adela noticed in [the court] was the humblest of all who were present, a person who had no bearing officially upon the trial; the man who pulled the punkah. Almost naked, and splendidly formed, he sat on a raised platform near the back [. . .] and he seemed to control the proceedings. He had the strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race nears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god—not many, but one here and there, to prove to society how little its categories impress her. [. . .] Pulling the rope towards him, relaxing it rhythmically, sending swirls of air over others, receiving none himself, he seemed apart from human destinies, a male fate, a winnower of souls. (217)

Although the punkah wallah has no voice, he is referred to as a god and holds an unacknowledged power within the scene, seeming “to control the proceedings.” Even as a silent subaltern only briefly mentioned, his actions of pulling the punkah are a necessity that allow the trial to go on. He is the one to provide the necessary comfort for the English in the courtroom. In the context of his job in the courtroom, the small thing becomes a Big Thing. But this god is silent, without a personal narrative, held in thrall to the social order of the time. Readers are not given the opportunity to learn beyond this silence and his description which emphasizes the need of narrative to go beyond the Orientalist silence. Perhaps Forster’s God of Small Things attains a voice and a life narrative and becomes a site of resistance to Orientalist ideas through Arundhati Roy’s novel.

An Untouchable deemed a God of Small Things in Roy’s novel is Velutha. Forster’s description of the “splendidly formed” punkah wallah/god could easily fit Velutha: Ammu “saw
the ridges of muscle on Velutha’s stomach grow taut and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate. She wondered at how his body had changed—so quietly, from a flat-muscled boy’s body into a man’s body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer’s body. A swimmer-carpenter’s body. Polished with a high-wax body polish” (167). Both the punkah wallah and Velutha are Untouchable but identified as physically god-like. Within Roy’s text this symbolic silent punkah god of Forster’s earlier Orientalist text is now given a voice and has a life narrative resisting the silence of the punkah wallah. In Roy’s novel, readers know about his laterite home on the river, his skill with tools, his mother’s death, and his brother’s accident. Velutha plays games with the children, going along with their made-up names, joining in their child-like charades (181).

Unfortunately, although Roy’s Velutha joins the children in play, most (all?) of Roy’s novel is far from fun and games. There is narrative resisting the stasis of an Orientalist text, a postcolonial revision of a western canonical tradition, stories of individual lives, but, when readers get to the end of Roy’s novel, they are ultimately left with a sad, depressing narrative of failed human beings. In Roy’s novel, there are no “happily ever afters” for the characters, the culture, or even for the environment. An explanation for this negativity is suggested in Roy’s comments in her political writings. (Since her phenomenal success with *The God of Small Things*, she has limited her writing to political issues and uses her notoriety as a soapbox to speak for Indian people.) Roy’s feelings of negativity regarding India itself are suggested in her comment in *Power Politics*:

It’s as though the people of India have been rounded up and loaded onto two convoys of trucks (a huge big one and a tiny little one) that have set off resolutely in opposite directions. The tiny convoy is on its way to a glittering destination
somewhere near the top of the world. The other convoy just melts into the darkness and disappears. (3)

This quotation indicates that although Roy sees success for an elite few of the Indian population, she sees a very pessimistic and powerless outlook for the majority of people of India, an outlook reflected in *The God of Small Things*. Roy, who, unlike so many other successful Indian writers, has chosen to stay in India, seems to be taking her pessimistic outlook for India and writing her characters into it, thus identifying them as “abject.”

Julia Kristeva’s abjection theory, as outlined in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, is useful in elucidating the pessimism evident in Roy’s novel. Kristeva’s theory regards identity formation (or failure) within a symbolic order as “the dependence and articulation of the speaking subject in the order of language” (67). Kristeva identifies the social symbolic system as allowing “the effects and especially the benefits that accrue to the speaking subject from a precise symbolic organization,” which then roots the symbolic system “within the only concrete universality that defines the speaking being—the signifying process” (67). Dino Felluga clarifies the “symbolic order” as part of Lacanian language theory, that “[o]nce a child enters into language and accepts the rules and dictates of society, it is able to deal with others.” Thus, to successfully enter a symbolic system means to develop a psychological identity that fits within a certain society. In Roy’s novel, Ammu and her children Estha and Rahel do not develop the necessary psychological identity to successfully enter the symbolic system of Ayemenem or even of their own family. Their short-coming is evidenced by Baby Kochamma’s reference to the children as “Half-Hindu hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry” (45). They do not even have the basic identity marker of a surname. Estha notes that their naming has been

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“postponed for the Time Being, while Ammu chose between her husband’s name and her fa-
thier’s” (150). Mullaney writes that the children are “in effect unclaimed (except by their mother) and nameless. One’s name is an index of one’s identity and the instability of naming [. . .] indi-
cates that there are certain fissures or gaps in the twins’ identity” (31). According to Kristeva, abjection is caused by what disturbs the signifying process, “what disturbs identity, system, or-
der. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). The children suffer abjection because of a lack within the signifying process, the lack of a named, acceptable, and accepting father to speak for them. Because they have “no Locusts Stand I” (56), (no legal standing), no part in the system, they are the feared, those who will disturb, those who are abject and must be rejected in order to maintain the order of the fragile system. In The God of Small Things, Roy uses her literary voice to “speak abjection,” showing the powerlessness of being outside the dominant sym-
-bolic order.

Abjection as a theme of the novel is evident within Roy’s language. Besides the story of Ammu, Estha, and Rahel’s abjection, embedded in the complicated narrative of The God of Small Things, are suggestions of India’s abjection as a result of colonialism and continuing neo-
colonialism, what Ngũgi wa Thiong’o calls “post-independence betrayal of hope” (21). In Roy’s language and the intricate movement of the text, there are continual gaps within language. As the story wanders back and forth through various generations and narratives (the chapters alternate between past and present tense), language repeatedly seems to confront something too awful for words. Early in the novel, speaking of Rahel’s personal despair in relation to the bigger issues of India, the narrator says,

personal despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, cir-
cling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation. That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God [the personal despair] (cozy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity. Inured by the confirmation of his own inconsequence, he became resilient and truly indifferent. Nothing mattered much. Nothing much mattered. And the less it mattered, the less it mattered. (20).

Roy’s usage of such strong words as ridiculous, insane, unfeasible suggests a country out of control. The description moves to the narrator’s sense of personal abjection within the bigger issues of Indian life to an abjection that can only be handled with cauterization to numb feelings. The narrator attempts to explain Rahel’s fearful situation but does so with ambiguous language: “Worse Things had happened. In the country that she came from, poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace, Worse Things kept happening” (20). Roy writes, “Worse Things [with capital letters] had happened” and “Worse Things kept happening,” but then there is a gap. Instead of discussing the specific “Worse Things,” perhaps some sad truths of a colonial or post-colonial society, Roy completely switches the tone of the text: “So Small God laughed a hollow laugh, and skipped away cheerfully” (20), suggesting the unspeakableness or madness of the “Worse Things.”7 Numerous gaps in language suggest Roy’s avoidance of something fearful. According to Kristeva’s theory of abjection, fear is the dominant/operative word. Making a connection between language and phobia, Kristeva claims that “phobia does not disappear but slides beneath language” and “any practice of speech, inasmuch as it involves writing, is a language of fear” (38). Within Roy’s writing, as she moves the narrative backwards and forwards both in the

7 In Power Politics Roy lists some of the more fearful “regular diet” of Indian citizens: caste massacres, nuclear tests, mosque breakings, church burnings, bonded labor, female infanticide, wife burnings, etc. (2)
text and in the consciousness of her characters, there seems to be an attempt to escape fear by sublimating abjection, to slide it beneath these language gaps.

In Roy’s novel, *fear* as the operative word causes a domino effect of abjection for her characters. The terror that starts this domino effect stems from Ammu’s father Papachi’s loss of credit for his identification of a new species of moth—the moth that hovers over the entire novel—constantly opening and closing its wings—with the constant movement suggesting ongoing tension. This moth “was held responsible for his black moods and sudden bouts of temper. Its pernicious ghost [. . .] haunted every house that he ever lived in. It tormented him and his children and his children’s children” (48). The ever-present moth hovering over Roy’s story is the symbol of Papachi’s “colonization of the mind.” Ngũgĩ identifies colonization of the mind as a “cultural bomb” the effect of which “annihilate[s] a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to [. . .] identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves” (3). Pappachi identifies with the British, with the former Colonial organization, as his identity under the British was that of “Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute” (47). He sees his only success in life tied to the British; without the British, he has lost his place in the symbolic order and feels powerless except in his home where he can beat his wife and daughter. Chacko explains to the children that Pappachi, their grandfather, was

An incurable British CCP, which was short for *chhi-chhi poach* and in Hindi meant shit-wiper. Chacko said that the correct word for people like Pappachi was *Anglophile*. [. . .] Chacko told the twins that, though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were a *family* of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong di-
rection, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. (50-51)

Within his comment about the footprints, Chacko puts Anglophiles on the same level as Untouchables because it was Untouchables who “were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints” (71). The sweeping away of footprints suggests a wiping away of history. England’s colonization pushed all Indians beyond the boundary of the history they could have created for themselves as an independent country. This lack of their own independent history has made Indians abject within their own minds. Anglophiles like Pappachi are unable to break free of their part in the history of English domination. Chacko tells the twins that “our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and redreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves” (52). This comment recalls Ngũgĩ’s identification of colonization of the mind—the desire to “identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves” (3).

Chacko’s statement suggests an inevitable and continual abjection of the spirit for Indian people as a result of colonization. For Pappachi his moth symbolizes this constantly working residual of colonialism creating a state of abjection as it is always there opening and folding its wings, reminding him of his loss. From this initial loss of Pappachi’s and his resultant anger can be traced the on-going, spiraling abjection subsequently suffered by Ammu, the twins, Velutha, and other characters. His anger over his loss of identity is visited upon his family members, pushing each toward his own fears of unacceptability/abjection.

The theme of borders and defiance of borders as suggestive of the means of abjection is introduced early in *The God of Small Things*: “Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons” (5). The “border” that Ammu
crosses that restricts her and her children from the symbolic order is her marriage outside her community compounded by a subsequent divorce. Ammu is from a Syrian Christian family and marries a Hindu Bengali. She marries outside acceptable society to escape Pappachi’s anger and a forced spinsterhood in Ayemenem because of the lack of a dowry. Although when she married her husband she did not love him, she “thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem” (39). Unfortunately, her husband proves a drunkard who is despicable enough to be willing to save his job by allowing his employer to “look after” the attractive Ammu while he “went away” for a while (41). When Ammu, in desperation, leaves her husband and returns home with the children, their precarious position as abject within the community, as outside the boundaries of what is acceptable, is evident in the attitude of the terrorizing grandaunt, Baby Kochamma, who asserts herself as codifier of the community standards. She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter—according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage. As for a divorced daughter from a [. . .] intercommunity love marriage—Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (45)

For Baby Kochamma, Ammu’s situation is beyond acceptable limits, beyond society, beyond hopes and dreams, and eventually, as evidenced by Kochamma’s silence, even beyond words, thus beyond the speaking required to allow Ammu’s integration into the symbolic order.

This loss of speaking as a means of the shutting off of the effects and benefits of the symbolic order is evident early in the life of Ammu and her twins. As they lie in bed together, the twins’ desire for their mother is suggested:
In the blue cross-stitch darkness laced with edges of light, with cross-stitch roses on her sleepy cheek, Ammu and her twins (one on either side of her) sang softly [. . .] (209). In the afternoon silence (laced with edges of light), her children curled into the warmth of her. The smell of her. They covered their heads with her hair (210). [. . .] Between them they apportioned their mother’s seven silver stretch marks. Then Rahel put her mouth on Ammu’s stomach and sucked at it, pulling the soft flesh back to admire the shining oval of spit and the faint red imprint of her teeth on her mother’s skin. (211)

Rahel and Esthappen (Estha), “two-egg” twins, surrounded by their mother, within her hair, within her smell, attempt to be incorporated into her body, to be taken back to the security of their womb experience—to a time of pre-subject existence. But during this idyllic, dreamlike time for the children and their mother, the lack of the “word of the father” as representative of the symbolic system interrupts. Rahel asks about their father: “D’you think he may have lost our address?” (211). Just as the question forces an end to conversation, because of this permanent and unanswered “interruption” of the question of a father, Ammu and her children are never able to integrate into the symbolic system of India of 1969. Because of this question, the children’s womb-like safety is ended, as they are expelled to the borders of societal acceptance. Writing about the role of endogamy\(^8\) in India, Kristeva states that

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\text{[t]he endogamic principle inherent in caste system amounts [. . .] to having the individual marry within his group, or rather to his being prohibited from marrying outside of it. Endogamy, in Indian castes, implies in addition a specific filiation: the passing on of membership in the group by \textit{both parents at the same time}.}
\]

\(^8\) Endogamy: marriage within a specific tribe or similar social unit
result of such a regulation is in fact a balancing, symbolic and real, of the role of both sexes within that socio-symbolic unit constituted by caste. (79)

With Ammu’s marriage outside the boundaries of an acceptable endogamic marriage, Estha and Rahel are recognized as “off balance,” as pollution outside the hierarchic caste system. Without a named father, they disturb the signifying process and thus, according to Kristeva, are abject (4).

Without a father, the children’s abjection is evident in their subsequent lack of a signifying name: “For the Time Being they had no surname because Ammu was considering reverting to her maiden name, though she said that choosing between her husband’s name and her father’s name didn’t give a woman much of a choice” (36-37). Without a name, they are unmarked, outside the symbolic order, and abject. In a school notebook, Estha “had rubbed out his surname with spit, and taken half the paper with it. Over the whole mess, he had written in pencil Un-known. Esthappen Unknown” (149). The author’s language suggests the intense frustration Estha feels about the situation. The action described is “rubbed out” rather than a gentler “erased.” Spit has a negative connotation as both verb and noun, referring to abjected body fluid. The words “over the whole mess” hold a double meaning with the second meaning being the “whole mess” of the family situation rather than the “whole mess” of the paper situation. But the final verdict is that Estha is “unknown.” He has no father to identify with or to be identified with to allow his integration into the symbolic system represented by the signification of naming, so he recognizes his position as non-existent, as “unknown.”

Although Ammu’s marital status leaves her and her children outside the acceptable limits of Indian society, the relationship between the young children Estha and Rahel is exceptionally inclusive. They are not identical twins but “two-egg twins,” yet mysteriously they have the feelings of “a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities” (5). As chil-
dren, they remember the other’s dreams and the taste of the other’s food. They feel, both literally and figuratively, as one (perhaps foreshadowing what is to come). As part of this oneness, in a joint effort to defy their abjection from the symbolic order, Rahel and Estha create their own special language, a reconstruction and subversion of the dominant and colonizing English language. Kristeva identifies speech as the abject’s “propitious ground for a sublimating discourse” (7). According to Kristeva, abjection’s “symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages” (45), and Estha and Rahel’s abjection is exemplified in their reconstruction of language, a form of sublimation they use to hide behind. When they read the title of the baby book that Miss Mitten, Baby Kochamma’s Australian Missionary friend, gives them, they read the title backwards: The Adventures of Susie Squirrel becomes the perverted “ehT scrutnevda fo eisuS lerriuqS” (58). But, despite their own attempts to control and use language, language as the codified symbol of all order is continuously used to remind the children of their abjection. They are punished with language: “They were made to write—In future we will not read backwards. In future we will not read backwards. A hundred times. Forwards” (58).

The proscribed use of language as the symbol of acceptance in the system also restricts their access to their Uncle Chacko. Estha and Rahel cling to their Uncle, desiring his love and unconsciously seeming to understand that he represents their only chance of a patriarchal love that would allow their fitting into the symbolic order. In spite of his often-abusive attitudes, he becomes a father figure. Each month when he receives his mail-order paper airplane kit, he takes them to the rice fields with him to fly his latest model (55). He is also the one who teaches them to swim in the river (193). But any affectionate relationship between him and the children is quickly supplanted with the arrival of his English ex-wife and their nine-year-old half-English daughter Sophie Mol. For Estha and Rahel, Sophie Mol’s visit becomes a form of a revisitation
of English colonialism in their lives. The Anglophile Baby Kochamma orders that, for what the children call “What Will Sophie Mol Think? Week,” they must write lines proclaiming “I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English,” and they have to be careful with their pronunciation—“Prer NUN sea ayshun” (36). Language again becomes abjection’s accomplice to remind the children of their marginalized position within the Anglophile household.

This use of the English language to marginalize reflects back to Macaulay’s Minute of 1835, when the East India Company decided that it was advantageous to create within India “a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern—a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect” (qted in Kachru 22). With the passage of Macaulay’s Minute, the emphasis on the use of English in India changed from teaching the general Indian population to creating a group of educated Indians to carry out the mercantile trade of the powerful East India Company. With the restriction of English to a specific class of Indians, the English established a zone of power for themselves within the population. The only way for Indians to even attempt to enter this zone was through taking on a pseudo-English identity (as Pappachi does), thus creating ambivalence within Indian self-identity. Along with the assumed prestige of the English language, Macaulay’s remarks, according to R. K. Agnihotri and A. L. Khanna, proved that “Indian languages and people were perceived as degenerate” (23).

Utilizing this attitude of English language superiority, the English then devised the “Infiltration Method” of education in India. Instead of honoring Indian literature as part of Indian identity and cultural heritage, the English used English literature as the model for Indian education (long before English literature was even a subject of study in England) (Schwarz 568). According to Henry Schwarz, the East India company “devised a highly literary curriculum reflect-
ing the notion of the day that imaginative literature embodied the deep truths of moral and rational philosophy in practical form” and then, “through this soft route to regulation, literature disposed its reader toward a correct, controlled discipline of rules that seemed voluntary even though it was elaborately learned” (569). Evidence of the residual of the Infiltration Method permeates the narrative of *The God of Small Things*. Ammu reads to Rahel and Estha from Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (57) and Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* (59). Baby Kochamma “who had been put in charge of their formal education” reads to them *The Tempest* in Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* (57). The children constantly repeat lines from the texts, and the ultimate infiltration of English literary texts is evidenced in that Ammu “used Kipling to love her children before putting them to bed: *We be of one blood, thou and I. Her goodnight kiss*” (155).

Ammu tried to love her children as she should, tried to do the right thing based on what she had been taught, but the English language does not lead to an inclusiveness of relationship for her children. Instead of the supposed value of the English language and literature as conveying all that was correct and moral, for Ammu and her children, it represents a failure in identity formation. The English language, instead of giving power and prestige, works as a mechanism to separate them from their Uncle Chacko since they don’t have the “proper” English “Prer Nun sea ayshun” (among other things) that Sophie Mol has, and thus they fear abjection from the familial relationship represented by the patriarchal head of the family.

Rahel fears more than the loss of Chacko’s love with Sophie Mol’s arrival. She asks Chacko, “is it *Necessary* that people HAVE to love their own children Most in the World? [. . .] [J]ust for *example*, is it possible that Ammu can love Sophie Mol more than me and Estha?” (112). Rahel is afraid of the loss of her mother’s love with the arrival of the special child. This would put her in danger, as abject “ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the
thinkable” (Kristeva 1). Sophie Mol’s arrival and the prescribed necessary use of the English language come to symbolize the fear that is abjection—the fear of Chacko’s and Ammu’s love being colonized away from the children.

Building on this fear of displacement is Estha’s even greater fear of loss caused by what happens at the bizarre conjunction of The Sound of Music and the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man at the Abhilash Talkies. While everyone else is watching the clean white Von Trapp children who are “like a packet of Peppermints” (100), Estha is in the lobby where the Lemondrink Man says to him, “Now if you’ll kindly hold this for me” as he hands him his penis. As Estha sips his drink, the Lemondrink Man “moved Estha’s hand up and down. First slowly. Then fastly. [. . .] The gristy-bristly face contorted, and Estha’s hand was wet and hot and sticky. It had egg white on it. White egg white” (99). The abjected body fluids of the Lemondrink Man now become part of Estha: “He held his sticky Other Hand away from his body. It wasn’t supposed to touch anything” (100). Estha recognizes the defilement brought by the abjected body fluid, defilement which is now part of him. The Von Trapp children are so clean, and he has a sticky hand. Ironically, not only is this supposedly “happy-together family time” his greatest identification of self as abject, it is also the time and place that Ammu makes the important connection between love and language. Not knowing (never knowing) what Estha has just experienced with the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, Ammu’s own identification as abject is obvious when Rahel makes a flippant remark about the Man. To Ammu’s “He doesn’t look it, but he was surprisingly sweet with Estha,” Rahel says, “So why don’t you marry him then?” The narrator says, “Time stopped on the red staircase” (106). Time stops for Ammu as the subject of marriage brings back the reality of her own marriage, which resulted in her own personal abjection, and as what she recognizes as the end of her own life. But Rahel and Estha are forced to suffer their own abjection as
Ammu suffers hers. Pappachi’s abjection and subsequent anger brought Ammu to her own state of abjection, and now it is carried down to her children. Ammu asks Rahel, “do you realize what you have done? [. . .] D’you know what happens when you hurt people?” (106-107). Ammu connects language to love: “When you hurt people, they begin to love you less.” Ammu has told Rahel (and Estha) that their own words, their language, a part of them, can divide them from those they love. Their own words have made them abject.

Ammu tells them that they can cause people to love them less by their wrong use of language, but Estha has bigger worries: “He knew that if Ammu found out about what he had done with the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, she’d love him less as well. Very much less” (108). Kristeva says that abjection “interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things” (4). Abjection hideously interferes with Estha’s childhood. Even worse than the defilement of the egg white is Estha’s continuing fear of the Lemondrink Man. In casual conversation with Ammu, the Lemondrink Man says, “My wife’s people are Ayemenem people. I know where your factory is. Paradise Pickles, isn’t it? He told me. Your Mon” (104). Again language in the form of Ammu’s friendly words betrays Estha and brings fear. Kristeva identifies “phobia as [an] abortive metaphor of want” (35). The Lemondrink Man becomes the phobic object, which, according to Kristeva’s theory, “calls attention to a drive economy in want of an object—that conglomerate of fear, deprivation, and nameless frustration, which [. . .] belongs to the unnamable” (35). The particular phobia “becomes a hieroglyph that condenses all fears, from unnamable to namable” (34). In Estha’s mind the deprivation of a father, the loss of Ammu’s love, and the various other lacks, his unnamable fears, are all brought together in the form of the namable fear—the Lemondrink Man.
Roy uses great poetic imagery to illustrate the grossness of Estha’s feelings of self at this point of the narrative. When the family arrives home from the airport to the “Welcome Home, Our Sophie Mol Play,” everyone else happily attends, but Estha retreats to the pickle factory with his private confusion and fear. The author catalogues all the pickles and supplies he passes as he goes deeper and deeper into the depths of the factory and, hopefully, farther and farther away from the Lemondrink Man who would always exist somewhere outside: “The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man could walk in any minute. Catch a Cochin-Kottayam bus and be there. And Ammu would offer him a cup of tea. Or Pineapple Squash perhaps. With Ice. Yellow in a glass” (185). Estha escapes deep into the factory to the illegal banana jam, illegal because, like Estha, it too defied borders of acceptability, was “neither jam nor jelly” (30):

> With the long iron stirrer, Estha stirred the thick, fresh jam.

> The dying froth made dying frothly shapes.

> A crow with a crushed wing.

> A clenched chicken’s claw.

> A Nowl (not Ousa) mired in sickly jam.

> A sadly swirl.

> And nobody to help. (185)

The author’s death imagery and words, “a sadly swirl” of death, pain, and loneliness, ending with a cry of “And nobody to help,” suggest that Estha sees himself mixed in with all the images of brokenness in the dying froth, the refuse of the pickling process, and as alone and beyond help, “as radically separate, loathsome” in society, as abject (Kristeva 2). According to Kristeva, “abjection acknowledges [the subject] to be in perpetual danger” (9), and, for Estha, danger is named as the Lemondrink Man.
As Estha considers his own fears, his mother Ammu goes beyond the “Unsafe Edge” (44) of her own fears of loss, compounding abjection upon abjection: “It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day” (44). Ammu initially became the abject of her community by being a divorced woman from an intercommunity marriage, but then she pushes herself and her children farther out beyond acceptable limits through her adulterous affair with Velutha, the Paravan, an Untouchable. Ammu’s father Pappachi, a codifier of “proper” behavior and a dispenser of great fear, had never even allowed Paravans in the house:

They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. […] Mamachi [Ammu’s mother] told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint. (71)

Paravans are the abject of the caste system, but not only does Ammu defile herself by walking in the footprints of an abjected caste Paravan, she also has a fourteen-night affair with one.

Velutha, the Untouchable, ironically, is the God of Small Things in Roy’s novel. The “small things” are his dexterity with tools, his maintenance of the Kochamma home and factory, his caring for his crippled brother, his interest in playing games with the children, all the things that are important to life on a basic level. The Big Things are the big issues of life—politics, finances, community, etc.—all the things Untouchables are restricted from, those things that reside in the sphere of the Touchable world and hold the Untouchables at bay. Mullaney recognizes that within The God of Small Things, “[c]aste, and the various histories of complicity and trans-
gression that mark it as a wider system of classification and belonging, are important themes in
the novel. The unities and divisions of life in a social system regulated by caste in the face of
wider social changes and political movements are explored” (9). In spite of supposedly great
democratic changes in the light of India’s independence, Velutha and his status as Untouchable
are used by the family/social system to keep the small, yet obviously very important mechanisms
of the Paradise Pickle Factory and the Kochamma home running smoothly (much like Forster’s
punkah wallah is used by the colonial social system), but he is still caught/kept outside of be-
longing because of the continuing Paravan classification.

Ammu, too, is caught in the old ways of the caste system. She did not plan on loving Ve-
lutha. Perhaps there is a mutual recognition of each other’s position of abjection within their
shared society of the Kochamma family. Perhaps there is a mutual reaching across abjections
trying to find someone to love. First she saw the “hooked fingers and sudden smiles,” symbolic
of the important “small things” of life, between Velutha and Rahel, and then for Ammu
“[c]enturies telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was wrong-footed, caught off
guard. Sloughed off like an old snakeskin. Its marks, its scars, its wounds from old wars and the
walking-backwards days all fell away” (167-8). Ammu has felt only abjection from her family
and the community around her in the long seven years since her return. The family looks back to
history for their identity, but, in Velutha, Ammu ignores history and sees forward to love. Soon
after recognizing the immediate and mutual attraction, “[s]even years of oblivion lifted off her
and flew into the shadows on weighty, quaking wings. Like a dull, steel peahen. And on Ammu’s
Road (to Age and Death) a small, sunny meadow appeared” (319). She “walked out of her world
like a witch. To a better, happier place” (314), to Velutha and love for fourteen nights until
“[h]istory’s fiends returned to claim them. To re-wrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them
back to where they really lived. Where the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And How. And how much” (168). Roy is connecting the loneliness and abjection evident within the caste system to a dead and dried-up, unchangeable history. The image of the “small, sunny meadow” suggests love and caring as a corrective to that distortion of life, with life as it should be in the sunshine. But in the end, the history of the old ways wins out—“drag[s] them back.”

The character Vellya Paapen, Velutha’s father, illustrates the perverse enslavement to history as centuries of the family role as abject Untouchables cannot be overcome. His imagination does not allow him a glimpse of life beyond that assigned to him by the hierarchical system. When he learns of the affair between Ammu and his son, he feels compelled to reveal the truth of the illicit affair to Mammachi, Ammu’s mother. With mortgaged eye in hand, caught within the abjection of the past, he stood almost inside the “Touchable kitchen” (241)

recounting to Mamachi how much her family had done for his. Generation for generation. [. . .] How Mammachi had paid for his eye. [. . .] Then the Terror took hold of him and shook the words out of him. He told Mammachi what he had seen. The story of the little boat that crossed the river night after night, and who was it it. The story of a man and woman, standing together in the moonlight. Skin to skin. [. . .] The boat [. . .] was tethered to the tree stump next to the steep path that led through the marsh to the abandoned rubber estate. He had seen it there. Every night. Rocking on the water. Empty. Waiting for the lovers to return. For hours it waited. (242)

Vellya Paapen gets caught up in the spiraling effect of abjection. His designated place as abject creates a phobia so great that he must betray his own son and, in doing so, passes the phobia on to Mammachi.
The shocked Mammachi realizes that he is saying that the lovers, “[s]prung from his loins and hers. His son and her daughter. They had made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happen” (242). From Mammachi’s point of view, her offspring Ammu has defiled Mammachi’s own body through her lustful contact with the Paravan, has brought her own body into contact with Vellya Paapen’s. Mammachi’s anger causes her to believe that Ammu “defiled generations of breeding [. . .] and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come forever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties. They’d nudge and whisper. It was all finished now” (244). Within Ammu’s actions, Mammachi sees her own abjection beyond borders of acceptability. In fear of abjection, Mammachi is driven to attempt to save herself and the family reputation.

The symbolic order of language continues to be complicit in the abjection of Ammu and her children. After Vellya Paapen’s revelation, when Mammachi and Baby Kochamma (Ammu’s grand-aunt) lock Ammu in her room, her children ask her why she is locked in. Ammu replies, “Because of you! [. . .] If it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t be here! None of this would have happened! I wouldn’t be here! I would have been free! I should have dumped you in an orphanage the day you were born! You’re the millstones around my neck!” (239–40). Ammu has already told the children that they could cause someone to love them less. Now it seems that she does not love them or want them. She says, “Just go away! [. . .] So they had” (240). According to Mohini Khot,

[t]he image of Ammu locked up or “locked away” [. . .] represents the triumph of patriarchal power and becomes an agonizing motif of the pitiful weakness of feminine endeavour. Reminiscent of the so-called crazed woman who was locked up
in earlier literature analyzed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Ammu is reduced to a sub-human being, her human will denied. (219)

Ammu’s treatment puts her outside the border of motherhood as it cuts her off from her children both physically and psychologically, compounding their losses, their abjection. And it is again language that serves as the method of betrayal.

Within Roy’s novel, as characters develop their various interconnecting fears, the pressure builds. Because of Estha’s fear of the Lemondrink Man, the children’s place of escape on the other side of the river is already arranged and equipped. Weighted down with their mother’s thoughtless words and with the cousin who convinces them that it is “essential that she go along” (276), they drag their little boat out of hiding and get in, not knowing that “they were in the wrong lane on a silent highway full of muffled traffic” that causes the boat to tip, spilling out the children. Chacko has taught Estha and Rahel how to swim, but Sophie Mol does not return their calls. There is only silence and

On Rahel’s heart Pappachi’s moth snapped open its somber wings.

Out.

In.

And lifted its legs.

Up.

Down. (277)

In the novel, due to Pappachi’s past violence towards the women of his family, the recurring image of his moth is the family symbol, the hieroglyph, of all the fears that bring abjection. And with Sophie Mol’s death, the moth re-asserts fear with its presence.
Just as the children attempt to seek their escape from abjection over the river, it is also the site of escape for Ammu and Velutha as they meet on the Verandah of the History House until the final destruction/annihilation of “the Terror.” Divya Anand discusses the significance of crossing the river:

The river serves as a borderline of water, segregating two different social worlds as well as connecting both the touchable and untouchable worlds. [. . .] On one bank of the river lived the upper class, upper caste, Syrian Christian family with its hypocrisies and pretences in the garb of age-old values and traditions. The other side earthed the “cultural other” to this world—the untouchable world of caste Christians—low caste, low class Paravans ensconced in the lap of nature [. . .].

The act of crossing the river therefore has multiple and significant connotations. [. . .] For Ammu it meant transcending the world of patriarchal norms to a world unfettered by them and giving free play to basic physical and emotional instincts. To Velutha, it meant the flouting of class and caste hierarchies, challenging the feudal order and thereby overturning all social and cultural observances. (102)

For both Ammu and Velutha, crossing the river “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 4) of their respective worlds making them abject. According to Anand, “[i]t is Velutha’s attempt to cross the river, both metaphorically and symbolically that causes the ‘history house’ to seek retribution” (103).

Ammu and Velutha do cross the river and break the love laws, and Baby Kochamma, hearing Vellya Paapen’s words, “recognized at once the immense potential of the situation [. . .]. She bloomed. She saw it as God’s Way of punishing Ammu for her sins” (243). Mohini Khot, writing about the feminist voice in Roy’s novel, points out that Baby Kochamma, seeing Ammu
“as a fellow ‘Man-less woman’” should feel some caring empathy for her (217), but, instead, Baby Kochamma becomes the personification of abjection in the life of Ammu. According to Kristeva, abjection is “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you” (4). Baby Kochamma, by manipulating the truth, becomes all of this in an effort to repay Ammu for what Baby sees as her past as well as present sins. Baby Kochamma accepted her own man-less position of dependence, but Ammu would not, and now must pay for this indiscretion. Baby’s scheme is an effort to save the family reputation from the damage it would suffer if the truth of Ammu’s part in the affair were known, to save them the loss of generations of respect.

At this point in the narrative, abjection in the form of Ammu and her children threatens the entire family and community, and the three must be driven away to purify the system and save the family reputation. The only method open to Mammachi and Baby Kochamma is the use of the troubling Untouchable as a scapegoat. Because Velutha goes so far beyond what the symbolic order allows and because, as Untouchable, he is himself already beyond the limits of acceptable society, to protect the fragile symbolic order, he is the one chosen to suffer the utmost of abjection—death. They devise the lie that, instead of mutually consensual sex, the affair was rape. He is tracked down like an animal, found beyond the river, and killed.

As far as the Touchable Policemen after Velutha are concerned, they are not approaching a potentially innocent man for questioning. Instead, they feel that they carry the “[r]esponsibility for the Touchable Future on their thin but able shoulders” (291). Velutha has dared to break the laws of the symbolic order, causing Touchable fear, and now they have to exorcise the fear, “inoculating a community” (293) with Velutha’s elimination. Velutha dares to break the love laws
and “[f]or this insolence, this spoiling-the-fun, their quarry paid. Oh yes. […] Boot on bone. On Teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man’s breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib” (292). Kristeva says that a corpse is “the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (4). In life Velutha’s untouchable position was outside acceptability. Then “[h]alf an hour past midnight” Velutha suffered the ultimate of abjection: “Death came for him” (304).

Abjection, which Kristeva identifies as “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady; a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter” (4), takes on a life of its own as it consumes more and more victims within Roy’s narrative. Language continues to be an accomplice in the terror. Baby Kochamma’s plan and method of purification require the misuse of language in the form of a lie to the police. At first she makes the rape charge, but then the police realize the falseness of her charge and that they are “saddled with the Death in Custody of a technically innocent man” (298). Baby Kochamma, as another unmarried woman with no standing in the community, has lived with her own unspoken “fear of being dispossessed” (67). She now fears the beginning of that dispossession in her own complicity in the crime of murder. Again she needs a scapegoat to protect her place in the community and now turns on the innocent children, using guilt and their love for their mother to protect herself. Accusing the children as at fault in the death of Sophie Mol, Baby Kochamma tells them, “It’s a terrible thing to take a person’s life […]. Even God doesn’t forgive that. […] You are murderers” (300). Now, besides all the abjection and loss the children already feel, Baby Kochamma suggests that they are even beyond the love of God. But she manipulates the children and language to suggest a way that they can save themselves and their mother: “What matters is whether you want to go to jail and make Ammu go to jail because of you. It’s up to you to decide that” (301). Estha must make a
false charge against Velutha whom he loves. To save Ammu, Estha must say that Velutha kidnapped the children. When the police inspector asks him the question, “Estha’s mouth said Yes” (303). Again the symbolic order of language betrays Estha. He sees himself as more and more abject, as the one “through whom the abject exists” (Kristeva 6), as the one who says “yes,” and then “[c]hildhood tiptoes out. Silence slid in like a bolt” (Roy 303). The symbolic order of language betrays Estha, and his response is silence, the silence of abjection.

Estha is not the only one who feels responsible for Velutha’s death. Ammu goes to the police station to try to straighten out the terrible mistake, but, instead of getting any justice, she is only reminded of her position of abjection within the community. The inspector tells her “the Kottayam Police didn’t take statements from veshyas [prostitutes] or their illegitimate children” (90). He uses the opportunity to terrorize her: “he tapped her breasts with his baton, it was not a policeman’s spontaneous brutishness on his part. He knew exactly what he was doing. It was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instill order into a world gone wrong” (246). Because of her lack of standing in the community (no Locusts Stand I), Ammu cannot clear the dead Velutha’s name or even defend her own dignity. All she is allowed is to see her guilt: “He’s dead [. . .]. I’ve killed him” (10). The police inspector’s words remind Ammu that she, as the abject in her family and community, condemned the innocent Velutha when she approached him on the riverbank. Her actions allowed the symbolic order to eliminate the already-marginalized Paravan.

The abjections increase. They all—Ammu, Estha, and Rahel—are seen as responsible for the death of the preferred child, the half-English Sophie Mol. At Sophie Mol’s funeral, “they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them” (7).
Baby Kochamma, with her own fears, sees Ammu’s desire to clear Velutha’s name as dangerous for the family. She is afraid Ammu’s “Unsafe Edge” (304) will allow her to admit the truth of her relationship with Velutha. Again, Baby has a plan to try to hold her world together. She must get Ammu out of Ayemenem as soon as possible. She uses Chacko’s anger over his daughter’s death: “She gnawed like a rat into the godown of Chacko’s grief. Within its walls she planted an easy, accessible target for his insane anger. It wasn’t hard for her to portray Ammu as the person actually responsible for Sophie Mol’s death. [. . .] It was her idea that Ammu be made to pack her bags and leave. That Estha be Returned” (305). Chacko, blaming Ammu and the children, forces them to leave Ayemenan, and, thus, the system is purified of the abject.

Ammu, with “no Locusts Stand I,” has no means of providing a home for her children. With the “promptings” of the family, she “returns” Estha to the father who has never made contact with them. Cécile Ohmhani points out that the word returned is “repeated several times, thus stressing a denial of any link between Estha and his mother’s family” (89) and emphasizing his abjection from the family constellation. At the train terminal, Estha asks when his mother will come get him. His mother answers: “As soon as I get a job. As soon as I can go away from here and get a job” (307). The terrified Estha responds, “‘But that will be never!’ A wave of panic. A bottomless bottomful feeling” (308). Estha sees himself as at fault in Velutha’s death and now for his mother’s grief and her eventual death:

It was his fault that the faraway man in Ammu’s chest stopped shouting. His fault that she died alone in the lodge with no one to lie at the back of her and talk to her.

