Covert Hinduism, Overt Secularism

A Postsecular Reading of the Indian English Novelistic Tradition

Alessandro Vescovi

Milano University Press

Alessandro Vescovi

COVERT HINDUISM, OVERT SECULARISM

A Postsecular Reading of the Indian English Novelistic Tradition

Milano University Press

Covert Hinduism, Overt Secularism. A Postsecular Reading of the Indian English Novelistic Tradition / Alessandro Vescovi. Milano: Milano University Press, 2024.

ISBN 9791255101055 (print)

ISBN 9791255101062 (PDF)

ISBN 9791255101079 (EPUB)

DOI 10.54103/milanoup.143

Published by Milano University Press
Via Festa del Perdono 7 – 20122 Milano
Web Site: https://milanoup.unimi.it
e-mail: redazione.milanoup@unimi.it

The print edition of this volume can be ordered from all physical and online bookstores, and is distributed by Ledizioni (www.ledizioni.it)

General note on figures and tables

Unless otherwise indicated, figures and tables have been prepared by the author.

Sommario

To Orazio, Maddalena Anita, and Isabella Margherita
this book has grown with them

Introduction

> There is perhaps no better means of tracking the diffusion of modernity across the globe than by charting the widening grip of this fear, which was nowhere more powerfully felt than in the places that were most visibly marked by the stigmata of "backwardness." It was what drove artists and writers in Asia, Africa and the Arab world to go to extraordinary lengths to "keep up" with each iteration of modernity in the arts: surrealism, existentialism, and so on. And far from diminishing over time, the impulse gathered strength through the twentieth century, so that writers of my generation were, if anything, even less resistant to its power than were our predecessors: we could not but be aware of the many 'isms'—structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism—that flashed past our eyes with ever increasing speed.
>
> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 123.

The first germ of this book lies not in a devotion to religion, nor any political allegiance to secularism, rather in a blend of two distinct pursuits: a critical interest in textual exegesis and an intellectual curiosity about Indian modernity. My study focuses on Indian English novels, including works by authors with diverse worldviews; some of them foreground their Hindu heritage while others uphold a more secular perspective. Oftentimes these novels exhibit characteristics better understood within the Hindu tradition's framework, manifesting in plot incidents, leitmotivs, character development, place naming, ethics, poetic retribution, and value systems. In this book, I argue that references to the Hindu heritage, when present, are almost invariably done in a covert manner. It follows that these references are often overlooked by critics or sometimes regarded primarily as tokens of the author's sophistication, akin to the use of Greek mythology in the works of authors like Charles Dickens or James Joyce, rather than being read as a counterpoint to the main narrative—an alternative epistemology or *Weltanschauung*.

The interpretation of Indian modernity varies considerably among scholars. Intellectuals like Amitav Ghosh, quoted in the epigraph, consider this issue vital, especially in light of the West's historical claim to a monopoly on modernity based on rationalism and capitalism. Adding to this discourse, the Argentinian scholar Walter Mignolo introduces the notion of coloniality, which he argues is "*constitutive* of modernity" (2011, 3). Extending beyond the apparent appropriation of political power, colonialism sets up a "colonial matrix of power" that acts at the epistemological level by imposing Western paradigms on colonised civilisations. This matrix, termed "coloniality" by Mignolo, encompasses four main principles: 1. Knowledge and subjectivity; 2. Racism, Gender,

and sexuality; 3. Authority; 4. Economy. These four principles are fuelled by patriarchy and theology and, since the Enlightenment, secularism—the latter especially in English and Dutch colonies. According to Mignolo, after formal independence, nations have two primary paths out of colonisation: postcolonialism and decoloniality. The former, prevalent in British ex-colonies, relies on Marxism as a frame of reference; in contrast, the latter, seen in South America and the Caribbean, relies on indigenous cultures to build alternative epistemologies. Gurminder Bhambra notes that despite distinct theoretical underpinnings, in practice, outside academic scrutiny, the differences are hardly noticeable, with numerous commonalities prevailing.

The distinction between postcolonial and decolonial frameworks offers valuable insights into India's development. During the years that led up to independence, Mahatma Gandhi followed a decolonial approach (Gandhi 2008, 19-22). He declined to compromise with Western values in all four tenets identified by Mignolo: he explicitly rejected the superiority of European knowledge, opposed racism, and advocated for a sexuality rooted in traditional Hindu values. He challenged Western authority through civil disobedience and non-violence, which he viewed as countering the European legacy of violence. His economic vision championed a village-centric model, accepting private property but rejecting capitalism. Above all, Gandhi opposed English secular materialism with Indian spirituality. In contrast, Jawaharlal Nehru, who became the first prime minister post-independence, was a socialist and a committed secularist, with English as his first language. Despite his critique of English industrialism and exploitation of the working class, as observed during his time in Manchester (Prakash 2020, 202), Nehru's vision of Indian modernity was rooted in the development paradigm, with a focus on heavy industry—concepts that were anathema to Gandhi. Nehru's vision of Indian modernisation was centered on elevating the nation to a level of development comparable to that of advanced countries in Asia and Europe. He was acutely aware of the imperative to actively construct this modernity and secularism played a pivotal role in achieving this goal.

In drafting the Indian constitution, Nehru sought the help of B.R. Ambedkar—a prominent advocate for Dalit rights and a convert to Buddhism. Nehru urged Ambedkar to embed strong secular principles into the constitution, believing that only secularism could save India from casteism and communal enmities. As we shall see in chapter one, the explicit inclusion of the word "secular" in the constitution occurred two decades later. However, even in the Republic's early days, the term was held in high esteem by most intellectuals eager to modernise India and prevent communal violence. Thus, Indian intellectual elites, who had been educated in colonial universities—if not in Oxbridge—equated decolonisation with development. They questioned European policies but rarely challenged the underlying Western epistemology.

Indian religions, which could have served as the foundation for an alternative epistemology, were relegated to the private sphere or dismissed as superstitions held by the uneducated masses. Consequently, the word "secularism" in India acquired a double meaning: at the personal level, it implied that religious activities should remain private, confined to individual solitude or family circles, whereas publicly, individuals were expected to be indifferent to religion. At the political level, it signified the impartiality of the law towards all religions, treating them equally. In popular usage, "secularism" thus evolved to become synonymous with tolerance.

Another difference between secularism in Europe and India lies in their different relationship with disenchantment. In Europe, the process of disenchantment—a term first deployed by sociologist Max Weber (2020 [1919])—preceded the advent of secularism. Weber used "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*) to describe the diminishing sense of magic in the world, a phenomenon closely tied to Protestant theology. He saw disenchantment stemming from "the Protestant ethos," which, along with rationalism, fostered a belief in the possibility of complete knowledge and human dominion over nature, whose agency is reduced to nil. This shift in perception, according to Weber, was not necessarily due to increased knowledge but rather a transformation in worldview. Weber further argues that Protestantism and rationalism are cognate and reinforce each other.

Historically, in Europe, secularism as an ideology emerged following this profound cultural and intellectual shift towards disenchantment and the secularization of political space. Conversely, in India, while movements to revise Hinduism had been underway since the eighteenth century, the notion of disenchantment, as Weber conceptualized it, did not gain significant ground until after Independence. Thus unlike in Europe, where secularism followed disenchantment, in India, secularism preceded any widespread sense of disenchantment. This inversion highlights the unique trajectory of Indian secularism and its relationship with the country's cultural and religious heritage.

The concept of disenchantment is crucial in understanding how twentieth-century realist Indian novelists have marginalised enchantment in intellectual debate on modernity, as suggested by Amitav Ghosh in our epigraph. Enchantment has been systematically excluded from areas like school curricula, city planning, and even "serious fiction" (Moretti 2001; Ghosh 2016), relegated instead to the realm of fantasy, thus stripping any non-human agency from the "real world." This exclusion is vividly portrayed in Satyajit Ray's remake of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1919 [1882]) as *Ganashatru* (1989). The film explores the tension between rational secularism and religion in Calcutta. A physician discovers that temple water, believed to be holy, is contaminated, causing an outbreak of jaundice. His efforts to halt its consumption are thwarted by corrupt politicians and orthodox believers who reject the notion that

holy water can be polluted. The story exemplifies the fraught divide between the rationalist elite and the religious masses, as well as the political class's ambiguity. Likewise, as the movie juxtaposes the clean, aseptic space of the clinic and the chaotic irrational space of the temple, it shows how religion breaks into the secular space and disrupts it. Supriya Chaudhuri (2021), reflecting on the intersection of religious spaces in the metropolis of Kolkata, notes how religious practices encroach upon the secular urban space, obstructing the rational flow of daily life, often backed by economic interest yet unchallenged. Ray's film ends optimistically with the doctor being celebrated—a conclusion perhaps more hopeful than realistic, suggesting in reality that such rationalist voices might be silenced or marginalised.

The embrace of secularism by young intellectuals equating it with modernity was likely intensified by the trauma of the Partition. Prior to the Partition, Indian intellectuals, particularly in Bengal, nurtured humanistic learning alongside their spirituality. Many of them were religious reformers as well as distinguished scholars whose contributions to the renewal of Hinduism and spirituality in India are immeasurable. Figures like Raj Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), and Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902), culminating with Nobel prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1841), exemplify this tradition. While Bankim and Tagore are predominantly celebrated as writers today, their dedicated engagement with spiritual matters forms an essential part of their legacy. Another defining characteristic of these intellectuals is their commitment to cosmopolitanism. Being multilingual and believing in the importance of a global network of scholars and artists, they viewed their Indian identity as part of a broader cosmopolitan scholarly community.

Post-Independence authors, especially those writing in English, tend to exhibit a more pronounced secular stance than their predecessors. In their descriptions of local settings, religious characters and rituals are portrayed, but their piety often remains superficial, viewed by the implied author more as an anthropological curiosity rather than a spiritual issue. Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* (1838, considered in chapter three), for instance, adopts the narrative style of *sthala purana,* or village legend. However, this form seems driven more by Rao's selection of an illiterate woman as the narrator than by a deeper commitment to religious storytelling. At the end of the novel, in an unexpected plot twist, the protagonist and moral centre of the novel leaves Gandhi to follow Nehru, prompting questions about Gandhi's appeal: Was it limited to the uneducated? Doesn't it pass the test of modernity? Such reflections lead us to wonder what the end would have been if the novel had not been written in Europe, in English, for a European publisher.