Because he was the one that had said it. But Ammu that will be never! (308)
He had not meant to say never, but the symbolic system of language again betrays him. Estha believes that language has such power that once he says something, the speaking makes it true, makes the action happen. As the train pulls out, Estha calls his mother’s name, but “[h]e left his voice behind” (309). He is now afraid to say anything, afraid of what he will cause.

With his return to his father, Estha now also sees himself as completely abject, as he is removed from his mother and sister, the only love and acceptance he has known, and, according to Kristeva’s identification of the process of abjection, “[o]ut of the daze that has petrified him [the abject] before the untouchable, impossible, absent body of the mother, a daze that has cut off his impulses from their objects, [. . .] out of such daze, he causes, along with loathing, one word to crop up—fear” (6). Estha has lost all place for himself and completely surrenders to his loss by removing himself from the symbolic system of language: Kristeva says that the abject’s fear “permeates all words of the language with nonexistence [. . .]. Thus, fear having been bracketed, discourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confront that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject” (6). Estha cannot face the horrors of discourse. He must bracket his fear by removing himself from the burden of speech; Estha stops speaking and acknowledging language. Estha rejects the symbolic order that has abjected him all his life.

After Estha is returned to his father, Ammu leaves Ayemenem to try to put together a life that will allow her to reunite with her children, but she goes through a succession of jobs because ill health causes her to miss work. The last time she visits Rahel, “[s]he was swollen with cortisone, moonfaced, not the slender mother Rahel knew. [. . .] She said that she felt like a road sign with birds shitting on her” (153). She recognizes herself as defilement, as bird shit. Her body is in the process of abjecting her. The night she dies, “She didn’t know where she was, she recog-
nized nothing around her. Only her fear was familiar” (154). All the abject knows is fear. Ammu, like Velutha, suffers the ultimate of abjection—death, and then, even after death, she continues to be abjected as the “church refused to bury Ammu. On several counts” (154). Because the young, pretty Ammu made one mistake of marrying the wrong man, the rest of her life she continues to be abjected from the symbolic order of India. She and her children continue to have “no Locusts Stand I.”

Twenty-three years later, after Ammu’s death and Estha’s return, beyond the river, the History House, now property of a five-star hotel chain, is the symbol of the abjected colonized past of the Indian people. (Roy continuously evokes the horrors of English colonialism with her allusion to the History House as Kurtz’s “heart of darkness” of Ayemenem.) Here India’s abjected past is evident in the kathakali dancers, whose performances of “ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-nine cameos” (121) for the tourists of the hotel. After (and because of) dancing at the History House, the dancers now dance stoned and drunk at the temple. They dance the non-ending Indian epic away from the gawking eyes of the tourists. Here, the Kathakali Man asks “pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encashing their identities” (218). The dancer identifies his History House dance as a perverted version of his country’s epic.

The dancer’s great grief and anguish, his recognition of his abjection, is understandable in light of the history of Kathakali dancing, which is particular to Kerala in South India, Roy’s home and the setting for her novel. In Kathakali: An Introduction to the Dance-Drama of Kerala, the authors explain the extensive, precise, and important training, rituals, and traditions of Kathakali dancing, which include performances that last five to nine hours an evening for several days in succession (12):
The pattern of persistence, continuity, and completion of the cycle of events is a strong psychological thread in the Kerala tradition. When these elements are applied to the training of young Kathakali actors-to-be, beginning from the age of twelve, continuing through a classic regime of eight to twelve years, they produce a discipline and technical command that is legendary. The elements of discipline are not only those identifiable with the military tradition of the past, but those that still form a part of the discipline of the old traditional extended family unit, the taravātu. [. . .] In broad terms it means a decorum and manner that speak eloquently of a fine family tradition and upbringing, of unquestionable honesty and loyalty, respect, pride and belief in one’s tradition. These qualities are emphasized in the training of Kathakali actors, and combined with the relentless physical training characteristic of the old military tradition, produce the finest of artists. (14)

In Roy’s novel the Kathakali dancer connects to this idea of family in his description of what the stories and dance mean to him: “these stories are his children and his childhood. [. . .] They are the house he was raised in, the meadows he played in. [. . .] So when he tells a story, he handles it as he would a child of his own” (Roy 219). The dancer recognizes the power of the art of Kathakali: He is “the most beautiful of men. Because his body is his soul. His only instrument. [. . .] He has magic in him, this man within the painted mask and swirling skirts” (Roy 219). But, unfortunately, the Kathakali dancer is now a victim of history, of the times, of the dominance of neo-colonialism: “left dangling somewhere between heaven and earth” (219). Within the story of Kunti and Karna, his national heritage, the dancer sees himself as abject: “He strives not to enter a part but to escape it. But this is what he cannot do. In his abject [emphasis mine] defeat lies his
supreme triumph. He is Karna, whom the world has abandoned. Karna Alone. Condemned goods” (220).

Besides the cultural loss represented by the perverted Kathakali performances, there are other losses attributed to neo-colonialism, which Roy recognizes as an enemy to the Indian people and nation. Her narrative suggests the loss of the natural habitat. Cheryll Glotfelty, discussing the relevance of Ecocriticism today, recognizes how “language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications” (xxv) and that “[c]onsciousness raising is its most important task” (xxiv). Based on Roy’s non-fiction writings, it seems that she has a political agenda of consciousness-raising in her portrayal of the river Meenachal as a victim of World Bank money’s role in the destruction of the environment.

*The God of Small Things* as an ecological writing is suggested as the opening description of the setting is of abundant, colorful, active life. The mangoes are bright: “Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. [. . .] Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. [. . .] Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads” (2). Scott Russell Sanders, defining “ecological” texts claims that “landscape is no mere scenery, no flimsy stage set, but rather the energizing medium from which human lives emerge and by which those lives are bounded and measured” (183). Within Roy’s novel, the landscape, particularly the river Meenachal, carries this weight of “energizing medium” for the characters.

The river Meenachal, as part of this active, energizing nature, has such importance in the plot that it takes on the identity of another character—another character ultimately suffering abjection. Its importance requires an ecological analysis of how “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty xix). A theme of the novel is the con-
trast between the fecundity of possibility and the loss of abjection as related to nature as well as
to human lives. A symbol of this contrast is the river. Within the story, the river as physical
world affects and is affected by the human culture around it.

Early in the story, the river is described as alive, teeming with life: “The Meenachal. 
Graygreen. With fish in it. The sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it”
(193). Estha and Rahel know the river as a friend: “They knew the slippery stone steps [. . .].
They knew the afternoon weed that flowed inwards from the backwaters of Komarakom. They
knew the smaller fish. The flat, foolish pallathi, the silver paral, the wily, whiskered koori, the
sometimes karimeen” (193). The children even dream of “their river”: “of the coconut trees that
bent into it and watched with coconut eyes, the boats slide by. Upstream in the mornings. Down-
stream in the evenings. And the dull, sullen sound of the boatmen’s bamboo poles as they thud-
ded against the dark, oiled boatwood. It was warm, the water. Graygreen. Like rippled silk. With
fish in it” (116). Even the coconut trees are personified as with eyes to take part in the life of the
river. There is a special life-evoking and psychologically possessive relationship between the
children and the river. The land surrounding the river is also lush with life: “The path, which ran
parallel to the river, led to a little grassy clearing that was hemmed in by huddled trees: coconut,
cashew, mango bilimbi” (195). Everything about the river is a picture of the lushness and con-
nectiveness of nature.

And the life of the river begets even more life, more connectiveness. The children join in
with the river, learning to swim and fish in it. They even “learned the bright language of dragon-
flies” (194). The river is a site of great fecundity as exemplified by the white boat-spider’s egg
sac which ruptures sending a hundred baby spiders out to sea. Even Velutha speaks of the river
as a wild, alive, “she,” eating “idi appams for breakfast, kanji and meen for lunch. Minding her
own business. Not looking right or left. […] Really a wild thing … […] rushing past in the moonlight, always in a hurry” (201). The river is powerful, taking on a life of its own, coded as productive female.

The lush, fertile riverbank is also the site of the consummation of the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, initiated with imagery of birth. Velutha floats in the river in a womb-like experience of peace and then begins to swim upstream until the “detonation” of seeing Ammu waiting for him brings him out of the river (315). Velutha’s rising from the river signifies the point of hopefulness of new birth for both of them, new life free from the encumbrances of history and their places within that history. The narrator says that “the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars” (315-316). Velutha is coded as the pure man of nature, and the fecundity of nature is written in terms of the lushness of the sexual encounter. For fourteen nights the couple celebrates the life and fulfillment of nature, commencing on the fertile riverbank, life with the ants, caterpillars, beetles, fish, praying mantis, and spiders emphasizing Glotfelty’s observation of the connection of the physical world with human culture (xix). All of nature is complicit in the fulfillment of natural desires: “the river pulsed through the darkness. Shimmering like wild silk. Yellow bamboo wept. Night’s elbows rested on the water and watched them” (317). Roy’s use of personification makes the connection between nature and man more vivid.

In contrast to the lushness and productivity associated with the River Meenachal in 1969 is what greets Rahel years later (in the 1990s) after World Bank money and neo-colonialism have destroyed the river and after the deaths of both Ammu and Velutha. When Rahel returns, the river “greeted her with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed” (118). The power and life of the river are gone. When Estha
walks the banks of the river, it “smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils” (14). Where there once was lushness and descriptions of life and fecundity, there are now images of death. The narrator says that the once powerful river is “no more than a swollen drain now,” (118) suggesting its role as the container of abjected body fluids (118). The wildness and naturalness of the river, its unbounded freedom, could not be a part of a world system that instead needed to control it, and thus destroyed it: “[s]o now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river” (118). The loss of power of the river is parallel to the loss of innocence of the children who once dreamed of it as well as the loss of the mother who lived her little happiness in life on the bank of the river, thus again, and sadly, suggesting/emphasizing the interconnectiveness of man and nature. The wild river had to be bounded, could not be outside containment to be of use. Kristeva’s comment on the fear of women appropriately applies to the mother/river: “Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power” (77). Roy’s novel works as an ecological text, raising the consciousness of readers to the damage done to the environment by neocolonialism/globalization.

At the end of the novel, after all the losses suffered, the incestuous act of the brother and sister seems to be a final, desperate, and cathartic seeking of completeness for Estha and Rahel. Because neither of the children had a father within the symbolic order for them to identify with or to be identified with, they are left in a pre-Oedipal stage of psychic development and orientation of sexual desire9. Estha sees Rahel as his mother: “She moves her mouth. Their beautiful mother’s mouth” (310). What happens is apparently too terrible for words, again suggesting writing as a language of fear (Kristeva 38). There is another language gap, and the author fails to

write any conclusion beyond readers’ assumed shock and questioning: “[t]here is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that [. . .] would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings” (310). There is nothing because there is no word from the father to prohibit incest. Without a father, the twins never fit into the symbolic order, and, in the end, all they have is each other.

The twins have been continuously pushed beyond borders of acceptance to abjection, and, ironically, the narrator suggests that there is a “crossing” they could have made to free themselves from the on-going abjection. She says they needed

[s]ome cheap brand of exorcism from a counselor with a fancy degree, who would sit them down and say, in one of many ways: ‘You’re not the Sinners. You’re the Sinned Against. You were only children. You had no control. You are the victims, not the perpetrators.’ (182)

But the counselor, part of the symbolic order, is not there, is part of the silence, and Ammu, Estha, and Rahel are victims of the colonial/neo-colonial continuing history of Indian caste, class, and gender restrictions that leave them with “no Locusts Stand I,” no place in the system, as abject, and, as Estha says, with “nobody to help” (185).

Estha’s comment seems to suggest the author’s final fear about India—that there is little that can be done to help the majority of the common people of India, those on the long convoy melting into the darkness. This is a feeling apparently shared by others. John Keay ends his 534-page India: A History with a comment from Roy’s “The End of Imagination.” Referring to India’s first detonation of nuclear weapons (and the people’s joyous celebration of the event), Roy called the tests “the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people” (qtd in Keay
Perhaps, based on this ominous comment, Estha, with “nobody to help,” is Roy’s metaphor for all Indians with her novel as an allegory representing a hopelessness for postcolonial India.¹⁰

But Estha does not have the final comment in the novel. Instead, it is Ammu who makes the final comment to Velutha—“Tomorrow” (321) (twice), thus suggesting through Roy’s narrative choice of the forward looking comment, that she feels that there is hope for the future. This ending of possibility again connects Roy’s novel to Forster’s A Passage to India. In Forster’s novel of “connections,” Aziz and Fielding face conflict as they seek ground for their inter-ethnic Anglo/Indian friendship. The novel ends with Aziz “riding in the jungle with his dear Cyril” questioning the need for distance between them. They both desire the connection of friendship, but “the earth didn’t want it” (322). Forster uses the physical world to tell them “no, not yet,” suggesting, as Roy does, that although now is not the time, there is possibility for the future. Arundhati Roy fights for that possibility through her political activism and through the power of language, through both her fiction and non-fiction, looking for the tomorrow of possibilities for India and the Indian people.

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Works Cited


Chapter Two: Speaking Magical Realism: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and the Trauma of Betrayal

“If one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one must make oneself grotesque.” (Rushdie 126)

In terms of the recognition accorded Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* the above line is particularly interesting to contemplate. As all the novel is Rushdie’s character Saleem Sinai narrating his life story, this is one of many commentaries on his life and times in India between his birth at midnight on August 15, 1947, the hour marking the start of India’s independence from British rule, through the abuses of Indira Gandhi’s (the Widow) State of Emergency which ran from June 25, 1975, to January 18, 1977. But if one were to take the line out of context (and out of Saleem’s mouth), one could easily imagine a scenario with this being the as-yet-relatively-unknown Rushdie contemplating writing this novel and the “teeming multitudes” being all the other writers in the world. Truly this sentence fits in terms of this novel’s role in making Rushdie’s name stand out in the field of writing as well as in terms of the uniqueness (grotesqueness) of the writing style. Today Rushdie’s greatest claim to fame is the recognition of *Midnight’s Children* as the winner of the Mann Booker Prize in 1982 and then the “Booker of Bookers,” the best novel of the first twenty-five years of the award, and then the “Best of the Booker,” the designation as the best novel to win in the award’s 40-year history. So, in the created scenario of the above comment, two points of discussion are the “making of oneself,” the creatorship involved, and the “grotesqueness” of this work.
The “Making of Oneself”

An important element of the introductory comment is the creation of the “self/selves” telling the story. Rushdie’s creation of the self/selves of narrator and/or of author is very distinctive. Within *Midnight’s Children* there are layers—layers of meaning told through layers of narrative. Indicative of these layers, the idea of narratology and narratological choice is a constant theme, signaled by the “Once upon a time” of the opening line and continuing with the many references to Scheherazade (4, 234, etc), the epitome of storytellers, continuing to Saleem’s final rush to finish his “long-winded autobiography [...] in words and pickles” (548) contained in the thirty jar-chapters. There is Rushdie’s character/narrator Saleem telling his story, thus, the “creator” of his story/history to Padma. And then there is Rushdie the author choosing Saleem’s method(s) of story-telling. And within Rushdie’s choices there is another layer. A narratological method Rushdie uses to develop multiple stories is the layering or “splitting” of Saleem as an eiron. In *A Handbook to Literature*, the eiron is identified as “typically a swindler, trickster, hypocrite, or picaresque rogue—[who] pretends to ignorance in order to trick others,” with irony as the “typical habit of the eiron, who does not and cannot speak directly.” In *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem, although someone who cannot be overtly labeled “a swindler, trickster, hypocrite, or picaresque rogue,” is Rushdie’s created eiron to allow a “layered” conversation. Within Saleem’s telling of the story there is his direct language, but embedded within that language is the supposed naïveté of the eiron creating an ironic split of meaning with the writer Rushdie standing behind the text choosing this “split.” The storytelling of Rushdie/Saleem/eiron allows/creates multiple layers of dialogue, identities, and meanings. Often Rushdie uses irony to make a humorous/not-so-humorous political comment. Rushdie wrote *Midnight’s Children* at the time that Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister and a co-planner of
the break-up of India at Independence (and Saleem’s antagonist, the “Widow”) was in power in India. This narratological mechanism of Saleem as an eiron permits Rushdie to tell more of the story, to say through the naive Saleem a great deal more than he (Rushdie) could (should?) say directly. Even the Englishman William Methwold acknowledges the usefulness of this method in his comment about Wee Willie Winkie: “The tradition of the fool, you know. Licensed to provoke and tease. Important social safety-valve” (117).

The “Grotesqueness” of Magical Realism

Another element of the opening quotation is that Saleem/Rushdie says “one must make oneself grotesque.” A dominant element of distinctiveness often discussed in light of Midnight’s Children is Rushdie’s use of magical realism, a literary form using the bizarre and grotesque but also a form which works as another method of layering meanings within a text. Wendy B. Faris identifies five primary characteristics of magical realist fiction:

1. “an irreducible element’ of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them” (167),
2. “[d]escriptions [which] detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world—this is the realism in magical realism” (169),
3. “the reader [who] may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events—and hence experiences some unsettling doubts” (171),
4. “[the] “experience [of] the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds” (172), and
5. “fictions [which] question received ideas about time, space, and identity.” (173)

11 Nonetheless Gandhi sued Rushdie regarding this novel. Ironically, Gandhi did not sue about any political comments, but about a personal comment relating to her husband’s death. Gandhi won her suit, and all subsequent printings of the novel saw the removal of the comment. See Katherine Frank’s “Mr. Rushdie and Mrs. Gandhi” in Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly 19. 3 (1996): 245-58.
These identifying characteristics of magic realist texts deal with various kinds of splits—splits between worlds, conflicting understandings, times, and identities—all evident within *Midnight's Children*. The various splits act as openings creating space for added commentary, interaction, and subversion. Faris writes that “in several instances, magical realist texts are written in reaction to totalitarian regimes” (179) and that “Rushdie writes *Midnight's Children* in opposition to Mrs. Gandhi’s autocratic rule” (180). This connects back to the idea of Rushdie’s layers of selves—that magical realism is another way to say more than can be said in a straightforward narrative. Isabel Allende confirms this idea when she identifies magical realism as a “way of facing reality in which the only things one dares talk about are those things one can control. What cannot be controlled is denied” (239). In magical realism, the real (truth) can be denied as it is “excused” through the magic. Thus magical realism allows one to discuss reality *without* actually/accurately discussing it. And by using the ironic distance of an eiron as an unreliable narrator, what Rushdie cannot say can instead be attributed to Saleem. Then, through this ironic narrative distancing, Rushdie creates an opening, a liminal space in which to use magic realism, a literary method previously connected primarily with Latin American texts. Saleem is the “coming together,” the liminal space of the meeting of magic and realism. This coming together of the two realities serves to emphasize the “other” reality in an inverted measure, often subverting the opposite. Thus, the starkness of the realism is questioned by the grotesqueness or playfulness of the magical elements, and the magical elements emphasize the shocking truth of the reality. Both of these are embedded in Saleem’s ironic naïveté, leaving the reader to experience the “unsettling doubts” (171) that Faris identifies as a consequence of the use of magical realism. Thus, when Saleem narrates the horrors of war, but then adds a magical element, the reader is left to question that
which was narrated—asking “did this really happen?” or perhaps “how could this have really happened?”

In discussing Rushdie’s narrative choice of magical realism as creating a certain celebrity, it is important to recognize that, although there is a serious and thought-provoking side to the literary method, there is also a playfulness that suggests a specialized audience. Jean-Pierre Durix says that in the magical realist text there is a game of “hide and seek” (59) between the narrator and narratee to see if the narratee has enough culture to pick up on the clues left by a text enshrouded in magical elements, thus suggesting a “sophisticated wink in the direction of the educated reader” (60). Angel Flores says that “[t]he magical realists do not cater to a popular taste, rather they address themselves to the sophisticated, those not merely initiated in aesthetic mysteries but versed in subtleties” (116). Saleem, as the eiron, adds to the playfulness with a mocking, often sarcastic attitude, suggesting a camaraderie of knowingness between the narrator and the reader. Thus, Rushdie’s novel, with its discussion of serious political issues written in terms of magical realism, becomes an “elitist” text assuming a supposed level of reader/writer camaraderie perhaps unrealized since James Joyce’s equally allusive Ulysses. The distinctive form certainly helps make Salman Rushdie “an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes” of writers.

Post-Colonial as National Allegory

In Midnight’s Children, Saleem’s personal narrative allegorically reflects India’s public narrative. Fredric Jameson argues that third-world texts, particularly the novel, should be read as “national allegories,” because, unlike first-world texts, there is not “a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political,” but, instead, “the story of the private
individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” [italics his] (69). Although other critics argue against this reading, there are elements of the novel that force a reader to see Saleem as India. He is born at midnight on August 15th, 1947, just as India was “born” via independence. His dominant facial feature is a nose the shape of India. Saleem’s geography teacher makes the physical connection (along with a political commentary): “In the face of these ugly ape you don’t see the whole map of India? [. . .] See here—the Deccan peninsula hanging down! [. . .] These birthmark on the right ear is the East Wing; and these horrible stained left cheek, the West! Remember, stupid boys: Pakistan ees a stain on the face of India!” (277) In the novel, even Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, “ratified” Saleem’s representation of India with a gratulatory note: “You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own” (143). Obviously Rushdie intends for the reader to see Saleem as India. Saleem even says, “I was linked to history” (285). Thus, Saleem’s history reads as the history of India. And, just as Scheherazade told her many stories to stay alive, Saleem/India is also struggling to stay alive. His history, like India’s, includes cracks that are threatening to destroy him. Early in the text, Saleem makes the important connection of cracks. He says that there are “cracks in the earth which will-be-have-been reborn in my skin” (124-25). The “crack in the earth” is the created line dividing India into Pakistan and India. This chapter of “speaking voices” identifies Saleem’s threatening body cracks as a reaction to trauma, the trauma of the betrayal of the promise of independence, a trauma that can only be discussed through subversive forms of writing such as magical realism.

The Trauma of Betrayal

Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, bases her theories of trauma on Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which Freud cites the epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* by Tasso as an example of fateful repetition:

Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders’ army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again. (qtd in Caruth 2)

The importance of this text as Caruth sees it is the way the traumatic experience is repeated unknowingly. Based on the studies of this repeated infliction of a wound, Caruth identifies trauma as a wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—which is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (3-4)

Along with the repeated action, Caruth identifies the “enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound” (3) as the representation of trauma.

In *Midnight’s Children*, a wound of the mind of India repeatedly cries out and is manifested in the cracks that Saleem perceives in his body and mind. This wound is betrayal. This foundational wound/event of trauma brought the “cracking” of India into India and Pakistan at
Partition, followed by the ongoing social and political consequences of that cracking. Writing about the work of mourning, Bhaskar Sarkar says that “[i]n the South Asian context, memories of social and economic losses still rankle; the counterfactual—that which never was, a free and united India—continues to beguile, producing a deep sense of betrayal and bereavement” (37).

Cracked, traumatized Saleem represents this dream struggling to survive. Caruth writes of trauma as the belated experience that “far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life” (7). Saleem’s narrative works as a powerful “trauma testimony,” a survivor story telling of the endless impact of trauma in the life of India as a country as well as in the life of its people. The various stories of Saleem’s personal life serve as a method of “working through” the trauma for Saleem/India and, perhaps, for Rushdie himself. They work as a method of questioning and coming to grips with India’s history.

Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, writes of trauma that there is a “need for empathic unsettlement, and the discursive inscription of that unsettlement, in the response to traumatic events or conditions” (xi). As a method of dealing with this need, of “working through” his/India’s traumas, Saleem’s compulsion is to tell his story to the listening Padma, to get it down on paper, in jars, to preserve, to repeat, and relive each instance of trauma. He says “my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings—by day amongst the pickle-vats, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks” (38).

Saleem’s drive and concern with the corruption of the clocks indicates a lack of faith in formal history, indicative of the greatest trauma of all—the fear of the loss of truth and identity. Preserving memory(ies) in the jar chapters is Saleem’s means of creation to overcome the loss brought
by trauma. LaCapra claims that “memory that confronts the traumatic dimensions of history, is ethically desirable in coming to terms with the past both for the individual and for the collectivity” (95). Although LaCapra recognizes the importance of confronting history, he also recognizes that “an extremely difficult problem is how to respond to, and give an account of, traumatic limit events and their effects in peoples’ lives in different genres and areas of study” (96). He writes that “[a]ny answer to this question is problematic and contains [. . .] paradoxes because trauma invites distortion [emphasis added], disrupts genres or bounded areas, and threatens to collapse distinctions” (96). For literature and for Rushdie, a literary “distortion” that has the ability to carry the weight of trauma, “that may render or transmit the disorientation of trauma” (LaCapra 106), is magical realism.

Within Saleem’s “scribblings,” there are several writing methods that indicate the disorientation of trauma—layered information; shifts in person; regression; cold, blunt language; understatement; hyperbole; sarcasm; and always a “turning away”—each representing some form of denial of or escape from trauma. The various repetitions, regressions, and encirclings within Saleem’s narrative indicate an attempt to deal with, to work out, the trauma of the history of India, a history requiring a mechanism such as magical realism to explain it. Caruth recognizes that in the language and stories connected with trauma each one of these texts engages, in its own specific way, a central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of the crisis. If traumatic experience [. . .] is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs, then these texts [. . .] ask what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness. Such a question [. . .] can never
be asked in a straight-forward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always literary; a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.

(5)

For Rushdie, this language that defies understanding and asks questions that “can never be asked in a straight-forward way” and is thus appropriate for Saleem’s problematic representation of his story to the listening Padma is magic realism. Its use is a literary method of dealing with the trauma of a history that cannot be spoken of openly and clearly, a history that is in Saleem’s case the trauma of a dream of independence turned to betrayal and slaughter.

The problematics of listening, knowing, and representing related to trauma is evident in Saleem’s narrative to Padma and in the filling of the jar chapters. Whenever Saleem’s narrative becomes too painful, he “turns away” into magical realism, switching to some form of magic as an escape. LaCapra explains that when “the real or the literal is traumatic, inaccessible, and inherently incomprehensible or unrepresentable [. . .] it can only be represented or addressed indirectly in figurative or allegorical terms that necessarily distort and betray it” (107, n 20). The figurative and allegorical terms necessary to present trauma are dominant features of Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, enabling the “speaking” of trauma of the history of India through magical realism.

Although a dominant method of writing in Midnight’s Children is magical realism, other methods of writing trauma are recognized. Saleem’s “turning away” from trauma is evidenced in one of the “splits” in the text, the narratological split. Saleem, in the telling of his history, switches back and forth between first and third person, sometimes in the same line of text, indicating a split between the inner narrative of first person and the outer narrative of third person—“He and I, I and he” (198)—suggesting a reaction to trauma with a form of denial. Instead of
trauma happening to the “I” of first person, it is happening outside Saleem to the “he” of an outer third person. Using this method of narratological split, Saleem “layers” information—reveals bits of information at a time—goes back, repeats, adds a little more, indicating a hesitant form of the repetitions Caruth indicates in her descriptions of trauma. The narrator starts building layers early in the text: “And already I can see the repetitions beginning; because didn’t my grandmother also find enormous . . . and the stroke, too, was not the only . . . and the Brass Monkey had her birds . . . and the curse begins already” (7). This narratological split and layered information, this layering and slow progression to the “truth,” indicates a foundational issue in Saleem’s story as evidence of trauma—his inability to face the whole truth at one time.

We see such a narratological split when Saleem is hit on the head by the spittoon. He says that “I am stripped of past present memory time shame and love, a fleeting but also timeless explosion in which I bow my head yes I acquiesce yes in the necessity of the blow, and then I am empty and free” (409). Saleem’s loss of memory indicates a complete detachment as a result of trauma. Although Saleem uses the word free to indicate the supposed loss of the burdens of past traumas, the loss of identity is traumatic, and he can only face the truth with a narratological split in his narrative of himself as the Buddha:

I must doggedly insist that I, he, had begun again; that after years of yearning for importance, he (or I) had been cleansed of the whole business; that after my abandonment by Jamila Singer, who wormed me into the Army to get me out of her sight, I (or he) accepted the fate which was my repayment for love, and sat uncomplaining under a chinar tree; that, emptied of history, the Buddha learned the arts of submission, and did only what was required of him. To sum up: I became a citizen of Pakistan. (419)
His identity as Saleem/India is being swept away by an empty, other, non-thinking person, who he, as a trauma victim, is powerless to resist. Emptied of his history of being India, he bluntly states that he becomes a citizen of Pakistan, which is especially shocking since India and Pakistan are at war at the time. As Saleem’s story progresses, this method of reacting with detachment becomes more and more commonplace.

Another illustration of the disorientation evident in trauma writing is the encircling language Rushdie often uses in Saleem’s narrative. There are long lines of out-of-control detail that seem to carry every identifying description of a magical realist text. At one point of the chapter appropriately named “Tick, Tock,” as Mountbatten’s clock is ticking towards England’s departure from the continent, Rushdie starts one line with an ellipsis, suggesting hesitancy, and then continues with contradictory remarks, “Hurtling on, I pause,” and then proceeds to a 317-word sentence which includes overlapping and colliding times, the contrast of magic and realism—the magic of a conjurer mixed with “wars of starvation” (Rushdie 125)—and what Faris recognizes as a logical reversal, a “disruption of the ordinary logic of cause and effect” (168), an element of magical realist writing. She argues that “Saleem’s claims in Midnight’s Children that he caused this or that historical event—by singing a song, moving a pepper pot on a dining table—are [. . .] logical reversals.” They “cannot be explain[ed] according to the laws of the universe as we know them” (167). In this particular 317-word sentence, the logical reversal is that the love of Emerald and Zulfikar enabled him to start a revolution (125), a connection that seems to bear no logic, thus illustrating the disorientation of trauma writing.

This long, seemingly out-of-control sentence in its haste gathers up images of magic and realism until it reaches its end. Rushdie follows this sentence with a fragment—and another logical reversal: “The power of giving birth to fathers and mothers; which Ahmed wanted and never
had” (125). The fragment suggests that, after all of the trauma identified in the long sentence, Saleem cannot go on. His speech is truncated.

Another “logical reversal” as evidence of continued disorientation is when Saleem says “I dreamed Kashmir into the fantasies of our rulers” (404-05), suggesting that he was the cause of the Indo-Pakistani war over Kashmir. There is no logical way the one action caused the other. Saleem’s narrative is consistently punctuated with these logical reversals. He constantly blames himself for the problems of the country, which suggests some type of self-scapegoating or persecution complex as part of the trauma he suffers. Jameson, in his analysis of third-world literature, recognizes the uses of the mechanisms of paranoia outlined in the writings of Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, “The delusion-formation [. . .] which we take to be a pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction” (qtd in Jameson 70). Saleem’s logical reversals serve as part of his process of reconstruction, of “working through” trauma. For Saleem the self-scapegoating is his way, or his attempt, to explain the shockingly unexplainable horrors of India’s history.

Layers of narrative indicating an attempt at denial of trauma are especially prominent in Rushdie’s chapter “Commander Sabarmati’s Baton.” As Saleem cuts words out of the newspaper (one layer of narrative) to create the intriguing note to Commander Sabarmati (another layer of narrative), there is a child-like game of finding each needed puzzle piece. Saleem cuts up each headline that he uses—apparently undeterred, almost disconnected, perhaps traumatized, by the much bigger and historically important situations the headlines announce: “GOAN LIBERATION COMMITTEE LAUNCHES SATYAGRAHA CAMPAIGN [. . .]. NEHRU CONSIDERS RESIGNATION AT CONGRESS ASSEMBLY [. . .]. DULLES FOREIGN POLICY IS INCONSISTENT [. . .]. WHY INDIRA GHANDI IS CONGRESS PRESIDENT NOW” (311). In-
stead of recognizing the literal and complete meaning of the words of the headlines, there is denial. Instead of the recognition of the importance of what each headline relates, there is apparent joy in finding the necessary pieces, suggesting that Saleem cannot face the whole truth—that he must cut up the truth—that he is suffering a reaction to trauma. In this very postmodern text, although Saleem does admit to “[cutting up history],” the meaning of the “under-cut” of history is not lost. Within the layers of intertextuality, readers are meant to recognize in Saleem’s actions a shocking disregard for, a belittling of, India’s fight for Independence—a reaction to trauma.

Trauma of the Partition of India

For Saleem/India the original traumatizing event is the partition of India, and the unassimilated trauma Rushdie bases his story on is the endless impact, the ongoing idea of betrayal, of the entire Indian continent and people with this partition. In his studies of the trauma of Partition, Bhaskar Sarkar says that “[s]peaking about 1947 remains a difficult task even after the passage of five decades; the corporeal, the material, and psychic losses, the wide-spread sense of betrayal, the overwhelming dislocations—in short, the deep lacerations [italics added] inflicted on one’s sense of self and community—bring up intense and consuming passions” (9). The word lacerations carries the weight of the wounding caused by Partition, connecting to the lacerations Tancred inflicted upon Clorinda. In the life story Saleem relates to Padma, the various Indian/Pakistani conflicts and his own resultant personal conflicts carry this theme of betrayal in the form of wounds. For Saleem, each of these betrayals is another crack in his body, a voice crying out from the foundational trauma/betrayal. He says to Padma, “I am falling apart. [. . .] I have begun to crack all over like an old jug—that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history [. . .] has started coming apart at the seams” (37). All of Saleem’s life seems to be a
revisiting of this crack/betrayal to the ultimate point that he takes on, almost as a Christ-figure, the cracks in his own body. Priya Kumar recognizes that the “ramifications of partition as a traumatic history [...] continues to impinge upon the present of its survivors” (201). The trauma drives Saleem’s compulsion to tell his story, to get it down on paper, in jars, to repeat, and relive each instance as a “working out” of trauma, a trauma too painful to discuss without the buffering effects of magical realism.

The trauma began at the stroke of midnight of August 15, 1947, when India became an independent country as the colonizing English withdrew. But, before they left, and in order to leave, the day before another country had been born—Pakistan—as an independent (Muslim) nation with India recognized (unofficially) as a Hindu nation. Saleem relates this important history of India and the new country of Pakistan in terms of the unreality of magic. When speaking of the events leading up to the formation of Pakistan, he writes of the Hummingbird creating a conjuration of power. He says that the Hummingbird “invited the leaders of the dozens of Muslim splinter groups to form a loosely federated alternative to the dogmatism and vested interests of the [Moslem] Leaguers. It had been a great conjuring trick, because they had all come” (47-48). Reiterating the theme of the cracking of India, Saleem, referring to the unrealistic optimism of the group, says that “[t]hey played hit-the-spitton, and ignored the cracks in the earth” (48). Their optimism is for the formation of their new country, but they fail to anticipate the trauma of the bigger cracks resulting from their plans.

This “cracking” of India into two separate countries had a devastating effect on all of India/Indians after centuries of a shared history. Many (most?) Muslims living in India at the time of partition left their homes and pasts forever to move to Pakistan. Hindus living in the new Pakistan left their homes and pasts behind to move to India. The feeling on the part of both Mus-
lims and Hindus was that this was a necessary move for safety’s sake. And yet about a million people died. And lost in between were the Sikhs of the Punjab. According to historian John Keay, “though a majority in very few areas, the Sikhs were fairly evenly spread throughout the province which they regarded both as their religious homeland and as the core of Sikh ‘empire’” (506). The Sikhs, fearing their potential loss in the division of India, demanded their own “Sikh-istan.” But this was not to be. Instead, “following reassurances from Congress about their status within what would become India’s slice of the Panjab, [they] accepted the inevitability of partition” (507). Caruth says the wound of trauma is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (3). For the Sikhs of the Punjab, the “too soon” of the trauma of Partition was their acceptance of partition based on false reassurances. Partition came on August 15\(^{th}\), but, according to Keay, “the new boundary, drawn up in great haste [italics added] by a League-Congress commission [. . .] was not announced until after the Independence celebrations [August 17\(^{th}\)]” (507). England was in such a hurry to leave India that no time was taken to carefully think through the consequences of each boundary. This is evidenced in the situation of the Sikhs:

> The Sikhs had demanded that the line of Partition, whilst dividing the majority non-Muslim East Panjab from the majority Muslim West Panjab, make exceptions for sites and shrines important to them by virtue of religious and historical associations. [. . .] In fact the Boundary Commission made no such allowances. Demography alone was decisive; Lahore went to Pakistan. (507-08)

According to Keay, prior to the boundary announcement, expecting the creation of their own country, the Sikhs had begun expelling non-Sikhs and appropriating their lands as a response to Muslim expulsions in the west. With growing displacement reprisals, the actual boundary announcement on August 17\(^{th}\), “lent a cut-throat urgency to the tit-for-tat” (508). (This “tit-for-tat”
of violence would continue to be a dominant dynamic between India and Pakistan for decades.)

As the necessary moves were made and properties and pasts were lost, each group became an enemy to the other. According to Pankaj Mishra, “Large parts of the subcontinent were descending into chaos, as the implications of partitioning the Indian Empire along religious lines became clear to the millions of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs caught on the wrong side of the border. In the next few months, some twelve million people would be uprooted and as many as a million murdered” (79). Keay says that

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\text{[t]he flow of refugees became a flood; word of atrocities, rapes and mass killings brought the inevitable retaliations. As the violence escalated, ghost trains}^{13} \text{chuffed silently across the new frontier carrying nothing but corpses. [. . .] East to west and west to east perhaps ten million fled for their lives in the greatest exodus in recorded history. [. . .] Two hundred thousand at least, possibly as many as a million, were massacred between August and October in the Panjab partition and associated riots. (507)}
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It is hard to imagine the physical and emotional traumas of the ensuing movement and murders as so many moved across borders. Rushdie uses simplistic, but brutal language in speaking of the significance of new borders: “artificial frontiers which pierced Punjab and Bengal” [emphasis added] (235). Few details have been recorded of the massacres that occurred, perhaps suggesting a mass historic trauma, a mass inability to deal with the facts. And, perhaps this inability is related to postcolonial political imperatives, as, according to Gauri Viswanathan in Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India, “one of the most durable legends of British rule [was] that the Indian mind was best suited to minor pursuits of trade, but not to government or

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\footnote{13 For a literary representation of the ghost trains, see Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan published in 1956, less than a decade after Partition.}
administration” (31). To acknowledge the massacres would be to acknowledge a failure to administer, thus supposedly proving the long-held Orientalist idea. According to Priya Kumar, “[w]hile the partition of the Indian subcontinent, as an event of shattering consequence, underlies the very origin of the postcolonial Indian state, historiographies of Indian nationhood are often marked by their failure to acknowledge or claim this cataclysmic history” (202). Besides the shocking loss of lives, so many lives were drastically and permanently changed as people lost family, homes, property, life-long friends, as well as faith in humanity. The lack of public/political/historical acknowledgement of these losses represents a cruel disregard of the people involved.