***

The research and reflections presented in this book are part of the ongoing rethinking of postcolonial studies, engaging with critiques of traditional approaches that have relied heavily on Western paradigms (Gandhi 2008; Mignolo 2011) while overlooking indigenous epistemologies. In his *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) highlights a pertinent question for scholars: what should a Marxist subaltern historian do when sources attribute the cause of a riot to some portent or the will of a goddess? Overwrite their explanations with a preconceived Western theory on economic inequality? This dilemma, though less pronounced, confronts the literary scholar as well. I am writing neither from a religious nor from a traditionally Western secular position. The word that may best describe my attitude as a scholar is "postsecular." Unfortunately, this term covers a range of different meanings extending from sociological (Habermas 2008) to political (Nandy 2013) and epistemological (Ratti 2013). In this book, "postsecular" does not denote a rejection of secularism; rather, it parallels the "post" in "post-modern" or "post-structuralist", where the prefix signifies moving beyond the limitations imposed by modern or structuralist paradigms. Likewise, the postsecular perspective liberates literary criticism to welcome supernatural elements in postcolonial realistic narratives without relegating them to fantasy, magic realism, or mere anthropological observations. It is high time that literary criticism delinked itself from rationalism, not necessarily to counter it as a philosophy, but certainly to counter its hegemonic position in literary studies. Postsecularism challenges the dominance of European rationalism and its intertwined relationship with coloniality, offering a platform where both secular and supernatural elements can coexist, delinking literary realism and world literature from Western secularism.

My work is hardly alone in this endeavour. It continues a dialogue with works such as Neelam Srivastava's *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel* (2008) and Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination* (2013), alongside other notable contributions in this field, including those addressing literature and religion in non-postcolonial contexts, as exemplified by the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion*. Such works collectively underscore the growing interest in exploring the intersections of literature, religion, and postsecularism.

My research focuses exclusively on Hindu influences, but expands beyond the time frame of previous monographs, tracing a subtle thread of enchantment within predominantly secular narratives. Neelam Srivastava underscores the role of the Indian English narrative in supporting a secular national identity, highlighting novels like *Midnight's Children* (1982) and *The Suitable Boy* (1993) as embodiments of Nehru's secular vision. Srivastava notes a tension between secular and religious perspectives within these Indian novels:

> In its renewed attention to postcolonial Indian English novels as historical fictions and sources of literary-linguistic innovation, my study alters the overly ideologized dynamics of current "postcolonial" readings by exploring how *narrative dialogism stages secular and religious perspectives within the same text without a final resolution*. (Srivastava 2008, 17 our emphasis)

However, Srivastava's focus primarily lies in her ethical commitment to secularism. She continues:

> In so doing, [my study] seeks to delineate how an ethical stance clearly emerges from the Indian novel in English, corresponding to the endorsement of a "practical" secularism, a form of accountability that endeavours to engage with belief while upholding the importance of the separation between secularism and religion in the public sphere. (Srivastava 2008, 17)

The re-election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in 2019 starkly contrasts this "practical secularism." The absence of a compelling religious alternative to Hindutva has allowed the Sangh constellation (RSS, BJP, etc.) to occupy the religious-political space with minimal resistance from progressive, non-fundamentalist spiritual forces.

This study complements Srivastava's by focusing on the religious aspect, revealing a parallel narrative to the dominant secular mode in Indian literature. A more overt attitude in this narrative might have offered a less extreme dichotomy between faith and a liberal state, underscoring the need for its recognition. Similarly, Saba Mahmood (2001) observed in Egypt that secularism paradoxically intensified religious conflicts by shifting religious influence from the public to the private space, amplifying religious control over family life, particularly impacting women.

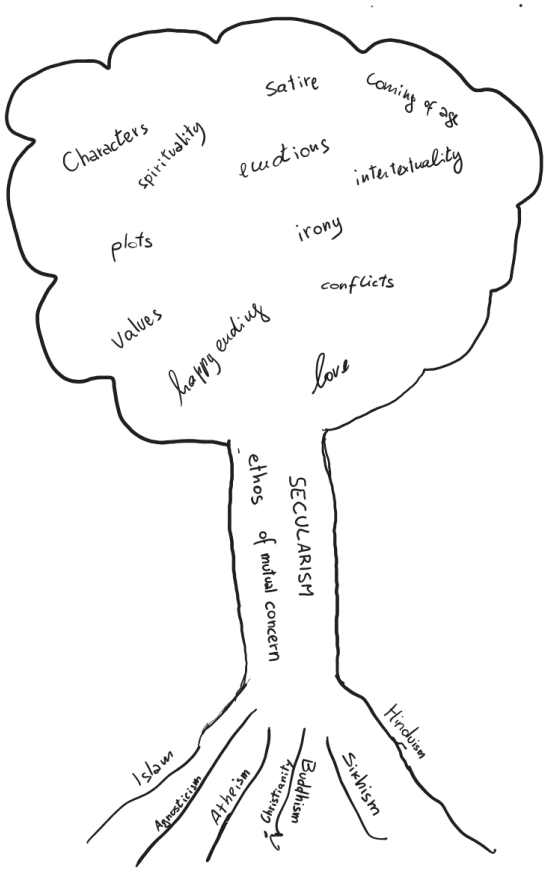
Manav Ratti's work bridges Srivastava's and mine, focusing on the postsecular. While Ratti engages with the religions of South Asia, he does not linger on Hinduism. Echoing Jürgen Habermas (2008), Ratti recognizes the complexity of the South Asian religious landscape and the shortcomings of secularism in accommodating diverse beliefs. For Ratti, as for Habermas, the problem is cogent: how can we preserve liberty of cult, plurality of beliefs, multiple worldviews together with liberal values? He joins other postsecular intellectuals in searching for alternatives to secularism that do not inhibit spiritual life. Literature, he argues, is certainly helpful in this search. Like Srivastava's, Ratti's ultimate commitment is ethical and political. Ratti explores how South Asian narratives have secularized religious tenets to address spiritual needs:

> I am interested in how writers write through religion by invoking its great signifiers and great ethics, and then translate and secularize them within the contingency—and urgency—of material and historical circumstance. (Ratti 2013, xxiii)

The scholar is interested in the "affirmative values" underpinned by post-secularism, which he identifies with "love, friendship, community, art, literature, music, nature, the migrant's eye-view, hybridity, and newness" (Ratti 2013, xxiii). Ratti convincingly argues that diasporic writers such as Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie exemplify a critique of secularism's limitations from a secular standpoint. Ratti also engages with other, lesser known, novels, like Allan Sealy's *Everest Hotel* (1988) and Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999), suggesting that they secularise Christianity and Sikhism.[1] In their different ways, the two writers have transferred the values of Christian and Sikh cultures into a secular perspective. Similarly, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* can be seen as an attempt to secularise Islam.

However, both Srivastava and Ratti seem to assume a kind of uniformity in secularism, irrespective of cultural background. Contrary to this view, I argue, particularly in the first chapter, that secularism is not intrinsic to Indian tradition and has been adopted in haste as a foil to communalism. While many in the West may see secularism as a philosophical stance, to most Indians it is simply an ethos—a moral choice. The same secular fruit, even though equally ripe and succulent, will not taste the same when it comes from Hindu, Muslim, Parsi, or Christian soil. In a literary context, secularism can be visualized as a phase in the creative process of a novelist. The following diagram shows three levels. At the bottom, roots connect a writer to a certain world-view, which may coincide with a historical religion or a philosophical system. This, however, remains hidden beneath the ground. Just above it is the trunk, symbolizing the pillar of secularism. Its appearance does not change, regardless of the roots' nature. The pillar's function is simply to support the structure, providing unity. Although it is visible, it hardly needs to attract attention to itself. The ethical and social motivations of secularism can vary, influenced by deeper beliefs. At the upper level is the crown of the tree, where the fruits grow. Though these fruits seem to emerge from the secular trunk, they are still, albeit subtly, flavoured by the roots. Thus, in the novelistic process, the fruits—the final literary work—are distanced from their roots but not entirely disconnected, subtly retaining the essence of their origin.

1 Ratti claims that Ondaatjie and Rushdie write from a minority position in India, which is the only point of his argumentation that I find problematic. Both are successful and hence powerful intellectuals firmly based in the heart of the world market. Their positions might have been minoritarian in South Asia, but not so in a wider literary scenario.



Sometimes the religious roots are more evident, sometimes less. Sometimes the author is conscious of their genealogy, sometimes not. In theory, acknowledging a novel's religious roots may compromise its secular nature, unless it is based on agnosticism, which for all practical purposes coincides with secularism. In practice, Indian secularism, understood as tolerance, remains unaffected by ties to a given religion. Exposing the roots, however, can invite an interpretation within the tenets of a certain religion.

In discussing the relationship between an author and secularism, it is important to distinguish between the "implied author"—a construct that varies with each work—and the actual author. This relationship can manifest in three distinct attitudes, influencing writing strategies: 1. fully secular, where the author's religious stance is indiscernible, often ignoring or portraying religious characters as eccentric; 2. covertly religious, where the author appears secular, but knowledgeable readers can identify religious elements such as myths or ethos, narrative patterns; 3. overtly religious, where the author actively engages

with religious themes sometimes requiring a suspension of secular disbelief on the part of the reader. Fully secular and covertly secular attitudes do not require deep religious knowledge to understand the text, much less an emotional involvement. Still, on occasion, they may provide information necessary to understand certain religiously-influenced novelistic situations. Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (2002 [1902]), for instance, offers information on Buddhism to understand the lama Teshoo's ways.

The markers of a covert religious attitude are diverse, ranging from character names and plot analogies with myths to dilemmas echoing religious teachings, supernatural events, or secular renditions of sacred practices. These elements could be seen as secular parodies of religious discourse, but parody alone is not sufficient, as Salman Rushdie's works amply demonstrate. The covert religious attitude comes into play when characters, even through this parody, experience spiritual transformations, as seen in *The Guide* (chapter four) and *The Glass Palace* (chapter five). In these novels, Raju and Arjun undergo spiritual journeys that are deeply entwined with the narratives' religious undercurrents. Raju is an impostor who pretends to be a sannyasin until that very role makes him a true renouncer, Arjun unconsciously becomes the parody of a renouncer and thus expiates his former sins.