Trauma of Departure

Cathy Caruth, in her studies of trauma in Sigmund Freud’s writings, recognizes a key figure is that of departures: “[i]n Freud’s own theoretical explanation of trauma [. . .] it is, finally, the act of leaving that constitutes its central and enigmatic core” (22). She bases her claim on Freud’s Moses and Monotheism, in which she sees the establishment of the history of the Jewish people through the trauma of their exodus from Egypt (14). Also, Freud’s own writing of the essay was done in two parts which were separated by the trauma of the German invasion of Vienna where he was writing. Each part had its own preface. Freud explained how his circumstances created the need for a second preface: “Formerly I lived under the protection of the Catholic Church and feared that by publishing the essay I should lose that protection. . . . Then, suddenly, the German invasion. . . . In the certainty of persecution . . . I left [. . .] with many friends, the city which from early childhood, through seventy-eight years, had been a home to me” (qtd in Caruth 21). Caruth sees the space between these two parts of his writing, marked by the “I left”
as “the space of a trauma” (21)—as a “gap” in which history is preserved—a gap that “convey[s] the impact of a history precisely as what cannot be grasped about leaving,” which, in Freud’s case, is the German invasion with all the trauma that meant for a Jew. The entire story of *Midnight’s Children* seems to represent an attempt to recover a similar space of trauma, a gap where history needs to be preserved. If departures bring trauma, the departures of ten million people at the time of partition meant that the new nations of Pakistan and India were built on the foundation of trauma. The naive Saleem almost uncontrollably bouncing around and back and forth in his narrative as well as in his country(ies) works as Rushdie’s portrait of what cannot be grasped of the traumas of the mass departures making up the history of modern India and Pakistan.

Rushdie frames Saleem’s story around a departure—his grandfather’s departure from the beautiful valley of Kashmir, which initially takes on the identity of an Edenic state. Early in the novel, Saleen says that his grandfather could “recall his childhood springs in Paradise” (5). But with Aadam Aziz’s departure, there is the loss of Paradise written in negative terms reflecting trauma. Paradise was when

there was no army camp at the lakeside, no endless snakes of camouflaged trucks and jeeps clogged the narrow mountain roads, no soldiers hid behind the crests of the mountains [. . .]. In those days travelers were not shot as spies if they took photographs of bridges [. . .]. To reveal the secret of my grandfather’s altered vision: he had spent five years, five springs, away from home. (5)

The departure brought an altered vision of loss. Kashmir becomes an over-arching theme in the novel as it carries the weight of the trauma of Partition. It represents the line of the crack, the center of the controversy of Partition, and continues to be the source of so much on-going controversy beginning with the trauma of Amritsar, the capital of Kashmir.
Upon Saleem’s grandfather’s return to Kashmir, he and his new bride travel through Amritsar on the day of the Mahatma’s “Hartal—April 7” (32). Although Dr. Aziz recognizes that “It was a mistake [of the British] to pass the Rowlatt Act [. . .] against political agitation,” he is not concerned because “Kashmir, after all, is not strictly speaking a part of the Empire, but an independent princely state.” But, here in Kashmir in 1919, even before the crack of Partition, there is a foreshadowing betrayal bringing trauma. This narrative of the trauma of Amritsar in Saleem’s grandfather’s life can only be faced with understatement and irony. In between lines describing a tickle in Aadam Aziz’s nose, Saleem writes of R. E. Dyer and his fifty-one men entering Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar. As Aziz’s sneeze causes him to lose his balance and fall, “[t]here is a noise like teeth chattering in winter and someone falls on him. Red stuff stains his shirt” (35). The narrator cannot face the truth of the contradictory understandings of the “red stuff.” There has been a slaughter with bodies all around, but the description is of Aziz’s nose “jammed against a bottle of red pills.” The irony is in the words attributed to Dyer: “Good Shooting. [. . .] We have done a jolly good thing.” And Saleem’s story of the incident abruptly ends, but the trauma is obvious: “My own hand, I confess, has begun to wobble; not entirely because of its theme, but because I have noticed a thin crack” (36). Amritsar is the beginning, a thin crack of trauma. Even the narrative of his grandfather’s experience overcomes Saleem. This “thin crack” suggests the bigger crack and bigger trauma to come.

Later, when the Sinai family moves to Pakistan, Saleem starts dreaming of Kashmir and suggests that it was a “reminder of [their separateness] from both India and Pakistan” (394). Ultimately, at the end of Saleem’s story of loss, when he expresses some hope for the future, he recognizes Kashmir as the symbol of that hope and says “Kashmir will be waiting” (551).
Kashmir, representative of Paradise before the loss brought by Partition, is the frame enclosing
the story of the trauma of the cracks of India.

**The Buffering of Magical Realism**

Saleem, in his narrative to Padma, uses many writing methods to deal with and work
through trauma, but the most pronounced method to buffer the trauma of the betrayal of Partition
is to escape into magical realism. As exemplary of this use of the near merging of the two worlds
of the magic and the real, Saleem, when speaking of what leads up to Partition, juxtaposes the
actual names of the main characters of the transfer with accusations of the use of magic: “astro-
logers make frantic representations to Congress Party bosses, [. . .] Earl Mountbatten deplores the
lack of trained occultists on his General Staff, [. . .] M. A. Jinnah [. . .] is scoffing at the protesta-
tions of horoscope-mongers” (Rushdie 126-27). Each person/group represents a different faction
in the transfer—the Indian Congress Party bosses; Earl Mountbatten, England’s envoy in the
transfer; and M. A. Jinnah, the Muslim representative pushing for a partitioned Pakistan. At such
an important point of history, the suggestion of the use of magic with the task of decision-
making is horrific in terms of the ultimate outcome. Rushdie’s ironic belittling of the situation
mirrors the feelings of many. Vinay Lal says “the partition of India may have been no more than
a convenient administrative arrangement, an expedient political device that enabled [the English]
to effect a rapid departure from a burdensome colony.” Unfortunately this “administrative ar-
rangement” brought about the “largest single migration in history”: “well over ten million, and
perhaps as many as fifteen million, people crossed borders, and a million or more became the
victims of murderous assault.” Through Saleem’s narration of the transfer of power, Rushdie
makes a shocking suggestion that some of the most important decisions of independence were
based on whims of the occult rather than on wisdom—or perhaps he is asking what other excuse can be made for such poor decisions.

This juxtaposition of wisdom with the occult suggests the reversal of the “carnivalesque,” a type of magical realism. In writing of magical realism texts, David K. Danow writes that “[t]he carnivalesque implies reversal—which is implemented by the physical reality of the world of magical realism, affording a realistic sense of a world turned upside down” (86). This “world turned upside down” is evidenced in Saleem’s description of the celebration of the midnight hour of independence coordinated in the colors saffron and green, colors of the new flag of India: “there are fireworks and crowds, also conforming to the colours of the night—saffron rockets, green sparkling rain” (132). Bombay celebrates: “they throng in the illuminated streets, beneath the infinite balconies of the city on which little dia-lamps of earthenware have been filled with mysterious oils; wicks float in the lamps which line every balcony and rooftop” (133). The narrator moves the celebration out of Bombay to cover all of India: “in all the cities all the towns all the villages the little dia-lamps burn on window-sills porches verandahs” (134). But then moving from the list of cities towns villages without using commas, suggesting the fluidity of the celebration, Rushdie uses the pause of a comma to break this fluidity: “, while trains burn in the Punjab, with the green flames of blistering paint and the glaring saffron of fired fuel, like the biggest dias in the world. And the city of Lahore, too, is burning” (134). The break of the comma contrasts the types of “celebration.” The burning of the trains and Lahore in the colors of independence becomes a carnivalesque, twisted version of the celebration of independence. The description is sandwiched in between the celebration in the streets of Bombay and the eloquent, reverential speech of Jawaharlal Nehru speaking of “a tryst with destiny” and of “redeem[ing] our pledge” at the exact time that Partition is bringing the slaughter and trauma of betrayal—a come-
dic, carnivalesque betrayal of hope. Faris, discussing the carnivalesque, says that “Midnight’s Children is perhaps the most carnivalesque of all, in its conscious adoption of the style of a Bombay Talkie—a cast of thousands, songs, dances, exaggeratedly sumptuous scenarios, horrifying blood and gore” (185). Danow identifies the carnivalesque as “support[ing] the unsupportable” (3). The celebration of new life, of promises, of independence, while a million or more people are being massacred is truly unsupportable. Saleem, in his narrative of Independence, goes on to say, “I shall turn away from these generalized, macrocosmic notions [of the dream of Independence] to concentrate upon a more private ritual; I shall not describe the mass blood-letting in progress on the frontiers of the divided Punjab [. . .]; I shall avert my eyes from the violence in Bengal” (130). Although the blood-letting and violence are horrific and obviously should be more important than any private ritual, Saleem must turn away from the trauma which has so grossly sullied the dreams of millions. He cannot face the truth of the slaughters. Danow says of magical realist texts that “[s]urvival, after all, is an overarching theme. And one possible mode of self-preservation is to engage the realm of the creative imagination” (70). Saleem must turn to magical realism to continue his narrative.

Rushdie often uses the mechanism of magical realism as a narratological subversion of the politics of the new country. An early example of this is his description/use of a split in time suggested in a “mildewing photograph” of the Hummingbird (45). According to Angel Flores, the manipulation of time is a common element of magical realist texts: “[t]ime exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality” (115). This fluidity is evident in the use of the present tense mildewing along with the supernatural elements which suggest the blending of past and present. What should be a static picture frozen in time instead continues to change. The picture was taken in the past, but the action is ongoing: “the Rani whispers, through
photographed lips that never move,” while Nadir’s voice is “issuing lowaslow from the fading picture” (46). The Rani is turning white with the mildew, “a disease which leaked into history and erupted on an enormous scale shortly after Independence.” She says, “My skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit” (46).

Further illustrations of this “disease” come later in the text when Saleem’s father, Ahmed Sinai, after business reversals, “began, literally, to fade . . . gradually his skin paled, his hair lost its colour, until within a few months he had become entirely white except for the darkness of his eyes” (212). Saleem, in his naive honesty, relates the “truth” of his father’s fading:

I should say, in all honesty, that although he pretended to be worried by his transformation into a white man, [. . .] he was secretly rather pleased when [the doctors] failed to explain the problem or prescribe a cure, because he had long envied Europeans their pigmentation. One day [. . .] he told Lila Sabarmati at the cocktail hour: “All the best people are white under the skin; I have merely given up pretending.” (212)

Through Saleem’s ironic narrative, Rushdie is suggesting that this unexplainable event of fading skin/picture, of white “leaking” into Ahmed Sinai, is a product of international business, a product Ahmed is proud of. Saleem’s subversive comment connects this “magical” fading to the bigger picture of the betrayal of Indian independence:

during the first nine years after Independence, a similar pigmentation disorder [. . .] afflicted large numbers of the nation’s business community. All over India, I stumbled across good Indian businessmen, their fortunes thriving thanks to the first Five Year Plan, which had concentrated on building up commerce . . . businessmen who had become or were becoming very, very pale indeed! (212)
The irony in Saleem’s comment is that the businessmen were not “good Indian businessmen” in terms of what was “good” for India, but were good businessmen in terms of what was “good” for them. According to a 1955 *Time* article, the first Five-Year Plan “pumped the bulk of its money into irrigation, electric power, transport and housing [. . .]. [T]he ‘private sector’ of India’s economy was left free to expand” (1, “Five-Year Plan”). Jawaharlal Nehru’s advisers agreed that in the second Five-Year Plan “the public sector must be expanded relatively faster than the private sector.” The eiron Saleem, in his seemingly naive remarks, is subverting Ahmed’s attitude and the fading of Indian businessmen, as well as the fading of the Rani, as symbolic of a betrayal of the higher goals of an independent India, since obviously the “private sector” of the “good businessmen” was the one benefitting from the Five-Year Plan intended to help the masses. Faris claims that many magical realist texts “take a position that is antibureaucratic, and so they often use their magic against the established social order [. . .] [to] create a poetics of subversion” (179). The change in color represents a betrayal of the identity of Indians as a darker-skinned people in favor of the white skin of the neo-colonialist Europeans or Americans, an example of what Ngũgĩ wa Thion’o calls “colonization of the mind.” Ngũgĩ describes colonization of the mind as a “cultural bomb” the effect of which is to “annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them [. . .] want to [. . .] identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves” (3). This colonization of the mind is especially evident in the story set at Methwold’s Estate when all the Indians “slip effortlessly into their imitation Oxford drawls” (113) whenever Methwold comes around “supervising their transformation,” suggesting that he (Methwold) knew exactly what he was doing—that the Indians could be expected to respond this way. After the “victory” of Independence, these white-skinned Indians represent a
failure to turn away from colonial dependence and a repudiation of the “heritage of struggle” that supposedly achieved Independence. But Saleem cannot face the truth. Instead, using magical realism, the trauma is covered with fading being “a pigmentation disorder.”

Just as Saleem narrates the trauma of the betrayal of the dream of Indian business independence, Rushdie continues the theme of betrayal in the chapter “On My Tenth Birthday,” a chapter that seems to be a summary of progress (or lack thereof) made in the ten years of independence for the young nation. He sets this summary up by introducing the chapter with Padma’s quest for virility for Saleem in opposition to his constant allusion to impotence and sterility as a consequence of “the widow.” As Saleem represents India, the quest for virility suggests a lack of power for the young nation as it strives to make a place in the world and prove its ability to govern itself. Padma attempts to fight Saleem’s sterility with the magic of herbs: “imagine, mister, I have spoken magic with these words: ‘Herb thou hast been uprooted by Bulls!’ [. . .] Give heat like that of Fire of Indra’” (232). But Saleem contrasts the two worlds of magic and realism and says that in spite of Padma’s suggestive magic of “feronia elephantum,” the reality is “I am beyond regeneration—the Widow has done for me.” Because Saleem is traumatized by his own sterilization, he cannot openly say or discuss the whole truth but instead gradually gives fragments of information. Earlier in the book there are innuendos of the truth. Very early in the text, in “Hit-the-Spittoon,” Saleem makes a reference to what the widow has done. He says, “I am unmanned. [. . .] I cannot hit her [Padma’s] spittoon.” (Interestingly, at this point in Saleem’s story, he does have a “pencil” with some power. Padma whispers in his ear “So now that the writer is done, let’s see if we can make your other pencil work!”[39]) In “All-India Radio,” as Saleem introduces the voices of midnight’s children, he makes another, clearer reference to his problem. In contrast to the proliferation of the magical voices in his head, there is the reality of
other radios: “And another, more obvious difference; then, the voices did not arrive through the oscillating valves of a transistor (which will never cease, in our part of the world, to symbolize impotence—ever since the notorious free-transistor sterilization bribe, the squawking machine has represented what men could do before scissors snipped and knots were tied)” (198-99).

Saleem is referring to the forced sterilization program instigated by Indira Gandhi’s son Sanjay during Gandhi’s declared “Emergency,” when the Indian constitution was suspended. Historian John Keay refers to the program as one of Sanjay’s “strong-arm methods” of government (528). Also, in that same chapter, Saleem again connects the Widow to ideas of sterility: “I paradoxically took my first tentative steps towards that involvement with mighty events and public lives from which I would never again be free . . . never, until the Widow . . .” (205). Instead of moving forward to “mighty events and public lives,” there is an ellipsis, a space, a gap. Saleem is verbally/figuratively/physically “cut off” by the Widow—“until the Widow.” He cannot express the whole truth of his condition. Instead of being a virile nation, as India, Saleem represents a powerlessness mirroring the powerlessness of the masses under Indira’s Emergency.

Continuing the reticence that indicates the working out of trauma, Saleem’s discussion of the Widow forces him from the realism of Sanjay Gandhi’s radio to the magic of dreams. In the last paragraph of “Love in Bombay,” as Rushdie nears the middle of the novel, Saleem says of the Widow, “I’m keeping for the end” (229), but then the next chapter, the middle chapter of the book, “At the Pioneer Café,” opens with one long paragraph of Saleem’s disjointed dream/nightmare of green and black, of the Widow and her arm which comes snaking down the snake is green the children scream the fingernails are black they scratch the Widow’s arm is hunting see the children run and scream the Widow’s hand curls round them green and black. [. . .] And children torn in two
in Widow hands which rolling rolling halves of children roll them into little balls
the balls are green the night is black. And little balls fly into night between the
walls the children shriek as one by one the Widow’s hand. (249)

Although in this passage there is no direct, overt naming of the Widow, there is a reference to
Indira Gandhi’s distinctive hair part. Saleem, using the magic of a dream sequence, brings his
reader to an understanding of the terror of the sterilization program by slowly building references
to the Widow’s actions with words such as scream, scratch, hunting, torn in two, and halves of
children to suggest violence, and then by using the euphemistic image of balls as children, sug-
gestive of the fertile potential of testicles. The “rolling rolling” halves of children suggest a loss
of control. The shrieking of the children leaves no doubt of the implication of trauma. With
Saleem as the allegorical representation of India, with Padma’s quest for virility for Saleem, and
with the sterilization dream, the indictment is that India, with a population of 600 million (Rus-
die 522), has become a sterile country—that, in spite of the attempt to apply the fantasy repre-
sented by the herbs, because of the trauma of the betrayal of the history of India, there is no real
power.

Rushdie begins the chapter with the quest for virility, thus identifying a lack of power, and ends the chapter with the summary of the important events of Saleem and India’s tenth
birthday. All of the last thirteen paragraphs start with “On my tenth birthday” (245-47). Some
bear more significance than others, suggesting the personal aspects of Saleem’s life mixed with
the allegorical aspects. Saleem starts with “On my tenth birthday, many chickens were coming
home to roost” (245) implying that for India the truth of the “successes” of Independence would
be made known. The second “On my tenth birthday” claims economic progress but then contin-
ues with “illiteracy survived unscathed; the population continued to mushroom”—emphasizing
signs of a lack of progress with issues concerning the masses. In the middle of the litany of tenth birthdays, at number five, Saleem says “everyone at Methwold’s Estate tried hard to be cheerful, but beneath this thin veneer everyone was possessed by the same thought: ‘Ten years, my God! Where have they gone? What have we done?’” (246). As with all of Saleem’s personal narrative, comments have relevance to the personal but also to the national. Saleem’s “everyone” is questioning whether India as an independent nation has accomplished much of all that was dreamed or expected. The lack of genuine cheerfulness suggests that the answer is a negative one. As Saleem/India continues his inventory of failed dreams—a family “which had forgotten how to be gay” (247), the loss of his clock-tower hiding-place, a dog with syphilis, and abandonment by his friends—he must turn away from the outer life and escape to the inner. He says “nothing but trouble outside my head, nothing but miracles inside it” (247). Unable to face the trauma of all the failures, Saleem/India retreats inward to the magic of his very own M. C. C.—Midnight Children’s Conference. He says, “Let me sum up: at a crucial point in the history of our child-nation, at a time when Five Year Plans were being drawn up and elections were approaching and language marchers were fighting over Bombay, a nine-year-old boy named Saleem Sinai acquired a miraculous gift” (204). Magically Saleem becomes a radio. Instead of the reality of infertility represented by Sanjay’s transistor radio, Saleem’s head is fertile with the magical voices of midnight’s children.

Abandoning the outer world of reality, Saleem’s inner world Midnight’s Children are beings of magic: “From Kerala, a boy who had the ability of stepping into mirrors and re-emerging through any reflective surface in the land [. . .] a Goanese girl with the gift of multiplying fish . . . and children with powers of transformation [. . .] a water-divining youth, [. . .] a sharp-tongued girl whose words already had the power of inflicting physical wounds” (237). Saleem says there
were “more and more and more” (237-38) and that he was “overwhelmed by their numbers, and by the exotic multiplicity of their gifts” (238). These children are magic because they connect with the magical hour of the midnight of India’s independence. They were all born the first hour, and, emphasizing the significance of the hour, there was “[o]ne remarkable fact; the closer to midnight our birth-times were, the greater our gifts” (238). These children represent the magic of the promise of an independent India.

Using his own “Midnight’s Children” as magical examples, the ironic narrator suggestively discusses the potential of the real children of India. Recognizing children as representative of the future, Saleem introduces the birth of the children as “one moment of fantasy” (234) connecting to that moment of midnight of August 15th, 1947, and India’s birth. He also makes the connection to Scheherazade’s 1001 stories; there are 1001 children of midnight, suggesting that each of these children represents possibility just as Scheherazade’s stories provided the opportunity for life. He says that these children are “endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous.” He goes on to make the connection to the potential of this multitude of children: “It was as though [. . .] history, arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time” (234-35). Saleem repeats the reference to a precise moment in time, reaffirming the significance of the birth of the new country. From this point of promise, again trauma sets in. Instead of the survival and fruition of these magical children of promise, “malnutrition, disease and the misfortunes of everyday life” (235) cost the loss of the lives of 420 of the children. These misfortunes of daily life in India killed the dreams of promise represented by the 420. But the trauma of the loss of potential is expressed in terms of the occult: “420 has been, since time immemorial, the number associated with fraud,
deception and trickery\textsuperscript{14},” which is “another excursion into fantasy” (235) Saleem cannot accept the trauma of such loss of potential without connecting to some form of magic. Interestingly, he connects fraud and deception as a form of fantasy.

In Rushdie’s greatest use of magic realism representing the central motif of the story, Saleem describes the remaining “five hundred and eighty-one children” of midnight introducing them with words such as “old-time fabulism” and “fantastic heart of my own story” (234). (Interestingly, when Rushdie/Saleem writes of the lost 420, the number is written out in digits, while the discussion of the remaining “five hundred and eighty-one” is written out in words, suggesting the importance of the literariness of their stories.) Just as Saleem is traumatized by the lack of vision recognized in the history of the Indian government, he is also traumatized by the failure of his special co-birthday children. Sundari, a beggar-girl and one of midnight’s children, exemplifies this failure. Her beauty was so great it blinded anyone who looked upon her. She blinded her beggar father, so he was unable “to distinguish between Indian and foreign tourists, a handicap which greatly affected his earning power as a beggar” (236), ironically charging planned deviousness behind what should be an act seeking mercy. Instead of her midnight gift of beauty being an asset, it is treated as a liability. Instead of thinking in new ways of potential and promise, her family remained stuck in the ideas of the limitations of the past: “an old and ruthless great-aunt took her into her bony arms and slashed her face nine times with a kitchen knife.” Sundari’s gift of beauty, her gift of the miracle of midnight, was perverted to win sympathy. The perversion of the gift enabled her to “receive [. . .] more alms than any other member of her

\textsuperscript{14}Michael Henderson writes in \textit{Experiment with Untruth: India Under Emergency} of actions taken on June 26\textsuperscript{th}, 1975, the day after the declaration of Emergency: “Students went out on the streets painting slogans ‘revoke Emergency,’ ‘restore press freedom,’ ‘release the prisoners’—and sometimes defacing government posters. Mrs. Gandhi’s 20-point programme and a 4-point programme of her son were being made much of, so posters announcing the 20-point programme were amended to 420, a byword for confidence trickster, the number of the fraud section in India’s penal code” (22).
family” (236). Through the story of the miracles and failures of the children of potential, the children of midnight, Rushdie is indicting the Indian people’s lack of vision for the future. Saleem says, “A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at one time before; and there were a thousand and one dead ends” (240). Nothing came from the potential; there was only the betrayal of dead ends. And Saleem, relating the story of India and his co-children, is traumatized and suffering cracks.

**Trauma of the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965**

After Partition, another major political trauma for the young country was the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965. Before the war, the Aziz family left their long-time Bombay home and moved to Pakistan after the death (from cracks) of grandfather Aadam Aziz. This move represents another departure in Saleem’s life that brings trauma. The trauma of the trip is indicated by the violent description of his leave-taking: “I found myself hurled into an exile [. . .]: I was flung across the Partition-created frontier into Pakistan” (340). Since Saleem is the allegorical representation of India, it would necessarily take violence to bring him across the border. The violence indicated in the language mirrors the traumatic foundational split of India and the trauma of forced changes of loyalties in the subsequent moves.

The move across the border brings a new trauma and another splitting of identity for Saleem since it also means leaving the magic of the midnight children: “[I]n Pakistan, I discovered that somehow the existence of a frontier ‘jammed’ my thought transmissions to the more-than-five-hundred; so that, exiled once more from my home, I was also exiled from the gift which was my truest birthright; the gift of the midnight children” (341). In the past, when exterior problems were too much for Saleem, he could escape to the magic of the midnight children
in his head. Since these children were the children of promise for India, Saleem’s crossing of the border out of India made him no longer a valid receptor of contact with the promise. Saleem loses the magic of the children, and he and his family become in Pakistan “helpless, non-productive members of the Zulfikar household” (344). Out of India, Saleem and his family are non-entities.

Although the border marked a break with midnight’s children, Saleem suffered another more permanent break through the drainage of his sinuses. His surgery “had the effect of breaking whatever connection had been made in a washing-chest; of depriving me of nose-given telepathy; of banishing me from the possibility of midnight children” (364). This break brought the end of Saleem’s escape into the magic of the midnight’s children, but Saleem says, “although I had been drained—although no voices spoke in my head, and never would again—there was one compensation; namely that, for the first time in my life, I was discovering the astonishing delights of possessing a sense of smell” (366). To offset the loss of the magical children, Saleem escapes into other magic—the magic of smell—suggesting the continued need for magic for at least psychological survival for the Saleem/split India facing continuing trauma.

Although Saleem loses the magic of midnight’s children with his move to Pakistan, he does carry with him the family dream of Kashmir and another “logical reversal” culminating in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965. He says that the war “happened because I dreamed Kashmir into the fantasies of our rulers” (404-05). Although Keay says that the “war lasted barely a month” (517), Saleem suggests a “confusion” of facts as he claims it as an “eighty-two-day struggle for the frontier” (Rushdie 400). Saleem, speaking of what should be a noble struggle, goes on to say: “That much is fact; but everything else lies concealed beneath the doubly hazy air of unreality and make-believe which affected all goings-on in those days, and, especially all events in the phantasmagoric Rann.” The Rann of Kutch is “phantasmagoric” because it represents all that is
a phantasm of Partition, a line drawn on paper, the “disputed territory” (400), the “unofficial frontier” of the “23rd parallel,” the division between Pakistan and India. Saleem’s comment suggests the coming together of the (un)reality of war and the magic of magical realism. But, interestingly, Saleem is not discussing himself as the creator/possessor of the magic. He is suggesting (accusing) others of “magic” in the way things that are not true become true with the magic of politics. To add to the confusion between the worlds of fact and fantasy and to introduce the trauma of government betrayal, Saleem says that the story he is going to tell “is as likely to be true as anything; that is to say, except what we were officially told” (400). Rushdie writes the story of the confrontation of Indian/Pakistani troops in terms of magical realism, starting with the setting-up of a scene of mystical dimensions: there is a marshy terrain with a “greeny sea-bed quality of the light.” He adds mythical characters, as the young Pakistani soldiers tell legends of “terrible things which happened in this amphibious zone, of demonic sea-beasts with glowing eyes, of fish-women who lay with their fishy heads underwater, breathing, while their perfectly-formed and naked human lower halves lay on the shore” (401). Imaginations run wild in the in-between worlds, such that the actual war takes on lesser importance until the (supposedly) actual opposing army appears: “they saw an army of ghosts coming out of the darkness toward them [. . .], and in the greeny moonlight they could see the sails of the ghostships, of phantom dhows; and the ghost-army approached, relentlessly, [. . .] specters bearing moss-covered chests and strange shrouded litters piled high with unseen things” (401-02). The sights are so horrible that the soldiers are brought to the point of “abject terror” (402). And then, contrasting with the supposed magic and fancifulness of the situation is the shocking reality of who the phantoms really are— “[n]ot ghosts; smugglers”—and “What are you mother-sleepers here for? Didn’t you all get properly paid off?” (402). The shocking reality is that instead of the nobility of fighting for one’s
country, the soldiers are part of a smuggling operation run by Saleem’s own Uncle Zulfikar, General of the Pakistani army, “whose fortune, [was] built originally on the miseries of fleeing Hindu families in 1947” (402). The references to the abuses of Partition and the “use” of the Indo-Pakistani border disputes for monetary gains confirms the betrayal of the higher calling of nationhood. Realism and magic get conflated in the ensuing false newspaper stories: “DASTARDLY INDIAN INVASION REPELLED BY OUR GALLANT BOYS” and, while “the truth about General Zulfikar became a ghostly, uncertain thing; the paying off of border guards became [...] INNOCENT SOLDIERS MASSACRED BY INDIAN FAUJ.” There are questions of aircraft, either “real or fictional,” and bombs, either “actual or mythical” (407). Saleem says “nothing was real; nothing certain” (406), again acknowledging the “unsettling doubts” “between two contradictory understandings of events” that characterizes magical realism (Faris 171).

Within Saleem’s questioning of the facts, there is evidence of another type of trauma in his continuing self-rejection in the logical reversals he uses to explain the war. He states that “the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth” (403). The cold, blunt, unemotional language Saleem uses to describe the effects of the bombs show how traumatized he is: “within the house of my aunt’s great bitterness my father mother aunt and unborn brother or sister who was only a week away from starting life, all of them all of them all squashed flatter than rice-pancakes, the house crashing in on their heads like a waffle-iron” (409). The use of words like squashed, flatter than rice-pancakes, and waffle-iron seem too mundane for such a horrific situation, thus suggesting a disconnect because of trauma. Saleem’s final disconnect comes with the blast of the same bombs when he is “stripped of past present memory time shame and love,” after being hit in the head with the spittoon. (Ironically, the spittoon, the one item he has to connect him to his past
and family history, is the object breaking the connection.) He says that “all the Saleems go pouring out of me,” again alluding to the theme of “leakage” as loss.

The Trauma of Ultimate Loss: Disappearance

According to Sarkar, postcolonial writers “have evoked loss, disappearance, and mourning as the defining moments of contemporary postcolonial life” (32). In Midnight’s Children, Saleem’s attempts to escape two of his most fearful life-experiences end with his facing the ultimate trauma of the possibility of total disappearance. After the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, another traumatic event for Saleem is March 25, 1971, the War of 1971 between East and West Pakistan, when Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman proclaims the new state of Bangladesh, creating another split, another border to divide people originally all of India. Saleem, as the man-dog of the CUITIA (Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities) unit, sniffs out trouble-makers in the city of Dacca as part of the infiltration of East Pakistan. The unit drives past the University and “[s]tudents and lecturers came running out of hostels; they were greeted by bullets, and Mercurochrome stained the lawns” (426). The truth of the redness of blood is denied by calling it Mercurochrome. The use of ironic language such as being “greeted by bullets” highlights the shocking realities. After capturing the Sheikh, as the unit is driving through the streets, the men in it looked out of windows and saw things that weren’t-couldn’t-have-been true: soldiers entering women’s hostels without knocking, women, dragged into the street, were also entered, and again nobody troubled to knock. And newspaper offices, burning with the dirty yellowblack smoke of cheap gutter newsprint, [. . .] roadside ditches filling up with people who were not merely asleep—bare chests were seen, and the hollow pimples of bullet holes. [italics added] (426)
Saleem, in his use of ironic “belittling language”—soldiers entering “without knocking,” people “not merely asleep,” “pimples of bullet holes”—attempts to bring the horrors of war to an understandable language of the everyday with a blending of the real and unreal and verifies trauma as a failure to face the truth. Trauma is evident in the long list of denial of the truth of what they see and what has happened.

Equally shocking in Saleem’s narrative is the insinuation that the attacks are framed as having a noble purpose—to restore unity in the face of East Pakistan’s desire for independence—an idea which is then twisted to the perversion of attacking the weak residents of the slums. Saleem suggests the noble purpose with his reference to “our boys, our soldiers-for-Allah” and then turns language against them and their cause as they “held Pakistan together [emphasis added] by turning flame-throwers machine-guns hand-grenades on city slums” (426). Saleem struggles to narrate the truth of what happens and covers up his inability: “There are things which took place on the night of March 25th which must remain permanently in a state of confusion” (427). This supposed ambiguity serves as another method of denial.

As in the case of other instances of overwhelming trauma, Saleem escapes the Dacca massacre into magic realism. He, with his Number 22 Unit, leaves Dacca—“as though some invisible force were directing their footsteps, drawing them into a darker heart of madness” (428), alluding to Joseph Conrad’s important colonial text of madness, *Heart of Darkness*. Saleem explains his need to escape: “an overdose of reality gave birth to a miasmic longing for flight into the safety of dreams” (431). The “overdose of reality” is the trauma of the massacre of so many innocent people, of Pakistanis fighting/killing Pakistanis rather than some guilty “other,” to the extent of requiring the escape/departure symbolic of trauma. Again Saleem resorts to the protective splitting of identity. When Padma relates her feelings about his running away, Saleem is
quick to say “not I. He. He, the Buddha.” Saleem escapes to the Sundarbans, to the “terrible phantasms of the dream-forest” (434).

As Saleem had previously left India and now seeks to escape Pakistan, he is left with no options for survival but once again to escape into magic, in this case to go to the “dream-forest” of magic realism. Within this forest, Rushdie accumulates images of “fadings” as foreshadowing the threat of Saleem’s total disappearance. Previous to entering the forest, Saleem had “lost” his name, giving him a form of non-existence before he even enters the forest. The personification of the forest gives it a power suggesting its ability to overcome all those who enter: “the jungle was gaining in size, power and ferocity” (432). Other words used to describe the action of the forest carry images of power—“sucking,” “swelling,” and “explode.” (432-33). Contrasting with these images of magical power are the fadings suggestive of disappearance. When the unit awakes, they find “their bodies covered in three-inch-long leeches which were almost entirely colourless owing to the absence of direct sunlight” (433). Ayooba awakens to find the “translucent figure of a peasant” (435) he had previously killed. The peasant leaks fluid onto Farooq’s arm, and “the arm was held immovably in the invisible fluid of the ghost.” The Buddha is bit by “a blind, translucent serpent” (436). The unit is visited by all these apparitions of magic, including ghostly white monkeys (435, 437). All the loss of color suggests the need for the loss of reality with an escape into magic.

Besides the threat of losing visibility, the unit moves deeper into the jungle and faces another loss of part of their humanity—the loss of hearing due to their attempt to escape the traumas of their past—“to escape from the accusing, pain-filled voices of their victims” (437). These voices of victims relate to the voice of the wound as a voice of trauma hauntingly calling out (Caruth 3). They are traumatized by guilt and are “[u]nable to escape from the unbearable torture
of the unceasing voices, incapable of bearing for a moment longer the burden of shame” (438),
again suggesting the repeated crying out of the wound of partition. “[I]n the throes of that awful
hallucination,” all except the Buddha stuff their ears with mud of the dream forest that not only
stops the voices but ends up causing total deafness. The loss of their hearing and the ensuing si-
lence continue to build the image of disappearance as the only answer to the trauma they have
faced.

The progression deeper into the magic of the jungle “when the four wanderers were near
the point of panic” brings the men to the miracle of a forgotten Hindu temple and their attempts
to overcome trauma by forgetting: “forgetting reasons and implications and deafness, forgetting
everything, they gave themselves to the four identical beauties without a single thought in their
heads” (439). But there is a price to pay and a lesson to be learned. Forgetting what is real and
succumbing to the timelessness of magic brings the loss of self. At some questionable point in
time, “they looked at each other and realized they were becoming transparent, that it was possi-
ble to see through their bodies, not clearly as yet, but cloudily,” and “they became as hollow and
translucent as glass” (439). The implication is that staying in the world of magic causes the loss
of reality: “The Buddha saw now that the colorlessness of insects and leeches and snakes might
have more to do with the depredations worked on their insectly, leechy, snakish imaginations
than with the absence of sunlight” (439). Reality, which must overcome “insectly, leechy,
snakish” imaginations, sets in when the men see “four funeral pyres” with a “fire-eaten heap of
uncrushed bones” (440). Action is required to reconnect to reality. As one final act of magic, the
“forest of illusion” (440) sends the unit out via a giant tidal wave, but as magic realism will ult-
imately have its own way, time is eschewed. They had entered the Sundarbans on March 25th,
1971. When they escape, it is October 1971. Also, to prove the “time-shifting sorcery of the for-
est [. . .] there was no tidal wave recorded that month, although, over a year previously, floods had indeed devastated the region.” Saleem admits that his “old life was waiting to reclaim [him]. [N]o escape from past acquaintance” (400). His remarks verify that all that happened in the Sundarbans was an attempt to escape as a reaction to the continuing trauma of his life.

Keay’s history of the time adds insight to the trauma that Saleem attempts to escape and cover with ambiguous language, the violence that brought yet another split with the formation of Bangladesh from the east arm of Pakistan. With political strife between the two arms of Pakistan, the United States put pressure on for general elections and a return to civilian rule after General Yahya Khan had imposed martial law for the entire country of Pakistan. According to Keay, [t]he elections gave [Z. A.] Bhutto a majority in the West while in the East Sheikh Mujib won one of the most impressive mandates ever recorded in a genuinely free vote. The implications for the cohesion of Pakistan were grim. The meeting of the National Assembly was postponed; talks between Mujib, Bhutto and Yahya Khan ended in failure; and in March 1971, as the Awami League made good its threat to proclaim the independence of ‘Bangladesh,’ tanks rolled onto the streets of Dacca. (526)

Saleem is right that “there was no tidal wave recorded that month, although, over a year previously, floods had indeed devastated the region” (Rushdie 440), but during that time of flood, “tens of thousands of flood victims had poured across the border into Indian territory” (Keay 526). Saleem’s “tidal wave” was not of water, but of “millions of refugees from the butchery of the Pakistani army. [. . .] Refugees were in fact being armed and trained by the Indian army, and then returned to their homeland as freedom-fighting ‘Mukhti Bahini.’ They were followed in November 1971 by regular units of the Indian army” (Keay 526). As Saleem says, “my old life
was waiting to reclaim me. [...] no escape from past acquaintance” (Rushdie 440), he recognizes the inevitability of war.

From one instance foreshadowing permanent disappearance, the Buddha finds his way to Dacca and his actual (and magical) “disappearance.” As the Buddha and the rest of his unit approach Dacca, they happen upon a field “in which grew crops so strange [...]. The crops were dead, having been hit by some unknown blight [...] and most of them, but not all, wore the uniforms of the West Pakistani Army” (444). The denial of truth concerning the dead bodies is covered by the ironic suggestion of a “blight” as the cause of death. Part of the crops includes a pyramid that is still alive: “One of its three heads had a blind left eye, the legacy of a childhood argument. Another had hair that was thickly plastered down with hair oil. The third head was the oddest; it had deep hollows where the temples should have been, hollows that could have been made by a gynaecologist’s forceps which had held it too tightly at birth” (446). The third head spoke to Saleem: “Hullo, man,” it said, “What the hell are you here for?” Saleem, resorting again to a magical realism logical reversal for an explanation of the tragedy before him, is convinced that “the purpose of that entire war had been to re-unite me with an old life, to bring me back together with my old friends” (446). The pyramid of heads of boyhood friends exemplifies the trauma of the loss of childish innocence due to the various wars of division in a once-united India. The head calling out to Saleem is another voice of the wound of partition trauma calling out.

With Saleem’s arrival in Dacca, Rushdie connects the incidents of the Bangladeshi War for independence to the carnivalesque with the arrival in Dacca of a conquering Indian Air Force troop transport which included “a hundred and one of the finest entertainers and conjurers India could provide” (451). Saleem says that these “were sorcerers of the highest order.” And Saleem needs the escape of magic as a means of denial because, as he and Shaheed enter the city, they
“saw many things which were not true, which were not possible, because our boys would not could not have behaved so badly; we saw men in spectacles with heads like eggs being shot in side-streets, we saw the intelligentsia of the city being massacred by the hundred, but it was not true because it could not have been true” (449). He says that it was an “impossible hallucination of the night.” Again Saleem is traumatized by what he sees and thus refuses to believe it as truth. He tells Shaheed “a person must sometimes choose what he will see and what he will not” (449). And there is the choice of the illusions of the magicians: “extraordinary female contortionists who could swallow their legs up to their knees; there were jugglers who operated outside the laws of gravity, so that they [. . .] delighted [the] crowd as they juggled with toy grenades, keeping four hundred and twenty in the air at a time” (452). Again Rushdie uses the ideas of the carnivalesque as he juxtaposes the magic with the “impossible hallucination” of the slaughters of the night as well as the idea of grenades as toys of magic.

The greatest incident of magic in Saleem’s life is his disappearance at the hands of Parvati-the-witch, one of his fellow children of midnight. Although her co-magicians constantly seek explanations for her “tricks,” her magic is genuine. In order to avoid being part of the deaths of the “impossible hallucination” of the atrocities of his fellow Pakistani soldiers, Saleem must “disappear.” Again, to avoid the trauma of atrocities, Saleem escapes into magic, and, ironically, where he feared disappearance in the Sundarban, now he is at the point where he accepts disappearance as his only chance of survival. He says that “[e]lsewhere in the city, ninety-three thou- sand soldiers were preparing to be carted off to P. O. W. camps; but Parvati-the-witch made me climb into a wicker basket with a close-fitting lid. [. . .] Then Parvati whispered some other words, and, inside the basket of invisibility, I, Saleem Sinai, complete with my loose anonymous garment, vanished instantly into thin air” (454-55). He says, “I was in the basket, but also not in
the basket” (455). In/not in the basket, Saleem feels his world slipping away, but, in the midst of magic, is reality—his spittoon. Saleem clings to his spittoon as his hold on reality when forced to escape the trauma of the residual of the war. The use of such a demeaning object as a spittoon as the only hold on reality is a shocking comment on Saleem/India’s existence at this point of animosities between the countries of divided India.

Trauma of the Double

Sarkar, in his investigation of representations of trauma in Indian cinema, finds the use of *doubles* to be “one of the most enduring features of Indian popular cinema” (107). Usually the doubles are siblings separated and growing up in very different environments. Ashis Nandy sees the role of the double as integrative “in relation to self-concepts fragmented by uprooting and deculturation” (qtd in Sarkar 107), yet Sarkar argues that the trend to use doubles “marked the exteriorization of deep anxieties regarding national identity” and “emerges as a way of negotiating the trauma of modernity and nationhood” (107). Rushdie makes the connection between *Midnight’s Children* and cinema when he refers to his story as “Bombay-talkie-melodramatic” (523) and relates scenes in terms of camera angle, etc.: “close-up of my grandfather’s right hand: [. . .] we cut to a long-shot—nobody from Bombay should be without a basic film vocabulary” (Rushdie 31). Besides camera angles, Rushdie also utilizes the cinema doubles of Saleem and Shiva to relate the trauma brought by what Sarkar regards as the “deep anxieties regarding national identity.” Whereas Nandy’s doubles are integrative, Rushdie’s doubles are constantly in conflict with each other. Their failure to reach the integrative point of the movie doubles is reflective of the failures caused by the traumas of Indian life, but, in this novel, the doubles also represent a “working through” of the various legacies of a divided India. The confrontations of
Shiva and Saleem, as each moves through his life, are the confrontations of different social and economic levels to reflect the pressures of a divided people.

Saleem and Shiva’s doubling begins with their double births at midnight of Independence. The switch of babies at birth leaves Saleem split between his Saleem/Shiva identities, thus creating an alternative/double of himself. Is he really Saleem, or is he really Shiva? What makes him Saleem? Is Saleem Shiva based on birth to a biological mother, or is he Saleem as a product of growing up as Saleem? Is he really Shiva posing as Saleem? There are other questions related to split-identity issues. Saleem grows up in India, but his family is Muslim, so where do his loyalties lie? Saleem lives in fear that Shiva will find out the truth. He says, “I’m still terrified of him. [. . .] I spend my days quivering at the thought that the war hero might somehow have discovered the secret of his birth” (529). The trauma and questions brought by the split of identity for Saleem mirrors the trauma and questions brought by the split of all of India at Partition. Ironically Saleem, as the child of the British William Methwold, actually represents India as a child of the British Empire, leaving questions of how he/India could ever hope to attain a stable post-colonial identity after British colonization. Would there always remain integrative problems? These questions of identity hearken back to Faris’s identification of the “unsettling doubts” of magical realist texts.

The opposition of Saleem and Shiva is introduced early in the text, even before the introduction of midnight’s children, in a chapter with the innocuous title of a child’s board game—“Snakes and Ladders.” Saleem’s explanation of the game foreshadows what is to come: “implicit in the game is the unchanging twoness of things, the duality of up against down, good against evil; the solid rationality of ladders balances the occult sinuosities of the serpent; in the opposition of staircase and cobra we can see, metaphorically, all conceivable oppositions, [. . .] the po-
larities of knees and nose” (167). Within the explanation is the conflict of rationality and the occult, suggesting the conflict of the two worlds of magic realism, as well as the conflict of knees and nose, suggesting the conflict between Saleem and Shiva.

Saleem introduces the special abilities of the children of midnight: “but two of us were born on the stroke of midnight. Saleem and Shiva, Shiva and Saleem, nose and knees and knees and nose . . . to Shiva, the hour had given the gifts of war [ . . . ] and to me, the greatest talent of all—the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men” (239). Saleem attributes to Shiva a capability of “nonchalant violence” (262) especially rendered through the gift of the constellation Capricorn: “Capricorn, as any astrologer will tell you, is the heavenly body with power over the knees” (265). Shiva’s greatest weapon is his powerful knees.

The conflict between the Saleem/Shiva doubles starts when Saleem tries to organize the midnight’s children. With Shiva’s recognition of both their births so close to midnight, he claims “that makes us joint bosses of this gang of yours!” (263). Whereas Saleem sees a “purpose” for the Midnight Children’s Conference, Shiva has a much different outlook on life. Saleem explains, “The thing is, we must be here for a purpose, don’t you agree? So what I thought, we should try and work out what it is, and then, you know, sort of dedicate our lives to . . .” (263). Shiva counters with

What purpose, man? What thing in the whole sister-sleeping world got reason, yara? For what reason you’re rich and I’m poor? Where’s the reason in starving, man? God knows how many millions of damn fools living in this country, man, and you think there’s a purpose! Man, I’ll tell you—you got to get what you can, do what you can with it, and then you got to die. That’s reason, rich boy. Everything else is only mother-sleeping wind! (263-64)
Shiva in his tirade confronts Saleem with the truth of what it means to live in poverty almost to the point of completing Saleem’s knowledge in his role as India. The discussion ends with what Saleem calls a “declaration of war,” thus setting up the trauma of the conflict of values which will ultimately destroy the future of promise represented by midnight’s children.

The conflict of predominance between Saleem and Shiva becomes a matter of productivity versus sterility. While Shiva becomes a war hero “applauded and monopolized by the noblest and fairest in the land,” beguiling all the women to the extent that he was “[s]trewing bastards across the map of India” (488), Saleem, as representative of the India of the people, is faced with the autocratic policies of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency which include mass vasectomies. According to Saleem, Indira is trying to wipe him out since he represents and is the access to midnight’s children who are the children of promise in opposition to her own role as India—as suggested “in-those-days-famous phrase: *Indira is India and India is Indira*” (501). To her the children are “that gang of cut-throat desperadoes before whom [as] an astrology-ridden Prime Minister [she] trembled in terror—the grotesque aberrational monsters of independence, for whom a modern-state could have neither time nor compassion” (517). These threats must be eliminated and not allowed to replicate themselves. Saleem, as the one person capable of identifying all the children, becomes one of the thousands of “political” prisoners to lose their freedom during the Emergency. His final trauma comes at the hands of Shiva and a vasectomy van, suggesting the lack of promise during Gandhi’s “Emergency.”

Ironically, Saleem’s capture as a political prisoner starts as part of a “Civic beautification programme . . . authorized operation of Sanjay Youth Central Committee” (511). “Civic beautification” means clearing out the ghetto of the magicians with the use of bulldozers, but it also means herding the people into sterilization vans. As Saleem attempts to escape the Russian guns
used to round up the magicians to move them to the vasectomy van, he recognizes that “Major Shiva has joined the fray, and he is looking only for me” (512). The whole scene reeks of betrayal. The Russian guns are used against the same magicians who had once “marched triumphantly beside a conquering army.” Whereas the magicians had been successfully used for India’s earlier military and political activities, all that is now forgotten. Saleem is left to wonder about Shiva’s betrayal: “why did he do it? Why did he, who had once led anarchistic apaches through the slums of Bombay, become the warlord of tyranny? Why did midnight’s child betray the children of midnight, and take me to my fate?” (513). Shiva’s betrayal of Saleem is a betrayal and an eventual capture of all of midnight’s children, all the children of promise.

Shiva and Saleem’s roles as doubles are confirmed in their double betrayals. Just as Shiva betrays the children with the capture of Saleem, Saleem betrays the children as “forced into treachery by the treason of another, I betrayed the children of midnight” (517). The trauma of the experience of Saleem’s capture and stay at the Widows’ Hostel is too much for him, and he reverts to a denial either true or false. He says, “Here I record a merciful blank in my memory. Nothing can induce me to remember the conversational techniques of that humorless, uniformed pair [. . .] No, I have forgotten, I cannot will not say how they made me spill the beans” (516). But the how is not the most important matter; most important is the fact that “I did most certainly talk” (516). The “beans” consist of the names and locations of all of midnight’s children, bringing them all “the curse of vanishment” (518) as a precursor to other curses:

testicles were removed from sacs, and wombs vanished for ever. [. . .] [T]he children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves . . . but that was only a side-effect [. . .] for all those who had come to the palace of the wailing windows with their magical gifts intact, the awakening from anaesthesia
was cruel indeed, and whispering through the wall came the tale of their undoing, the tormented cry of children who had lost their magic; she had cut it out of us [. . .] gone forever, [. . .] the originally-one-thousand-and-one marvelous promises of a numinous midnight. (523)

What had begun as Nehru’s congratulatory letter of promise—of watching the token child grow and blossom as a mirror of the growing and blossoming of a new nation—is betrayed by Nehru’s daughter. The Emergency becomes Indira’s carnivalesque inversion of the midnight of promise, “the birth of the new India and the beginning of a continuous midnight which would not end for two long years” (499-500). Instead of children of promise, at this midnight, were born “occult tyrannies” (500). Just as she destroyed the promises of the children of midnight, her emergency measures betray the vision of the democratic process of the new nation.

In the end, Saleem is left with cracks as wounds of trauma calling out. He says that in the various drainages including the ones at the hands of the Widow, “lie the origins of the cracks: my hapless, pulverized body, drained above and below, began to crack because it was dried out. Parched, it yielded at last to the effects of a lifetime’s battering. And now there is rip tear crunch, and a stench issuing through the fissures, which must be the smell of death” (550). In a country where experts see the need “to defuse inter-group conflict” of various ethnic, religious, and language groups in order to survive and prosper as a nation (Malik and Vajpeyi 4), Saleem/India says, “I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust” (37). His lifetime’s battering includes the traumas of partition, wars, and the Widow.

But Saleem is left with the last word of his jars of pickles. He says that in spite of the fact that “on March 20th, files were burned by a mother with parti-colored hair and her beloved son”
(524), in his jars he was “able to include memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sundarbans. [. . .] Thirty jars stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation” (549). These lines, as some of the last of Saleem’s narrative, stand as a warning, or perhaps a threat, that the truth will come out in spite of attempts to hide it, that politicians and, in particular Indira Gandhi, will ultimately be held responsible for their actions, that the voice of the trauma will continue to cry out. Also, in Salman Rushdie’s character’s lines is a suggestion that is discussed in another chapter of this dissertation—that much of the history of the young country of India is preserved only in the novels written about the times—that in a country where people are too traumatized to face the truth and/or those in power feel compelled to destroy records, there is more history in novels than is available in history books. Saleem says “to pickle is to give immortality” (549). His narrative gives immortality to the story of the traumas of India.
Works Cited


Chapter Three: Speaking History: India’s Partition and Emergency in *Ice-Candy-Man*, *Train to Pakistan, A Fine Balance and Such a Long Journey*

Fiction as History

August 15, 1947, the day India became a country free from its English colonizer, was a long-awaited time of celebration that included the stories of self-sacrifice of Mohandas Gandhi, a figure who had become a world-wide symbol of peaceful resistance. The celebration of independence was to be a celebration of democracy—a model for other countries seeking their own independence in the future. But behind the rhetoric of celebration of that day, there was a darker side, a side of suffering, suffering caused by the apparent necessity of the partition of India into two countries—Pakistan and India—to bring about independence. This is not the place to discuss the long, involved history that led to India’s independence from colonial rule, but let it suffice to say that, to quote Vinay Lal, “the partition of India may have been no more than a convenient administrative arrangement, an expedient political device that enabled [the English] to effect a rapid departure from a burdensome colony.” According to the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, the decision about the boundaries for the two new countries was the “departing kick of British imperialism at both the Hindus and Muslims” (qtd in Butalia 67). Unfortunately, this “administrative arrangement” brought about the “largest single migration in history”: “well over ten million, and perhaps as many as fifteen million, people crossed borders” (Lal). And sadly, and ironically in a country whose independence was gained through Gandhi’s practice of *peaceful resistance*, “a million or more [people] became the victims of murderous assaults.” Lal goes on to say that, in spite of these numbers, “they barely register in world histories [. . .] and until the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence was celebrated in 1997, the public memory of partition was encap-
sulated in a handful of notable works.” In spite of the massive number of deaths and the suffering that took place during the partition migrations, there is little mention of the details and facts in official histories. Priya Kumar recognizes that there are “gaps and silences that underlie the origin of the modern Indian nation-state—silences around specific moments and events which, if articulated, will throw the ‘imagined community’ of a unified Indian nation into disarray, and thus, cannot be acknowledged in the national memory” (204). Instead much of what is known about the tragedies has come from a few important fictional writings that contest the silence.

Prior to the proliferation of Partition literature in the last few years, except for a very limited number of works of fiction, there was little said or written about the victims of Partition. According to Urvashi Butalia, “[d]espite the recent opening up of Partition histories there are many aspects that remain invisible in official, historical accounts of the event” (235). This lack of official records emphasizes the importance of fiction for carrying the burden of history. Beverly Schneller, discussing the relationship between history and fiction (and between historian and fiction writer) refers to Hayden White, the leader in this discussion, who “argues that there is little difference between historical narrative and the type of prose narrative associated with fictions.” According to White, “the historian’s point of view towards the material used in historical writing is equivalent to the fiction writer’s point of view when creating a plot for a novel” (qtd in Schneller 233). David Cowart justifies this comparison from a “scientific viewpoint”: “History cannot escape imprecision because source material, frequently incomplete or slanted, must undergo interpretation by historians who, unlike physicists or chemists, can never neutralize or obviate the effects of their own subjectivity” (14). Schneller argues that novels often work as “historical fictions” as the authors “rely on historical information which they shape to fit their plots” and that

15 It is important to acknowledge the ethnocentric beliefs of the English as expressed in Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden” and, thus, the pressures on the new countries to downplay the harsh truths of Partition in order to prove their ability to govern themselves.
these novels “perform as history for their readers” (234). Within this chapter of “Speaking Voices,” I will discuss this relationship of history and fiction in four postcolonial novels by connecting the writing in the novels to events whose history, gleaned from first-person narratives, primary documents, etc. that have often failed to be incorporated into “official documentation,” emphasize that in some cases, because of this lack of official historical documentation, fiction is the only voice of history.

Speaking the History of Partition

One important novel to give voice to Partition history is Bapsi Sidhwa’s Ice-Candy-Man, first published in 1988 and then republished in 1991 as Cracking India. According to Andrew Whitehead, Sidhwa’s novel “is the truth—a recreation of Sidhwa’s childhood experience of Partition” (104). In a Time magazine special issue on the Golden Jubilee of Indian independence, Sidhwa wrote: “I was a child then. Yet the ominous roar of distant mobs was a constant of my awareness, alerting me, even at the age of seven, to a palpable sense of the evil that was taking place in various parts of Lahore” (qtd. in Whitehead 104). Whitehead identifies Sidhwa, at the time of Partition, as “the same age, of the same religion and the same city, and with the same disability” as her character Lenny. David Cowart, writing of the validity of the historic fiction, recognizes that “the past can only be known imaginatively and [. . .] the most reliable explorer of the past is the one best able to integrate facts into a living imagined reality—again, not the historian but the historically informed artist” (28). Based on her personal knowledge, Bapsi Sidhwa qualifies as a reliable explorer and informed artist writing of the history of Partition. In an interview with Isabella Bruschi, Sidhwa explains that “[h]istorians are often guided by their own and their nation’s prejudices. Fiction-writer can paint a fuller canvas and often intuitively arrive at
the *larger truth* [emphasis added]” (143), a claim important in recognizing the unique value of historical novels. Through the portrayal of emotions of the fictional characters, the fiction writer is able to relate the effect of the historical situation in terms of the people involved.

Sidhwa was in a unique position to tell/retell her story as she is Parsi, part of a peace-loving religious minority supposedly not directly affected by Partition. The Parsis were not threatened by any of the majority religious faiths, and, thus, did not have to migrate, seemingly giving them a unique position of stability during the tumultuous time. Together with her child-character’s naiveté and her own Parsi faith, a narratological distance allows Sidhwa a clearer perspective for writing. She makes this connection in her interview with Bruschi: “I am Parsi, not Hindu, Muslim or Sikh and I wrote from a Parsi child’s perspective, because I felt it could bring some sort of fairness on the issue of Partition which still raises strong emotions involving religious communities” (143).

As a valued part of the ability to relate truthful emotions of the time, especially vital and interesting to the story of the shocking Partition horrors are Sidhwa’s narratological observations of the changing social currents leading up to the historic time. Cowart, acknowledging the role of “social currents” within history, cites the work of Georg Lukacs: “The novel, he argues, is intrinsically historical in that it concerns social currents and forces that are the products of historical antecedents” (4). The importance of changing social currents related to Partition is perceptively drawn as Sidhwa portrays a sequence of scenes relating to a statue of Queen Victoria in a Lahore park across from the British government’s Assembly Chambers. Since a common sentiment expressed in much of postcolonial Indian literature is a feeling of betrayal by the English because of the way they abruptly left India, in *Ice-Candy-Man* this statue becomes a symbol of this betrayal. Early in the novel, Sidhwa’s child character Lenny says, “Queen Victoria, cast in gunmet-
al [italics added], is majestic, massive, overpoweringly ugly. Her statue imposes the English Raj in the park” (18). Her words suggest the power of the British, especially the military power in the reference to the gunmetal. And, in a novel ultimately about the agency of women, the words suggest Queen Victoria initially as an archetypal protective mother figure. Early in the novel, before the violence begins, the sphere of English power represented by the queen gives a sense of security to the various religious groups that gather in the park. Imam Din the Muslim cook, Sher Singh the Sikh zoo attendant, and the Muslim Ice-candy-man all gather around the Hindu Ayah under the protection of Queen Victoria: “all hover round you like moths round a lamp” (qtd. in Whitehead 104). Various characters of contrasting religious affiliations hover around in the security of the British Raj, but the social climate will change as the working-out of Partition is brought from the tables of discussion of the dominant political figures to the streets and parks of the ordinary citizens. According to Andrew Whitehead, “[t]he rivalry among Shanta’s [Ayah’s] circle of admirers in the park stands as a metaphor for the fight to carve up British India” (103). Ultimately the “defiling of the ayah, can be seen as reflecting the despoiling of a country” (104). The characters’ dialogue and actions connect the social currents to the historical outcome as the powerful, protective statue of the mother figure is ultimately reduced to a degrading shadow over the park as well as over the new country.

Early in the story the characters of various religious denominations come together to socialize in the park. The conversations center around Shanta the ayah and then move to “the inside track of the Raj’s doings” (90) and the various manipulations and power combinations to bring about independence for India. Discussing the close relationship between Nehru and the Mount-battens, the Moslem Masseur wonders what will happen to Jinnah: “[W]ho’s going to hold our Jinnah Sahib’s hand? Master Tara Singh?” (91). The butcher responds with “That non-violent
violence-monger—your precious Gandhijee—first declares the Sikhs fanatics! Now suddenly he says: ‘Oh dear, the poor Sikhs cannot live with the Muslims if there is a Pakistan!’” The Government House gardener sums up his feelings: “It is the English’s mischief . . . They are past masters at intrigue. It suits them to have us all fight” (92). The manipulative British actions create a new social current of division that contributes to the violence that follows.

The friendly coming together of various ethnic/religious groups changes with the recognition of the bigger issues of government and the questions of an individual’s tie to the possible government configurations in terms of religion/ethnicity. Lenny recognizes the changes. Where-as before the innocent child saw people as individuals, she now “become[s] aware of religious differences” (93) as her friends move to align themselves with religions that were previously marginal in their lives. Whereas previously the various characters did not practice their religious faiths, they now do so to clarify their religious affiliations. Lenny recognizes that “[o]ne day everybody is themselves—and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols” (93). She sees each as “[c]rammed into a narrow religious slot.” It is these newly created/emphasized social currents of division that lead to what becomes the communal violence of Partition. As the British prepare to leave, the various characters “withdraw [. . .] from the shadow cast by the Queen’s Statue” (Sidhwa 127), and eventually the statue is completely gone from the park, as are the Hindu and Sikh women and families who no longer are safe in the park or in Lahore (237).

This same idea of respect for a shared Muslim/Hindu community is evident in other dialogues outside the arena of the park. Lenny travels with Imam Din, their Muslim cook, to his home village of Pir Pindo, “Forty miles from Lahore as the crow flies” (49). Late in the afternoon the men of the village are joined by Sikh peasants from a neighboring village. After eating
and belching together, and as the Muslim villagers smoke the hookah, the Muslim mullah brings up a concern: “I hear there is trouble in the cities . . . Hindus are being murdered in Bengal . . . Muslims, in Bihar. It’s strange . . . the English Sarkar can’t seem to do anything about it” (55). To protestations that the troubles will not reach the remote village, Imam Din realistically asserts, “I don’t think you know how serious things are getting in the towns” (56) as he claims Hindu-Muslim as well as Sikh-Muslim trouble. At this point “[t]he villagers, Sikh and Muslim, erupt in protest.” The various characters swear protection for their friends:

“If needs be, we’ll protect our Muslim brothers with our lives!” says Jagjeet Singh. “I am prepared to take an oath on the Holy Koran,” declares the chaudhry, “that every man in this village will guard his Sikh brothers with no regard for his own life!” “We have no need for oaths and such,” says the mullah in a fragile elderly voice. “Brothers don’t require oaths to fulfil their duty.” (56-57)

All the men of various religious affiliations are ready to protect each other no matter what. They feel no religious divide, but rather brotherhood, at this point in the novel.

A similar shared devotion is evidenced in Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, a novel published in 1956, less than ten years after the 1947 Partition, by one of India’s most trusted writer/journalists, a novel that Vinay Lal identifies as one of the “notable works” portraying the history of Partition. Here, also, the progression of dialogue takes the citizens of the small village of Mano Majra from the ideal of a shared community to willingness to mercilessly kill their long-time friends and neighbors. Although the communal rioting and murders started in Calcutta the summer before, it is not until the summer of Partition (1947) that the little village feels the impinging of communal separation within its triangular commons area. Until this time, the village, predominately made up of Sikhs and Muslims (with one Hindu family), even had a local
deity they worshipped in common (2). All their lives were intertwined with the comings and goings of the trains:

Before daybreak, the mail train rushes through on its way to Lahore, and as it approaches the bridge, the driver invariably blows two long blasts of the whistle. In an instant, all Mano Majra comes awake. [. . .] The mullah at the mosque knows that it is time for the morning prayer. He [. . .] cries in long sonorous notes, “Allah-ho-Akbar.” The priest at the Sikh temple lies in bed till the mullah has called. Then he too gets up [. . .] and intones his prayer. (4)

This same feeling of interrelated social lives is evident in their conversations. When the head constable arrives to arrange the evacuation of the Muslims, the conversations are about the deep feelings of the groups. The Muslim leader Imam Baksh

wiped a tear from his eyes and blew his nose in the hem of his shirt.

“What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers. Imam Baksh broke down. Meet Singh [Sikh] clasped him in his arms and began to sob. [. . .] The lambardar [Meet Singh] spoke: “Yes, you are our brothers. As far as we are concerned, you and your children and your grandchildren can live here as long as you like. If anyone speaks rudely to you, your wives or your children, it will be us first and our wives and children before a single hair of your heads is touched.”” (126)

The two groups express their devotion to one another, with the Sikhs pledging to protect their Muslim tenants/friends. According to historian Sumit Sarkar, even leading up to the partition “Hindu-Muslim unity was a notable feature” (qtd. in Butalia 70).
Later in the story, as the changes of Partition bring more of the outside world into the community’s commons area, the dialogue changes, evidencing new social currents. The later dialogue moves from the Sikhs’ pledges of devotion and sacrifice for their fellow villagers to their manhood being questioned: One of the strangers in the village tries to stir the Sikhs to violence and asks, “What sort of Sikhs are you? [...] Potent or impotent?” (148). Just as in *Ice-Candy-Man*, the unity of the community is broken over religious differences as characters see a need to align themselves with members of their own religion for security purposes. The challenging rhetoric continues: “Do you know how many trainloads of dead Sikhs and Hindus have come over? Do you know of the massacres in Rawalpindi and Multan, Gujranwala and Sheikhupura? What are you doing about it? You just eat and sleep and you call yourselves Sikhs—the brave Sikhs! The Martial class!” (148). The narrator says that every sentence becomes a challenge, and, although “[t]he villagers felt very uncomfortable [...] [t]he harangue had made them angry and they wanted to prove their manliness” (150-51). Emotions rather than logic drive the Sikhs to volunteer to assist the “visitor,” who is initially and anonymously identified synecdochically by his method of transportation as “a jeep” (146). And “[s]ome villagers who had only recently wept at the departure of their Muslim friends also stood up to volunteer” to kill their Muslim friends traveling on the train to Pakistan.

Sidhwa also writes in *Ice-Candy-Man* of the shocking details regarding the trains of migration. Ice-candy-man relates the news: “‘A train from Gurdaspur has just come in,’ he announces panting. ‘Everyone in it is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslim. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women’s breasts!’” (149). He feels the devastation on a very personal level: “I was expecting relatives . . . For three days . . . For twelve hours each day . . . I waited for that train” (149). Earlier the narrator says, “Playing British gods
under the ceiling fans of the Flettis Hotel—behind Queen Victoria’s gardened skirt—the Radcliff Commission deals out Indian cities like a pack of cards” (140). Because Gurdaspur had gone to India, those leaving on the train would have been Muslims fleeing the insecurity of living in Hindu India.

The confusion and emotional drives in the fictionalized versions of the train massacres between Hindustan and Pakistan are verified with recently published personal Partition narratives. Urvashi Butalia, in her collection of stories from those who participated in the massacres, acknowledges the damage of the uncontrolled emotions of the time: “For years afterwards—indeed well into the present day—people involved in Partition violence would ask themselves what it was that turned the interconnectedness of entire lifetimes, often generations of shared, interdependent, albeit different lives, into feelings of enmity” (58). In one of her interviews, a Sikh who lived close to a border town tried to explain the emotions of the time: “I cannot explain it, […] but one day our entire village took off to a nearby Muslim village on a killing spree. We simply went mad. And it has cost me fifty years of remorse, of sleepless nights—I cannot forget the faces of those we killed” (qtd. in Butalia 58). No one paid a legal penalty for these crimes. There are no official records of these killings. The shocking narratives in novels such as the fictionalized *Train to Pakistan* and *Ice-Candy-Man* carry the burden of voice in resistance to the silence surrounding the history of Partition.

Besides the killings of Partition, there were other atrocities committed particularly against women. Urvashi Butalia’s research shows that, apart from the murders, rapes, other, more specific kinds of violence had been visited on women. Many were paraded naked in the streets, several had their breasts cut off, their bodies were tattooed with marks of the ‘other’ religion; in a bid to defile the so-called
‘purity’ of the race, women were forced to have sex with men of the other religion, many were impregnated. They bore children, often only to have them taken away forcibly. Sometimes families traded their women in exchange for freedom, at other times the women simply disappeared, abducted from camps, or as caravans of people marched across the border on foot. (105)

Rumors of this violence drove husbands and fathers to drastic measures to protect their women and the honor of their faith. In her research, Butalia interviewed 70-year-old Mangal Singh who was a legend in Amritsar because he and his two brothers were said to have killed seventeen women and children of their family before coming across the border. He said that the women were willing to be martyrs as the “real fear was one of dishonour. If they had been caught by the Muslims, our honour, their honour would have been sacrificed, lost” (155). Many families chose to burn buildings with all their young girls in them to save the “honor” of the girls (Butalia 162).

Also, another story of saving a girl’s honor is told. A brother tells of his sister, a young girl named Maan Kaur who sat in front of her father, with her back to him, and pulled aside her long braid of hair to allow him to successfully use his sword to cut her head off in order to save her from possible dishonor (Bir Bahadur Singh qtd. in Butalia 163).

This idea of saving the honor of women through their deaths is also related through the fictionalized narratives. In Ice-Candy-Man, when Lenny visits Pir Pindo, she befriends the Muslim child Ranna. When the Partition riots start, his village is attacked by a group of militant Sikhs. In spite of the rumors of riots, the villagers feel that they are safe, “[e]mbedded in the heart of the Punjab” (198). When the attack seems inevitable, the villagers make a plan for the women: “The women and girls will gather at the chaudhry’s. Rather than face the brutality of the mob they will pour kerosene around the house and burn themselves” (198-99). Sidhwa verifies
this story as based on an actual incident described to her by a man who was a small child during Partition. She says that “what I describe in my writings is much less horrifying than what he went through. It is amazing how many times he escaped and every time he felt there was somebody to help him and he was safe, he fainted. Each time people left him for dead” (qtd in Bruschi 144). This man became angry at the inclusion of the story in her novel. She said that she thought he “was angry because I had written about the women in his family being kidnapped. That is something nobody talks about, nobody; it is such a dishonor to admit that a woman in one’s family was raped” (qtd. in Brushi 144). This fictionalized story again connects with Butalia’s research into the atrocities committed against women by their own families as well as by the “other” of an opposing religious faith.

In addition to such harsh attempts to “protect” women from dishonor, another ongoing injustice of Partition was the case of abducted women on both sides of newly-created borders. Butalia cites a 1988 documentary account of a woman named Kamlaben Patel who worked with women after Partition. Patel recounted that nearly 75,000 women “had been raped and abducted on both sides of the border at Partition” (qtd. in Butalia 105). This figure does not take into account Kashmir, which, if it had been included, would have brought the figure closer to 100,000. After seeing the account, Butalia searched out Patel to ask why she had waited so long to tell her story of the abducted women. Butalia recognized an obvious “deliberate erasure” of the existence of the abducted women. Her interviews about Partition violence brought her to the realization that “while abducted women [. . .] entered the realm of silence, women who were killed by families, or who took their own lives, entered the realm of martyrdom” (165). Mangal Singh, who killed seventeen women and children family members, did not say they were “killed.” Instead, they were “martyred” (154). To be kidnapped and survive was a fate worse than death and a
blow to the honor of the family and country because of the fear of conversion to the “other reli-
gion.”

The Agency of Women

A case of kidnapping and the issue of honor is the pivotal story in Ice-Candy-Man. The important relationship that drives Lenny’s narrative is that of her and her Hindu ayah (referred to as Ayah), who is abducted by the Muslim Ice-candy-man. Interestingly, as the novel opens with the description of Queen Victoria’s statue made of gunmetal, a theme of this novel is the powerful agency of women within the patriarchal system during this time of such heinous treatment of women, a time when the their treatment was tied to the honor of men. Illustrative of the theme, early in the novel, a young mother behind the barrier of a black burka takes her sick baby to Col Bharucha, the doctor referred to as “cloaked in thunder” (Sidhwa 4). Initially the mother cannot speak directly to the doctor but must relay answers to his questions through her husband; however, when this obviously becomes less efficacious, she abandons the mediated conversation and “addresses the doctor directly, looking at him through the netting covering her eyes” (12). This change represents the agency women in this novel must assert to help fellow women in need, accentuating the failure of the male-dominated society to provide the necessary and proper aid and protection for women.

As Butalia’s research indicates, men were motivated to protect the women’s honor to the point of killing them. Obviously, one would have to possess a certain amount of “strength” to be able to kill one’s wife and/or daughter to protect them, but many elements of Sidhwa’s novel work as an indictment of the weakness of the male-dominated society that caused the loss of so many women as wives and mothers. Not forgetting the failure of those male politicians involved
in the actual division of the country, Sidhwa suggests the failure of men in general. Instead of indicating strength within her men characters, Sidhwa emasculates them. Ice-candy-man’s strength seems to rest in his suggestive toes (19). Masseur’s weapons are his hands used in massage. Lenny’s father is not shown in any stance of strength. While Mother “shoots off in the Morris,” Father “drudges off on his bicycle” (171). Even Moti, the untouchable, “dares not interfere” with his wife’s fits of anger against his child: “Muccho would make his life intolerable” (46). As Godmother dictates the actions of her household, Oldhusband is relegated to being a synecdochic newspaper.

But the greatest indictment of men in this Partition story is Sidhwa’s emasculation of Mahatma Gandhi, a man whose strength of character is generally recognized as a driving force behind Indian independence. As the story is told from the perspective of a naïve young girl, her response to Gandhi is portrayed as without guile; she is honest and states what she sees. Although there is an acknowledgement of the good works of Gandhi, as Lenny thought he was not real—that instead he was a “mythic figure”—Sidhwa’s characterization of him is almost perverse. When Lenny’s mother takes her to meet Gandhi, he is knitting, “sitting cross-legged on the marble floor of a palatial veranda, [. . .] surrounded by women. He is small, dark, shriveled, old” (86). As Lenny and her mother approach Gandhi, he “politely puts aside his knitting and uncreases his disgruntled scowl” and speaks softly. In these spring months related in the novel, just prior to the August independence and Partition, India was facing very serious issues and decisions, but Sidhwa’s Gandhi directs his attention to other issues: “sluggish stomachs are the scourge of the Punjabis16 . . . too much rich food and too little exercise. The cause of India’s ailments lies in our clogged alimentary canals. The hungry stomach is the scourge of the poor—and

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16 The Punjabi’s greatest “scourge” at this time was certainly not rich food, since the Punjab would be the area suffering the greatest violence of Partition as the state was cut in two, causing catastrophic identity and, thus, safety issues for the people.
the full stomach of the rich.” Lenny’s mother feels impressed enough to relay to Gandhijee the “odour, consistency, time and frequency of her bowel movements” (87), to which he replies, “Flush your system with an enema, daughter [. . .]. Use plain, lukewarm water. Do it for thirty days . . . every morning. [. . .] Look at these girls [. . .]. I give them enemas myself—there is no shame in it—I am like their mother. You can see how smooth and moist their skin is. Look at their shining eyes!” (87). The powerful work of Mahatma Gandhi is reduced to that of a mother giving enemas to women. And Lenny does not see even this perverted solution to India’s problems as efficacious: “The enema-emaciated women have faint shadows beneath their limpid eyes and, moist-skinned or not, they are much too pale, their brown skins tinged by a clayish pallor” (87). Sidhwa’s characterization of Gandhi, and thus the whole process and work of Partition, works as an indictment of those (men) involved.

Instead of men, women are the strong characters in this novel, being proactive, fighting back against the atrocities against their sister victim women. It is women who make the sacrifices. Lenny’s mother’s resistance to her husband’s wishes gets to the point of “bruises on her body,” but she continues to work to rescue kidnapped women (238). The text connects her work to the Ministry for the Rehabilitation of Recovered Women (273) established by the Sixteenth Meeting of the Partition Council in 1948, a ministry Butalia recognizes in her collected narratives of the time. Interestingly, Sidhwa claims that it was “not till Ice-Candy-Man came out that people realized how many women had been kidnapped and people wanted to find out what had happened” (qtd. in Bruschi 146). She recognizes her work as spurring the gender research of both Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon’s and Kamla Bashin’s Borders and Boundaries: How Women Experienced the Partition of India. Even in this chain of references, it is women helping
women. So, as a point of fiction representative of history, ironically, it is fiction that spurs history-gathering.

Early in the novel *Ice-Candy-Man*, the various characters radiate to the beautiful Hindu Ayah. After the death of the Hindu Masseur, the man she loved, it is the Muslim Ice-candy-man who betrays his friendship with the child Lenny to trick her into revealing Ayah’s hiding place:

They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet—that want to move backwards—are forced forward instead. Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat opens her mouth like the dead child’s screamless mouth. [. . .] The last thing I noticed was Ayah, her mouth slack and piteously gaping, her disheveled hair flying into her kidnappers’ faces, staring at us as if she wanted to leave behind her wide-open and terrified eyes. (183-84)

In spite of Imam Din and Yousaf’s attempts to save Ayah, the innocent Lenny, moved by her belief in the loyalty of Ice-candy-man, betrays Ayah. In Sidhwa’s story, it is ultimately the agency of a woman, Godmother, that brings the rescue of the Hindu Ayah from the disgrace of the Muslim Ice-candy-man. It is the rage of women at the situation that brings change. When Godmother faces Ice-candy-man to force Ayah’s release, Lenny “can tell by the hooded droop of her wrinkled lids, by the somber shape of her tongueless cheeks, that she is in a cold rage; and God help Ice-candy-man” (247-48).