The implied author's attitude towards secularism determines the attitude of the implied reader. The latter is usually described as embodying the set of skills and knowledge needed to interpret a text as the author intended it (Iser 1974; Eco 1979). Beyond these, the implied reader should also share the author's value system. A flesh and blood reader should suspend his/her disbelief, not only in terms of narrative reality, but also in terms of values, to fully comprehend a text. This is both a cognitive and emotional ability, which requires a certain detachment from one's actual emotional status, which can be challenging when religion and secularism are involved. Consequently, books like *The Satanic Verses* have been considered blasphemous, while *Pilgrim's Progress* has lost the appeal it enjoyed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The general readership's difficulty in abstracting from personal beliefs has, broadly speaking, favoured secular novels, especially in the international market where they do not challenge Western worldviews.

This study focuses on the subtle resistance to secularism, perceived as an alien ideology in Indian literature. My point of departure is that a critical and ethical attitude can be best achieved by allowing secular and non-secular dialogue to interplay freely. Given the hegemonic influence of secularism in Indian liberal thought, the dialectic between the secular and the non-secular in fiction has had limited space to develop, and the religious element has only seldom emerged. The two discourses do not produce any synthesis or Hegelian *Aufhebung*; they just coexist, complementing and perhaps enriching each other.

While Srivastava and Ratti have extensively explored the "fully secular" approach, my focus is on "covertly religious" and the intersection with "overtly religious" narratives. Often it is indeed difficult to distinguish covert attitudes from overt religious engagement, especially in layered narratives, like those of Amitav Ghosh or Anita Desai. The issue is made all the more complicated because, in matters of religion, the flesh and blood authors may not feel like exposing themselves in interviews and book launches, and may therefore decline to acknowledge non-secular readings of their oeuvre. In the following pages, *Anandamath* (1882) by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and *Samskara* (1978) by Anantha Murthy serve as examples of overtly religious narratives. It is no accident that neither was written in English, as overtly religious engagement does not chime well with the language of world literature. It seems that, in India, even writing in English is a secular statement. These novels are considered here as an example of what I mean by overtly religious novels within the realist tradition—as opposed to, say, *Pilgrim's Progress* or *The Paradise Lost*, which are allegorical and mythical rather than realist.

The tenuity of religious elements in modern novels necessitates a focused approach, particularly on a specific religion—in this case, Hinduism. This choice is dictated primarily by the need to move beyond a broad assessment of secularism and religious interplay, allowing for a deeper engagement with specific religious subtexts. Secondly, the material available on Hindu elements in modern Indian novels significantly surpasses that of other religions, partly due to the prevalence of novelists from Hindu backgrounds. Thirdly, Hinduism is distinctively rich in mythical narrative structures, more so than many other religions. There are indeed other religions connected to sacred books, but none relying on so many epic poems and myths as widely known as the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Puranas as holy texts. This aspect of Hinduism, I believe, offers narrative patterns and structures that linger in the mind of authors, even those who may not overtly subscribe to Hindu beliefs. It is important to note that while these Hindu texts are not exclusively known to Hindus—Salman Rushdie, for instance, harps on Krishna's colour in *Midnight's Children*—there is a nuanced difference between merely citing a myth and internalizing its essence. This distinction is evident in the different treatment of the Bon Bibi myth in *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and in *Jungle Nama* (Ghosh and Toor 2021). Both are by the same flesh and blood author but by two different implied authors. While the novel showcases the myth of Bon Bibi, inviting the reader to wonder at that ethnographical exhibit, the poem endorses the myth, inviting the reader to meditate upon its wisdom. My last reason for focussing on Hindu authors lies in my own limitations as a scholar who has worked intermittently on Hinduism for over two decades and knows much less of other religions of the subcontinent, except perhaps Christianity.

Clearly, this survey does not encompass "the Indian novel in English," a category that has expanded beyond the capacity of a single scholarly endeavour. In fact, this is just a starting point. I envisage other scholars continuing where this research concludes, exploring covert religious themes in the literature of other faiths, including Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Christian, and tribal traditions. Despite its focused scope, I hope that this work can shed some light on the fraught relationship between modern narrative and religion in the Indian context, complicating our reading of so many modern Indian novels.

This project is anchored in three main objectives: first, to deepen understanding of literary works that diverge from mainstream secular ideology; second, to explore decolonial practices rooted in diverse non-Western epistemologies and ethos, mirroring unique modes of thought; third, and perhaps most importantly, to challenge Western epistemology on a global scale. This involves a decolonisation of world literature and a questioning of the entrenched certitudes of Western rationalism. The emergence of different paradigms and epistemologies is of the greatest importance in an era where the climate crisis has exposed the limits of Western models. In his recent essays, *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), Amitav Ghosh abandons secular rationalism, not in favour of any organised religion, but advocating for a separation of science from capitalism and fostering dialogue between Western and shamanic or indigenous forms of knowledge. This shift from covert enchantment has become overt, even transitioning from the fictional to the essayistic realm; there is a reasonable hope that other intellectuals will follow in his footsteps.

***

The first chapter explores the contrasting landscapes of Western and Indian secularism. It traces the origins of secularism during the European Reformation and examines various historical examples of tolerance in India, as well as the debate about secularism during the Swaraj movement. It argues that the nation-building process in India encompassed a deliberate move towards secularisation, a task earnestly undertaken by intellectuals. Writing from a secular standpoint in the twentieth century presented several advantages for novelists. It aligned them with national efforts to forge a new Indian identity, kept them distant from communal conflicts, and allowed them to appeal to a pan-Indian readership and international audience. Secular Indian fiction thus presented a common ground for readers of various religious, atheist, or agnostic backgrounds, particularly in the West, facilitating a shared platform for engagement.

Western readers often comfortably engage with the anthropological portrayal of different rituals and beliefs, as long as they are not compelled to adopt a religious stance or confront religious dilemmas. Chapter two delves into

this phenomenon, examinings two overtly religious novels, Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* (1965) and *Bhava* (1998). While these novels achieved considerable success in India, their reception in the West was notably lukewarm. Interestingly, *Samskara* is reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957), while *Bhava* shares many features with Arundhati Roy's *God of the Small Things* (1997). Both of these works, being overtly secular, were well-received in the West. I argue that the underwhelming response to Murthy's novels in the West stems from their overtly religious attitude, which is unpalatable to Western readers. Ingmar Bergman and Arundhati Roy are, in contrast, perceived as secular authors who show religion but do not ask the audience to share the views of the protagonists. Bergman's film, set in the Middle Ages, can be interpreted allegorically, which aids its secular perception. The case of Bankim Chandra further illustrates this divide. His first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), written in English, targeted an international audience, while his subsequent Bengali novels catered to a local readership. Interestingly, *Rajmohan's Wife* is by far the most secular of Bankim's novels, where even gothic heroines in distress fail to utter a prayer and dutiful wives are never seen performing *pujas* during their daily chores.

Indian writers, particularly those writing in English, often feel pressured to adopt a secular stance in their narratives. However, interpretations of secularism vary among authors. While some, like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy—whom we categorize as "fully secular"—never falter in their secularism, others have woven non-secular themes or motifs into their narrative canvasses, re-enchanting their secular narratives. This dynamic is the subject of chapter four. A prime example of this blend of secularism and non-secularism appears in the novels of R.K. Narayan, particularly his middle-period works like *Mr Sampath the Printer of Malgudi* (1949), *The Guide* (1958), and *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1961). Narayan's implied author maintains a secular tone even when his subject matter is the supernatural, as in *The English Teacher*. While those who knew him personally were aware of the autobiographical, non-secular elements in his novels, to the broader public, his belief in the supernatural remained largely unseen or could be disregarded as a private reference. This is how his lifelong friend and mentor Graham Greene—himself a Roman Catholic, though predominantly writing from a secular perspective—perceived Narayan's Malgudi novels. Yet, following his time in America and interacting with overseas audiences, Narayan gained more confidence in making religious themes more overt in his writing. Thus, by deftly covering and uncovering religious elements, each of the three novels examined in chapter four creates two different implied authors: secular and non-secular. Both implied authors appear detached from their subject matter, but this detachment can be construed as either ironic or religious, with realism serving merely as a facade over the veil of *Maya*. This narrative approach resembles an anamorphic technique: from a Western viewpoint, these novels come across as social comedies, whereas from an Eastern

viewpoint, they are philosophical speculations on the universe. Narayan's novelistic process goes through two phases. Initially, he subtly incorporates religious patterns, such as the *ashrama* system, while masking the religious underpinnings of his novels. Later, he adopts a more overtly religious attitude, albeit under the guise of secularism. His texts engage with religion in two essential ways: through reference to Hindu myths, often slant, and through ethical dilemmas that can resonate more deeply within a Hindu context.

The fifth chapter is devoted to Amitav Ghosh, a prominent Bengali novelist and part of the first generation of intellectuals born after independence. Despite his profound respect for Gandhi and Tagore, Ghosh's writings appear very secular. In particular, his most successful early works, the autobiographical *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *In An Antique Land* (1992), lack any supernatural element. Even *The Circle of Reason* (1985) and *Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), while subtly incorporating Hindu motifs, appear written from a position that excludes any non-human agency. The former, highly ironic and reminiscent of magic realism, and the latter, a science fiction narrative, both challenge the credibility of their engagement with the supernatural. By the time Ghosh wrote *The Glass Palace* (2000), he had firmly established himself as an internationally recognized secular author. In an interview with Anshuman Mondal, he went so far as to affirm:

> [...] at this particular moment in time, I feel incredibly hostile to religion. We're living at a time when our world is being torn apart by these things which are not religion itself, but some sort of politicised version of a religious belief. (Boehmer and Mondal 2012, 35)

Despite its secular conception, *The Glass Palace* contains several references to Hindu scriptures and values, much like Narayan's works, which remain unnoticed by secular readers. Religion is mostly relegated to the background—with the exception of a minor character who retreats to a monastery at the end of her life. However, the novel's ethical underpinnings are framed within a Hindu context. The character of Arjun, in particular, experiences a transformative realization, recognizing how he has been blinded by Western values alien to his own culture and identity. This epiphany leads him to seek atonement through a guerrilla resistance against the British, adopting a life akin to a forest-dwelling renouncer.

A similar pattern is observable in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2007), where migration to the West and the subsequent contempt for India are punished like the sin of *samudrayana*—the crossing of the black waters, traditionally viewed as a transgression in Hindu society resulting in the loss of one's societal standing. Two characters in Desai's novel commit the same "sin" and undergo respective forms of atonement, reintroducing a sense of enchantment into the secular narrative.

The final chapter examines the subtle infusion of Hindu *Weltanschauung* in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Unaccustomed Earth." This story explores the relationship between an elderly father and his daughter, who is navigating the complexities of married life and motherhood. Both are of Indian origin, with the daughter born and raised in the USA. She has recently moved to Seattle from the East Coast, where she grew up and her father still resides. The recently widowed man is visiting her new abode, and she is afraid that he might like her to take care of him the way a traditional Indian woman would. However, as the story progresses, it becomes apparent that her father has embraced a unique blend of his Indian heritage and his American experiences. This fusion manifests in his synthesis of traditional Indian *ashramas*, or stages of life, with American Transcendentalist philosophy, allowing a seamless integration of his dual identities. Lahiri's story subtly roots the search for a new secular identity in a covert religious heritage.

Acknowledgements

These pages contain notions and ideas that I started gleaning twenty years ago, when I first began doing research on Narayan, which is the subject of chapter four. The actual writing took a little more than six years. To acknowledge all the people who have helped me by contributing ideas and information, posing questions, recommending readings, or simply listening to my musings over a cup of tea is beyond my power. I shall mention here some of the most cogent professional debts.

Besides his books, Amitav Ghosh has been an inspiring presence in these years, as he has had the patience to ask and comment on my work from time to time. Another novelist who has contributed excellent food for thought is Neel Mukherjee, whose novels are alas too overtly secular to be considered here. In India I am indebted to at least four scholars from two generations: my gratitude and *pranam* goes to Supriya Chaudhuri and Sukanta Chaudhuri, whose work and counselling helped me to find a direction, when I was still perplexed about how to proceed. In a younger generation, I would like to express my heartful thanks to Asis De and Binayak Roy from Tamluk and Siliguri respectively. They have been so generous as to share precious views and information with me; they also allowed me to get in touch with many colleagues and students in India to whom I have presented some parts of my work, receiving valuable feedback and suggestions.

In Milano, I have often knocked at the doors of Giuliano Boccali and Cinzia Pieruccini, whose immense knowledge of Indology has been invaluable saucerful of gems. This book would be much more naïve if it had not been for them. Maria Angelillo has first disclosed to me some of the secrets of Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*. My colleague Giuliana Iannaccaro, herself an expert in religion and literature, has readily consented to devote our course in Anglophone

literatures to postsecularism on at least two occasions. Discussing postsecularism with students has allowed me to gauge some of the strengths and limits of my theory.

To Carmen Concilio and Esterino Adami I owe more than one session of productive discussions in Turin. Lucio De Capitani from Venice read some parts of the book, providing perceptive and challenging comments.

Last in a lengthy process, but by no means least, I am thankful to my editor Nicoletta Vallorani at MUP for her belief in this project and for her steadfast support throughout. For the Introduction, Sapana Gupta from Berlin has also served as a unique copyeditor, always ready to explore various solutions and propose improvements without eroding my self-confidence, and more importantly, my intended meaning.

I really appreciate the generosity proffered by all the friends and colleagues that have helped me during the process of writing, however, any remaining mistakes or inaccuracies in this work are solely my responsibility.

Works Cited

Anantha Murthy, U. R., and Judith Kroll. 1998. *Bhava*. New Delhi; New York: Penguin Books.

Bhambra, Gurminder K. 2014. "Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues." *Postcolonial Studies* 17 (2):115-121.

Boehmer, Elleke, and Anshuman A. Mondal. 2012. "Networks and Traces. An Interview with Amitav Ghosh." *Wasafiri* 27 (2):30-35.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Chatterjee, Bankimchandra. 1996. *Rajmohan's Wife*. Delhi: Ravi Dayal. Original edition, 1864.

Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra. 2004. *Anandamath*. Translated by Basanta Kumar Roy. Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad: Orient Paperbacks.

Chaudhuri, Supriya. 2021. *Spaces of the Sacred: Religious Practice in Urban Interstices*. Berlin, Boston.

Desai, Kiran. 2007. *The Inheritance of Loss*. London: Penguin Books.

Eco, Umberto. 1979. *Lector in fabula: La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*. 1. Ed., Il Campo semiotico. Milano: Bompiani.

Gandhi, Leela. 2008. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ghosh, Amitav. 1988. *The Shadow Lines*. London: Houghton Mifflin. Original edition, 1998. Reprint, 2005.

Ghosh, Amitav. 1992. *In an Antique Land*. Delhi: Ravi Dayal.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2000. *The Glass Palace*. London: HarperCollins.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2004. *The Hungry Tide*. London: HarperCollins.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2016. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, The Randy L and Melvin R Berlin family lectures. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2021. *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. London: John Murray.

Ghosh, Amitav, and Salman Toor. 2021. *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sunderban*. Delhi: HarperCollins India.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2008. "Notes on Post-secular Society." *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (4):17-29.

Ibsen, Henrik, and W. Archer. 1919. *An Enemy of the People*. [S.l.]: Heinemann.

Iser, Wolfgang. 1974. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kipling, Rudyard, and Zohreh T. Sullivan. 2002. *Kim*. 1st ed. New York: Norton.

Mahmood, Saba. 2001. "Feminist theory, embodiment, and the docile agent: Some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic revival." *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2):202-236.

Mignolo, Walter. 2011. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Moretti, Franco. 2001. "Il secolo serio." In *Il romanzo. La cultura del romanzo*, edited by Franco Moretti, 688-725. Torino: Einaudi.

Murthy, U.R. Anantha 1978. *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*. Translated by A. K. Ramanujan. Second edition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Nandy, Ashis. 2013. "Politics of Democracy and the Politics of Religion in a Post-secular Age." In *On India: Self-image and Counter-image*, edited by Anindita N. Balslev, 59-71. New Delhi and Singapore: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Prakash, Gyan. 2020. *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*: Princeton University Press.

Ratti, Manav. 2013. *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge.

Ray, Satyajit. 1989. *Ganashatru*. India.

Srivastava, Neelam. 2008. *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English*. London: Routledge.

Weber, Max. 2020. *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*. Translated by Damion Searls: New York Review of Books.

Chapter 1.
Secularism, World Literature, and the Politics of Indian Novel

Indian secularism

I first became interested in Indian literature in the late Nineties, but it was not until 2005 that a series of coincidences offered me the opportunity to see the country with my own eyes. India's economy was then booming. I had read about the "modernisation" process that was underway and how secularism had been instrumental to it and to a more widespread welfare. I undertook a tour of Tamil Nadu with a friend who runs a Bharata Natyam school in London; she was conducting a heritage tour for her students, who were mostly second-generation migrants to the UK. My plan was to gather material for a book on R.K. Narayan that I never wrote. I was flabbergasted by the magnificent and chaotic daily routine of so many temple goers in Tanjavur and Kumbakonam, but most of all, I was interested in villages and village life. Thus, I visited medium-sized villages, hoping to catch a whiff of Malgudi. Finding yourself all alone in a village with no maps and no knowledge of the local language is probably not the best way to come in touch with its life, so I naturally turned towards the local schools, where someone would surely speak English, I hoped. Sure enough, that proved a good tactic, thanks to the exquisite Tamilian hospitality, and probably to the curious figure I must have cut.

In one of these visits, the headmaster himself took the trouble to show me around his school, explaining how difficult it was to keep the children after a certain age as their families required them for agricultural labour, and how difficult it had been to convince different communities (i.e. Muslims and Hindus, and different castes) that their children could go to school together with no prejudice to their respective identities. He was justly very proud of his school, their work, and how they upheld secularism in their precincts. As he told me about the subjects that were taught there, I asked whether they also taught religion and how they managed with the different "communities." "This is a government school," he retorted firmly, "and therefore we are secular and cannot have any 'religion' among the subjects." A few minutes later, as we entered an empty classroom—the pupils were attending their class under the banyan tree in the yard—I saw the words "GOD IS TRUTH" written on the blackboard in plain English. I turned to the headmaster and asked him how it came there as they do not teach religion. He did not waver, but probably thought my question

a bit stupid: "That's not religion," he explained patiently, "it is a general truth, not a matter of Hindus or Muslims; anyone would agree with that." Then he added almost casually: "The teacher of English or moral sciences must have written it."

In January 2008 various vicissitudes had made me give up my project on R.K. Narayan, and I was writing a book on Amitav Ghosh instead. Thus I decided to visit the Doon school in Dehradun, where he had been a student in the Seventies. The headmaster was then Dr Kanti Bajpai, an economist, who had been a student from the same batch as Ghosh. He showed me around and answered my queries about the school. I asked the same question about teaching religion among other subjects, and he explained that the school has always taken pride in being secular; no students are allowed to bring signs of their creed with them. Consequently, during the morning assembly, they read from diverse sacred books—the Bible, the Quran, the Baghavad Gita, Buddha's sermons…

I was not surprised that high-school students would read religious texts during the morning assembly, nor that someone would write "God is truth" on the blackboard of a twelfth form classroom (though I am still wondering why it was written in English). I was surprised at the principals' taking pride in their secularism and at their blindness in front of what to me appeared a blatant inconsistency.

I was yet to learn that Indians have developed their own brand of secularism, which is a wonderful, if sometimes fragile, constellation of practices that negotiate individual religiosity and public tolerance. Even though the word "secular" has found its way into the Indian Constitution, Indian intellectuals have not yet come to an agreement as to what "secularism" means in the subcontinent. In 1972 Mushir-Ul-Haq wrote: "For the last two decades we have been discussing about secularism, yet the term remains vague and ambiguous" (qtd. in De Rooer 2015, 32); a statement confirmed twenty-three years later by M.M. Sankhdher, who wrote: "Such a commonplace concept as secularism, with which the man of the street is so familiar […], tends to acquire the character of a riddle, a puzzle, an enigma among the intelligentsia" (qtd. in De Roover 2015, 32). According to Ashis Nandy (1995, 35), in modern India, the word secularism carries two meanings. The first was born in the West and refers to the separation of the public and religious spheres, asserting that religions should not interfere with democratic polities. Here, the meaning of secular is the opposite of sacred. The second meaning is more typically Indian; it is vaguer, and looking for it in a dictionary would be vain. Nandy defines it in the negative as the "opposite of ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and fanaticism" (1995, 35). This second meaning began to circulate as the anti-colonial élite needed to mobilise Indian masses against British rule regardless of their religious differences. *Swaraj* leaders understood that the European brand of secularism "would make little sense to the average Indian, rooted in a religious worldview and not exposed to

the kind of debate the Church-State divide produced in premodern Europe" (Nandy 1995, 36). Thus, while secularism in the West entails the separation of State and religious hierarchies, Indian secularism stresses the equal tolerance of all religions (*sarva dharma samabhava*—all faiths are possible, according to a phrase attributed to Gandhi), even though it also upholds a certain differentiation or relative separation of the political and religious spheres (Pantham, 524).