The power and depth of the rage of women in general and Lenny’s mother in particular against the cruelty is suggested earlier in the story in Imam Din’s capture of an alley cat that invades the kitchen. He threatens to teach the cat a lesson, and, just as with the communal riots of Partition, neighbors join in encouraging Imam Din. In the midst of the yelling, Lenny’s mother
drives up, but “Imam Din is so intent on chastising the cat that he doesn’t hear her, and oblivious of her presence roars invective at the caterwauling animal. ‘Let her go at once!’ screams Mother, slamming shut the door of the car” (225). Mother instructs Lenny to get the fly-swat and then waving her arms in an awkwardly feminine and energetic way, swats Imam Din with it. She strikes his legs, arms, shoulders, and even his shaven head. [. . .]

Glasses dramatically awry, face flushed, she continues to whack him. Imam Din looks bewildered—and searches confusedly for the flies she is swatting on his person. When he realizes her fury is directed at him, his bewilderment turns to incredulity, and then to shock. (225-26)

Although this story seems to be about a wayward cat, in Mother’s mistaken reference to the cat as female, it becomes a metaphor for the women abused by men during Partition. As Mother has been working to rescue these women and sees the violence inflicted upon them and then hears and sees the violence Imam Din inflicts upon the cat, she goes into a rage to protect the cat as representative of the abused women. Based on Imam Din’s shocked response, this is not the expected or usual behaviour of Lenny’s mother, thus dramatizing the effect of what she has seen in her work to bring her to this point of anger and violence. This scene can be said to be repeated later in the novel when Ice-candy-man follows the rescued Ayah to the women’s compound. Again Mother displays her rage as she screams at the departing carts carrying Ice-candy-man and his goondas: “Duffa ho! Show your blackened faces at someone else’s door! That scoundrel! He can’t deceive me again! If he dares show his face I’ll call the police and have him hung upside down!’ She is flushed and fuming and panting in a fierce way” (272). Mother is intent on protecting women who are the innocent victims of history as well as of the men in the story.
Sidhwa’s story illustrates both the process and consequences of kidnapping women from either side of the line of partition through Ayah and Hamida, women rescued and aided by Lenny’s mother and Godmother. After the kidnapping, there are “sightings” of Ayah, sightings that indicate her to be in the position of dishonor feared by the women interviewed by Butalia. Lenny’s cousin is the first to sight Ayah and infers that she is in a less-than-honorable situation through the recognition that she is wearing make-up. Lenny describes her own first sighting: “I realize that the flashy woman with the blazing lipstick and chalky powder and a huge pink hibiscus in her hair, and unseeing eyes enlarged like an actress’s with kohl and mascaraed eyelashes, sitting squashed between two thin poets, was Ayah” (233). Cousin has to explain to the naïve Lenny that Ayah is the “opposite of Virgin Mary. She’s become a dancing-girl!” (240). Lenny wants Ayah to come to her, but Godmother explains that “[S]he is ashamed to face us” (253). Ayah’s shame is emblematic of the social power used to manipulate women during this time of upheaval.

When Ice-candy-man visits Godmother, she charges him with bringing shame to Ayah: “You permit her to be raped by butchers, drunks, and goondas and say she has come to no harm? [. . .] Is that why you had her lifted off—let hundreds of eyes probe her—so that you could marry her?” Ice-candy-man’s failure and weakness is obvious in his reply: “I’m a man! Only dogs are faithful! If you want faith, let her marry a dog!” (248). Lenny knows that Godmother has “established a network of espionage” (210) that gives her influence and power to confront Ice-candy-man with the truth: “Can’t you bring yourself to say you played the drums when she danced? Counted money while drunks, pedlars, sahibs, and cut-throats used her like a sewer?” Lenny feels and sees the power of Godmother’s rage: “Godmother’s face is slippery with sweat. Her thighs beneath me are trembling. I have a potent sense of her presence now. And when I inhale I
can smell the formidable power of her attack” (250). Again, Sidhwa’s narrative reflects men’s failure while emphasizing the power of women. Instead of Ice-candy-man protecting the woman he supposedly loves, he uses her for his own dishonoring pleasure and then tries to excuse his actions. Ayah’s rescue comes only through the agency of women protecting women.

Godmother’s rage drives her to recover the Ayah from Ice-candy-man. Meeting Ayah for the first time after her abduction, Lenny and Godmother see a different Ayah from the innocent, friendly girl who earlier cared for Lenny and her younger brother Adi. When Ayah enters the room, she is “teetering on high heels, tripping on the massive divided skirt of her garara, jangling gold bangles. Her eyes are lowered and her head draped in a gold-fringed and gauzy red ghongat. A jeweled tika nestles on her forehead and bunches of pearls and gold dangle from her ears” (260). She is now Mumtaz, the name of a Mogul queen, dressed in Muslim garb. The clothes are different, she is wearing make-up, but the biggest difference is her eyes: “Where have the radiance and the animation gone? Can the soul be extracted from its living body? Her vacant eyes are bigger than ever; wide-opened with what they’ve seen and felt [. . .]. Colder than the ice that lurks behind the hazel in Ice-candy-man’s beguiling eyes.” When she opens her eyes, “frenziedly, starkly—[. . . she] says ‘I want to go to my family’” (261). The shock and trauma of what she has gone through are not easily overcome. She adds, “I’m not alive” (262). Even after Ayah is rescued and delivered to the Recovered Women’s Camp, her weakened physical and emotional state is obvious: “[SUPPORTED by two old women Ayah appears in the courtyard. She looks up at us out of glazed and unfeeling eyes for a moment, as if we are strangers, and goes in again” (274). Ayah is rescued and returned to her Hindu family. She is one of the fortunate ones whose family is willing to take her back after her dishonor, but, like so many other women who were victims of the trauma of Partition, she will never be the same. She will never be the inno-
cent Ayah caring for her loving Lenny again. Lenny’s own loss, as a Parsi child supposedly not directly involved in Partition, emphasizes how everyone loses in such a tragedy. As Lenny grows, matures, and loses her naivété about what is happening around her, she says, “I feel so sorry for myself—and for Cousin—and for all the senile, lame and hurt people and fallen women—and the condition of the world—in which countries can be broken, people slaughtered and cities burned” (217). Lenny knows and empathizes with the powerless victims of the macro-historic events of Partition.

Godmother rescues a Hindu woman from a Muslim man, but Sidhwa’s story emphasizes that there were kidnappings on both sides of the border (Sidhwa 105). Since Ayah was single when she was kidnapped, there is neither husband nor children to complicate her return to her family. This is not the case with Hamida, the “fallen” woman from the Recovered Women’s Camp who takes over the care of the children after Ayah is taken. Hamida represents the other side of the communal violence: she is a Muslim woman who was kidnapped by Sikhs, a martial group of Hindus. Now her family refuses to take back the dishonored woman. Hamida was a housewife (191) with children—two teenage sons and two younger daughters (221)—but she is not allowed to see her children. She tells Lenny that “[t]heir father won’t like it. [. . .] If their father gets to know I’ve met them he will only get angry, and the children will suffer” (221-22). Hamida’s kidnapping has made her a disgrace to her family. Butalia writes of the ruptured lives of many women as a result of the kidnappings. She says that “Krishna Sobti, a well-known writer and someone who has lived through Partition herself, speaks movingly of a whole generation of women whose lives [. . .] were destroyed by Partition” (89). In Sidhwa’s story, Hamida does not blame her husband, but instead cannot face the truth. She says that “[i]t’s my kismet that’s no good” (222).
Sidhwa’s story tells of the physical recovery of two women, but it also suggests the impossibility of the long-term emotional recovery of women “dishonored” by their kidnapping. Butalia’s research condemns the silence of many years as a failure to confront the emotional aspect of the ruptured lives of so many women. She speaks of the reticence to confront the truth even years after Partition: “having begun to remember, to excavate memory, words would suddenly fail speech as memory encountered something too painful, often too frightening to allow it to enter speech” (18). These feelings of dishonor and shame are evident in Sidhwa’s character Hamida. When Lenny first acknowledges her new ayah as a woman from the neighboring compound, she describes Hamida in terms indicating shame: “She stops speaking abruptly and looks unaccountably guilty and even more bashful. Suddenly, folding her knees, she hunkers down on the bedroom floor and draws her chuddar forward over her face” (191). The actions indicate Hamida’s total effacing of herself as a person—a reflection of the emotional consequences of Partition.

In the end, the walls of the compound of recovered women symbolize the silence of Partition kidnapping. Hamida and Ayah are brought out from behind the walls of silence of supposed dishonor to live again. Although these women will never fully recover their losses of dignity, family, and what could have been, through the agency of Godmother and Mother both learn that they can be accepted back into life. Hamida is trusted with the care of the children Lenny and Adi, and Ayah is accepted back by her family in Amritsar. There is a fictional recovery. Isabella Bruschi says that “[l]iterature, visual art and music are said to succeed where history fails, that is they can express what is silenced, because it is officially unsavoury or because it is too painful to voice” (143). Ice-Candy-Man works as a speaking voice of history to overcome theunsavory and painful. It speaks of possibility through the continuing agency of women helping women.
Death Trains of Partition

Whereas Sidwa in *Ice-Candy-Man* writes of the emotions and agency of women that history fails to express, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* illustrates another facet of Partition history—the infamous “death trains”—and the imagined emotions attached to these death trains, which carried refugees across the newly-created borders. Whereas Bapsi Sidhwa was a child growing up during the time of Partition, thus giving her some emotional distance from the actions going on at the time, Khushwant Singh was a Sikh attorney living in Lahore and, thus, knowledgeable of the happenings around him. C. N. Srinath, commenting on Singh’s novel, suggests that closeness to an actual historical event is a detriment to writing historical fiction. In terms of “writer as witness,” Srinath claims that “As witness to his own art he is welcome but not as witness to the historical incident which threatens to make him a reporter, at best a realistic reporter unless there is a colouring of imagination” (58). He goes on to identify areas in Singh’s novel that suggest a lack of personal coloration as a deficit in an historical novel. Srinath writes of the “flamboyant neutrality” (60) which lacks an exploration of “the dehumanizing atrocities of partition with profound sympathy” (59). But Srinath recognizes within Singh’s novel

the strength of a neutral narrative voice and a detached observation of the moving train, the moving panorama of death and at the same time an indulgence which sensationalises [sic] this act with all the accompanying rhetoric that leaves the reader shocked, appalled and disgusted but dumb. This may partly be because of the magnitude of the violence which leaves the reader dehumanized and dry with all feeling drained out of him. (60)

Srinath claims that Singh’s neutral narratological voice is limiting, but then validates its usefulness in conveying the silence identified as a product of partition violence: it “leaves the
reader shocked, appalled and disgusted but dumb.” Thus the silence about Partition is also extended to the reader because of the shock of the realities. Although Srinath identifies Singh’s character Juggut Singh as having “no interior, [. . .] no notions of an inner life” (62), it is actually the blunt portrayal of the actions of Juggat Singh defending against the out-of-control emotions that produced the senseless violence of the train massacres that demonstrates a strong interior reality. Like the moving train, circumstances were moving so quickly that they left little time for deep thought, but instead required only action.

Whereas in Ice-Candy-Man Sidhwa’s strong characters are women, in Singh’s Train to Pakistan women in their precarious positions of weakness are written as totally at the mercy of men. But Singh’s novel does not emasculate men as Sidhwa’s does. Instead, ultimately there are saving emotions and mercy shown by some of the male characters. At the beginning of the novel, readers are introduced to the power of the patriarchal system symbolized by the train. The entire village of Mano Majra, its waking and religious life, centers around the running of the trains (4). Srinath recognizes that the train is “metaphorically time and consciousness” (60) in the community. Another symbol of the patriarchal system is Mr. Hukum Chand, magistrate and deputy commissioner of the local district in the Punjab (18). In the conversation about the atrocities against the Hindu and Sikh refugees at Sheikhupura and Gujranwala, he shows some emotion with a sigh and says, “Our Hindu women are like that: so pure that they would rather commit suicide than let a stranger touch them,” yet he abuses his authority by having a young girl brought to him for his pleasure: “She was only a child and not very pretty, just young and exploited. Her breasts barely filled her bodice. They could not have known the touch of a male hand. The thought that she was perhaps younger than his own daughter flashed across his mind” (28). As she sings, he “felt uneasy. He took another whisky and dismissed his conscience. Life
was too short for people to have consciences” (27). Chand’s interior monologue relates his attempt to deny his emotions through silence.

Although Srinath writes of a lack of “colouring of imagination” (58) and a “detached observation of the moving train” (60) concerning the emotions of Singh’s characters, Hukum Chand’s evolving emotions are key to the plot of the story and show the author’s “colouring of imagination” as the character becomes more and more involved with the coming movement of the train. Chand analyzes his own strong emotions:

“No fool like an old fool.” The sentence kept recurring in Hukum Chand’s mind. He tried to dismiss it, but it came back again and again: “No fool like an old fool.” It was bad enough for a married man in his fifties to go picking up women. To get emotionally involved with a girl young enough to be his daughter and a Muslim prostitute at that! That was too ludicrous. He must be losing his grip on things. He was getting senile and stupid. (175)

Chand comes to realize that the child is in danger since she is part of the Muslim community attempting to leave on the train that he knows is doomed to suffer attack. Because of his strong feelings for a child supposedly not of great value in his life, he works to become an agent of change through his manipulation of Juggut Singh, the only man he recognizes as having the strength of character to act on his own beliefs.

Juggut is another male character showing the strong emotions necessary to fight the needless destruction represented by the death trains. Although Srinath claims there is a certain lack of visible tenderness in the character, there is no lack of strong emotions. He writes that “the relationship between Juggat Singh and Nooran is almost bestial in its exclusive sexuality” (61):
She could not struggle against Juggut Singh’s brute force. She did not particularly want to. Her world was narrowed to the rhythmic sound of breathing and the warm smell of dusky skins raised to fever heat. His lips slubbed over her eyes and cheeks. His tongue sought the inside of her ears. In a state of frenzy she dug her nails into his thinly bearded cheeks and bit his nose. The stars above her went into a mad whirl and then came back to their places like a merry-go-round slowly coming to a stop. (Singh 14)

The relationship between Nooran and Juggut is strong, but it is more than sexual. When Juggut is released from jail in Chundunnugger, he is told of the plan for the Muslims of Mano Majra to leave by train that night. As he rides the tonga back, his emotional depth is evident as his “immediate concern was the fate of Nooran” (164). Besides the emotional depth, a spiritual depth is acknowledged with Juggut’s visit to the gurdwara for a reading from the Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book. Meet Singh explains the reading: “If you are going to do something good, the Guru will help you; if you are going to do something bad, the Guru will stand in your way” (174). Juggut’s concern for Nooran’s well-being and his visit to the gurdwara belies Srinath’s charge that Juggut is a character “who has no interior, has no notions of an inner life” (62).

There are other less honorable passions driving other characters and the plot. The story of Juggut beating Malli “had gone round the village. His reputation had to be redeemed” (151). Malli becomes the leader organizing the Sikhs to attack the train carrying their Muslim neighbors to Pakistan. Again, “Some villagers who had only recently wept at the departure of their Muslim friends also stood up to volunteer” (152). Malli relays the “perfect plan” (154):

People with swords and spears will be right at the bridge to deal with those that fall off the roof of the train. They will have to be killed and thrown into the river.
Men with guns will be a few yards up the track and will shoot at the windows. There will be no danger of fire being returned. [...] If they stop the trains, we will take care of them and kill many more into the bargain. (154)

Just as the train is moving forward to its destiny, the story’s action picks up steam with emotionally charged vignettes of violence ironically associated with the idea of Nehru’s “tryst with destiny,” a phrase used in his celebratory speech the night of independence (176-78). Sundari, the daughter of Hukum Chand’s orderly, “made her tryst with destiny on the road to Gujranwala” with her new husband: “She had hardly seen his face through her veil. [...] She who had not really had a good look at Mansa Ram was shown her husband completely naked. They held him by the arms and legs and one man cut off his penis and gave it to her” (177). These stories move quickly with little/no commentary—just straight forward descriptions of cruelty—to the embankment along the train track where the men “sat on their haunches with their rifles and spears between their legs” (179). Meanwhile Hukum Chand in Chunddunnugger, thinking of the young girl on the train, “slid off his chair, covered his face with arms and started to cry. Then he raised his face to the sky and began to pray.” As the train approached, “a man started climbing on the steel span,” attempting to untie the knot of the rope which was to be the first attack on the train, causing hundreds to fall off the top of the train to the waiting spears below. The man on the rope “whipped out a small kirpan [sword] from his waist and began to slash at the rope” (180). The action becomes intense as Juggut Singh, the man on the rope, having no thoughts of his own safety, fights to save those on the train which he realizes includes Nooran. The leader of the Sikhs raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired. He hit his mark and one of the man’s legs came off the rope and dangled in the air. The other was still twined round the
rope. He slashed away in frantic haste. The engine was only a few yards off [. . .]. Somebody fired another shot. The man’s body slid off the rope, but he clung to it with his hands and chin [. . .] and again started hacking with his right hand. The rope had been cut in shreds. Only a thin tough strand remained. He went at it with the knife, and then with his teeth. The engine was almost on him. There was a volley of shots. The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the center as he fell. The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan. (181)

Juggut Singh is a Sikh who overcomes his religious affiliation to save a train full of Muslims knowing that Nooran is on board, but not knowing that she is carrying his child. His strong actions are the result of his emotions, thus showing a “personal coloration” of character by the author. In the end, this baby represents the correct emotions and strong character of its father who overcomes the atrocities of lesser out-of-control emotions during the Partition. The child is a seed of hope, a symbol of overcoming man’s inhumanity to man at a time of such irrational behavior, suggesting again what Bruschi says about literature and the arts succeeding where history fails (143).

Much of the history of Partition reflects a seemingly lost sense of humanity, perhaps explaining much of the silence surrounding this time in the history of the young nation, but through the addition of emotional coloration by writers of fiction, readers come to understand the larger truths of the history of the Indian Partition of 1947.

Speaking the History of the “Emergency”

Besides the Partition of India, another momentous time in India’s history as a nation was Indira Gandhi’s “Emergency” of 1975-1977. Just as with the atrocities of Partition, this too was
a time of silence in terms of truth, another silence requiring the voice of fiction to speak for the victims involved. As discussed in an earlier chapter, Salman Rushdie writes of the trauma of the time through his fictive character Saleem in *Midnight’s Children*. This chapter will connect traumas of fictive characters with those of the actual victims as writers overcome the silence of the Emergency with the speaking voice of fiction.

The Emergency declared on June 25, 1975, began a 21-month period of time when, under Article 352 of the Constitution of India, Gandhi, in an effort to maintain power in her country at a time when she was charged with election fraud, ruled by decree and shut down presses and suspended civil liberties. She and her son/advisor Sanjay Gandhi were charged with many abuses of power, such as arresting and detaining their political adversaries, forcing thousands of men to undergo vasectomies, and destroying slum homes of the poor in New Delhi. Yet, characteristically, there is little official record of these abuses. Sukumar Muralidharan, writing in *Frontline*, gives a possible explanation for this omission:

As a family with a strong sense of its own destiny, the Nehrus were once fastidious record-keepers. Yet during Indira Gandhi’s later tenure as Prime Minister, the family proved eager to efface certain aspects of the public record. An instance is the J. C. Shah Commission of Inquiry into political excesses during the Emergency—many hours of tape-recording of the depositions before the commission have been lost and it is believed that not one copy of its final report has survived within the country. (“Enigma”)

The Indian news organization *Samachar* reported on August 5, 1977, that Indira Gandhi “disclosed in the Lok Sabha [. . .] that 3,000 files had been burnt in ‘the house in which I live now’” (qtd. in Henderson 218). This information suggests a deliberate failure of accurate reporting of
history. Even as recently as the year 2000, with the 25th anniversary commemoration of the Emergency, Muralidharan recognized the continuing indifference to what happened. Referring to the Congress I party, he says that it “still accords considerable honour and responsibility to some of the principal villains of the Emergency. And being in thrall [italics added] to the dynasty that was perhaps firmly established during the authoritarian interlude, it has little by way of an authentic spirit of introspection alive” (“Legacy”). Again, the suggestion is that there is a continued deliberate manipulation or overlooking of historical facts and information related to the Emergency. Stepping into this void to correct or undo the silencing of truth are several post-Emergency historical fiction writers who resist the silence of history by putting imaginative flesh on the facts of history—combining/integrating details—bringing them together to paint a more complete picture of separated pieces by attaching them to the lives of characters. David Cowart, writing of the benefit of the historical novel, says that the “reader learns to understand the past by entering into its mental life” (9). Writers of historical fiction are able to relate historic events in terms of the mental and emotional life of their characters, thus bringing greater understanding. Fiction writer Rohinton Mistry says that in writing he looks at history “from the bottom up,” suggesting that the everyday life and stories are what become the “big” events of history (Oprah.com).

An important non-fiction text relating the facts of the Emergency is Michael Henderson’s *Experiment with Untruth: India under Emergency*, much of which was written during the Emergency. Henderson relates how his writing had to be done “discretely” (xi), how documents had to be fed to him as he feared leaving his room during the day because anyone going against the Gandhi regime was jailed. To indicate how extreme the situation was, Henderson writes of how
a group of Delhi citizens headed by 81-year-old Bhim Sen Sachar, former Chief Minister of the Punjab and a former Governor of two states, wrote to Mrs Gandhi (23 July 1975): “We are amongst the very humble of your fellow countrymen, just ordinary citizens interested chiefly in constructive work, none of us belonging to any political party. We have no political axe to grind nor are we interested in any political office or power. Our chief interest is in upholding the freedom and dignity of the individual.” (25-26)

Henderson continues that “after detailing in a moderate tone their views on the suppression of freedom they concluded” by offering themselves in opening up a public dialogue as a “humble offering at the feet of the Motherland,” “regardless of consequences” (25). But the “‘humble offering’ was never given. For two days later, in the early hours of the morning, all eight signatories to the letter were arrested and put in jail” (26). This instance stands as an example of the abuses of Gandhi’s Emergency when civil liberties were suspended, creating and maintaining an environment of fear for those who wanted to speak against or question what was happening. During the Emergency, 200,000 people were arrested, and a year and a half later 20,000 were still imprisoned without a trial (Henderson xiv). Fearing his own imprisonment, Henderson had to hide and do his investigating and writing on the sly. His well-documented research clearly proves how Indira Gandhi created a fiction to justify her actions and maintain control of India. Henderson writes that a “committee set up to investigate the performance of the national news agency, Samachar, during the Emergency concluded [there was] ‘constant and direct political interference with a view to manipulate or even fabricate news in the interest of a small group round the former Prime Minister’” (xii). Thus, since Samachar was the official news agency and
the only source to disseminate information, the general public did not know the truth of what was happening.

Indira Gandhi declared the state of Emergency in a desperate attempt to hold onto power after the Allahabad High Court, on June 12, 1975, found her guilty of corrupt electioneering practices, resulting in the denial of her “right to participate in debate or vote in the Lok Sabha [lower house]” (Henderson 1). On November 7, the Supreme Court set aside the earlier ruling because by then “Indira Gandhi had declared a state of Emergency, called an emergency session of Parliament, amended the Representation of the People’s Act with *retrospective* [italics added] effect, making corrupt practices no longer corrupt, and changed the Constitution, depriving the High Courts and the Supreme Court of the power to decide petitions relating to her election” (1). With the retrospective effect of the Amendment, Indira Gandhi could not be charged with any crimes, thus opening the door to totalitarian government actions. Along with this retroactive exonerated, she would be exonerated from “all possible future charges of criminal actions while she was in high office” (Wolpert, qtd. in Gupte). According to an article in the *New Statesman* (29 August 1975), “Mrs. Gandhi arrested the opposition and censored the press last month not because India was threatened but simply because her own position was” (qtd. in Henderson 2). Henderson reports “the great non-debate on the changes in the Constitution. [. . .] [and] take[s] a look at the part played by fear and who it stemmed from and suggest that prison torture, compulsory sterilization and the callous demolition of people’s precious homes were not just excesses but inevitable consequences of a philosophy rooted in untruth” (xiv). When Indira Gandhi declared a state of Emergency on June 25th, 1975, all information about the reasons for it and the truth of what was happening was completely controlled by the Gandhi government. To cover the
trail of the evils of the Emergency, Gandhi took the facts of history and created fiction, and today
the writers of Indian fiction have taken the facts and have become the writers of history.

Although Beverly Schneller writes that Rohinton Mistry “does not indicate if he conduct-
ed research to develop his novel [A Fine Balance],” in both A Fine Balance and Such a Long
Journey, many of Mistry’s plot elements come directly from the documentation in Henderson’s
book, thus verifying extensive research into the history behind the plots. Both of Mistry’s novels
deal with historical people and incidents. Based on this documentation, in contrast to the “un-
truth” of the Gandhi regime, the writings of Rohinton Mistry become a “speaking voice” of the
history of the Emergency.

A Common Theme

Rohinton Mistry’s novels of Indian history, Such a Long Journey and A Fine Balance, are
chronologically and thematically connected. The action in Such a Long Journey begins in 1971
as India struggles with the refugees from the war between East and West Pakistan that ends with
the creation of the new country Bangladesh, the time period leading up to the Emergency de-
clared in June of 1975. A Fine Balance opens on the day of the declaration. Although Mistry u-
ses different characters in the two novels, there is a common theme, which relates to what Hen-
derson refers to as the “non-debate” on the Emergency: the ignorance of the common man as to
the truth of what is going on. Mistry’s characters often do unwise things because they do not un-
derstand the possibility of serious consequences, sometimes failing even to believe the horrors of
what is going on. By invoking this ignorance of Emergency politics, Mistry is better able to
show his characters as innocent victims of the bigger issues around them, an example of what
Cowart writes is historical fiction’s ability to emphasize “the helplessness of decent individuals
at the mercy of enormous forces” (3). In both novels, Mistry brings characters from a point of ignorance and naivété to a painful, gradual understanding and then to a shocking revelation of the truth of their situation within the bigger picture of Indian history.

Leading to the Emergency: *Such a Long Journey*

Although Mistry utilizes a common theme in these two novels, he emphasizes the universality of the Indian situation with the inclusion of characters from different social levels. Whereas in *A Fine Balance* Mistry’s characters are from a lower social level, in *Such a Long Journey*, Gustad Noble is a middle-class banker. In *A Fine Balance*, characters are literally struggling from day to day to keep either a roof over their heads or at least a small portion of pavement under their blankets. In contrast, Gustad has a job, family, religious concerns, and a home. Mistry introduces him in positive terms with his prayer cap “settled comfortably on his grey-white hair” and with the “envy and admiration of friends and relatives.” The narrator says, he “looked so solid” (1). Even his name relates a valued character trait. By focusing on characters of a middle-class social and educational level, Mistry is able to show a middle-class perspective on what happens during this particular historic time in India. In particular, with his main character a banker, Mistry is able to illustrate Indira Gandhi’s use and manipulation of the business community, especially of the banks, in her quest for power.

*Such a Long Journey* opens in 1971, but the main character Gustad is musing about another time and another war—India’s war with China in 1962—when he puts blackout paper over his window panes for protection. Just as Gustad connects the blackout paper to the blackened spirit of Nehru after the betrayal of China’s Chou En-lai (9), it also connects to his blackening out of truth—his naiveté about what is happening outside the covered windows. His wife
Dilnavaz observes how “the paper collected dust and was difficult to clean; it gave spiders ideal places to spin their webs; it provided perfect cover for cockroaches to lay their eggs; and it made the whole house dark and depressing. Weeks went by, then months, with paper restricting the ingress of all forms of light, earthly and celestial” (11). This description easily symbolizes the dark spirit of the times with cover for “cockroaches,” like the laying of evil plans and the restriction of the light of truth. At one point Gustad expresses a desire to “let the rotten world go by” (141). Part of the “celestial” light blocked by the blackout paper is his own understanding of the political situation in India which becomes his unconscious way of letting the world go by, his refusal to face the truth.

Mistry uses Gustad’s relationships, particularly with his friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria, to reveal his naivety. This naivety connects the plot of Mistry’s fiction and the historical facts. Although the Noble family has known Bilimoria for years and had looked up to him as a model of a noble military leader and fine person, he suddenly and mysteriously disappears from Khodadad Building, the apartment building where they all live. Eventually Gustad receives a letter from Bilimoria relating that he is working with RAW (Research and Analysis Wing), an agency political historian Michael Henderson connects to Indira Gandhi’s Emergency tactics. According to Henderson, “[t]o enforce her will Mrs. Gandhi had the services not only of her personal secretariat itself, and various federal police forces totaling 600,000 men, but also the tightly-knit apparatus of her secretariat’s Research and Analysis Wing” (19). Lawrence Lifschultz reported in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* of February 20, 1976, on the power and high standing of RAW in “every ministry” within the Gandhi government: “RAW prepares lists and a detailed dossier on every political opponent of the Prime Minister. Its people are rarely in the open and they make decisions without having to give explanations to those affected” (qtd. in
Henderson 19). Based on Mistry’s characterization of Bilimoria as a loyal Indian military leader even fighting for India as far back as “in the days of Empire” (13), the suggestion is that he sees the work that he is now doing as part of the greater good of India, implying that he also initially misunderstands the truth of what is happening in the Gandhi government. Through his characters’ discussions, Mistry implies a deviousness of the Gandhi government in terms of the use of “Research and Analysis Wing” as the name of the organization. Dilnavaz naïvely says to her husband Gustad, “Research and Analysis Wing. I did not know Jimmy was also a scientist” (92). Just as some of the characters in A Fine Balance exhibit a naïve assumption that whatever Indira Gandhi does is for the good of India, this same false assumption is revealed in Such a Long Journey. When Gustad’s son Sohrab sarcastically tells his father the truth of RAW, how “Our wonderful Prime Minister uses RAW like a private police force, to do all her dirty work,” Gustad dismisses the claims as coming from “fools” who “went around saying rubbish about the Prime Minister” (93).

Gustad’s belief in the good of Indira Gandhi and his friend Jimmy Bilimoria begins to erode after he reads a newspaper story about Bilimoria’s role in RAW. The story, the central plot device of Mistry’s novel and the main connection to history, is entitled “CORRUPTION RIPE IN RAW,” and tells of Bilimoria’s arrest on charges of extortion:

The police report stated that, based on the accused’s confession, the facts were as follows. Some months ago in New Delhi, Mr. Bilimoria, impersonating the prime Minister’s voice, telephoned the State Bank of India and identified himself as Indira Gandhi. He instructed the Chief Cashier to withdraw sixty lakh rupees from the bank’s reserves for delivery to a man who would identify himself as the Bang-
ladeshi Babu. The next day, Mr. Bilimoria, this time in the persona of the Bangla-
deshi Babu, met the Chief Cashier and took delivery of the sixty lakh rupees.

The police report goes on to state that Mr. Bilimoria has admitted he per-
petrated the fraud in order to expedite aid to the guerrillas in East Pakistan. “The
Mukti Bahini are brave and courageous fighters,” the RAW officer is said to have
written in his confession, “and I was growing tired of watching the bureaucrats
drag their feet.” He claims the idea was entirely his own, and his zealousness in
helping the Mukti Bahini is to blame. (Such a Long Journey 195)

The reader could easily question Mistry’s wisdom in the use of this plot device because of the
lack of believability of a man imitating the easily recognized voice of the female Prime Minister.
Mistry’s newspaper article contains a footnote questioning this point, among others:

assuming that Mr. Bilimoria has the talent of voice impersonation, is it routine for
our national banks to hand over vast sums of money if the Prime Minister tel-
phones? How high up does one have to be in the government or the Congress Par-
ty to be able to make such a call? And was the Chief Cashier so familiar with Mrs.
Gandhi’s voice that he accepted the instructions without any verification whatso-
ever? If yes, does that mean that Mrs. Gandhi has done this sort of thing frequent-
ly? (195)

Shockingly, as bizarre as this plot element seems to be, according to Henderson’s research into
Indira Gandhi’s actions leading up to the Emergency, this story is based on an actual occurrence,
thus verifying Mistry’s novel as a portrayal of history. Mistry sets up this story as the focus of
his novel by making his main character a bank teller and then by using that connection to devel-
op the incident.
Henderson’s research gives background to explain this incident. He starts chapter one of his book with a question from P. G. Mavalankar, M. P.: “Is this an Emergency of the country or an Emergency of the ruling party?” (1), since the evidence indicates that Indira Gandhi in amending the constitution was protecting herself rather than the nation. Henderson reports that Ram Jethmalani, then Chairman of the Bar Council of India, testified before a United States Congressional Committee on Human Rights on June 29, 1976, that

Mrs. Gandhi doubtless considered the alternative for her resignation from office. There is reason to believe that she rejected it because she had a few skeletons in her cupboard. Once she would be out of office these would have started rattling. One of her actions after the Emergency provides almost conclusive evidence in support of this thesis. The 41st amendment to the Indian Constitution [. . .] confers on her complete immunity from prosecution in respect of criminal offences committed by her, both before and after she became Prime Minister. This immunity is life-long. (qtd. in Henderson 8)

Henderson explains three incidents that “have never been satisfactorily cleared up” (8-9) and, thus, could be the “skeletons in the cupboard.” Saying that the first involves “a large sum of money and at least three deaths,” he then relates the story that obviously served as the basis for the unusual story in Mistry’s novel. According to the *Far Eastern Economic Review* on August 22, 1975,

Rustom Sohrab Nagarwalla, ex-army officer, twice phoned the cashier of the New Delhi office of the State Bank in 1971, imitating the voice of Mrs. Gandhi and her chief official aide, P. N. Haksar, now Deputy Head of the Planning Commission,
asking for Rs. 6 million to be made available to the Prime Minister “for Bangladesh.”

Nagarwalla was arrested within a few hours of picking up the money from a cashier, Ved Prakash Malhotra. At the subsequent trial he pleaded guilty and was jailed. The speed with which his case was completed aroused suspicion.

A re-trial was later ordered on the grounds that there had been a miscarriage of justice. But Nagarwalla died of a heart attack while waiting for the new hearing. More suspicion about official duplicity in the case was aroused when a police officer who was investigating the case was killed in a car accident, and when another official connected with the case died of a heart attack. It was also noted that Malhotra, though dismissed by the bank, was employed as a worker for the Congress Party.

The affair sparked speculation about whether large sums of money had been similarly withdrawn in the past on the say-so of senior Government officials and to what use they were put. (qtd. in Henderson 9)

Besides the obvious similarity between Mistry’s story and the journal story, Mistry makes other suggestive connections between the historical documentation and his novels with the names of his fictional characters connected to the army officer. Rustom is the name of Dina’s deceased husband in *A Fine Balance*, and Sohrab is the name of Gustard’s son in *Such a Long Journey*.

This story as an example of naïve belief in Indira Gandhi is revealed in Bilimoria’s discussion of how he felt so strongly about the supposed good that he was doing for the Bangladeshi people that he even dangerously involved the Noble family. Bilimoria’s position is related in two letters sent to Gustad. In his first letter he explains that his sudden departure from Khoda-
dad Building and the subsequent lack of contact was “a matter of national security” based on his government work (*Such a Long Journey* 54). In his second letter, he relates the situation in the border zones between India and East Pakistan/Bangladesh. He says, “*This new breed of Pakistani butchers is something else. I tell you, Gustad, everything in the papers these days about the atrocities is true*” (91). Gustad discusses the pictures in the newspaper: “Bloody butchers, slaughtering left and right” (76). There were stories about “Bengali refugees streaming over the border with tales of terror and bestiality, of torture and killings and mutilations; of women in ditches with their breasts sliced off, babies impaled on bayonets, charred bodies everywhere, whole villages razed” (12). Gustad can understand Jimmy’s concern as he knows him to be a caring person. When Gustad had his accident, it was Jimmy who literally carried him to the Bonesetter—“picked Gustad up in his arms like a baby and carried him inside” (60). Also, Ghulam Mohammed relates how “Bili Boy” saved his life in Kashmir in 1948: “He will always have me with him. Least I can do for the man who saved my life in ‘48. [. . .] Yes, he came alone, looking for me after orders to retreat were given. Or I would be lying in the hills in seventeen separate pieces, nicely carved up by those tribesmen” (105). Based on this characterization of Bilimoria, the assumption is that one of two things happened. Either he is an honest, caring man duped by the Gandhi government machinery into thinking that his stealing money was for the greater good when it apparently was to benefit the private coffers of the Gandhi family/regime, or he was willing to go along with the outrageous story thinking it was a method of self-sacrifice to benefit the Bengali refugees. Bilimoria had even involved Gustad in a plan to funnel some of the Gandhi bank money to the refugees. Discussing the possibilities, initially the shocked Gustad says, “We took such a risk. For his stolen ten lakh rupees. For a bloody crook, thinking we were doing something good” (196). But his wife reminds him that “I still cannot believe [. . .] our
Jimmy would do something so crooked. [...] But we don’t know the whole story. [...] Everyone says Indira and her son—the motorcar fellow—are involved in all kinds of crooked deals, that they have Swiss bank accounts and everything. [...] And there has been talk of worse things” (197).

The “worse things” suggested center around the supposed heart attacks of two important people in Indira’s life—one, her father’s successor as Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, just months after he took office, which led to her election as Prime Minister, and the other, her husband, Feroze Gandhi, who proved to be an embarrassment to the Nehru government. According to Pranay Gupte, “alarmed at the influence of big business in national life” (229), Feroze used his journalistic expertise to uncover corruption within large insurance companies, ultimately leading to the resignation of T. T. Krishnamachari, Nehru’s financial minister and personal friend. Gupte says that “Feroze made a growing number of enemies within the Congress Party and among India’s businessmen. One former chief of protocol told Dom Moraes: ‘Feroze was an oaf. All he wanted to do was flail out, to hit people and hurt them. Nothing he did was in any way constructive’” (230n). Feroze Gandhi may have been an embarrassment to Nehru and his government, but based on his medical condition and the reported circumstances of his final heart attack, the charge of some type of duplicity in his death seems unfounded. However, there were other stories of deaths that led to questions as to how far Gandhi would go to maintain power.