As Thomas Pantham suggests, the two views on secularism are not always as separate as they may appear in the above definitions. Western-educated South Asian intellectuals have often praised Indian secularism as a particular brand of the "universal" one. Likewise, T.N. Madan argues that "secularism is not an Indian ideology, but there is an Indian ideology of secularism" (1993, 668). The latter is based on three assumptions: firstly, that secularism has universal applicability, although it has "culturally specific expressions"; secondly, that it will be welcomed by modern-oriented persons; thirdly, that it will eventually succeed in India "notwithstanding all the faltering of the last four decades" (Madan 1993, 668). In 2022 as I am writing these pages, the situation has changed dramatically, especially since the BJP has won over the majority in the Indian Parliament, so that, for many people, being Indian and Hindu has become virtually the same, a position that reneges the secular premises of the Indian state and is often considered fundamentalist. Such ideas have been in circulation for decades now and have even found their way into a book by Sandeep Balakrishna (2018) averring that Indian secularism has been a pseudo-secularism that basically has favoured religious and social minorities over Hindus. Historian Partha Chatterjee (1994) addressed these theories long before Balakrishna, pointing out similarities between the emergence of Fascism in Europe and Hindutva (Hindu fundamentalism) in India. A similar confutation is also found in Amartya Sen's famous *Argumentative Indian* (2006a). Whatever one's opinion about the late political success of the BJP, it certainly shows traces of a profound dissatisfaction with Indian secularism, which is probably to be sought both in the instability of the concept and its non-Indian genealogy.

Secularism in the West

The Western genealogy of secularism is interesting in that the term has taken on new layers of meaning over time without entirely obliterating the older ones. In Latin the word *saeculum* referred to one's lifetime, and later to the material life on Earth as opposed to the spiritual afterlife. The medieval chant that goes by the name of *Dies Irae* provides a good example. It describes the Day of Doom with the words: "Dies irae dies illa solvet *seclum* in favilla," which might be roughly translated as "That day of wrath dissolves the *sec(u)lum* (everything that is material) in embers." The word acquired a social connotation after Martin Luther's Reformation (launched in 1517). An increasing number of European

princes, particularly German, turned Protestant and confiscated the Church's real estates in their territories. Abbeys, convents, and their lands were thus "secularised," that is seized by the State. The whole process is usually described as "secularisation of ecclesiastical lands," and was officially recognised by the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. This treaty considered "secularisation" as a *fait accompli* and established the principle epitomised in the phrase "cuius regio eius religio"—which practically meant that both Lutheranism and Catholicism were accepted, and each state would follow the religion elected by its ruler. This was the first step in the establishment of nation-states in Europe, which would receive a final systematisation at the end of the Thirty Years' War.

The order sanctioned by the Peace of Augsburg continued undisturbed until 1618 when a war between Catholic and Protestant powers in continental Europe erupted that would last until 1648, and would be afterwards known as the Thirty Years War. Spain, France, Holland, Sweden, the Emperor, and the Papacy were all variously involved in the conflict. Among the reasons behind the dispute was the legitimacy of secularisation. After three decades of battles and bloodshed, which impoverished all the parties involved, the principal actors in the conflict decided to put an end to it through a treaty that goes by the name of Peace of Westphalia (1648). Apart from drawing new borders, the treaty confirmed the principles of the Peace of Augsburg—accepting Calvinism as a religion along with Catholicism and Lutheranism—and sanctioned the sovereignty of each European nation, protecting them from the encroachment of any external power. This, of course, included the Pope, who lost much of his power on the European chessboard. Thus, the modern nation-state was born under the auspices of a "secular doctrine," where "secular" denoted the separation of political and religious spheres. The agreement was somewhat successful, as no other wars of religion were subsequently fought in Europe, even though episodes of religious intolerance would blacken the history of the continent for many years to come.

Following the Peace of Westphalia, the word "secular" gained currency in the political jargon and acquired the connotations of "modern" and "tolerant," which are fundamental in its later Indian adoption. However, before travelling to India, the concept, which was born of historical necessity, underwent the scrutiny of political philosophers, who refined, enriched, and promoted it to the status of a universal value. In 1670 Baruch Spinoza published his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, which rejects any interference from religious hierarchies in the working of the State but accepts the notion of a State religion. Likewise, John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) offers a reflection on the necessity of separating State and religion, pushing the latter to the private sphere of the citizens' lives. Locke's rationale for dividing political and religious spheres does not rest on the rejection of religion, but rather on a theological premise. The philosopher believed that the Gospel, unlike the Old Testament, positively

excludes a religious commonwealth (De Roover 2015, 142-145). While the Old Testament was the source of the Jewish Law, the Gospel does not prescribe any temporal (secular) law, but rather invites the faithful to belong together in spirit only. Toleration follows as a necessity since the social compact founding society and the spiritual covenant founding religion are cleanly separated. However, De Roover notes, Locke's toleration cannot be applied to religions which do not recognise the legitimacy of the State, or for that matter, to atheism.

Locke's ideas, stripped of their theological basis, became the model for American liberalism. At the time of the American Declaration of Independence, religious liberals, such as the Baptists or the Quakers, would agree with secular liberals such as Thomas Jefferson in advocating freedom of cult and non-interference between the State and religious groups (De Roover 2015). Consequently, the First Amendment in 1791 read "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the exercise thereof." The principle of a modern State equidistant from religious confessions was turned into practice and would find enthusiastic imitators in other political cultures, such as Turkey in 1920, and India in 1947 (Copland 2013, 13). Secularism was firmly welded to the idea of modern and liberal democracy.

However, American liberalism is not the only outcome of the encounter between secularism and politics. French *laïcité* positively refuses any public display of religious affiliation, thus encroaching upon the second tenet of secularism, namely the liberty of cult (De Roover 2015). Secularism as an antireligious doctrine, later endorsed by the USSR and China, first took shape in Britain, where the term secularism appeared for the first time in 1851 in the writings of the agnostic socialist thinker George J. Holyoake (1817-1906). In 1876 he founded the *Secular Review*, printed until 1907, and became a prominent member of the National Secular Society. To Holyoake the term "secularism" was preferable to "atheism" as it does not criticise religion per se, but only what he considered the errors of religion. He believed that secularism was an epistemological stance that considered religions with detachment, and a political attitude that stressed the "secular element" of human life. To him secularism entailed a sense of duty towards the "development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of man to the highest perceivable point," as he argued that "[t]he Secular is sacred in its influence on life, for by purity of material conditions the loftiest natures are best sustained, and the lower the most surely elevated" (Holyoake 1871, 11). Holyoake remained mostly silent about religion, but he never considered it an adversary. To him "Secularism is a series of principles intended for the guidance of those who find Theology indefinite, or inadequate" (Holyoake 1871, 12). However, the word would become almost synonymous with atheism when new members of the National Secular Society, like Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, argued that religion positively hindered social advancement, and advocated active atheism as an antidote (Perumal 1987).

Over time the political and historical scenario that we have just recalled has appended a number of different meanings to the word "secular" and its European equivalents—laïcité, Säkularismus, sekularisme, laicità, secularismo, секуляризм, λαϊκισμός. Depending on the context, the word may carry any of these meanings even in contemporary Europe. Still, its implications are far from exhausted; for our purpose, we should look at two further connotations that bring "secularism" into the sociological and epistemological realms, namely "disenchantment" and "ideology." Max Weber borrowed the word "disenchantment"[1] from Friedrich Schiller to refer to the process whereby, over the last millennium or so, people have gradually given up their beliefs in magic. The notion is foreshadowed by Giambattista Vico's theory of the three ages of man. In *La scienza nuova* (1725-1744) Vico maintained that every civilisation develops through three ages: the divine, the heroic, and the human. In the first, primitive men are "all wonder" before natural phenomena. Clueless as to what may originate them, they attribute them to magic and explain the world through poetic language, i.e. myths. Myth is an emplotment of magic. As civilisation develops, it forms a notion of organised religion, which offers the first kind of rationalisation of myths. Religions, particularly monotheistic ones, may provide a unifying principle and a single explanation for natural phenomena. In the third age, philosophy supersedes religion; rational and scientific explanations are sought and commonly accepted. Magic, which is a necessary element of the myth and of most religions, ceases to be a living presence in the life of humans. Vico is interesting in this context because he always retained a Christian view. In his analysis, disenchantment is not brought about by secularisation but by rationalism.

Max Weber moves from a similar standpoint. He refers to disenchantment twice in his writings: in *The Ethics of Protestantism* (1905), and in two lectures delivered in 1919 and published posthumously as *Disenchantment and Charisma* (2020). Weber attributes disenchantment to the "Protestant ethos," which has criticised and emptied Catholic rituals, like eucharist and sacraments, of their magical salvific elements. The Protestant motto *sola scriptura et sola fide* is actually doing away with every external agency except God's Grace. Although disenchantment and secularisation are not one and the same, they are nonetheless strictly connected. According to Weber, Protestantism is a "secular religion" that promotes and encourages material welfare and capital accumulation. Disenchantment is not brought about by a more widespread knowledge of events but rather by a different worldview. It is based on the epistemological premise that one could come to know something if one wishes to, even when

1 The German phrase is "Entzauberung der Welt," which is slightly different from its English translation. According to Swatos (1981, 120), the English "enchantment" has "lost its magical or mystical connotation" and mostly refers to the "appeal or fascination" of the world. In German the phrase actually means that "agencies of magic and spiritual power have lost their grip on the lives of men and the affairs of nature," which is the meaning we favour here.

one ignores it at the moment. Thus, one may be utterly ignorant of how a hurricane moves or under what conditions it is formed, or of how leaves turn carbon dioxide and water into sugar, but one finds no magic in that because one trusts that some human specialist knows it and one could come to know it if one really wanted. While men in an enchanted world were powerless in front of natural events, disenchanted men do not have more agency, but nourish the comforting notion that they could gain agency if they tried. Rationalism and secularism cooperate in disenchanting the world. The former by promising a rational explanation for everything, and the latter by denying divine intervention in natural affairs. The corollary is that human efforts combined with rationality may change the course of nature. An enchanted world, on the contrary, is beyond human control and claims awe and respect.