The idea of questionable deaths is related to what could be another skeleton in Indira Gandhi’s cupboard. Henderson identifies a second incident that has “never been satisfactorily cleared up” (9)—the death of Shri L. N. Mishra, the Minister of Railways in the Gandhi cabinet, in a bomb explosion in January 1975. In her declaration of Emergency, Gandhi used the death as justification for the state of Emergency, as she blamed the death on opposition agitation. But,
according to Henderson, there is another explanation for it. Records indicate that Mishra had been part of a corruption scandal:

his ministry (then Foreign Trade) had granted import licenses to men with no business experience [. . .] and the government tried to prevent the placing of the records of the police enquiry before Parliament. There was a furore and it was assumed by many people that where one wrong had been discovered others lay hidden. Mrs. Gandhi asked Mishra to resign. But he was the main money raiser for Congress, and a lot of money raised never entered the account books. He was in a powerful enough position to refuse. (10)

Henderson’s investigation goes on to explain how, although Mishra was not immediately killed by the bomb explosion, his medical care was neglected for a full six hours after the incident, by which time it was too late for his recovery. There were other unusual situations surrounding the incident, such as a lack of the usual security around Mishra at the time of the explosion. The feelings of the time were summed up in a January 10, 1975, report by Lewis Simons of the Washington Post: “The belief that Mrs. Gandhi in some way engineered the death of Mishra because he had become an intolerable political embarrassment to her is gaining currency at every level of society” (qtd. in Henderson 10). This belief seems to be suggested within the plot of Mistry’s novel.

No matter what Bilimoria’s motive for his involvement with RAW, Mistry suggests that the Gandhi government would go to any length to retrieve the missing money and hide its own trail regarding the incident with no concern for the innocent people affected. When Gustad does not immediately start depositing the money into the account, he is given “warnings” in the form
of decapitated animals left so close/too close to home in the yard at the base of his treasured vinca plant. The threat is obvious, leaving questions of Gustad’s fate as well as of Bilimoria’s.

The original story about the money cited by Henderson included details about the fate of Nagarwalla, the ex-army officer. It said that there was “suspicion about official duplicity in the case,” and that Nagarwalla “died of a heart attack while waiting for the new hearing” (9). This, too, relates to details Mistry uses in his story about the fate of Bilimoria. Jimmy’s friend Ghulam tells Gustad that “Bili Boy’s life is in danger. […] People at the very top are involved. They can do whatever they like with Bili boy. In this country, laws don’t apply to the ones at the top” (Such a Long Journey 204). Just as in Henderson’s story of Nagarwalla there were mysterious deaths of those pursuing information in the case, in Bilimoria’s case, a special investigator is killed in a car accident. Henderson’s historic Nagarwalla died of a heart attack while waiting for a new trial, and Mistry’s fictional Bilimoria is hospitalized suffering some strange illness while he’s awaiting his trial. Gustad has a hard time believing that Jimmy becomes delirious at times: “Jimmy’s mind, sharp as a Seven O’Clock stainless-steel razor blade, delirious? Not possible” (267). He recognizes other impossibilities when he sees his old friend: “On the bed lay nothing more than a shadow. The shadow of the powerfully-built army man […]. His hairline had receded, and sunken cheeks made the bones jut sharp and grotesque. The regal handlebar moustache was no more. His eyes had disappeared within their sockets. The neck […] was as scrawny as poor behest Dinshawji’s” (267). His hand was as emaciated as his face. Although Bilimoria says his medical condition supposedly has a legitimate foundation, the language used is ambiguous: “Something. Caught in Sundarbans. First . . . yellow fever, they said, then typhus, malaria . . . typhoid . . . God knows. But I think . . . getting better. Injections . . . terrible . . .” (268). The suggestion is that the naïve Bilimoria is slowly being killed as, through the fog of his deteriora-
tion, he relates the truth of the evil of the Gandhi regime: “Big surprise . . . she was using RAW like her own private agency. Spying on opposition parties, ministers . . . anyone. For blackmail. Made me sick. Even spying on her own cabinet. One of them . . . prefers little boys” (270). He explains his own entrapment when he tries to help the Mukti Bahini, how she would “arrange more funds” (272), but then: “Next morning, got the m-m-money. Amazing . . . sixty lakh, just like that. Then, in a few days, she sent m-m-m-message . . . Now ja-ja-just listen carefully . . . her pe-plans. Hu-how she was arranging. To protect herself . . . ta-ta-trap me” (272). Eventually Bilimoria suffers the same fate as Nagarwalla, his historical counter-part: he “died of a heart attack while serving his four-year prison sentence” (Mistry 311). Based on research of the time, Bilimoria’s halting and difficult telling of the truth represents a “speaking voice” of innocent silent victims of a betrayal of the citizens of India. Gustad comes to a revelation of the truth as Bilimoria’s experience illustrates the sad results of naiveté of the policies of the Indira Gandhi regime.

The Naiveté of Tehmul

Throughout Mistry’s story of governmental manipulation and deceit, he offers a contrasting view of life—that of innocence—told through stories of animals. The novel contains a plethora of animals beginning with an agitated chicken in a basket in Gustad’s kitchen and ending in the final line with a frightened moth attempting to fly to freedom. Also, as another connection to the innocence of nature, Mistry as a Parsi includes in his novel a discussion of the unique human/nature relationship of the Tower of Silence as part of the Parsi faith. The Parsis’ final duty for their dead is to leave the naked body at the top of the Tower of Silence for an ultimate un-
ion with nature as vultures consume the body. The emphasis on the naturalism of this union is suggested in the imagery used to describe Gustad’s friend’s body’s procession to the Tower:

On both sides of the path, from dense foliage and undergrowth came the rustle of scurrying creatures. Once, a squirrel ran in front of the nassasalers, froze, then scampered on. Carrion crows, large and glistening, watched the column curiously from tree-tops. Ahead, a muster of peacocks shuffled to the edge of the path, craning inquisitively before scrambling to safety in the bushes. Their necks flashed blue amidst the green of the shrubbery. (253)

The imagery suggests the animals’ recognition and welcoming of the body as a part of nature. Mistry’s inclusion of these stories and creatures indicates his awareness of how all sentient beings are connected in the scheme of life. Randy Malamud recognizes that there are a growing number of ecologically concerned citizens “trying to articulate the place that animals occupy in our world [. . .], how human and nonhuman animals share this world.” Mistry’s novel shows the relationship of man and animals—how animals are important in the lives of his characters—and then uses these relationships of innocent animals at the mercy of man to dramatize the same relationship between people within the political realm. Mahatma Gandhi said, “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be measured by the way in which its animals are treated.” Malamud echoes this belief in his claim that “Anthrozoology (the study of human-animal relations) examines what our associations with animals illustrate about us.” In *Journey*, Mistry writes an anthrozoological novel with innocent animals exploited for spiritual/medicinal experiments as illustrations of similar power issues within human activity. As Mistry makes the connection between a necessary concern for animals as well as for humans, he also makes the connection between history and fiction. As he awakens his characters’ consciousness concerning the welfare of
the innocent, both animal and human, he also awakens them to a parallel concern about naïveté regarding the political environment.

The importance of the relationship of human and animal is introduced early in the story. In an attempt to make a connection with his past, Gustad goes to the market for a live chicken for his family dinner (19). The thought of a chicken dinner takes Gustad back to an earlier, happier time in his life. Although he actually hates the “game” of the market, he feels that, with this savory cooked chicken, his “humble flat would fill with the happiness and merriment that used to reside in his childhood home” (20). For Gustad the chicken symbolizes the good of his earlier life before his father’s business failure and also his attempt to duplicate that good for his own family. But Gustad’s noble idea of the value of the chicken cannot be separated from the repulsiveness of the violence and gore of the Crawford Market with “animal ooze,” “smelly air abuzz with bold and bellicose flies,” “the sight and smell of blood (sometimes trickling, sometimes coagulated) and bone (gory, or stripped to whiteness)” (21). In terms of the relationship between man and beast, the most telling description Gustad uses is his reference to the meat hooks: “huge, wicked-looking meat hooks hanging from the ceiling (some empty, some with sides of beef—the empty ones more threatening)” (21). The reference to the empty meat hooks as threatening indicates Gustad putting himself in the place of the animal on the meat hook, thus his recognition of the animals as fellow sentient beings. Ultimately, Gustad’s idea of the good chicken dinner is a failure, as his family also connects with the feelings of the animal. The discussion of killing the chicken ruins the dinner. His son Sohrab accusingly berates Gustad: “You brought the live chicken home and killed it and made us feel sick at the table” (50). The entire family connected to the chicken as a living being and could not justify the need for its death.
But Gustad’s memories of earlier market visits bring up a most important animal/man relationship for India—the relationship of man’s faith and his diet. Much of the history of India hinges on the Muslim/Hindu divide physically realized by the division of India into Pakistan and India at the time of Independence. These religious identities are tied to animal relationships: For the Hindu, the cow is a holy being, and, for the Muslim, the pig is unclean. Gustad recognizes these relationships as he worries about taking his meat purchase on the bus: “Throughout the trip he felt anxious and guilty—felt that in his basket was something deadlier than a bomb. For was he not carrying the potential source of Hindu-Muslim riots? Riots which often started due to offences of the flesh, usually of porcine or bovine origins?” (21). He remembers back to a demonstration to protest cow slaughter which included a herd of cows outside Parliament House: “the gathering turned violent. The police opened fire. Cows and sadhus stampeded. Staffs and tridents, hooves and horns, bullets and truncheons, all took their toll” (221). Mistry, while depicting the pedestrian activity of purchasing food, relates a significant animal/human relationship in India and the considerations that have to be made to maintain peace and order in a country with a multitude of religious beliefs.\(^{17}\) Also, in the telling of the above incident, Mistry shows the innocent animals at the mercy of human politics as they are being “used” as a part of “modern trends in political campaigning and public relations.” He writes, “Slogans were raised, banners unfurled, curses showered on government personnel: drums, bells, horns, cymbals added to the clamour; and the gentle creatures in their midst began lowing nervously.” Again Mistry indicates his empathy with the emotions of the “gentle creatures,” as they show fear by “lowing nervously.” The irony of the situation is obvious when “the Registered Trade Union of Sadhus and Holy Men sanctioned country-wide agitation, and it was a long time before cow-slaughterers and beef-

\(^{17}\) For more details of the multitude of Indian faiths Mistry recognizes through the work of the pavement artist, see in particular pages 286-87.
eaters could breathe freely again.” In a supposed effort to retain the holiness of their relationship with the cow, the Holy Men create un-holy agitation for man and beast.

Another connection between innocence and animal life is revealed in Gustad’s son Sohrab’s early interest in collecting butterflies. For Gustad, Sohrab’s interest and dedication to his project suggest a dedication to other scientific pursuits that could lead to a profitable future career. Early on Sohrab had great success in his various interests. When he built model airplanes, “Gustad was sure he would grow up to be an aeronautical engineer. Replicas of famous buildings, made to scale, brought forth predictions of brilliant architecture. And tinkering with mechanical things like can-openers could only mean one thing: a budding inventor” (65). When Sohrab collects and mounts butterflies, this work, too, is highly praised as being very beautiful: “They admired the lovely colours and patterns on the wings as if he had had a personal hand in designing them.” But, instead of an emphasis on the natural beauty, Mistry’s description emphasizes the unnaturalness of Sohrab’s work. After catching and killing the butterflies with petrol-soaked cotton, “when the fluttering ceased,” Sohrab “unfolded the wings gently. The wings were always clenched tight over the legs and proboscis, folded in the reverse of their natural direction, as if, in extremis, the butterfly had tried to fend off the noxious fumes by covering its head” (65). Mistry’s personification of the butterfly attributes emotions to the butterfly as it attempts to fight death. The beautiful butterfly display in the case made with Sohrab’s great-grandfather’s tools was “Gustad’s greatest source of joy,” but “[t]hen the moths and butterflies began to fall apart. Soon, maggots were crawling inside the case, and it was a nauseating sight.” When the butterflies were taken from their natural environment, their beauty was destroyed, leaving only the “nauseating sight”—after which “Sohrab chased no more after butterflies” (66). This entire description emphasizes the loss and futility of humans actions in opposition to the natural world,
actions that involve the powerful taking advantage of the innocent, actions suggested as a theme and political comment in Mistry’s novel.

Just as Sohrab learns the futility of capturing creatures for his own benefit, his younger brother Darius has a similar experience. The narrator says that Darius’s “fascination with living creatures used to take him to the pet shop at Crawford Market” (42). His fascination drives him to collect and contain fish for his own enjoyment, but “one evening, just a fortnight after they came home, his guppies, black mollies, kissing gouramis, and neon tetra died following a spell of leaping and thrashing against the glass,” an example of what Malamud says results “when people decontextualize animals and frame them as displays.” The implication is that the various fish were attempting to escape the unnatural containment of the fish tank and died violent deaths.

From fish, Darius moved on to various bird pets, “all of which succumbed to illnesses ranging from chest colds to mysterious growths in their craws that prevented eating and led to starvation. At each demise, Darius wept bitterly [. . .]. He spent long hours meditating on the wisdom of loving living things which invariably ended up dead” (43). Again, Mistry’s writing makes a statement regarding the loss when man attempts to contain, control, or manipulate the innocent creatures of nature.

Just as Gustad kills the chicken, Sohrab the butterflies, and Darius his fish and birds, in Mistry’s story other humans use and destroy innocent beings. These stories of the destruction of innocent animals bring revelations regarding misplaced ideas about the containment and control of nature. The character that brings together the two concerns of the death of innocent living beings and the naïveté of the political situation is Tehmul, a human being, but, like the animals in the story, powerless to control his situation or destiny. Although he is in his mid-thirties (30),
with manly urges that he does not fully understand, he is innocent and without guile. Gustad refers to Tehmul as a “[p]oor lame fellow with a half-cracked head. [. . .] [H]e’s like a child” (203).

With his mental limitations, Tehmul’s innocence stands as the ultimate contrast to a country/government run by guile, while Gustad represents a father figure and protector for the innocent young man. When Tehmul gets upset, Gustad “spoke patiently, gently to allay Tehmul’s perpetual agitation. [. . .] Somebody had to look after God’s unfortunate ones” (86).

There is also a special connection of weakness as both Gustad and Tehmul walk with a limp from accidents, but, whereas Gustad was taken to the Bonesetter by his friend Jimmy, Tehmul “had the misfortune to be treated by conventional methods, condemned to years on crutches and walking sticks, with nothing to look forward to but a life of pain, [. . .] swaying frighteningly from side to side” (29-30). His fall from a tree caused not only physical impairment, but “something went wrong inside [his head] due to the jolt of the accident.” Tehmul’s physical and mental limitations leave him at the mercy of those around him. Just as animals are used by the more powerful humans around them, Tehmul also becomes an innocent used by those around him. Tehmul is used as a beast of burden to carry messages and run errands, but, most shockingly, Gustad’s wife Dilnavaz and their eccentric neighbor Miss Kuptitia use Tehmul as a human guinea pig in their attempts to take spells off Dilnavaz’s children. Although the narrator describes Kuptitia as “the ubiquitous witch of their fairy stories come to life” (2), Dilnavaz, in her need of help, thought “how tempting, to believe in magic—how quickly it simplifies and explains” (63).

In an attempt to draw out from Sohrab the evil that drives him to refuse his father’s direction for his life, Miss Kuptitia instructs Dilnavaz to “describe [. . .] seven clockwise circles over his head” (69). When this action does not prove profitable, Miss Kuptitia relates that the “black spell goes so deep and strong inside Sohrab, the lime cannot pull it out. [. . .] [I]t requires another
human being to pull it out” (109). As a way of exemplifying Malamud’s charge that the way humans treat innocent animals often illustrates power issues, Miss Kutpitia and Dilnavaz “use” Tehmul as an innocent animal at their mercy because of his “weakness,” much like animals used for testing various products for human consumption. Although Dilnavaz initially shows some mild concern (“I cannot make an innocent person suffer”), Miss Kutpitia rationalizes their actions based on Tehmul’s mental deficiencies: with so little brains, it won’t make a difference. Tehmul’s weakness supposedly entitles them to manipulate and abuse him.

The March of Innocence

The deaths of the various innocent animals at the mercy of human power foreshadow the death of the innocent Tehmul at the mercy of the political situation at the time leading up to the Emergency. When Indira Gandhi proclaimed the Emergency on June 25, 1975, it was supposedly because “India’s security was threatened by internal disturbance” (Henderson 6). But, according to Henderson, as discussed earlier, with Gandhi’s conviction of election fraud, she had come to “realize not that the country was getting out of hand, but that it was getting out of her hands.” As a matter of fact, although the approach of her opposition which was led by Jayaprakash Narayan, “was non-violent [,] his meetings were often disturbed by the police” (4). The charge of internal disturbance was recognized as merely a propaganda tool. N. G. Goray, writing on September 13, 1976, fourteen months after the Emergency declaration, questioned Gandhi’s claim: “Is it not surprising that in a vast country like India not a single case of violent action has occurred, not even in the states where opposition parties were in power for quite some time? And this, in spite of the Government’s keen desire to show that the opposition’s objective was a violent mass uprising” (qtd in Henderson xiii). Perhaps to emphasize the “non-uprising” of Gandhi’s claim, this
lack of an historic antecedent, Mistry creates a fictional “non-uprising.” Mistry’s inclusion of the story of the “violence” created by the attempt to destroy the sacred wall suggests Tehmul’s allegorical representation of the Indian people as victims of the bureaucracy of the Emergency restrictions.

In the final chapter, Tehmul, as the ultimate innocent, becomes a representation of the common people of a neighborhood innocently marching to seek help for their problems. They were marching

to the municipal ward office, to voice their protests against overflowing sewers, broken water-pipes, pot-holed pavements, rodent invasions, bribe-extracting public servants, uncollected hills of garbage, open manholes, shattered street lights—in short, against the general decay and corruption of cogs that turned the wheels of city life. Their petitions and letters of complaint had been ignored long enough. (312)

They march merely to voice their complaints about the municipality’s failure to fulfill its responsibilities. There are not affiliated with any specific political or religious organization, but are representative only of the neighborhood:

There were mechanics and shopkeepers, indefatigable restaurant waiters, swaggering tyre retreaders, hunch-shouldered radio repairers, bow-legged tailors, shifty transistors-for-vasectomies salesmen, cross-eyed chemists, sallow cinema ushers, hoarse-voiced lottery-ticket sellers, squat clothiers, accommodating women from the House of Cages. Hundreds and thousands gathered, eager to march, arm in arm and shoulder to shoulder, to alleviate the miseries of the neighborhood. (312)
Innocent Tehmul is not even one of the marchers, but only gets involved because of the excitement.

During the march, they stop at the prayer wall representing all the people of India with the multitudinous gods of every religion portrayed. The march director explains the stop:

What better place than this sacred wall of miracles to pause and meditate upon our purpose? The wall of gods and goddesses. The wall of Hindu and Muslim, Sikh and Christian, Parsi and Buddhist! A holy wall, a wall suitable for worship and devotion, whatever your faith! So let us give thanks for past success! Let us ask blessings for future endeavours! Let us pray that when we reach our destination we will achieve our purpose! Let us pray that in the spirit of truth and non-violence [emphasis added] we will defeat our enemies! (326)

The people are united in their common goals of procuring the basics of life from the municipal authorities and in their mutual respect for each other’s beliefs. This is an especially important point Mistry makes through this story, as so much violence in India continues to be related to religious differences. Most democratic governments would appreciate citizens of different religious groups coming together, channeling their energies in a peaceful demonstration for change. But instead of a government interested in the voice of the people, Malcolm reports that “the municipality cannot back down before a mob, the work of the city must go on” (Mistry 331). The Police Inspector will not help: “I never interfere when off duty” (330). With no one listening to the wishes of the people, the attack on the wall of godliness and togetherness starts the riot that innocent Tehmul sees as fun.

Earlier in the story Gustad considers Tehmul’s innocence as almost saintly as he tries to touch the beam of the flashlight: “The rays played upon his beaming face, upon the innocent joy
he displayed for the rusty old torch’s meager light. Sadness and affection filled Gustad’s heart. In this pose, with his blissful smile, he thought, Tehmul’s picture would fit right in among the others upon the black wall” (309). But Tehmul’s lack of understanding puts him in extreme danger, reflecting the danger inherent in India’s innocence regarding the political situation. He is entranced by the flying stones, rocks, bricks, and bottles, as the construction workers and marchers battle over the wall: “A brick sailed towards Tehmul, and he was deaf to the world. Entranced by airborne things, things that could soar and swoop and dive, agile things made to glide or dart or arch through the air, nimble things that could flit and float on soft feathers or gossamer wings; enchanted as always by all such things, Tehmul hobbled to catch the brick” (333). Mistry’s diction parallels the innocent way Tehmul relates to the world and nature as he suggests again the innocent beings relating to “soft feathers” and “gossamer wings.” But, reality interrupts innocence: Tehmul’s “twisted body let him down. The brick caught him on the forehead, and Gustad heard the crack” (333).

In the end, after the deaths of Bilimoria and Tehmul, Gustad comes to a full recognition of the truth of the Indian government’s relationship to the people. He says, “Nothing is beyond the government. Ordinary people like us are helpless against them” (338). As evidence of this revelation, he finally removes the black-out paper that symbolized his lack of understanding of the political situation in India: “He stood upon the chair and pulled at the paper covering the ventilators. As the first sheet tore away, a frightened moth flew out and circled the room” (339). Gustad will no longer be the innocent moth hiding from the sad truth of life in India.
Another important and powerful novel “speaking” history is Rohinton Mistry’s 1995 novel *A Fine Balance*. The Prologue of this novel is identified with the year 1975, thus connecting the time of the novel to the auspicious date of the Emergency. Mistry starts with an epigraph by Honoré de Balzac from *Le Pére Goriot*:

> Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair, you will say to yourself; perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured; this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true.

Before even starting to read the novel, the reader is told that in this book of “fiction,” a story perhaps of misfortunes, there is truth.

The main characters’ “misfortunes” exemplify Mistry’s title. A “fine balance” is what is needed to survive in the very precarious times of the Emergency. The novel starts on a relatively positive note (although it is the day of the announcement of the Emergency) as the main characters look forward to their futures. Maneck Kohlah is a young man starting a college career. Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash have left their small village to start careers as tailors in the city by the sea. Dina is a widowed Parsi woman trying to run a sewing business to maintain her independent life. The oppositions that cause the need for a fine balance are evident from the very beginning of the novel. As Maneck, Ishvar, and Om (Omprakash) get off the train, they see “a beggar slumped upon a small wooden platform fitted with castors, which raised him four inches off the ground. His fingers and thumbs were missing, and his legs were amputated almost to the
buttocks” (6-7). Their comment is “That’s one of the worst I’ve seen since coming to the city” (7), not realizing how this scene foreshadows their own future.

Contrasting with (balancing?) the horrific condition of the beggar is the kindness and friendship established between the three men. Maneck buys a watermelon-sherbet, “tinkling chunks of ice afloat in a sea of dark red” (7) and notices “the tailors who stood with eyes averted, not looking at the tempting tub or his frosted glass. He saw their tired faces, how poor their clothes were, the worn-out chappals.” He shares his drink and realizes, “[h]ow much gratitude for a little sherbet, [. . .] how starved they seemed for ordinary kindness” (7). Within the story, continued gratitude for small kindnesses seems to be what allows survival during the difficult time of the Emergency.

In the “fictive” writing of A Fine Balance, what Michael Henderson refers to as the “non-debate” over the Emergency is obvious. Early in the novel a question suggests the background theme in both A Fine Balance and Such a Long Journey: the common person’s ignorance regarding the truth of what is going on. Omprakash, Ishvar, and Maneck are listening to a discussion about the stoppage of their train. Someone states “Maybe it has to do with the Emergency” (5). Someone else asks “What emergency?” This question suggests the “non-debate,” the naiveté of the characters symbolizing the attitude of the common people of India concerning the Emergency. As in Such a Long Journey, Mistry’s characters often do unwise things because they do not understand the possibility of serious consequences and/or horrors of the Emergency. Through their ignorance of Emergency politics, Mistry is better able to show his characters as innocent victims of the bigger issues around them, an example of what Cowart writes is historical fiction’s ability to emphasize “the helplessness of decent individuals at the mercy of enormous forces” (3). As with Such a Long Journey, Mistry’s A Fine Balance brings characters from a point of ig-
orance and innocence to a painful, gradual understanding and then to a shocking recognition of the truth of their situation within the bigger picture of Indian history.

**Naiveté and the “Bubble” that is the Raj**

Beverly Schneller, writing about the character Jaya in Gita Mehta’s novel *Raj*, says, “We experience through Jaya’s eyes what it is like to see the old world slip away and the curtain rise on the new” (239). The same can be said about Maneck in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*; however, in Mehta’s novel her character adjusts to the changing political landscape, while Mistry’s character Maneck is unable to do so. Maneck represents an unintegrated character. He is raised in what can be identified as a continuing “bubble” of the British Raj in India. E. M. Forster, a novelist familiar with India from his long residency there during the time of the British Raj, writes in his 1924 novel *A Passage to India* of the British schedule of moving to the hill country during the hottest months of the year (183). In Mistry’s novel, Maneck’s family earns its living running a store in the hill country formerly frequented by the British colonizers. The suggestion is that Maneck’s parents, the Kohlahs, previously had a flourishing business catering to the British vacationing in the mountains, but, before Maneck’s birth, “A foreigner drew a magic line on a map and called it the new border; it became a river of blood upon the earth. And the orchards, fields, factories, businesses, all on the wrong side of that line, vanished with a wave of the pale conjuror’s wand” (*A Fine Balance* 203). Maneck’s parents and their friends, the British who stayed behind after Indian independence, represent an attempt at a continuation of the British Raj: “Most of his and Mrs. Kohlah’s friends were army men and their wives, who, grown used to a lifetime of British-style cantonment living, had chosen to retire here in the hills, unable to countenance a return to dusty plains and smelly cities. They too had oft-told tales to tell, of [. .
.

] when everyone knew their place in the scheme of things” (206). When the British friends dined with the Kohlahs, the men “arrived suited and booted, as they called it, with watches in their fobs and ties around their necks” (207). Food was served on “Aynsley bone china; the cutlery was Sheffield.” For conversation, they discussed “the nightmare that would haunt them to the end of their days—they anatomized the Partition, recited the chronology of events, and mourned the senseless slaughter. [. . .] [T]he post-mortem was tempered by nostalgia for the old days.” Mr. Kohlah would not have missed the gathering of old friends, but yet, afterwards, “there was a sense of unease, like a smell which should not have been there, of something rotten. It took a day or two for his equilibrium to return” (207). The suggestion is that Mr. Kohlah, as an Indian entertaining what continues as a form of the British Raj, is subconsciously caught up in what Ngũgĩ describes as a colonization of the mind (3), a remnant of British colonization of India, which makes Indians want to identify with their colonizers’ ideas no matter how adverse these are to an Indian’s positive identification with his own culture. But after each “Raj” gathering, there seems to be for Mr. Kohlah a realization of the sickening truth of his demeaning position in the façade, a realization that puts him mentally off-balance.

Life in the mountains was Maneck’s “happy childhood universe.” But this “universe” is an unreal world, a bubble of protection that keeps Maneck from integrating into the real world, thus establishing a pattern for his life, a pattern that keeps him ignorant of truth. At one point he says, “I am never going to leave the mountains again” (213), suggesting limiting thinking, a lack of desire or drive to be involved in life beyond his geographically narrow beginnings. But, although Maneck does not want to be involved in a bigger world, the bigger world is always there ready to intrude on edenic desires. Even his mountains cannot withstand the disruption of time-honoring past as “the day soon came when the mountains began to leave them” (213). The out-
side world intruded with roads which “continued to inch upwards, swallowing everything in [their] path. The sides of their beautiful hills were becoming gashed and scarred.” But Mr. Kohlah “harboured an irrational hope: the work would never be completed, their little haven would remain unscathed” (213). Mr. Kohlah’s continuing refusal to understand, both the inevitability of change evident in his misplaced grief over Indian freedom and in the economic intrusion represented by the roads, encourages this same naiveté within Maneck. Just as Mr. Kohlah learns the truths of life, so must Maneck. These lessons learned are the focus of Mistry’s novel.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry moves Maneck out of the mountain “raj” into the city during the painful time of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency and from a point of naiveté regarding the political situation to a point of understanding. Because Maneck starts life in a false bubble of protection in his beautiful mountain home, Mistry moves the plot of the story and brings revelation through the characters’ struggles, especially those for living quarters. Maneck seeks more privacy (a new bubble of protection?) by leaving the college youth hostel and moving in with Dina, Dina struggles to maintain her independence by maintaining her own apartment, and Omprakash and Ishvar struggle just for a small piece of ground or pavement upon which to lay their heads at night. These characters’ individual struggles bring them together and from a point of ignorance to a true understanding of the political situation, a “fictive” situation that aligns with the historic.

When Maneck comes to the city, he is shocked by the conditions of the youth hostel he is to live in while attending refrigeration school, as it is “filthy, with rats and cockroaches everywhere” (236). Mistry relates the history of the Emergency through the experiences of Maneck’s friend Avinash, the President of the Student Union and Chairman of the Hostel Committee (236), who tries to correct the abuses that allow these conditions. The politically savvy Avinash recognizes that “the money for maintenance is all going into someone’s pocket” and tries to organize
agitation denouncing the abuses to force a change. As President of the Student Union, he “promised that, one by one, they would weed out all the evils of the campus; nepotism in staff hiring, bribery for admissions, sale of examination papers, special privileges for politicians’ families, government interference in the syllabus, intimidation of faculty members. The list was long, for the rot went deep” (241). Avinash’s list emphasizes an overarching theme/problem of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency—the role of corruption. Henderson charges that Indira Gandhi’s regime was a regime of corruption, that “[o]ver the years she had learned that money buttresses power” (2). Mistry’s novel relates the “trickle-down” effect of the corruption at the top level of Indian government. Pranay Gupte in *Mother India: A Political Biography of Indira Gandhi* corroborates this charge. Speaking of Gandhi, he says,

> she was part of the era in which it became customary to extort political contributions from businessmen. In the tightly regulated License Raj of Indira Gandhi, governmental permissions were needed for the most innocuous of commercial activities—and business men who sought licenses were now required to embellish the coffers of the Congress Party. This extortion went far beyond the standard practice in India’s business community of making political contributions. (20)

Throughout the text of *A Fine Balance* there are references to the payments required to accomplish almost every task. Gupte sees this “culture of corruption” as Gandhi’s lasting “gift to India” (21). Writing in 1992, he says that even “[t]oday, it is impossible to get anything done in India without bribery and commissions.”

As part of their political agenda, the students see their protest as complementing the “grass-roots movement of Jay Prakash Narayan [Indira Gandhi’s political opposition] that was

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18 For a recent Indian novel using this ongoing issue of bribery as a source of narrative conflict, see Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, winner of the 2008 Man Booker Prize.
rousing the nation with a call to return to Gandhian\textsuperscript{19} principles” (Balance 241). But, as Henderson’s history of the Emergency reveals, those in opposition to Indira Gandhi, rather than being seen as peaceful, often suffered torture. He says,

The Lok Sangharsh Samiti published in the last months of the Emergency a booklet of 46 pages [Torture of Political Prisoners in India] containing documented cases of 214 individual cases in 42 different places involving people from 12 to 70 years of age. Often the names of the police officers involved were recorded with reference sometimes to ‘teams of constables.’ [. . .] This particular booklet also described thirteen different types of torture from ‘inserting live wires in the crevices of the body’ to ‘making the victim drink his own urine,’ from ‘burning the skin with wax candles’ to stripping the body nude and making satyagrahis lie on slabs of ice.’ (40)

The list of those tortured contains names of many university students, some identified as various officers of University Students’ Unions (41). Henderson identifies many of the students: D. P. Tripathy, President of the students’ union at Jawaharlal Nehru University, who had to go underground to escape seizure and torture (42); Hemant Kumar Vishnoit, Secretary of the University Students’ Union at Delhi University, who was beaten with lathis and a torn tyre, tied to a stick and left dangling, and had water with chilli powder poured in his nose (41-42); and Jasbir Singh from JNU who was beaten and suspended swinging from a pole between two chairs until he vomited blood (43). The list also includes students known to have been tortured who then disappeared. Besides the tortures and victims, Henderson relates the horrors of families trying to find

\textsuperscript{19} The reference here is to Mahatma Gandhi. Indira Gandhi was not a relative but gained the common name through her marriage to Feroze Gandhi, also not related to Mahatma Gandhi.
out about the students. Dr. P. C. Chunder, Minister of Education after the Emergency, writing in the *Statesman* on May 15, 1977, compared the torture to Nazi atrocities (Henderson 41).

Mistry portrays the history of the student torture through his character Avinash, who, like D. P. Tripathy of JNU, goes underground to avoid imprisonment. Another student tells Maneck that “It’s too risky for them to hang around here” (245). That is all that Maneck learns of his friend until a year later when he returns to the hostel and hears of Avinash’s death from his parents. The father relates what happened: “They told us the body was found many months ago, on the railway tracks, no identification. They said he died because he fell off a fast train. […] We saw burns on many shameful parts of his body, and when his mother picked up his hand to press it to her forehead, we could see that his fingernails were gone” (490). The idea of the train connects to the story of George Lawrence’s actual torture and imprisonment by the police during the Emergency. He said that after his torture, “My condition was so critical that they thought I might collapse any moment. An officer asked constables to ready a jeep. ‘Let’s throw this guy before a running train and say he committed suicide’” (qtd. in Henderson 45).

As the various characters of Mistry’s novel are forced to face shocking facts of the political situation, their naiveté to the truth of the political situation is suggested. When Om and Ishvar discuss the arrest of their relative Nawaz after he embarrassed a “well-connected” (295) businessman, Om naively says, “They don’t send people to jail for nothing.” When Maneck tells Dina about Om and Ishvar being taken away by the police for sleeping on the street, she says, “Don’t make me laugh, there’s no law for doing that” (328). When forced sterilization is discussed, Maneck questions what is going on: “Wouldn’t it be undemocratic to mutilate people against their will?” (366). Henderson discusses the climate of fear within India due to the power
of the police made possible with the Defense of India Rules and the Maintenance of Internal Security Act:

Already before the Emergency the Government possessed two laws which gave them sweeping powers: the Defense of India Rules (DIR) and the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). The former had still the relative advantage of requiring that individuals formally be brought to court and charged; they could also be released on bail. Under the latter, through an ordinance promulgated by the President on 29 June 1975, grounds no longer needed to be given to anyone, even the judiciary, for a person detained. To this was added later the prohibition of bail for detenus [those held in detention] and the power to re-arrest persons whose detention orders had expired (for one year) or been revoked. (19)

Mistry expresses the extremity of the powers in his fictional discussion between Dina and her brother Nusswan about the sterilization program. Nusswan argues the need to eliminate the poor: “One way would be to feed them a free meal containing arsenic or cyanide, whichever is cost-effective” (366). When Dina asks if many business people think this way, he replies, “A lot of us think like this, but until now we did not have the courage to say so. With the Emergency, people can freely speak their minds” (367). Unfortunately and perversely, Nusswan’s suggestion of freedoms relates to cruel abuses of the law rather than those freedoms befitting a democratic society. At this point, Maneck realizes that he knows little about what is going on: “He wished he had paid more attention when Avinash talked politics” (367).
Sanjay Gandhi

An example of the “helplessness of decent individuals” (Cowart 3) and of the lack of political understanding is related in the story of Sanjay Gandhi’s destruction of the huts of the poor as part of a “beautification” plan. In Mistry’s novel, Ishvar and Om’s friend Rajaram tells them:

[the men, the ones who said they were safety inspectors. They tricked us. Sent by the government, they said to check the colony. At first the people were pleased [. . .]. Maybe improvements were coming—water, latrines, lights, like they kept promising at voting time. So we did as they told us, came out of the shacks. But once the colony was empty, the big machines went in. (291)

The bulldozers destroy the entire section of huts. When people try to stop them, “the drivers kept going. People were crushed. Blood everywhere. And the police are protecting those murderers.” The explanation for how this could happen is: “it’s a new Emergency law. If shacks are illegal, they can remove them. The new law says the city must be made beautiful.” Yet there is denial of the truth of what happened, what it took to “beautify” the city.

Michael Henderson records how a “beautification scheme” for Delhi turned into “one of the ugliest features of an ugly twenty months” (59). Just as described by Mistry’s characters, Henderson writes of people being crushed under bulldozers or “being deposited possessionless a dozen miles from their homes which had been razed to the ground.” But he also relates how “[f]or three days nothing appeared in the Indian papers. Then the BBC [British Broadcasting Company] reported the event and put figure [sic] for dead at 80” (62). The state-run news organization *Samachar* distorted the truth, releasing an official statement “blaming ‘miscreants’ and ‘groups of anti-social elements,’ making it out to be a communal disturbance: ‘The police were left with no other alternative except to open fire in order to prevent serious harm to life and prop-
erty’” (Indian Express qtd. in Henderson, 62). The Censor’s office insisted that this official version had to be used, and this was not even to be used outside of Delhi. The entire incident was played down, with Samachar claiming as few as five people being killed. Inder Mohan, who spent five years working as a social worker in the area, tried to intervene when he heard of the demolition plan. He met with Sanjay Gandhi, and his “reward” was that two nights later he was arrested. According to Anthony Lukas of the New York Times, “So far as I could determine, his only crime had been to dare to differ with the Prime Minister’s son” (qtd. in Henderson 60). Mohan believes that the death count could not have been less than 250 (62). This story, as told in A Fine Balance, better relates the truth of the situation in terms of the people who lived it then does the “official” newspaper. The “fiction” tells the history that the “official” record distorts or omits.

Tied to Om and Ishvar’s confusion about the demolition of their hut is the fact that they had paid their “rent” for the hut for the month. Om and Ishvar question Rajaram:

“What about Navalkar? And his boss, Thokray? They collected this month’s rent only two days ago.”

“They are here.”

“And they’re not complaining to the police?”

“Complaining? Thokray is the one in charge of this. He is wearing a badge: Controller of Slums. And Navalkar is Assistant Controller.” (291-92)

Their naivété is obvious in their misplaced belief in the honesty of their landlord, that simply paying rent meant that they would have rights, and again emphasizes the evil and damaging role of pervasive corruption within Indira Gandhi’s regime.
Connected with Sanjay Gandhi’s role in the destruction of the slums, his unofficial regime is most remembered for his notorious “family planning” measures, which Henderson identifies as the central theme of his five-point program. But Gavin Young wrote in the Observer of March 27, 1977, that “he had set the whole campaign back several years ‘by equating sterilization with terror’” (qtd. in Henderson 67). Henderson says that this “achievement” of the Gandhi family “was produced by incentive, by disincentive and by naked compulsion” (67). All of these methods are exemplified in Mistry’s novel.