As we have seen, secularisation agreed well with the Protestant mindset until, in some philosophical contexts, it became overtly antireligious and almost synonymous with agnosticism and atheism. The German theologist Friedrich Gogarten (1887-1967) in a book published in 1953 distinguished between "secularisation" from "secularism." The former carries a positive connotation and comes from an evolution of the Christian thought confronting the world; the latter has a negative connotation and refers to worldly institutions and polities that aim at replacing the divine. Gogarten interestingly does not attribute such a trend to a misunderstanding of secularisation, but rather to the overestimate of its positive elements—a surfeit of belief in the secular. Thereby secularism unwarrantedly indicts and impeaches harmless religious beliefs and practices. We shall call this enthusiastic belief in secularism "ideological."

"Ideology" is yet another term that may cover a variety of meanings, so that it calls for a few words of introduction. Terry Eagleton (2007, 1-2) lists no less than sixteen different connotations for this term. Some of them will be useful in this context, namely: "(b) a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class; (c) ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; forms of thought motivated by social interests; […] (h) identity thinking; (i) socially necessary illusion." These are the meanings that best describe the position of Nandy and Madan when they use the term "ideological" to criticise Indian secularism. Madan writes that "secularism can itself pretend to become a religion […] as the ideology of the State" (Madan 1993, 674). Likewise, Nandy talks of "State-centric ideologies in the Indian polity" (Nandy 1995, 41). Both scholars maintain that an "ideology" borrowed from the West cannot and should not become hegemonic and modernise India. Secularism should be the very opposite of ideology: according to its genealogy it should be rational and tolerant. It would be expected that secularists endorse ideas only after a critical scrutiny. Critics of secularism in India believe that this scrutiny has never taken place because the connotations of "modern" and "non-communal" have

prevailed, overshadowing other implications of the term.[2] While believers may be prompted to adopt or reject a certain idea or practice simply by the demands of a religious authority or a tradition, secularists should be guided only by their critical sense. However, once secularism, like other systems of beliefs, has become synonymous with modernity or tolerance, political rhetoric has made it hard to gainsay any practice or idea that is presented as secular, since objecting to it may be construed as a disavowal of democratic, modern, tolerant, and liberal values. Hence secularism may become an ideology in the senses expressed in (b) and (h)—a distinctive idea of a social group; identity thinking. The reasoning goes: "I belong to an élite of modern and forward-thinking people, and I do not want to fall out with them just because I criticise a certain idea that presents itself as a secularist." Indira Gandhi was an illustrious victim of the (i) meaning—socially necessary illusion. After the Blue Star operation in Amritsar, during which the government troops stormed the Golden Temple, religious resentment was running high in India. Some security officials advised the Prime Minister that she should change her Sikh bodyguards with someone from a different community, as it was impossible to be certain of their loyalty. Mrs Gandhi retorted that India was a secular country and it would not be acceptable to show anything different. On October 31, 1984 her Sikh bodyguards opened fire against her; she died a few hours later. Surely, she was not blind to the communal tensions of 1984, and she was a devout Hindu at the time of her death. Still, she believed that a Prime Minister should appear unflinchingly secular, and miscalculated the risk.

For the purpose of this study, we shall call "ideological" every instance of secular action, including speech acts, that is not inspired by a philosophical or by personal conviction, but rather by the need to be recognised as "secular" for whatever reason—as Eagleton suggests, ideas which help the dominant political power, foster individual or group identity, social illusion, etc. This distinction is similar to the one that Arne Naess (2008) posits between deep and shallow ecology. Deep ecology is grounded in a religious or philosophical view and considers the environment as a value per se. Shallow ecology, on the contrary, is anthropocentric and considers the environment as a resource for the human species. Likewise, ideological secularism is not prompted by a philosophical conviction but by some kind of social convenience.

The ideological aspects of secularism can be partly explained through Benedetto Croce's and Jacob De Roover's original theories about Christianity. Benedetto Croce, who was an idealistic, agnostic philosopher deeply influenced by Hegel, famously applied religious lexis to politics in his *History of Europe of the XIX Century* (1932). There he spoke of the liberal idea as a religion titling

2 Incidentally "modern" is another term that is seldom defined and whose positive connotation is seldom discussed.

the first "The religion of freedom." Ten years later, Croce authored a famous pamphlet called *Perché non possiamo non dirci "cristiani"* (*Why We Cannot Help Calling Ourselves "Christians*," 1942), where he maintained that all Western philosophy would have never existed without the tenets of Christian theology. Even secularism, he avers, sinks its roots in Christianity. More recently, and independently of Croce who is nowhere mentioned in his book, Jacob De Rooer has proposed a similar theory expounded in *Europe, India, and the Limits of Secularism* (2015). Working within the framework studies inaugurated by S.N. Balagangadhara, De Rooer maintains that in Europe Christianity, particularly Protestantism, has provided a frame of mind and a set of ideas that have made the notion of secularism possible. He maintains that Western secularism is a "secularization of theology" (De Roover 2015, 55). Questions, methods, and patterns of the Christian mindset have been emptied of their supernatural content but have otherwise remained unchanged. Contrary to what is often thought, De Rooer provocatively affirms that "Western culture does not lie in its secularity, but in its religiosity" (2015, 65).

Croce's and De Roover's insights may explain why, in the West, political doctrines (another term borrowed from the religious sphere) tend to become ideologies. The Greeks invented both tyranny and democracy, but they never made either into an ideology, while both fascism and communism are considered ideologies. Those who follow an ideology also tend to apply certain behavioural patterns consistently to different aspects of their lives, from ethical and metaphysical down to simpler preoccupations such as games or food. Every choice will be made according to its consistency with the chosen ideology. Christianity may be said to be the first instance of ideological thought in the West, as Christians refused everything that was not Christian, thus incurring the ire of the Roman state that saw in it a danger to stability. Later philosophical or political systems have resorted to ideology as a ploy to gain acceptance and stability. Even Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, famously popularised by Said, implies ideology. When a notion becomes hegemonic, it is also ideological in the sense that a social group accepts it without scrutiny.

Secularism in India

When the concept of secularism reached India at the time of decolonization, the word was heavily loaded with meanings, both historical and philosophical. Among the former, the idea that the church should not interfere with the matters of the State made little sense in India and found therefore little opposition. More poignant was the notion that all religions should be "tolerated," though not supported by the State. The equation of secularism and modernity—whatever this term may come to mean—was generally accepted, and to this day, the word secularism has retained a positive connotation. Even

the Hindu parties that criticise the secular policy of the former Governments do not attack secularism per se, but accuse the adversaries of implementing a "pseudo-secularism" favouring religious minorities over Hindus (Chatterjee 1994; Sen 2006b; Balakrishna 2018). As for the philosophical notions attached to the idea of secularism, they were hardly ever discussed outside intellectual circles, but have been the target of non-fundamentalist liberal intellectuals like Ashish Nandy and T.N. Madan. They blame the connection between secularism and Protestantism, the tyranny of rationalism that it implies—Weber's disenchantment—and finally the ideologization of secularism, which often attacks religion from the rhetorical vantage point of modernity. Furthermore, the idea that religiosity should be restricted to the personal sphere makes little sense for Hinduism, which is properly speaking a way of life covering every daily activity, including, say, literature, sport, or cooking together with spirituality.

***

Although the concept of secularism in India is relatively new, the relationship between religion and politics, and between different religions has a long history. Thus, to understand the complicated relationship of Indian intellectuals to secularism, it is necessary to briefly recall the relationship between state and religion in Indian history even before the European concept of secularism reached the subcontinent.

Although India never developed the philosophical concept of secularism autonomously, religious and political authorities lived side by side for thousands of years. What we now call Hinduism—a name that began to circulate only during British domination—has gone through various phases, none of which has ever entirely superseded the former. Thus, although the Vedic Gods are now remembered only as part of cosmogonic myths, the *Vedas* have not ceased to be considered the foundational texts of Hinduism, along with later texts, such as the *Puranas*. Even a champion of modern Hinduism like Mohandas K. Gandhi, the Mahatma, would refer to the *Vedas* as the fixed point for any discussion on religion. And yet, many intervening currents have concurred to shape the complex features of Hinduism. Leaving aside all popular instances of religiosity, too complicated and too little documented to be remembered by official histories, we should mention the Brahmanical tradition, the ascetic turn that also gave rise to Buddhism and Jainism, the *bhakti* movements, and the religious reformers of the XVIII and XIX centuries. A history of Hinduism is much beyond the scope of this book, but it will be useful to briefly recall these movements with reference to secularism in order to offer an idea of the complexity of the religious traditions within Hinduism and try to trace them in contemporary literature.

The first seed of what we now call Hinduism was brought to the subcontinent during the second millennium BCE by the Aryans. These were populations speaking an Indo-European language whose dialect would evolve into classic Sanskrit. They worshipped the gods that characterise the so-called Vedic period, such as Agni, Varuna, and Indra. Their society was mostly nomadic, and religious figures were also power-holders (Copland 2013, 17).

During the first millennium BCE, Vedic religiosity evolved into a form known as Brahmanism. The Brahmanical society owes its name to the social classes known as *varnas* (literally colours), which hark back to the *vedas*. According to this doctrine, humans are divided into four *varnas*, hierarchically ordered. The highest class is that of *brahmans*, the compilers of holy texts, entitled to perform holy rites and sacrifices; second come the *kshatriyas*, the warriors and rulers, who managed temporal matters; then come the two most numerous classes: *vaishyas*, the commoners who worked and produced the wealth of the society, and last the *shudras*, mostly peasants and servants, who had no access to the *vedic* rituals. The two apical classes provided mutual help in legitimising each other's sphere, without ever trespassing into the other's precincts. Kings offered oblations and protection to the priests, while the latter supported the power at a supernatural level by performing rituals, and at a temporal level by justifying the rulers' power to the subjects.

Towards the half of the first millennium BCE, new powerful ideas emerged. The concepts of *karma* (the persistence of the effects of actions performed in former lives), *samsara* (the cycle of birth, death and rebirth), *moksha* (liberation from *samsara*), *ahimsa* (non-violence) offered a novel approach to spirituality. These ideas, which were probably born into ascetic milieus, will remain the hallmark of Hinduism and other dharmic religions to this day. Within the brahmanic tradition, they are first mentioned in the *Upanishads*. They are seminal also for the two new religions developing at the time: Buddhism and Jainism. Initially these were considered as heresies of Brahmanism, as they rejected sacrifice, anthropomorphic gods, and the supremacy of brahmans, foregrounding individual spiritual research and ethics. Among these heresies, Buddhism gains particular traction, jeopardising the status of brahmans.