During the Emergency, the Indian government offered incentives to get sterilized as well as to get others sterilized. Salman Rushdie in Midnight’s Children describes the horrific use of the transistor radio as a sterilization incentive. Henderson writes of the anger of an irate crowd when a Bombay municipal planning booth persuaded a youth of sixteen to be sterilized for a reward of 100 rupees (68). A person would also be rewarded for getting others sterilized. And there were competitions to see who could “motivate” the most people to get sterilized. At one point in Aligarh, the District Magistrate “announced that those ‘motivating’ 500 sterilisation cases in the district would be presented with an Ambassador car” (Henderson 68).

An example of voluntary sterilization at the hands of a motivator in A Fine Balance is not that of a 16-year-old boy, but of an elderly man. Rajaram, working as a Motivator for the Family Planning Centre, signs up his first client for sterilization. Soon after, he learns that the elderly man died after the operation: “The old man’s groin had filled up with pus. When the rot began to spread, the clinic was no help, and the old man died” (385). This death suggests the inept sterilization procedures as well as foreshadowing Ishvar’s similar situation that causes the loss of his legs. Henderson’s history suggests the reason for the sixteen-year-old’s death in his example of the “kind of report encouraged by the family planning drive: Dr. F. R. Patil has, it is claimed, the
distinction of performing a record number of over 10,000 vasectomy operations. He does a vasectomy in just 3 minutes against the normal time of 5-6 minutes, the official press release said” (68). At the time the “world record” for the number of vasectomies in a day (2,000) supposedly went to Bhimanna Khandre, the organizer of a family planning camp at Bhakki. He was rewarded with a “pat on the back from Sanjay Gandhi when he visited the area in November 1976” (Henderson 72). Mistry’s novel reflects this idea of the importance of time in the quest for the required number of vasectomies. When Omprakash and Ishvar are rounded up at the sterilization camp and the autoclaves for sterilization break down and slow the process as water is boiled for sterilizing the instruments, the senior administrator says,

“Instruments are clean enough. How long do you want to heat the water? Efficiency is paramount at a Nussbandhi Mela, targets have to be achieved within the budget. Who’s going to pay for so many gas cylinders?” He threatened that they would be reported to higher authorities for lack of cooperation, promotions would be denied. Salaries frozen.

The doctors resumed work with partially sterile equipment. They knew of colleagues whose careers had suffered similarly. (523)

The history as well as the fiction emphasizes that the vast number of sterilizations done in a relatively short time were done in less-than-sterile or less-than-careful conditions. According to documentation, hundreds died from “botched operations or inadequate follow-up” (Henderson 69).

Besides the unsafe methods of sterilization, the above commentary relates the other two methods of achieving family planning by the Gandhi regime—disincentive and compulsory sterilization. Disincentive means a punishment for failure to reach a quota. Instead of getting money or a radio or a car, something would be taken away. According to Henderson, “Farmers were
forced to get sterilized or their water and electricity would be stopped, fathers likewise in order to get their children accepted in schools. [...] Women teachers suffered the indignity of having to motivate men to be sterilized in order even to get their salary paid to them. [...] A young unmarried man, 25, was forced to get sterilized because he needed treatment at a hospital” (69). Reflecting this practice, in Mistry’s novel, when Ishvar and Om first come to the city, they unsuccessfully try to get a ration card. Their friend tells them there is a sure method that will get them immediately approved—the Certificate of Sterilization (Family Planning Receipt) (177). This requirement is also documented in Henderson’s history of the Emergency: In Maharashtra, “daily-paid Government employees were not engaged unless they could produce vasectomy certificates” (70). These certificates were needed for vehicle registrations, bank loans, ration cards, and so forth.

A Fine Balance

Early in Mistry’s story, a proofreader tells Maneck the secret to survival: “You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair” (128-29). But, in the end, the kindness established with the shared watermelon-sherbet at the beginning of the friendship between Maneck, Om, and Ishvar is not enough to maintain balance. Maneck, after a number of years and “misfortunes” of the Emergency, again sees his friends Om and Ishvar, now beggars: “One sat slumped on a low platform that moved on castors. He had no legs [result of complications of forced vasectomy]. The other pulled the platform with a rope slung over his shoulder. His plumpness [effects of forced castration] sat upon him strangely, like oversized, padded clothes” (597). The repeated image of the legless beggar on the platform, a symbol of the on-going effects of the Emergency measures, pushes Maneck, ironically the one character with a future, off balance as
he is forced out of the bubble of artificiality he has lived in starting with his years in the hilltop Raj to his recent refrigeration work in the artificially created city of Dubai, to face the truth of the consequences of the Emergency in Indian life. In the end, forced to face the truth, he loses his psychological balance and ends his life under the wheels of a fast-moving train. In the end, the despair of the life situations resulting from the Emergency regime is too much to bear. Ultimately, Mistry’s characters show a clearer picture of the ramifications of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency in the lives of ordinary people than a history text could do.

Fiction, valuably, may take history from a possibly obscure history book that few would read out to the mainstreams of the world, thus spreading the facts and information and emotions of history. Through the emotions and concerns of the characters, readers can better understand what the implications of the happenings of history would have been for the participants, thus adding another dimension to the understanding of history. But most important is fiction’s value in giving voice to those histories not written, for those stories that have been silenced or lost in some gap in time. For these losses and silence, fiction is a speaking voice of history.
Works Cited


Chapter Four: Speaking (Dis)assimilation: Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and “Mrs Sen’s” and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*

In Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the starting point of this discussion of the power of speaking voices in postcolonial novels, he charged that “Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience” (328), but that, in opposition, “narrative asserts the power of men to be born, develop, and die” (240). It is narrative that gives voice to a life lived. In opposition to the silencing of Orientalism, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Kushwant Singh, Rohinton Mistry, and others give voice to the lives of the people of India through their novels. But the narratives discussed in the preceding chapters are set in the Indian sub-continent, and a fact of life is that Indian experiences and stories are not contained in this one setting. Today Indians cover the globe, and, with their physical move from the homeland, the life-stories continue but often bring questions about the place of Indians in the world today, questions about assimilation into new cultures. And, as the settings change, writers continue to give voice to these stories.

I will use the term *(dis)assimilation* to suggest and acknowledge the ambiguity of the word *assimilation* in terms of migrant experience. The meaning of “assimilation,” “to take in, digest, and transform, or to make or become similar,” suggests a choice that many immigrants do not wholly choose to make, a choice they often see and feel as an abandonment, even a betrayal, of their cultural identity. Therefore, I use the designation of *(dis)assimilation* to represent the migrant’s ongoing choices and negotiations between cultures, recognizing that a transcultural existence brings destabilizing questions and problematics. Frank Schulze-Engler argues for the appropriateness of the “tag” *transcultural* for the interdisciplinary practice of Postcolonial Studies.
with all its “fuzzy edges” (ix) because “the dynamics of contemporary ‘transculture’ can no longer be understood in terms of classical dichotomies such as colonizer vs. colonized or centres vs. peripheries” (xi). Instead such vocabulary as transcultural and (dis)assimilation represents the ongoing negotiations immigrants make to survive in new cultural settings while retaining various levels of hold onto the beliefs and practices that make up their personal identity.

Although the Indian population is spread throughout the world, this chapter will deal with two dominant locations from which to discuss novels that give Indians a speaking voice at various points of transcultural (dis)assimilation—first the United States and then the United Kingdom. This chapter will identify the movement of Indian groups and novelistic portrayals of their reactions, their (dis)assimilation, to new cultural environments.

Indian Migration

According to historian Judith M. Brown, “by the last decades of the twentieth century, somewhere over 9 million people of South Asian descent lived outside the subcontinent” (2) as a diaspora, a word which has come to mean “any group of migrants permanently settled outside their place of origin” (4). The largest portion of these South Asians is from India and/or Pakistan and Bangladesh. The latter two, for the purpose of this study, will be recognized and utilized as “postcolonial India” since their pre-colonial and colonial identities were Indian.

Brown identifies three Indian migratory movements during the age of empire: indentured labor, contracted labor, and free Indian movement. Part of the free Indian movement included an “unusual strand [. . .] small numbers, particularly of Sikhs, who found their way to the Pacific coast of America and Canada” (38). At this time, those coming to America went mainly to San Francisco. A significant number of Indians migrated to California to work in agriculture; the size
of the Indian community there reached 72,500 by 1890 with 6,800 Punjabis arriving between 1899 and 1914. All United States immigration from Asia was stopped in 1917 (38-39).

The next recognized movement of Indians to the United States was during the second half of the twentieth century, a period of decolonization and globalization. During this time, South Asians moved to places which previously had seen no permanent South Asian presence. Brown claims that “[i]t was this second set of large-scale movements that made the South Asian diaspora a truly global phenomenon, visible and significant in every continent” and identifies four “main and very distinctive kinds of migratory flow” (39). The first new flow, which will be discussed later, was to the United Kingdom after the end of British colonial rule. During this same time, a small number of South Asians who had previously migrated to East Africa were now forced because of political issues there to undergo a second migration that brought them to the United States (Brown 46-47). Then the later part of the twentieth century brought the final large-scale international movement of South Asians. By the 1990s “India became the fourth largest sending country” in terms of immigrants. Brown writes that “countries which had once barred their doors to people of non-European descent now opened them” (52). One of these countries was the United States: “The USA became the Mecca for aspiring emigrants from many places in the less-developed world when it […] revised its immigration laws in 1965, abandoning the National Origins System set up in 1924” (55). The United States was an important destination for Indian immigration for several reasons, one of which was the shared English language: “[i]n the last decade of the century Indians with a population nearing 1 million were the fourth largest Asian group in the USA, coming after the Japanese, Filipinos, and Chinese.” The four states with the highest concentrations of South Asian settlement in the late twentieth century were California, Texas, Illinois, and New York (Brown xv). Although many Indians never achieved profes-
sional status and thus became part of the United States working class, this wave of immigrants was particularly skilled and well educated. By the 1980s “Indian men and women [. . .] earned more than their white counterparts.” Well over half of the Indian males were professionals, “with particularly high concentrations in engineering and medicine. At the start of the twenty-first century there were over 38,000 physicians of Indian origin in the USA, amounting to one in every twenty doctors practicing medicine” (56). Due to its high education levels and productivity, this wave of Indian migration was readily accepted into mainstream American society.

Although Indian immigration to the United States seems rather simple and straightforward, Indian immigration to the United Kingdom is much more complicated, creating multiplied identity and assimilation issues. England’s past history as an imperial power dominating India created a foundational complication. In 1857 rebellions in Northern India precipitated the end of the East India Company’s rule and brought India under the imperial rule of the British government until 1947, when India gained its independence. Although much can be said about this arrangement and its effects, our interest here is to clarify the Indian immigration process to the imperial “home” country of Britain. According to Brown, “[i]t was largely the dense networks of Imperial connections binding India to a wider imperial world that drew Indians overseas, and led to the creation of settled populations of people of Indian origin around the globe” (30). Brown identifies the first movement of Indians during the age of empire as indentured labor going “in response to the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery in the British Empire and in other European Empires. [. . .] About 1.5 million people left India under this system between 1834 and its ending in 1917, with the largest numbers going to Mauritius, British Guiana, Natal and Trinidad.” A second wave of Indians as contract labor went to other South Asian countries (2.5 mil-
lion to Burma and 1.5 million to Ceylon between the 1850s and the mid 1930s) or to East Africa “to build the infrastructure of British rule” (34-35).

The first big flow of South Asians to England came with the end of British Rule in India and after World War II when England suffered extensive physical damage. The need for reconstruction opened the doors to employment for the skilled and unskilled alike (Brown 40). Important to the flow was that citizens of Commonwealth countries such as India and Pakistan had “free right of access into Britain at this stage.” This valuable free access to England ended when, starting in the early 1960s,

successive governments enacted legislation restricting New Commonwealth immigration, out of concerns about social tension where there were large and distinctive ‘colored communities,’ the pressure immigration placed on housing in certain areas, and latterly to ward off a massive influx of Indians from East Africa. Political parties were in large part responding to domestic political pressures, and behind these controls lay a degree of serious racism in many sections of British society. (Brown 40)

For the British government, the massive number of immigrants coming to its shores put pressure on all areas of British life: “in 1961 when the [immigration] figures do reflect mainly immigrants rather than those locally born, there were 81,400 Indians compared with 24,900 of Pakistani origin. By 2001 those with origins in Pakistan and Bangladesh together numbered 1,030,348 compared with 1,053,411 with ethnic roots in India” (41). While in the United States the land mass of 3,623,420 square miles supports a population density of 87.9 people per square mile, in the United Kingdom, a land mass of 94,399 square miles supports a population density of 620 people per square mile with a recognition that a large portion of this population is of Indian de-

20 According to the US Census 2010 data
scent. Some districts in London, such as Kensington and Chelsea, have a population density of 13,981 per km.\textsuperscript{21} This high population density, along with racism, suggests the inevitability of social tensions and pressures bringing problems to overcome for both Indians and British to assimilate into any semblance of a peaceful English culture. These tensions and pressures are evident within fictional writings. This chapter will examine literary representations of the drive for (dis)assimilation, first in works of United States Indian and then in those of British Indian diaspora writers while recognizing the greater pressures in England because of the population density issues. The “dis” of the title word (dis)assimilation acknowledges the problematic—assimilation is not always a desired outcome on the part of either the immigrant or the home-born native—a problematic readily identified and discussed in both American and English postcolonial writings.

**United States Identity and Assimilation: “We are what we eat”**

As mentioned above, because of the high educational level of most Indian immigrants, they generally were and continue to be readily accepted into mainstream American society. Any reference to the words *immigrant* or *immigration* in America today instead readily evokes the controversy of illegal immigration from Mexico. Generally speaking, assimilation issues faced by Indian immigrants are not political or public, as Mexican immigration issues are, but instead domestic or home-centered. Thus, the writings of Indian writers in America reflect these issues which include prominently the all-important issue of reconciling the contrasting diets in India and the United States. Food and eating are dominant themes reflecting (dis)assimilation in postcolonial writing.

It is an old adage that “we are what we eat.” Certainly this is universally true, since what we eat becomes what we are physically and is also predicated on what/who we are culturally.

\textsuperscript{21} Midyear population estimate for 2010 from the British Office for National Statistics
The first dictionary definition of *assimilation* is “to take in, digest, and transform (food) into living tissue.” In today’s global movement of people, food is a portable and important identity marker, as it “transforms” the cultural life of the immigrant. Anita Mannur writes that food “becomes a means of articulating one’s sense of ethnic or national identity” (14), an “enunciative space” (24) that paradoxically can be “at once a site of affirmation and resistance” (7), thus a site of conflicted (dis)assimilation. Mannur’s studies of food in South Asian diasporic culture reveal that “discursively the terms by which ‘Indianness’ is imagined almost always mobilizes [sic] a culinary idiom; more often than not food is situated in narratives about racial and ethnic identity as an intractable measure of cultural authenticity” (3). In postcolonial Indian novels ethnic food often stands in for the lost home, conveying either assimilation or dissimilation. Evoking such nostalgic memories, food works both as a form of continuing ingestion of ethnicity, facilitating emotional acceptance of the break between the past and present selves, while also having the power to represent (dis)assimilation as a statement of being an opposing identity within a new environment.

In approaching postcolonial novels as “speaking (dis)assimilation,” both assimilation and disassimilation, food and eating work as communication. According to Carlnita P. Greene and Janet M. Cramer, “[b]roadly defined, communication is the process by which we understand the world and our attempts to convey that understanding to others through both verbal and nonverbal language” (x). Greene and Cramer refer to the work of Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Mary Douglas in asserting that food represents a communication code expressing relationship patterns. C. Sprulock proposes that “because of their ability to signify, mediate, contest, and represent ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’ foodways are deeply rhetorical and performative” (qtd. in Greene
This chapter will include an examination of the culinary—food and eating—as communicative of identity formation during the process of (dis)assimilation.

**(Dis)assimilation in *The Namesake***

One of the first novelists often identified as using food to portray identity and assimilation issues is the Indian-American Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Jhumpa Lahiri. The importance of food is immediately signaled in her award-winning novel *The Namesake* (2003) as the story opens in an American kitchen with her Indian immigrant character Ashima Ganguli concocting a blend of Rice Krispies cereal and Planters peanuts with chopped red onion, salt, lemon juice, and thin slices of green chili pepper. Although the concoction mixes both American culture with the Rice Krispies and Indian culture with the green chili pepper, it fails to blend because Ashima lacks the mustard oil to “pour into the mix” to facilitate its coming together, to facilitate symbolically the satisfactory assimilation of American and Indian culture, her negotiation between cultures. Although the mixture is not the “real thing,” Ashima has had to satisfy herself by “consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. [. . .] [I]t is the one thing she craves” (1). The object of her desire is the food of her Calcutta home, the food of her nostalgic memories, the food that nourishes, not just the body, but the soul.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin defines food two ways: “Food is everything that nourishes [. . . and] all those substances which, submitted to the action of the stomach, can be assimilated

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22 A visual representation of foodways as performative is writer/director Gurinder Chadha’s movie *Bend it Like Beckham* when Mr. Bhamra, a Punjabi immigrant living in England, forces his daughter Jess to “perform” her culture through cooking Punjabi food rather than allowing her the freedom to play the less-culturally related, thus unacceptable game, of soccer. Jess performs her transcultural identity by “playing” with the food.
or changed into life by digestion, and can thus repair the losses which the human body suffers through the act of living. Thus, the distinctive quality of food consists in its ability to submit to assimilation” (qtd. in Skubal 2-3). The implication is that, just as food assimilates to repair bodily losses, it also has the potential to foster a nourishing, nostalgic assimilation of the soul to repair the losses of global migration. Ashima’s concoction is not the complete fulfillment of her desires “spilling from newspaper cones,” but is all she can produce to bring some psychological nourishment by evoking memories of the fullness of Indian life on Calcutta sidewalks while living life in an American kitchen. Susanne Skubal reminds us that “much of human hunger is memory” (5). Those foods and tastes and desires of home, of the mother (country), often register as “right” in our mind/memory.

Greene and Cramer claim that food is communicative and performative because it is “directly linked to both ritual and culture” (x). *The Namesake* exemplifies this claim as Ashoke and Ashima, while living in America, continue to produce and perform their native Indian rituals as evidenced by baby Gogol’s annaprasan, his rice ceremony. The narrator explains the significance of the ceremony, that “[t]here is no baptism for Bengali babies, no ritualistic naming in the eyes of God. Instead, the first formal ceremony of their lives centers around the consumption of solid food” (38). The idea of performance is suggested as the new parents ask a friend “to play the part of Ashima’s brother, to hold the child and feed him rice, the Bengali staff of life, for the very first time” (39, emphasis added). The importance of the rice is identified through its metaphorical naming as the “staff of life.” The narrator describes the ritualistic details of the ceremony which brings together the many Bengali friends of the Ganguli family with each detail modified to fit the circumstance of living in America rather than in India: “Ashima regrets that the plate on which the rice is heaped is melamine, not silver or brass or at the very least stainless-
stele” (39). Although the baby should be the center of attention, it is the food that takes center stage: “Ashima sets out paper plates that have to be tripled to hold the weight of the biryani, the carp in yogurt sauce, the dal, the six different vegetable dishes she’d spent the past week preparing.” A form of this ritual will be carried on for the rest of Gogol’s life, as the payesh, the warm rice pudding in the final bowl, will be prepared “for him to eat on each of his birthdays as a child, as an adult even, alongside a slice of bakery cake” (39). The ritual of food, clothing, and people gathered verify that, as for the Gangulis, “food is a means by which we create culture” (Greene and Cramer xi). Through the formal rites of annaprasan and with the assembling of their Bengali friends, the Gangulis are affirming their identity, their continuing desire to be identified with their Bengali heritage.

The rice ceremony as culturally important is borne out in Lahiri’s story of her own father whom she describes as an “oracle of rice,” the annaprasan rice, his own special recipe which “has become an extension of himself, that he has perfected, and to which he has earned the copyright. A dish that will die with him when he dies” (“Rice” 89). As with the fictive Gangulis, Lahiri’s father’s rice brings together Bengalis for children’s parties, weddings, even Bengali cultural events. Anne J. Kershen writes that “it is in the private sphere that the eating and ceremony of ethnic diet enables the retention of links with, and memories of, kith, kin and homelands left behind” (7). Linking the past to the present through food is often one of those negotiations that mitigate the “aloneness” of being away from the cultural home and allow assimilation into a new culture.

But the ever-changing practices and performances that bring assimilation do not occur overnight. Instead assimilation is achieved through the daily occurrences and contacts of life that constantly move and adjust the borders of self-identity through time. This process is evident
within *The Namesake* as the Gangulis live their daily lives in America. Because the parents and the children “start” the assimilation process at different identity markers, at different points of “investment” in their Bengali heritage, with the parents as immigrants and the children as first-generation Americans, the assimilation process looks and works differently for each generation which can cause confusion and misunderstandings for those involved.

**The Economics of (Dis)assimilation**

Important to a discussion of the negotiations of (dis)assimilation is the economic status of the immigrant. Brown’s research indicates that the first flow of Indians coming to the United States were generally highly skilled professionals (56), as is the case in Lahiri’s *The Namesake*: “The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers” (38). Ashoke’s education and position as a university professor give the family financial freedom and thus the security and ability to live separately from other Bengali families, avoiding the charge of “ghettoization” often made when unskilled laborers gather together in one distinct location for security. The Gangulis’ process of assimilation intensifies with a move to their own house “at a university town outside Boston” (48) where they are apparently the only Bengali residents. Their Cambridge Bengali friends also feel secure enough to move to their own choices of homes, “to places like Dedham and Framingham and Lexington and Winchester, to houses with backyards and driveways,” choices that are not contingent on immigrant community but on different architectural styles (51). The Gangulis look at houses “on ordinary roads where plastic wading pools and baseball bats are left out on the lawns. All the houses belong to Americans.” Instead of maintaining exclusively Bengali customs, etc. in an exclusively Bengali neighborhood, they are, with the move, plunged into the thick of American life. The narrator says that “to a casual observer, the Gangulis, apart from
the name on their mailbox, apart from the issues of *India Abroad* and *Sangbad Bichitra* that are delivered there, appear no different from their neighbors. Their garage, like every other, contains shovels and pruning shears and a sled” (64). The picture is one of a supposedly easy acceptance and assimilation into American suburban life.

But living in the midst of an American community does bring the challenges and pressures of American customs and beliefs into the home, requiring adjustments and negotiations. The Gangulis, “learn to [. . .] nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowmen, to color boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter and hide them around the house. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati” (64). These adjustments represent those “in-between spaces” Homi K. Bhabha identifies as interstices that “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration” (1-2). Rather than being “pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition,” Bhabha claims that the “social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation (emphasis added) that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (2). And, as food works as an enunciative site of identity (and contestation) within *The Namesake*, food negotiations are tied to the creation of the hybrid lives of the children:

In the supermarket they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hot dogs. For Gogol’s lunches they stand at the deli to buy cold cuts, and in the mornings Ashima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. At his insistence,
she concedes and makes him an American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake ‘n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb. (65)

Ashima fixing meat sandwiches for Gogol’s lunches suggests a culinary negotiation to avoid what Mannur terms the lunch box as a “disruptive otherness” (151). She writes that “food marks the racialized body in [. . .] traumatizing ways. When the subjects are school-aged, with less cultural and political arsenal to shape their cultural terrain, opting to eat certain foods that carry the stigma and smell of otherness viscerally marks the body in disastrous ways” (150). Mannur cites ethnographic work on first-generation school children using the example of a student who was told by a classmate that her chutney sandwich smelled bad. To shield his children, the parent made lunches that “made them feel part of a group rather than excluded . . . For Rohan [the parent] the move from the exotic to everyday involved repackaging Indian food in a way that fit in with the lunch practices of his children’s white schoolmates” (Bhatia qtd. in Mannur 150-51). The repackaged food thus becomes a form of “lunchbox” hybridity.

As Lahiri moves her characters through the changes brought with assimilation to American life, the diction relating to food suggests an important attitude difference between the parents as immigrants and the children as first-generation Americans. In describing the ritualistic performances of a Bengali religious ceremony, the attitude of the children is conveyed through negative language: “During pujos [. . .] Gogol and Sonia are dragged off to a high school or a Knights of Columbus hall overtaken by Bengalis, where they are required to throw marigold petals at a cardboard effigy of a goddess and eat bland vegetarian food” (64). The words dragged and required convey resistance to the Hindu religious practice. The use of the word cardboard along with the denotation of “a goddess” without the honoring signified by a proper name sug-

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23 Speaking of the negotiations necessary for the hybrid immigrant life, it is interesting to note the irony of the “site” of the worship of an Indian god as a Roman Catholic Knights of Columbus hall “overtaken” by Bengalis.
gests the ceremony as a less efficacious copy, a mere shadow of a now lost more essential form. This implied lifelessness of the attempt to duplicate India in America is also registered in terms of the lifelessness of food: “bland vegetarian food.” Cultural assimilation is evident in the comparison of the Hindu religious practice to American Christmas, also conveyed through and connected to culinary representation: “It can’t compare to Christmas, when they hang stockings on the fireplace mantel, and set out cookies and milk for Santa Claus, and receive heaps of presents, and stay home from school” (64-65). Instead of the diction of negativity, the description of Christmas suggests abundance and positivity with the sweetness of the food, the reception and acceptance of which suggest and reflect the children’s assimilation to American abundance and culture.

This acceptance of American abundance, besides being an enunciative site of assimilation suggesting a new hybrid identity, also serves as political/social commentary. Mannur charges that diasporic novels “too easily get lost amid a sea of exotic detritus if we are not able to delve into the details within to unearth the vision of social justice lodged in each novel” (220). Instead, she writes “food must be cast in a different light; not simply an easily digestible comestible, not simply an item on a menu, food in these works demands a rigorous interrogation of the meanings that can be accrued to food” (220). Lahiri’s novel, by contrasting the abundance of the United States and the poverty of India, questions social justice, even in the assimilation process.

A questioning of social justice is evident in Lahiri’s portrayal of American abundance through the characters Gerald and Lydia, parents of Gogol’s love interest Maxine. The narrator says that Gogol “falls in love with Maxine, the house, and Gerald and Lydia’s manner of living, for to know her and love her is to know and love all of these things” (137). Although “these things” include Maxine’s “unkempt ways,” much of Gerald and Lydia’s “manner of living” per-
tains to the culinary, which appears to become the foundation of the relationship between Gogol and Maxine: Gogol learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper. He comes to expect the weight of their flatware in his hands, and to keep the cloth napkin, still partially folded, on his lap. He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. He learns not to put wooden spoons in the dishwasher [. . .]. He learns to anticipate, every evening, the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine. (137)

Every description of dining with Gerald and Lydia includes a litany of foodstuffs. Dinner parties mean the production of Western gourmet delights: peeling apples and deveining shrimp, shucking oysters, choosing wine. The production includes dinner guests who are the epitome of the social elite: “a dozen or so guests sitting around the candlelit table, a carefully selected mix of painters, editors, academics, gallery owners, eating the meal course by course, talking intelligently” (140). Within the perfectly planned aesthetic production, Gogol recognizes the contrast with his parents’ dinner parties: “cheerfully unruly evenings” with “fish and meat served side by side, so many courses that people had to eat in shifts, the food still in the pans they were cooked in crowding the table” (140). The contrast is a divide that Gogol cannot seem to overcome. He “cannot imagine” (141) his parents sitting at Gerald and Lydia’s table enjoying the perfect, elitist dinner party. Just as he does not know the emotionally charged nature of his name, he either chooses not to know or not to remember the emotional truth of his father’s dietary past.

Just as the food-equals-home paradigm drives nostalgic longing, it also drives migration. Skubal sees the enormity of “human alimentation”: “Everything, from migration and settlement
patterns to warfare, religion, family size and structure, technological advances and even the physical size and characteristics of the human form itself, has to a great extent been predicated on what there was or wasn’t to eat” (5, emphasis added). In discussing the negotiations of (dis)assimilation, it is imperative to acknowledge what the mere possession of food means. Lahiri’s character Ashoke briefly, but starkly, comments on what it means to live in the United States rather than in India in terms of food. When his young son doesn’t finish his meal, “Ashoke shakes his head at Gogol, disapproving, unyielding. Each day Ashoke is pained by the half-eaten sandwiches people toss into garbage cans on campus, apples abandoned after one or two bites. ‘Finish it, Gogol. At your age I ate tin’” (55). The implications are overwhelming as the blunt, hard language of the blunt, hard food conjures up images of the truth about the poverty in India. The culinary contrasts between Maxine’s parents’ and Gogol’s parents’ relationships to food elicit questions regarding the greater meaning of food in the literary novel, of the social, political, and economic issues that produce such a variance between the diets in two countries. The suggestion is that Gerald and Lydia would not “muddy up” their lives (or their meals) with knowledge or discussion of the unloveliness of poverty, serving as an indictment against an uncaring, affluent American society.

(Dis)assimilation in “Mrs. Sen’s”

Another of Lahiri’s stories often referenced in the discussion of food in the migrant experience is “Mrs. Sen’s,” from her collection Interpreter of Maladies (1999). Food as defense against the loneliness and isolation of immigration is the theme of the story. Just like Lahiri’s own mother, the character Mrs. Sen migrated to the United States as the wife of an Indian college professor and has little contact with others. Lahiri, in an interview with Vibuthi Patel of
Newsweek International, “remarks that ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ was her attempt to imagine what life might have been like for someone like her mother, a young South Asian immigrant cast into the silent vastness of a largely white America of the 1960s” (qtd. in Mannur 158). The biggest event of Mrs. Sen’s day is preparing and cooking dinner, an event that connects her to her homeland of India. Her immigrant identity is tied to the one area of her life where she has power to enunciate and perform her culture—preparing food. Lahiri pictures Mrs. Sen’s proficiency in terms of a general in charge of legions of vegetables. Her formidable weapon is described in terms of battle: “Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas” (114). She is able to conquer the vegetables:

she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds. At times she sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients.

(114)

The blade and the chopping of vegetables symbolize the rituals of community in India. Mrs. Sen tells Eliot, the young American boy she babysits, “Whenever there is a wedding in the family, [. . .] or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night” (115). Sadly, here in the United States where Mrs. Sen is isolated from her Indian community, instead of hearing laughing and gossiping, she can’t sleep because of the silence.
The story “Mrs. Sen’s” is about the gathering of the foods which are Mrs. Sen’s markers of identity. Through her endeavor to cook meals that approximate those of India, she is forced to attempt various “steps of assimilation,” to deal with what Mannur calls “pressures to assimilate” (161). She has to negotiate her shopping around her husband’s work schedule until that plan fails (124). Next, she resorts to the use of public transportation, but carrying a “blood-lined bag” of fish on the bus causes a smell that bothers other passengers (132-33). Madhuparna Mitra writes that “[p]resumably, this experience of othering discomfits Mrs. Sen to the extent that she does not attempt to take the bus again” (195). She finally gets so desperate to pick up a fish for dinner that she attempts what is for her the ultimate act of assimilation—moving out into the mainstream of American life by driving her car in traffic—but again meets failure when she has an accident (134). Ashutosh Dubey suggests that “Mrs. Sen’s stubborn refusal to learn driving can be seen as a subconscious way of her resistance to the dictated terms of this new world” (qtd. in Mitra 194), a form of (dis)assimilation. To Mrs. Sen, her failure to procure the fish, which has become her necessary identity marker, represents a failed attempt to duplicate India in her home through her food. Instead of making her ethnic food, she gives up the security of her pretence: “She prepared a plate of crackers with peanut butter” (134).

Although, through her acquiescence to serving American snack food, Mrs. Sen seems to accept failure in her personal drive to retain her ethnic identity, the title of the story suggests some attainment or possession on her part. As Mrs. Sen’s various attempts at (dis)assimilation through food are played out, she has for an audience the little boy Eliot. What Mrs. Sen does not realize is that, through her attempts to duplicate India within her home, Eliot is learning valuable lessons about community and family—something that has failed to be communicated in his own home. When Mrs. Sen tells Eliot about the gathering of community for the chopping parties or in
response to the cries for help, he thinks about his lack of community, about how his neighbors have a party without inviting his mother and him (116). When he sees Mrs. Sen putting such time and love and tradition into her food, he thinks about the pizzas he and his mother pick up and how his mother never eats because of the glasses of wine and the bread and cheese she consumes before leaving him to eat alone. His own isolation is a reflection of the sense of isolation that Mrs. Sen is attempting to overcome through her food. The reader is left with the suggestion that perhaps the possession indicated by the apostrophe in the title is a “lesson,”—“Mrs. Sen’s Lesson.” Mrs. Sen’s identifying statement of self is through her husband’s identity—“Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university” (112)—but, ironically, it is she who teaches a more important lesson on multiculturalism.

Through Mrs. Sen, Lahiri introduces a lesson about how different generations and ethnicities can come together to teach and learn life lessons, that there are two sides to the assimilation process, that there is also a dominant culture assimilating to a new minority presence. Mrs. Sen’s food gathering and preparation show Eliot a valuable love for community, family, and tradition which he does not have or see in his own life. Mary Ann Chacko opines that “lives in multicultural societies are not lived on the basis of permanent differences but entail ‘horizontal relationships’ across differences that have the potential for transforming identities” (85). Although Mrs. Sen, through her ultimate acquiescence to peanut butter and crackers, seems to accept failure in her attempts to negotiate diasporic life, she has actually succeeded in building a “horizontal relationship” of differences through her contribution to a greater understanding between the dominant American culture represented by Eliot and the minority Indian culture she represents. She has modeled the more universal issues of “home”—those of love, caring, and community—thus
“bridging the gaps between cultures and individuals” which Jennifer Bess suggests as a failure of global living which must be overcome (125).

(Dis)assimilation in the United Kingdom

The flows of Indian (and Pakistani and Bangladeshi) immigration to the United Kingdom were very different than those to the United States, and these differences are reflected in the literature written by diasporic writers living in England. Although English diasporic writers show many of the same personal and domestic concerns of immigrants evidenced in Lahiri’s writings24, the very different relational and political situation with England’s immigrants and its former colony brings unique pressures and expectations for both the historically “dominant” English culture and its immigrants.

An important factor to impact Indian immigration and thus its literary representation is the history of English imperial power in South Asia which was predicated on the practice of building England in India through English education which implied the transformation of Indians into Englishmen.25 This suggestion of “Englishness” drove the Indian vision of the United Kingdom as a “home” country—what Taryn Beukema refers to as the “internalized [. . .] values and social codes” (3) of the British Empire—that the colonialized were part of the bigger imperial British identity. Seeing themselves as citizens of the United Kingdom, Indians even fought in World War II as part of British forces. Based on these assumptions, it was inevitable that, when considering immigration to the United Kingdom, the expectation was for a warm welcome home.

24 See for example the food references in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane: “The next day she chopped two fiery red chilies and placed them, like hand grenades, in Chanu’s sandwich” (45).

25 See Thomas Babington Macaulay’s 1835 “Minute on Education”: “We must at present do our best to form [. . .] a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” Also see Gauri Viswanathan’s Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
Brown notes that, as Commonwealth countries, Indians had “free right of access into Britain at this stage” (40), and British-educated Indians did fare better than the Pakistani or Bangladeshi immigrants (69). There is a definite geographical pattern of settlement of South Asian immigrants, with each ethnicity concentrated in particular areas in Britain (Brown 68): “Although opportunities for work often pulled immigrants to live in similar areas, the social and emotional benefits of living in an ethnic enclave were also considerable” (80). And the population density of 620 people per square mile would inevitably foster tensions and pressures with vast numbers of immigrants in a limited space. These pressures were vehemently discussed when the United Kingdom considered its future at the beginning of the new century. Assimilation issues were not contained in or limited to personal kitchens, but were instead forced to the forefront of all of British cultural life.

The “New” Britain/The New Millennium

As a New Year often causes people to stop and ponder the past and the future, the more significant marker of the millennium would seemingly require greater introspection. With the approach of the year 2000, Britain, the proud proprietor of a past that included being the home of an empire upon which “the sun never set,” considered its past and future in terms of its identity and place in the world. While the British concerns in the past were of governing the masses of “others” beyond its own shores, in the year 2000, the concerns were about the proper stance to take regarding the masses of “others” now upon Britain’s own shores. Britain’s past imperial experience allowed them the option of leaving the colonized behind and returning home, but these others now on Britain’s shores were not leaving, but staying and becoming part of Britain. As Alan Riding observed, with the arrival of the Jamaicans, Indians, Pakistanis, etc., “[i]t was now
the turn of the ex-colonies to change the mother country. In a sense, the British Empire had come home to roost” (A-14). What these changes brought by these immigrants would mean to traditionally-minded British was up for debate.

At the millennium, many British newspapers entered this debate dealing with the question of what it meant to be British. It was inevitable that any discussion of the effect of the influx of minorities into Britain would look back to Enoch Powell’s inflammatory “Rivers of Blood” speech given in April 1968. In this speech, Powell charged that Britain, “must be mad, literally mad, as a nation” to allow 50,000 dependants of immigrants into the country every year and called for an immediate reduction of the inflow as well as re-emigration of many already settled in Britain. He foresaw that “[w]e are on the verge here of a change,” a change brought about by the integration of the immigrants into British society, an integration where people like the Sikhs would want “to maintain customs inappropriate in Britain.” Powell said that he was “filled with foreboding,” that he seemed “to see ‘the River Tiber foaming with much blood.’” Powell’s ominous remarks indicate a great fear and hatred of the immigrants, perhaps a guilty fear of the consequences of British imperialism.

In contrast to the negative attitudes expressed by Powell in 1986, the report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain published in October of 2000 stated that their goal was “to analyze the current state of multi-ethnic Britain and propose ways of countering racial discrimination and disadvantage and making Britain a confident and vibrant multicultural society at ease with its rich diversity” (Preface). But, Hugo Young reports that “the commission’s proposal that historic concepts of Britishness deserves rethinking in 2000 meets a tirade of anger based on the claim that there are not enough blacks and Asians here to justify any such exercise.”