Towards the end of the millennium, the brahamanic tradition shows its resilience. It accepts the basic notions of the ascetic movements, but asserts the necessity of castes and priests. In fact, ascetic norms rest uneasily on the lay society, which needs festivals, nuptials, funerals, propitiatory ceremonies, etc.—and the new compromise proved successful all over India. This is the religion that today we know as Hinduism. Dating from this period, the new divinities like Shiva and Vishnu supersede in the cult if not in mythology old Vedic gods. Importantly, also female goddesses become object of cult, not only Shiva and Vishnu's spouses, Parvati and Lakshmi, begin to be worshipped, but also terrific standalone divinities like Durga and Kali. It is believed that some of these

divinities have been incorporated into official Hinduism from local cults. To this day, syncretism remains one of the features of Hinduism.

Over the centuries, this scenario, which developed mainly in Northern India, gradually moves southwards even to non-Brahmanic communities, spreading throughout the whole sub-continent—a process that often goes by the name of Sanskritization. Dietmar Rothermund (2007) maintains that the diffusion of Brahmanical culture is due to the tremendous efficiency of the alliance between religious and temporal powers, while Ian Copland (2013) stresses the work of ascetics' communities, which moved well beyond the boundaries of the Aryan territories.

Although some historians use the word monasticism to refer to the several ascetic movements of the time, apart from Buddhism and Jainism, there were no monastic orders with rules and founders as we know them in Europe, but rather ascetic communities. Wandering ascetics played a role in bringing together pre-Vedic and Vedic-brahmanical notions. In rural areas they were probably seen as quasi supernatural beings because of the hardships to which they would submit themselves. As they moved from village to village, often welcomed by local communities, they also spread the doctrine of *karma* and *dharma*, while brahmans from the north were appreciated for their knowledge and spread the socio-cosmical order. Even though the Brahmanical religious establishment was probably uneasy with ideas such as *karma* and *samsara*, which undermined the magical power of rituals, the new ideas were not disruptive when it came to social order. The *karma* doctrine may convince subjects to accept their predicament and put up with any unpleasant situation in view of a better future life. Even more importantly, this doctrine contributed to the social peace of the various kingdoms by bringing together the Vedic-Brahmanical tradition of the ruling classes and the traditional lore of non-Aryan communities (Copland 2013, 51).

Coming to the last centuries BCE, as the pristine kingdoms were gradually coalescing to form the Mauryan empire, different religions were accepted as a matter of fact. The renowned Mauryan monarch Ashoka (304-232 BCE) famously set out to build a prosperous and peaceful state upon Buddhist premises. After an initial phase of expansion, he swore that he would wage no more wars and dedicate his efforts to his subjects' welfare and spiritual enlightenment. Although he was a Buddhist, and the notion of Buddhist *dharma* was central to his political action, he accepted every religion within his kingdom, which won him a reputation as a model of religious piety and toleration. He distanced himself both from the *tapas* (religious penitence) of ascetic communities and the empty ceremonials of the brahmins. Patrick Olivelle (2012) argues that Ashoka proposed a kind of civil religion in which the Buddhist *dharma* accommodates doctrinarian differences among his subjects and fosters good citizenship. In the 12th Major Rock Edict—one of his most famous texts—Ashoka underlines the spiritual value of religious tolerance:

> [The King] does not consider gifts or honour to be as important as the advancement of the essential doctrine of all sects. This progress of the essential doctrine takes many forms, but its basis is the control of one's speech, so as not to extoll one's own sect or disparage another's on unsuitable occasions, or at least to do so only mildly on certain occasions. On each occasion, one should honour another man's sect, for by doing so one increases the influence of one's own sect and benefits that of the other man; while by doing otherwise one diminishes the influence of one's own sect and harms the other man's. […] Therefore, concord is to be commended, so that men may hear one another's principles and obey them. (Thapar 1961, 255)

Even though the empire, which stretched over most of northern India from Bengal to Afghanistan, and deep in South India, would not last long, Ashoka's religious wisdom set an important precedent in Indian history. Even when rulers were not earnest like Ashoka, tolerance of religious diversity became a virtue necessary to prevent social unrest even in the following centuries, when Buddhism declined in India, and Brahmanism gained momentum again.

The next two crucial moments in the history of religions in India are the development of *bhakti* movements and the arrival of Islam. The term *bhakti*—usually translated as "devotion"—denotes a kind of personal worship based on love for a specific God or even guru. The term predates the diffusion of such movements, which began developing in southern India only in the sixth and seventh centuries CE. The Brahmanic tradition relied on rituals that appease and propitiate the deities, the monastic tradition was essentially spiritual, aiming at *moksha* (i.e. freedom from the cycle of deaths and rebirths) through meditation and renunciation; *bhakti,* on the contrary, binds together the faithful and their chosen divinity. *Bhaktiyoga* entails an emotional involvement that is unnecessary in the case of the sacrificial practice of the Brahmanic tradition, and actively discouraged by the monastic tradition, which seeks enlightenment through detachment from earthly passions. Although it is possibly the most popular form of Hinduism, and the most similar to Christianity, *bhakti* is little known in the West, where most people identify Hinduism with the non-dualistic tradition of Shankara (VIII-IX century CE). On the contrary, allowing for the disparities between different schools, *bhakti* generally follows the dualistic tradition often associated with Ramanujan (XI-XII century CE). *Bhakti* refers to a personal relationship with God, who is loved and loves the worshipper in return. In some cases this devotion may take on extreme connotations, as in the case of some *bhakti* enthusiasts like Mirabai or Chaitanya, who can be compared to Christian saints. The god worshipped by *bhaktas* (devotees) is usually identified with Shiva, with Vishnu and his two most famous avatars, Krishna and Rama.

One element of *bhakti* is particularly relevant to the students of letters, namely its tight connection with literature, myths, and stories. Krishna *bhakti*, for example, is strictly connected to the *Baghavad Gita*, which is a part of the *Mahabharata*.

Another text of great importance for Krishna devotees is Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* (XII-XIII century CE), which tells the story of Krishna's love for a *gopi* (shepherdess) named Radha. The sensual celestial love has often been interpreted as the totalising love of the devotee for the divinity. *Ramabhakti*, on the other hand, is connected to the *Ramayana*, and its diverse characters. Listening to the stories of God's *avataras*, or the stories of *bhakti* saints, is itself an act of devotion, as we shall see in the case of the *acharyas* in the novel by Anantha Murthy considered in chapter two. The very title of *acharya* was instituted by a *bhakti* guru called Nathamuni in the ninth century CE (Franci 2020, 86 ff.) to set off religious and theological authority. Nathamuni is also remembered for establishing a sort of canon of the Vaishnava tradition, bringing together Sanskrit texts and Tamilian works such as the poems composed by the *alvars*. This word means the "deep ones," and refers to twelve Tamilian saints, whose devotional works have been handed down under the collective title of "Forty Thousand Hymns." The older ones are probably coeval with the composition of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Thanks to Nathamuni, their work has achieved a prominent position in the South Indian *bhakti* canon. However, while the hymns are probably of little interest to students of modern narrative, the biographies of their authors, equally famous, may offer several noteworthy insights. Andal was the only woman among the *alvars*. She was the adoptive daughter of Periyalvar (the great *alvar*) who found her in his garden. Once, as her adoptive father was away, she adorned herself with some flowers that the holy man had set apart for his votive offering to Krishna. On his return, Periyalvar was very upset finding that he should have to forgo his duties. However, it turned out that Krishna appreciated the flowers that had been worn by Andal even more than fresh ones. For this reason, the woman is considered an avatar of Lakshmi, Vishnu's bride. When the time came for her to get married, a vision revealed that she was already married to Ranganatha, an epiphany of Vishnu worshipped in Srirangam. Accordingly, she turned down every man and lived as a *gopi* writing devotional poems until she took a pilgrimage to Srirangam. There she entered the temple and disappeared, absorbed by the divine form of her husband Ranganatha.

The last of the *alvars* was Tirumangai, who was born into the *kallar* caste, traditionally a caste of thieves. He fell in love with the adopted daughter of a Vaishnava doctor, who set a few conditions for their marriage. He should first convert to Vishnuism and then feed one thousand and eight followers of Vishnu for one year. Not knowing where to look for the resources, Tirumangai robbed his master and ended up in jail. There he met a kind of Vishnu avatar who gave him some money whereby he could feed his protegees. However, even this money ended soon, and he turned highwayman to procure the resources. Vishnu appeared to him in the shape of a wealthy brahmin and tempted Tirumangai to rob him. The man tried to take away his booty, but it became so heavy that he was unable to lift it. The brahmin then taught him a

mantra that would help him lift the stolen goods. As the robber uttered it, the mantra turned the brahmin into Krishna himself, fortifying his devotion. Later Tirumangai stole a golden Buddha from a sanctuary to pay for an extension of the Ranganatha temple in Srirangam. Since he had no money to pay the bricklayers, he drowned them all in the Kaveri, reasoning that they were certainly happier at the feet of Vishnu than they could ever be on Earth (Franci 2020, 78-80). Despite his active life, Tirumangai was probably the most prolific of the *alvars*. An attentive reader will certainly see a resemblance between these stories and the peripeteias of some characters penned by R.K. Narayan.

It is often believed that Islam reached India with Muslim conquerors. This is of course true when one thinks of Islam as a state religion, but not quite as true when referring to its doctrine. Even before the first raids of Persian marauders began in the thirteenth century, Sunni Sufi mystics had made their way to South Asia, finding themselves very welcome. Islamic mysticism was not very far from the *bhakti* tradition (Torri 2007, 244-245). Sufi mystics would try to achieve a personal relationship with God based on prayers, mantras, asceticism, and love. Both the notion of a personal God and the ascetic techniques were congenial to Hindus, and Sufism soon established itself primarily in Western and Southern India. Sufis would eschew large cities, seeking remote villages instead, where they became spiritual guides (and possibly also temporal); on occasion they were even credited with miracles. After their death, their lives might take on legendary connotations, such is the case of the *Bonbibi Jahurnama*, which forms the centre of Amitav Ghosh's famous *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and more recently of his *Jungle Nama* (Ghosh and Toor 2021). Obviously, the conversion to Islam posed some major linguistic problems, especially in rustic areas, and the forms of Islam established there were not orthodox for a long time. It is highly probable that Mohammed was taken to be an avatar of God and simply another deity to be worshipped (Copland 2013, 98). This understanding of Islam probably fostered the pacific cohabitation of different faiths within the same villages. Hindu hamlets formed small self-contained societies where caste differences were taken for granted along with different rituals and often different sites and times for worship. Therefore, a Muslim community would fit seamlessly into the village system (Copland 2013, 8).