Many citizens viewed the suggestion that the definition of *Britishness* should encompass wider definitions to include the many minorities “as an insult to history and our intelligence” (Rptd. in Young). Based on the conflicted rhetoric regarding the reception and assimilation of immigrants, it is obvious that some British citizens look to their imperialistic history for their model for citizenship while others look to the future for their model.

Although the immigrant population did not grow to the levels Enoch Powell prophesied, immigration and the immigration debate continue. As recently as April, 2011, an article in the United Kingdom’s *Telegraph* demonstrates the continuing divisiveness regarding the issue of immigration. Writer Ruth Dudley Edwards describes a significant change in her West London home in South Ealing where she has lived for thirty years. Until recently it was a well-integrated neighborhood with immigrants from “perhaps 20 countries.” But this all changed when young Eastern Europeans “poured in from 2004 onwards.” Edwards says that they were “generally hardworking, eager and ambitious,” but the problem was that they “arrived all at once in large numbers, and most significantly, had zero interest in integrating. They lived and socialized exclusively together, watched Polish television channels via their satellite dishes, chatted to family back home for free on Skype, set up Polish shops to sell Polish food, newspapers and books, and they learnt only as much English as they had to.” Although Edwards moved to central London, to “the most cosmopolitan city state in the world and which reflects the upside of immigration—a dynamic employment market and a diverse cultural scene,” she says that the downside “is visible a few Tube stops down the line [. . .] in places like Tower Hamlets and New Cross where the communities are far more fractured than South Ealing.” Exemplifying the tensions of the situation, Edwards claims that though “assured by politicians that immigration is under control, locals have the evidence of their eyes and ears telling a different story, whether it be a sharp rise in the
women wearing burkas or the newcomers without a word of English, the shortage of school places or the queues at the local medical centre.” These conflicting ideas and tensions regarding immigrants and immigration are the subject and theme of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*.

**(Dis)assimilation in *White Teeth***

While newspapers and commissions debate what it means to be British, a parallel immigrant discussion goes on as Zadie Smith, author of *White Teeth*, takes the question of what it means to be British and to be an immigrant in Britain to the streets of London, to the homes of the Jamaicans, Indians, Pakistanis, and all the “others” coming home to roost. Here, in the streets and homes, there is also a debate. This debate is not about what it means to be British, but rather about the danger of losing ethnic identity with assimilation into British culture. While many British worry about how the immigrant population may negatively change the British identity and way of life, many immigrants have the opposite impression of what is happening. In Smith’s novel, Samad, a Bengali immigrant, says, “I have been corrupted by England, I see that now—my children, my wife, they too have been corrupted” (120). Samad, as Smith’s textual representative of immigrants of various ethnicities, worries about the loss of his ethnic identity and culture through assimilation. The narrator says, “it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears—dissolution, *disappearance*” (272). Smith’s novel is important in the discussion of cultural (dis)assimilation as it speaks bluntly and clearly of the deepest fears of people left to the mercy of another culture through immigration, even to the point of fears of total loss of self. But, by speaking bluntly and clearly, according to Taryn Beukema, Smith, who herself is of dual ethnic parentage with an English father and Jamaican mother, also
“infuses White Teeth with humour and irony, devices often used to defuse the seriousness of situations” (2). Barbara Schaff writes that “postcolonial writers have discarded holistic or homogeneous concepts of nations and identities, and have replaced them by stories of flexible and transgressive global urban identities, living in the creative contact zone of the in-between” (282). Smith’s novel exemplifies this claim as her first-generation characters fight to find their places in today’s diverse and struggling United Kingdom.

Seeking Control of Identity

Just as the British look to their immigration reports, newspaper articles, commission reports, laws, and speeches as texts to help contain and control British identity, in Smith’s novel immigrants seek their own texts of identity control. Smith’s characters search, manipulate, and negotiate their own textual authorities in attempts to assure themselves of identity and control within the randomness and chaos of immigration life. But in spite of the questioning, searching, planning, and manipulating done by both the native-born British and the immigrant to control the issues of identity, in White Teeth the randomness and chaos of humanity defeat the controls in the end. In Smith’s novel, randomness fights the controlling texts, and, interestingly, in a novel with a self-consciously postmodern concern for the text, the text loses. (The belittlement of formal texts is symbolized in the proliferation of the very pedestrian leaflets. One of the characters says, “you can’t move for leaflets in Norf London these days” [373].) In the end, randomness proves to be the controlling ideology regarding immigration and (dis)assimilation in the new millennium in the United Kingdom.

While Smith’s immigrant characters fight various recognized and acknowledged texts of control, there is another “text” to fight, not formally acknowledged, but a pervasive text, a text
Michel Foucault calls an *episteme*. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault explains that an episteme may be suspected of being something like a world-view, a slice of history common to all branches of knowledge, which imposes on each one the same norms and postulates, a general stage of reason, a certain structure of thought that the men of a particular period cannot escape—a great body of legislation written once and for all by some anonymous hand. (191)

The episteme that the immigrants must fight is the episteme of racist colonialism. The episteme of colonialism as a world-view is obvious in the well-known moniker—the British Empire as the empire upon which the sun never sets. During Britain’s imperial age, there was a power structure with a great body of writings spread all over the world to rule the “others” of the empire. The connection of empire with Foucault’s theory of the episteme is validated through further designations he makes. He defines *episteme* as “the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possible formalized systems” (191) and defines *discursive practices* as “a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area” (117). Foucault’s study of the discourse of language and its relationship to knowledge posits that knowledge and truth are based on power relations. Those in power determine the “texts” of knowledge and truth. After more than a century of being the primary imperial power in the world, the discursive practices of colonialism, the rules, reports, and writings of empire, permeated the entire British society and became accepted “knowledge,” thus an episteme of colonialism. The insecurities and fears of immigrant life that

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27 See *Empire Online*, a database offering approximately 60,000 images of original documents linked to essays by leading scholars in the field of Empire Studies. Included are document images from the British library, including the Oriental and India Office Collections at the British Library.
Smith depicts can be seen and identified as an always-present residual fear of the power of England’s colonial history. The discursive practices of the episteme of colonialism created Indians, Pakistanis, Jamaicans, and their ethnic cultures as objects of “otherness” to the texts they must continually fight in order to survive in Britain.

That the immigrants are seen as continuing objects of colonial otherness is obvious from various dialogues within Smith’s novel. When Magid, Millat, and Irie visit the elderly Mr. Hamilton to give him their harvest day donation, on the bus they hear “the oldest sentence in the world”—“If you ask me,” said one disgruntled old age pensioner to another, ‘they should all go back to their own . . .’” (137). Once they arrive, Mr. Hamilton’s conversation about teeth immediately moves to his past colonial experience in the Congo: “the only way I could identify the nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth [. . .]; See a flash of white and bang! as it were . . . Dark as buggery [. . .]; poor fools didn’t even know why they were there, what people they were fighting for, who they were shooting at” (144). Mr. Hamilton’s acceptance of a racist colonial episteme allows no possibility of intelligence for the black “nigger.” When Millat claims that his father was in the war, “played for England,” Mr. Hamilton’s belittling racial response comes in terms of food as a suggestion of a limiting ethnic identity: Millat’s father Samad suffered a permanent injury fighting for the British during World War II, but according to Mr. Hamilton, “There were certainly no wogs as I remember—though you’re probably not allowed to say that these days, are you? But no . . . no Pakistanis . . .what would we have fed them?” Identity is expressed in terms of food— not in terms of what they would eat, rather, in terms of what we would “have fed them,” as if Pakistanis were lesser beings to be fed like animals rather than people eating food. Mr. Hamilton may deny Samad’s identity as part of the British forces, but Barbara Korte identifies White Teeth as a novel reflecting a new awareness of the presence of Asians
in the British Forces during World War II evidencing their right to identify themselves as British (35).

Mr. Hamilton’s continuing racist presumption is obvious because he immediately suspects the darker-complexioned children of being robbers or at least disreputable encyclopedia salesmen. These dialogues reveal blatant racism, a cultural denigration of the immigrants, but, according to Foucault, a bigger part of an episteme is unspoken, requiring a questioning of “what was being said in what was said” (28), perhaps reflecting what today we call “politically correct” language which may have another meaning lurking behind it. The episteme of colonialism is always present, sometimes subtly revealed and sometimes not so subtly revealed, as a text continuing to control and contain the “others” on Britain’s shores, a text the immigrant must continually fight in order to establish and maintain his own identity as a valid part of British identity.

Evidencing the negotiations of (dis)assimilation within Smith’s novel, characters of various ethnicities each search for some controlling text to assure their identities in a time when the racist rhetoric questions their right to belong. The marginalized Hortense looks for her identity within the writings and workings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a faith that is part of the heritage handed down from her Jamaican mother Ambrosia. But the Bible allows another form of manipulation and domination in Hortense’s life. Attempting to use biblical text to instruct Irie on the ways of the Lord regarding interracial marriages, Hortense relates that the Lord “want everybody to keep tings separate. [. . .] When you mix it up, nuttin’ good can come. It wasn’t intended” (318), an interpretation evidencing the continuing and pervasive presence and power of the episteme of colonialism even within the migrant community as an example of the “colonization of the mind.”

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While Hortense looks to the textual authority of the Bible and the writings of the Jehovah Witnesses to give her identity, Samad Iqbal’s identity is tied to the things of the East. He wishes to escape what he sees as the corruption of England (120). He says, “I don’t wish to be a modern man! I wish to live as I was always meant to! I wish to return to the East!” (121). What represents “the East” for Samad is his Moslem faith and traditions, his personal identity text to claim to avoid assimilation within the corrupt society. Beukema suggests that, within her novel, Smith “maps the desires of the first generation men to negotiate pure and essentialized masculine selves in order to succeed in a society marked with nostalgia for a past greatness” (3). In an effort to hold onto even a loose form of his faith in a country where he is tempted with new ways and ideas, Samad looks to the Qur’an as textual authority for answers on how to live a pure, undefiled life. When faced with the temptation to masturbate, Samad seeks out an elderly Alim in the mosque for clarification of the rulings of Allah, to determine if the practice of masturbation is halal (lawful) or haraam (unlawful). When Samad does a “tentative mime” to clarify his question, the Alim “silently passes him a leaflet from a pile on a table” (115). (Ironically, the Alim uses the pedestrian leaflets as texts to clarify and contain the meaning of the sacred Qur’an.) When there seems to be a contradiction of beliefs within the leaflets, the Alim turns to a higher authority, to a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad: “O Allah, I seek refuge in you from the evil of my hearing, of my sight, of my tongue, of my heart, and of my private parts.” The Alim’s final words to Samad are: “my advice to you is to stay away from your right hand.” But Samad, fighting the chaos and bifurcation of immigrant life, manipulates this authoritarian advice; he “employed the best of his Western pragmatism, gone home and vigorously tackled the job with his functional left hand” (116).
Besides Samad’s Islamic religion as a site of his Bengali identity, another important marker of his self-identity is his great-grandfather, Mangal Pande. According to the historical account, in 1857, when it was rumored that the new bullets “designed to be used in English guns by Indian soldiers” were coated with grease—“a grease made from the fat of pigs, monstrous to Muslims, and the fat of cows, sacred to Hindus,” the Indians saw in this outrage that the English “were attempting to destroy their caste, their honor, their standing in the eyes of gods and men—everything, in short, that made life worth living” (Smith 210). Supposedly, in defiance of this plan, Pande shot his English lieutenant and then was hung for what was seen as a traitorous act. But, for Samad, Pande’s shot was not treason but the beginning of the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857 that culminated in India’s independence from England in 1947. Samad believes his great-grandfather to be the beginning of a line of illustrious Indian freedom fighters which culminates with Mohandas Gandhi, a fact denied by the British episteme of colonialism.

But contrary to Samad’s hopes and desires, history and historical texts have not been kind to Pande. In Smith’s novel, according to the OED, Pande’s “only claim to fame [. . .] was his etymological gift to the English language by the way of the word ‘Pandy’” (209). Beginning with Pande’s designation as a traitor firing the first shot of the Mutiny, the definition continues on to include “Any fool or coward in a military situation.” The hegemonic dictionary has made the “other” of the Indian mutiny an object of ridicule rather than a heroic Indian freedom fighter. What Samad sees as a conflict of textual definitions represents a matter of honor to him. He believes that the “petty English academics try [. . .] to discredit [Pande], because they cannot bear to give an Indian his due” (84), and he strives to undo this textual inaccuracy. The OED definition shows how the British used discursive practices “to perpetuate their lives” (Foucault 211) of
imperialism. According to “history,” Pande as a rebel rather than as a hero legitimized the right of the dominance of British imperialism.

Samad’s quest to restore the honor and reputation of his great-grandfather begins with a struggle to define truth. Samad’s best friend Archie says, “[t]he problem with you, Sam, is you won’t listen to the evidence. I’ve read up on it all. The truth is the truth, no matter how nasty it may taste” (211). For Archie, the written text is truth with no regard to whose truth it is. Samad corrects him: “No, Archie. That is a common mistake. The truth does not depend on what you read” (213). Samad warns Archie that the “full story” is not being reported by British scholarship: “full stories are as rare as honesty” (209-10). The narrator adds that “[h]istory was a different business then: taught with one eye on narrative, the other on drama, no matter how unlikely or chronologically inaccurate” (211). Samad argues for a new way to examine texts—to look at them from different perspectives. He realizes that, as Foucault argues, historical rules are “always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period” (Foucault117) and that the British imperial system made the rules for the interpretation of the Mangal Pande incident.

In contrast to the derogatory but easily accessible OED definition of Pande, in his Cambridge college library, Samad’s nephew finds an old text with a different story of Pande:

> When Rajnu passed the book to his uncle, Samad felt his fingers tingle and, looking at its cover, shape, and color, saw that it was all he had dreamed of. It was heavy, many-paged, bound in a tan leather and covered in the light dust that denotes something incredibly precious, something rarely touched. (215)

Samad’s reaction to the book illustrates certain pre-conceived ideas about literary texts. For Samad, the impressive size, shape, and condition of the book’s exterior give the interior text validity. Its appearance of age seems to move it back historically closer to the time and thus hopefully
to the truth of Mangal Pande. The book is the precious text (almost sacred) that will give back to the Indian Pande (and his great-grandson Samad) the honor previously colonized away by the British control of the historical text. The reference to the covering of light dust denoting “something rarely touched” suggests a secreting away of truth by the British as the dominant possessor of this knowledge. The caption under the picture of Pande identifies him as “laying the foundations of the Independence to be won in 1947” (215). Samad is so overcome with finding the text, a written verification of his long-asserted beliefs, that he must sit down and weep (215).

Anita Mannur, again connecting identity issues to food, delves into India’s history to relate another issue of concern about Mangal Pande for the British, about a time “when action and resistance coalesced around the mutable significance of food” (114). She relates the story of the “circulating chapatti incident” tied to the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 when,

a series of seditious messages, apparently encoded within chapattis, circulated rapidly through a number of villages in northwest India. One of the earliest historical accounts of the episode suggests that a local villager would deliver chapattis to the adjoining village with an injunction to make six others—to be then delivered to people in the adjacent villages, with instructions to act in a similar manner; in this way, the chapattis were passed on rapidly from village to village. [. . .] Some accounts suggest there were messages enclosed within the structure of the chapatti itself; others suggest that the chapatti had symbolic meaning known to the anticolonial organizers. (115)

Although it is impossible to know the truth of the contents or meaning of the chapattis, Mannur writes that what this “gesture firmly states is that food at this particular historical moment became a source of anxiety for the colonial powers because it became linked to struggles for free-
dom, national identity, and self-determination. [. . .] We might thus consider food a vehicle of protest or an agent of change, not merely a passive vessel to reflect cultural norms” (116). The story suggests another possible motive for the English to trivialize Mangal Pande’s identity and thus deny Indian cultural pride.

The need Samad feels to find verification of the heroics of his grandfather emphasizes the connection of history and the past to identity. In Samad’s own attempts to hold onto Bengali tradition while living in the West, he relates to his ancestor’s supposed frustrations and “saw that great-grandfather of his, Mangal Pande, flailing with a musket; fighting against the new, holding on to tradition” (150). He relates the battle for his ancestor’s reputation (8) to his own battle to hold onto a proud Bengali identity within the United Kingdom. Living in Bangladesh, he was considered important. He thinks back to “[t]he Man he once was: erudite, handsome, light-skinned Samad Miah; so precious his mother kept him in from the sun’s rays, sent him to the best tutors, and covered him in linseed oil twice a day” (94). His evolution from an admired Bengali to an often despised British immigrant is represented by his hand, crippled in service in the British army: “And my faith is crippled, do you understand? I’m fit for nothing now, not even Allah” (95). Leaving Bangladesh for England made him a damaged man both physically and emotionally. He wonders, “Who would have such an Indian? They promise us independence in exchange for the men we were” (95). The immigrant life has not brought Samad the honor and respect he expected from his “mother” country. Instead he feels betrayed and emasculated. He still feels his place as subaltern within the relationship. Imperialism took away honor that Samad now tries to reclaim through his great-grandfather.

The supposed textual authority of his ancestor Mangal Pande’s greatness gives Samad pride and connection in his Bengali identity, but he worries about what he can do to preserve
Bengali cultural identity for his twin sons while they live in a land not their own: “how can I show them the straight road when I have lost my own bearings?” (158). Samad sees his relatives’ children leaving their ethnic traditions as they assimilate into western culture: “They won’t go to mosque, they don’t pray, they speak strangely, they dress strangely, they eat all kinds of rubbish, they have intercourse with God knows who. No respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!” (159). He analyzes the situation and questions himself: “What kind of a world do I want my children to grow up in?” (158). Samad sees a loss of control within the chaos and bifurcation, the dual consciousness of immigrant life, and senses that his only control of his heritage is in a return to the more noble East, to his “imaginary homeland,” which Schaff identifies as giving Samad “security, an imaginary, mythic, and illusory space which retains an emotional influence, shapes his identity, and compensates for his humiliation” (285), a return he realizes that he can no longer make himself.

In a desperate attempt to preserve Bengali heritage and traditions and to control the corrupt assimilation within his family, Samad sends one of his sons back to Bangladesh. For Samad, who idealizes his past, his homeland of Bangladesh represents a holy text, as the source of all that is “right and correct” and, thus, the only means to control the randomness and chaos of his British present. Samad envisions his son Magid reading Holy Scriptures in the local Bengali mosque, away from and untainted by the corrupt British society, but, instead, a photograph shows him in the company of R.V. Saraswati, a writer Samad calls a “colonial-throwback, English licker-of-behinds.” Instead of being interested in retaining his Bengali ethnic identity, Magid says, “We must be more like the English.” Magid claims that for Bangladesh, “New laws, new stipulations, are required” (239). While Magid envisions a British version of Bangladesh con-

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trolled by English texts, Samad believes in a Muslim Bangladesh where nature and the randomness of nature are Muslim:

If Allah says there will be a storm, there will be a storm. [. . .] Of course it has to be! That is the very reason I sent the child there—to understand that essentially we are weak, that we are not in control. What does Islam mean? What does the word, the very word, mean? I surrender. I surrender to God. [. . .] This life I call mine is his to do with what he will. Indeed, I shall be tossed and turned on the wave, and there shall be nothing to be done. (240)

Samad sends Magid to Bangladesh in an attempt to hold onto an eastern identity for himself and his children, but the “text” of the east does not have the power of control Samad seeks, and Magid appears to be just as much, if not more, influenced by the West while in Bangladesh as he would have been if he had stayed in England.

As Samad continues to fight controlling western texts of identity, there is a literal “fighting of the text” when Samad and, ironically, Millat, the twin who apparently was felt to be too far enculturated to be sent home to learn his ethnic identity, oppose what is understood to be Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses. Although Alsana claims that Samad has not read anything since his “bloody A-Z” (195), Millat claims, “you don’t have to read shit to know that it’s blasphemous” (194). Ironically a news reporter’s synopsis of the controversial book indicates that the author’s writing reflects Samad’s own feelings of bifurcation within British society. According to the reporter, the author “denies blasphemy, and argues that the book concerns the struggle between secular and religious views of life.” Yet Samad denies his true feelings and claims, “I don’t see any struggle. I get on perfectly OK” (195). Just like his struggle to defend his great-grandfather, this struggle against the blasphemous text is to protect honor and reputation: “It is a
matter of protecting one’s culture, shielding one’s religion from abuse” (195). Samad fights the offending text to protect his ethnic identity from abuse.

The controversial book continues to symbolize the confusion about (dis)assimilation and identity within the Iqbal household. When Samad refers to protecting his culture, his wife Alsana challenges what his culture actually is, what a Bengali really is. To give an “authoritative” answer, Alsana looks to texts, to their “twenty-four-volume-set Reader’s Digest Encyclopedia” for an accurate definition of Bengali:

The vast majority of Bangladesh’s inhabitants are Bengalis, who are largely descended from Indo-Aryans who began to migrate into the country from the west thousands of years ago and who mixed within Bengal with indigenous groups of various racial stocks. Ethnic minorities include the Chakma and Mogh, Mongoloid peoples who live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts District; the Santal, mainly descended from migrants from present-day India; and the Biharis, non-Bengali Muslims who migrated from India after the partition. (196)

Because the definition indicates that some of those labeled Bengalis are actually descendants of Europeans, Alsana makes the astute observation: “it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe” (196). Her argument against the immigrant Samad’s claim to ethnic purity also becomes an indictment of the British concern for their country’s own ethnic purity: “Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairy tale!” (196).

Ironically, while Samad, who thinks that his son Millat is not at all concerned about his ethnic identity, sits in front of the television denouncing the offending book, Millat is taking a more proactive stance against the same text. Like his father, he “hadn’t read it. Millat knew noth-
ing about the writer, nothing about the book; could not identify the book if it lay in a pile of other books; could not pick out the writer in a lineup of other writers” (194), yet he recognizes that something about the text relates to his own identity. Prior to the controversy surrounding the book, “he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country, until the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands” (194). Millat realizes that he is not alone in feeling a sense of confusion and rejection within his British home. Although he has not read the text, he realizes that the controversy is really about a marginalized people fighting for their own voice in a land that is not their own. Millat accepts the idea that the text is an insult to his identity and that he must fight the insult by joining in the ultimate manipulation of the offending text, its burning.

As the various characters of Smith’s novel search, manipulate, and create their own textual authorities to give themselves identity, the central “identity” text that brings all the characters and their arguments together is the text of the genome. With the completion of the Human Genome Project in 2003, the possibility of manipulation and control of genetics is more feasible than ever. Smith’s novel addresses these issues as some of the characters appear to be intent on gaining control through genetics.

Irie, one of Smith’s multi-racial characters, reads her own body as genetic text and attempts to manipulate the results of this text to change her identity. The author says that Irie is “intent upon fighting her genes” (227) in her drive to attain what she feels is the appearance that would attract the loving attentions of Millat. Instead of her mother Clara’s slimmer body, Irie has her grandmother Hortense’s “substantial Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangoes, and guavas; the girl had weight; big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth.” The various
body parts show their hereditary value as “ledges” to carry “children, bags of fruit, buckets of water” (222), which harkens back to another existence. Her body represents landscape genetically adapted for another place and time, for life in her ancestral Jamaica, but which seems out of place and out of control in her now-native England. Life in English society has dictated another genetic text for acceptability. Instead of her kinky Afro, Irie wants “straight hair. Straight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair. With Bangs” (228). Her body makes her feel that she is “[a] stranger in a stranger land” (222), and she fights the biological text of her body in order to try to fit into the strange land.

Irie’s fight with genetic code meets literary text in a classroom discussion of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 127. After a morning science class about “Inherited characteristics. Part One (a)” (224), the discussion is of the value of the sonneteer’s mistress’s black eyes and dun breasts: “Thy black is fairest in my judgment’s place” (225). Irie considers the possibility that the dark lady is black and “[s]he thought [. . .] that she had seen something like a reflection, but it was receding” (227). With the possibility of the object of the sonneteer’s affection being black, with the possibility of the affirmation of black as beautiful, Irie has a momentary glimpse of her own value, of the possibility of herself as beautiful, but the teacher’s personal interpretation of the text closes off that possibility: “No, dear, you’re reading it with a modern ear. Never read what is old with a modern ear” (227). Irie is not allowed to read her genetic text as beautiful because of the no of the dominant English society represented by the teacher. The teacher’s interpretation of the text then becomes an indictment of any “other” form of appearance as beautiful.

While Irie questions her own identity markers, Millat seeks his identity in the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation. KEVIN’s identity is revealed in the many leaflets they
use to attempt to control Millat. When Millat is attracted to the many young, western women who flock around him, KEVIN gives him a leaflet to address the issue: “Who is Truly Free? The Sisters of KEVIN or the Sisters of Soho?” (307). Millat tries to fit into the role the KEVIN texts set for him. He tries to deny himself control of his own body with the spiritual ablutions prescribed by KEVIN. He tries to

get his head around Brother Hifan’s written instructions concerning the act of prostration (leaflet: Correct Worship):

SAJDA; prostration. In the sajda, fingers must be closed, pointing toward the qibla in line with the ears, and the head must be between hands. It is fard to put the forehead on something clean, such as a stone, some earth, wood, cloth, and it is said (by savants) that it is wajib to put the nose down, too. [. . .] He was in a cold sweat from trying to recall all that was halal or haraam, fard or sunnat, makrub-tahrima (prohibited with much stress) or makruh-tanzih (prohibited, but to a lesser degree). (379-380)

As Millat tries to manipulate his body into the text’s required position, he is overcome. Just as his body cannot perform the required text, his mind rejects the intellectual definitions required for his KEVIN identity. Instead, Millat chooses what he sees as the more culturally powerful gangster movie scripts whose text he immerses himself in on a continual basis. Instead of fulfilling the textual requirements for the act of prostration, Millat

ripped off his T-shirt, tied a series of belts at angles over his spectacular upper body, stood in front of the mirror, and practiced a different, easier routine, one he knew in intimate detail:

You lookin”at me? You lookin” at me?
Well, who the fuck else are you looking at, huh?

I can’t see anybody else in here.

You lookin’ at me? (380)

His body becomes the text that he reads in the reflection. As he opens a door, “the opening of GoodFellas ran through his head and he found this sentence rolling around in what he presumed was his subconscious: As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster. He even saw it like that, in that font, like on the movie poster” (368). The movie texts are in conflict with the writings of KEVIN for control of how Millat perceives and acts on his identity. The narrator makes an astute comment about Millat’s bifurcation: “Millat was neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian, Englishman or Bengali; he lived for the in-between” (291).

Millat is a first-generation British Bengali and is confused. As evidence of the difficulties of (dis)assimilation, Samad tells Mad Mary, “We are split people” (150).

Parallel to the characters’ individual attempts to control their identity, the central attempt to control identity macrocosmically is the scientist Marcus Chalfen’s genetic project for the future, his own text of control: the FutureMouse©. Chalfen theorizes about the great benefits to humanity brought by the mouse experiments in terms of control:

if you re-engineer the actual genome, so that specific cancers are expressed in specific tissues at predetermined times in the mouse’s development, then you’re no longer dealing with the random. You’re eliminating the random actions of a mutagen. Now you’re talking the genetic program of the mouse. (282)

He is even bold enough to say, “You eliminate the random, you rule the world” (283) suggesting a new form of biological imperialism. He goes on to explain that by learning to control the genes, “[o]ne could program every step in the development of an organism: reproduction, food
habits, life expectancy.” Chalfen’s obsession with obtaining control through the elimination of
the random symbolizes the narrow, out-of-touch, perverse ideals and ideas of the past. His con-
nection to the past is his mentor Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret. Ironically, during the war, a Russian sol-
dier relates to Archie the identification of a prisoner as Dr. Perret: “[a] young Frenchman. A
prodigy. Very brilliant. He has worked in a scientific capacity for the Nazis since before the war.
On the sterilization program, and later the euthanasia policy” (90). Early in the novel, Samad is
astute enough to question Perret’s science: “but what is his science? Choosing who shall be born
and who shall not—breeding people as if they were so many chickens, destroying them if the
specifications are not correct. He wants to control, to dictate the future” (100). Perret’s work
suggests the manipulative power of man versus the randomness of nature and connects back to
the various Nazi experiments to purify the Aryan race. Samad’s commentary alludes to his own
fears of dissolution and disappearance as a marginalized British citizen (272).

Although Samad seems to understand some broader issues of Perret’s science, Chalfen
seems naïve about who Perret is and what he stands for and, perhaps, what his long-term goals
are. When Magid returns from Bangladesh, he is the one who leads Marcus out of the laboratory,
into the sunshine, and makes Marcus realize that perhaps “[h]e had been too insular” (352).
While Marcus’s wife Joyce seems to know instinctively about human nature through her work
with plants, Marcus, in his work with the mouse, seems completely cut off from an understand-
ing of humanity beyond his own household, perhaps symbolizing the more narrow-minded, eth-
nocentric British. Because of his basic naïveté regarding human nature, he presents his life’s
work to the public in combination with science-fiction writings. The resultant book is a combina-
tion of chapters of Marcus’s serious science, each followed by a matching chapter of “futuristic,
fictional, what-if-this-led-to-this point of view” (344). A person more understanding of human
nature would recognize that any value of the serious scientific work would be subverted by the fears created by the science fiction chapters of the text. The science fiction writing portrays a negative view of Marcus’s work, thus creating opposition from many groups—including Millat’s KEVIN—concerned about Marcus appropriating the powers that belong to God—and Josh Chalfen’s FATE (Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation [333]), an animal rights group concerned about the ill treatment of the mouse.

Because of the fear and controversy created by the science-fiction portrayal of Marcus’s work and with the coming of the big New Year’s revelation of FutureMouse©, Millat recognizes a chance to bring together his KEVIN and his gangster identities. KEVIN wants to destroy the FutureMouse© which it sees as defaming Allah in its supposed control of life and death. Although KEVIN had initially planned a more physical approach to its demonstration, they go to “Plan B.” Instead of using violence at the December 31st press conference, KEVIN will quote “Sura 52, ‘The Mountain,’ first in Arabic [. . .] and then in English. Plan B made Millat sick” (414). The KEVIN members believe that the quotation of texts will give them the power to overcome the sacrilegious beliefs tied to the scripted mouse, but there is a questioning about which translation of the text to use—which was more “poetic” or which “sounds like an Elvis ballad” (415). Even in this minor debate there seems to be a battle line drawn between the ideas of the past and those of the present, between the established patriarchal power of what is recognized as “poetic” and the popular-culture acceptance of the Elvis ballad. Rather than the action that Millat sees as KEVIN’s identity, he regards Plan B as them just “sit[ting] around on our arses playing with words” (415). Millat does not see any power in these texts. Instead he wants the action of the gangster movies. The debate suggests that Smith is almost belittling English verbal attempts represented by speeches, newspaper articles, and commissions to discuss the more seri-
ous negotiations necessary for immigrant cultural survival in England. Just as Millat sees Plan B as less efficacious, Smith suggests the same for the current political rhetoric.

As Josh’s FATE, Millat’s KEVIN, and Hortense’s Jehovah’s Witnesses each prepares its unique assault on the “Final Space,” the site of the exhibition of the ultimate authority of control, the FutureMouse©, Samad’s English friend Archie is the character who, in the end, seems to look to the best “authority” for the future: “He always wanted advice, he was a huge fan of second opinions. That’s why he never went anywhere without a ten-pence coin” (21). Archie’s “text” of control is the randomness of the flip of a coin. Throughout their long acquaintance, Samad judges Archie harshly as indecisive—“make a decision, Archibald. For once in your pathetic little life, make a decision” (377). As all the characters depend on their various identity texts as they come together for the revelation of the FutureMouse©, ironically, it is Archie who makes the unscripted and random jump in front of the bullet that changes everything, subverting all the plans and texts and sends the mouse, the symbol of control, out into the world to become a text of randomness.

Just as Archie, who initially seems to be a bumbling, inconsequential character in Smith’s book, ends up making the most important move, which proves the power of the random over man’s attempts at control, another supposedly less important character seems to provide the ultimate message of Smith’s book, a message perhaps directed towards England’s obsession with the retention of its own idea of “Britishness” in the face of immigration. Joyce Chalfen, Marcus’s wife, recognizes all the problems of humanity within her plants. In her book *The New Flower Power*, she summarizes a horticultural stance which seemingly addresses the current racial issues:
Where once gardeners swore by the reliability of the self-pollinating plant, in which pollen is transferred from the stamen to the stigma of the same flower (autogamy), now we are more adventurous, positively singing the praises of cross-pollination [. . .]. Yes, self-pollination is the simpler and more certain of the two fertilization processes, especially for many species that colonize by copiously repeating the same parental strain. But a species cloning such uniform offspring runs the risk of having its entire population wiped out by a single evolutionary event. [emphasis added] In the garden, as in the social and political arena, change should be the only constant. (257-58)

Joyce Chalfen’s horticultural advice is a direct indictment of the drive for ethnic purity seen in England’s concerns about immigration, even to the extent that she uses the word colonize in writing about horticulture within a book about the place of immigrants in the home of the colonial empire. Joyce writes of “singing the praises of cross-pollination” and says, “The birds and the bees, the thick haze of pollen—these are all to be encouraged” (258). Smith, through Joyce Chalfen, is saying that the British need to move beyond the mind-set of boundaries between the colonizer and colonized and look to a future of ethnic diversity instead of limiting themselves to “copiously repeating the same parental strain.”

Smith’s story of the questioning of the values of inherited characteristics—the white teeth of the title—ends with the half Jamaican/half English Irie married to the English Josh of Jewish descent, mothering a child who is the product of the random movement of one sperm from the unknown origin of one of two Bengali brothers. Just as FutureMouse© ultimately represents the defeat of controlling texts in its random movement out into the world, Irie’s daughter represents
the answer to the English question of its identity for the future. Simon Hattenstone reporting in the *Guardian* in the year 2000 says of London that it is a city in which 40% of children are born to at least one black parent, a city in which the terms black and white become less and less relevant as we gradually meld into different shades of brown. *White Teeth* reflects a new generation for whom race is the backdrop to daily life rather than the defining characteristic of existence.

England’s future identity must be the rejection of the continuing episteme of colonial domination and be instead the joyous acceptance of the little girl of randomness. She must be seen as “a consequence of living, a consequence of occupation and immigration, of empires and expansion” (363). Samad’s wife Alsana says, “There are two rules that everybody knows, from PM [Prime Minister] to jinricksha-wallah. The first is, never let your country become a trading post. [. . .] The second is, don’t interfere in other people’s family business” (364). In the end, the changes brought by immigration are a consequence of the randomness of English imperialism, the randomness of the English setting up trading posts in foreign lands. And just as Archie in the final line of the text bids the mouse farewell and says, “Go on my son!” (448), the British must now see all the children of England, black, white, and brown, as their own children, as a consequence of life, and wish them all well in the future.

And Salman Rushdie echoes these ideas in terms of the immigrant writer. Speaking of the value of Indian immigrant writing and his literary forefathers and influences in “Imaginary Homelands,” he says “cross-pollination is everywhere” (20) and that there is an extra value to the tradition of the immigrant writer:
Let me suggest that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews; the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrant Britain. [. . .] America, a nation of immigrants, has created great literature out of the phenomenon of cultural transplantation, out of examining the ways in which people cope with a new world; it may be that by discovering what we have in common with those who preceded us into this country [England], we can begin to do the same.

(20)

Rushdie emphasizes that ongoing human history is the subject of writing, and today’s immigrant writer is part of the continuum expressing lives in progress. As Joyce Chalfen claims, change should be the only constant of life. Postcolonial Indian writers chronicle the transcultural changes and adjustments brought by migration. As Indians move from the mother country to new homes around the world, their writers are there to give voice both to the joys and pains, the (dis)assimilation of creating identities that work for the future—transcultural identities made up of the balancing of the old and the new. And just as in the history of both the United Kingdom and the United States, the “immigrants” who arrived before them will also change and be changed by the addition of new pollen in the rich fertilization process of the development of mankind as all move forward together.
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Conclusion

Alsana Iqbal in *White Teeth* says “never let your country become a trading post” (364), but the English East India Company did set up a trading post in India for the purpose of exploitation of trade with Southeast Asia. From this starting point of economics, the company eventually became an agent of British imperialism in India until the Indian Mutiny of 1857 when the British government took over the management of the Indian colony. To facilitate colonial success, the British developed a plan to encourage Indian cooperation. Part of the plan included the “Filtration Theory” of education, the use of literary study to incalculable within the Indian populace the particular values that would encourage cooperation with the British. Gauri Viswanathan, in his research of the British use of literary study in colonizing India, identifies the Filtration Theory as “predicated on the notion that cultural values percolate downward from a position of power” (34). According to Viswanathan, the English developed an “imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England, a mission that in the long run served to strengthen Western cultural hegemony in enormously complex ways” (2). English literature became “the means through which the claims of Western belief were at once asserted and the grounds of its truthfulness vindicated” (108). Viswanathan recognizes that, because of this plan, “the charge of conspiring to erase the voice of the colonized and blot out his identity will remain to some extent” (12).

Interestingly, a psychology similar to the filtration method as a measure to blot out Indian identity and voice seems to be used in today’s outsourcing training centers in India. T. K. Rajalakshmi commenting about a study of call center agents prepared at the V. V. Giri National Labour Institute in India recognizes what he calls interesting aspects “hitherto undocumented”
about training for agents. He writes that “the post-recruitment training normally included four to eight weeks of in-house orientation in voice/accent, soft skills and spoken English. Exposure to television shows and Hollywood blockbusters, reading fiction [italics added] to familiarize the agents with Western culture and etiquette further enhanced this.” The strategy described sounds reminiscent of that of the English filtration project—a plan intended to inculcate a western mindset as dominant. The study even referred to a “productively docile” workforce. This may seem to be a good business practice for a Western company, but it creates a false representation of the Indian voice. This negation of an honest portrayal of the Indian voice emphasizes the importance of Indian novels in portraying realistic speaking voices for Indians as resistance to continued western hegemony in today’s global market. Peter Morey asserts the value of Indian novels as being “accretional, cumulative and continually being created and worked out” and as creating a literary space for the “multiplicity of communal, ethnic, caste, and class voices that comprise India [. . .] and reclaim colonized space and its bodies from external and internal forces of oppression [. . .] and the issue once again becomes one of narrative as resistance” (162). As Indian writers today continue to write narratives of the Indian experience both in India and abroad, the cumulative effect is resistance to a stable representation of Orientalism. These narratives instead speak of the fluidity of Indian life and experience. The various ways of speaking discussed here—abjection, magical realism, history, and (dis)assimilation—work as important narrative resistance to western hegemony as writers convey a multiplicity of postcolonial voices that speak of India today.
Works Cited