During the centuries of the Persian conquest, desecrations of Hindu temples and mass slaughters did occur, but historians aver that these events were sporadic and perpetrated more for political reasons than out of religious zeal. During the sultanate period (between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries), rulers sought a legitimation of their power through religion; Muslims would then turn to *ulamas*, while the Hindus of Vijayanagar (the only big Hindu kingdom in Southern India) would turn to Hindu gurus, as they had done for centuries. Nonetheless, both Hindu and Muslim rulers were rather pragmatic when it came to choosing generals and administrators, often letting religious

affiliation slip in the background (Torri 2007, 241-243). Likewise, the Mughals never discontinued the policy of employing local notables to manage state affairs, especially in remote parts of the empire (Copland 2013, 100-103). Sufi cut ice in remote villages, while urban centres remained sceptical on the whole (Copland 2013, 87). Only in big cities like Delhi did Islam surge to a more official connotation; here, the State's presence was felt the more and one's religious affiliation was an advantage in courtly careers.

The personality of Akbar (1542-1605) stands out as the "Mughal Ashoka." After his ascension to the Delhi throne, Akbar dedicated his energies to expanding the empire and consolidating the boundaries. He is credited with being the first Indian monarch to inaugurate a modern state, *viz.,* a state based on centralisation, bureaucracy, and economy. He privileged Muslims over Hindus for some time, but he soon understood that this dichotomy would weaken the kingdom and changed his policy. He abolished the taxes paid by non-Muslims and became more tolerant. Furthermore, he recruited functionaries of different confessions and made them part of the new nobility. As in the case of Ashoka, Akbar's political and administrative achievements would not have been possible had the emperor not inaugurated a new political ideology (Torri 2007, 271-275). Although he was technically illiterate—possibly he suffered from some form of dyslexia (Rothermund 2007)—he was extraordinarily accomplished; he had clerks reading to him books on theology and philosophy. In one of his capital cities, Fatehpur Sikri, he built a unique "house of prayers" where he used to discuss theology with the most eminent theologians of the time: Italian and Spanish Jesuits, pundits, *ulamas*. As a result, he promulgated a kind of "act of supremacy," whereby he acquired the power to decide upon theological disputes. This exceptional position paved the way to an even bolder action: Akbar founded a religious current called *Din-i-Ilahi*, "divine religion." In Akbar's lifetime, it was followed only by functionaries and high-rank dignitaries, and it was soon forgotten after his death. However, in the long run, some tenets of Akbar's religiosity, like tolerance for all creeds, were retained by subsequent rulers. Some historians consider *Din-i-Ilahi* a new religion; some argue that Akbar considered himself a Sufi mystic. Either way, what matters is the way the monarch brought together religion and governmentality, assuming in his own person the functions of both ruler and spiritual leader. The attribution of a divine aura to the monarch continued even after Akbar's death, and even his more orthodox successors upheld this role, figuratively hypostatised by Moghul miniaturists, who often painted an aura around the sovereign.[3] More important still is to register the popularity that the celebrated character of Akbar has

3 The famous Moghul miniature painting was initiated by Akbar, who hosted artists and encouraged an artistic syncretism, which brought together Persian and Indian traditions. Miniatures privileged historical events and historical portraits over religious subjects, but retained some mannerisms of the Indian religious tradition (Pieruccini 2013, 38-41).

always enjoyed in India among people from all walks of life. In 2008 Akbar was the protagonist of Salman Rushdie's *Enchantress of Florence* and of the successful Bollywood movie *Jodhaa Akbar*, later expanded into a TV series with the same name (Zee TV 2013).

***

In the first chapter of his *Argumentative Indian* (2006a) Amartya Sen sketches a counterhistory of Indian intellectuals, highlighting an undercurrent of agnosticism and even atheism that surfaces from time to time among Indian intellectuals. Sen points out that even works traditionally considered religious, like the *Ramayana*, contain parts that betray a radical scepticism. However, while Sen's examples appear undisputable, he fails to prove that these single episodes are linked to one another and constitute a secular agnostic tradition. Certainly such tradition would not reach a political level, although it can be argued that there existed a tolerant tradition in Indian polities based on religious pluralism before the English colonial system sanctioned the distance between the ruling power and religious authorities. As it happens, the British in India were always a tiny minority compared with the number of their subjects and were therefore seriously concerned about the possibility of being suddenly overthrown, as it nearly happened during the Sepoy rebellion of 1857. For this reason they kept a very low profile when it came to religion, and discouraged missionaries until the end of the XVIII century. Indeed, most Christians in India today (who do not exceed 2.3% of the population) are Roman Catholics and not Anglicans. The English knew well that their police apparatus should be used as sparingly as possible so as not to create discontent. Above all, the British feared disorder of whatever nature. Therefore, the British powers went to great lengths to maintain huge archives and foster sociological and anthropological research, which could give them a clue on how to manage the complexity of Indian society. Colonel Creighton in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) is an embodiment of this attitude.

While the ruling classes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries England sought their legitimacy by appealing to the force of traditions or reforms—whatever suited them better—in India, they relied on a scientific governmentality, which consisted in collecting data and acting accordingly, unencumbered by the demands of either democracy or hereditary charges. In the short run, this scheme proved effective and even beguiling to many Indian subjects. In matters of religion and traditions, the English tried to be as neutral as possible, intervening only when communal tensions put their position at risk. Even the English army was organised so that soldiers of different faiths could follow their traditional practices. They made sure that different communities (Muslims, Hindu, Jains, Sikh, Buddhists) could observe their laws in matters

such as marriage, dowry, funereal rites, inheritance. The British seldom interfered with Hindu laws. It happened only in 1829 on abolition of *sati*—the practice of burning widows on their husbands' funeral pyre—and in 1856 on the Widows' Remarriage Act, which allowed Hindu widows to marry again if they wished. In both cases, the acts were prepared by a long diplomatic and propagandistic work carried out with reformist religious authorities.

The policy change in the East India Company was due to the heavy pressure of the Evangelical lobby, which started sending missionaries to India. Given the missionary zeal—of which the character of St John in *Jane Eyre* is a telling caricature—for some time it was believed that India would become a Christian(ised) country. However, the sepoy rebellion changed things forever, and the English abandoned their Christianising enterprise altogether. The rebellion began in Meerut, when the English introduced a new kind of breechloading Enfield rifle, which required the cartridge to be torn open with one's teeth. Rumours spread out that the cartridges were lubricated with animal grease. The Muslims feared it was pig's lard and the Hindus believed it was cow's tallow. After some minor disturbances and attempts on the English part to quell the Indians' concerns about the cartridges, a revolt broke out in Meerut when eighty-five men were court-martialled for refusing to use the new weapons. Several English officers were shot dead and the prisoners freed. The riot rapidly extended to all north Indian territories, where English soldiers and civilians were brutally slaughtered. Soon the peasants joined the rebellion, and a native State was proclaimed in Delhi. Eventually, the English army sieged Delhi and butchered thousands of rebels, mutilating their corpses. The episode was a watershed: the East India Company was dissolved and the British crown took direct control of India, but the English forever lost confidence in their ability to keep India under control.

Historians have pointed out how the reasons for discontent should be sought in the bad administration of the East India Company, and yet religion was "the rallying cry" of the riot (Copland 2013, 179). In England the insurrection was mainly blamed on religious interferences, and as an act of precaution, the English rulers called a halt to the Evangelical efforts to convert Indians. The proclamation of Queen Victoria as Monarch of India in 1858 explicitly mentioned religion, as it denied "any desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects," enjoining all who were in authority under the crown to "abstain from interference with Indian belief or worship," while "due regard" would be paid "to the ancient rites, usages, and customs of India" (Metcalf and Metcalf 2002, 104). Modern historians have challenged the view that this change in the English policy actually made a difference (Copland 2013, 179-180), but it is beyond doubt that the long seasons of slow reforms that started in the 1860s actively discouraged conversions. The British government acknowledged the existence of different religions and made every possible effort to avoid displeasing any of them, even making *ad hoc* provisions if needed.

***

The British efforts to be accepted as legitimate masters by the Indians were never more successful than in the last part of the nineteenth century, when two related phenomena took place: the rise of Anglophilia and the so-called Hindu Renaissance. Following the establishment of English medium schools and universities in the mid-nineteenth century, a new generation of educated Indians started reading European literature and philosophy. As Gauri Viswanathan argues in her classic *Masks of Conquest*, the English culture created a sort of ideal Englishman that appealed to the sophisticated Indian scholar, but did not in fact exist. English liberal culture was used to hide the brutality of English exploitation and inculcate English values, seducing the middle class with an English lifestyle (Viswanathan 1989). While it is quite possible that this was the case with some English people, it would be an error to ascribe the same mentality to all English intellectuals who had a hand in the diffusion of Western culture in South Asia. Besides, this thesis entails a gullibility of Indian intellectuals that is not entirely persuasive. More recently, historians have proposed a milder view whereby the educational effort was to be inscribed in the missionary zeal of the English spurred by the Evangelical movement (Copland et al. 2013, 177). Whatever the reasons for the English policies, in due time this "mask" would no longer hide the real face of colonialism, and those very liberal and philosophical ideas coming from Europe would be used to call the bluff and expose the contradictions of the colonial rule.

The exposure to higher education fostered cultural and literary circles, which flourished almost overnight throughout India; these élites printed journals and promoted literary clubs where even Indian literature was discussed in English. Anglophile upper-class intellectuals are admirably described by Tagore in *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World, 1916), where Nikhil, the zamindar whose house is endowed with a piano and English furniture, employs a British governess to teach English to his young wife. In so doing, the zamindar means to liberate his wife from the yoke of old superstitions and customs, symbolised by *purdah*, the seclusion of high-rank women. Likewise, in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the Raja of Raskhali speaks English and knows English philosophers far better than the affluent English merchants he meets. This anglophile upper class earnestly believed in a new "liberal" idea of empire as a benign cosmopolitan scenario, where different peoples contributed to the universal welfare. Literary journals were founded, written in English or in the vernacular and, for the first time, Indian writers turned to the hitherto unknown form of the novel. Writers like Michael Madhusudan (1824-1873), Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), Toru Dutt (1856-1877), and her cousin Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909) paved the way to Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), and more recently Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), in a

long line that connects them to contemporary novelists like Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) and Amitav Ghosh (1956-). In fact, this line of Indian, mostly Bengali, intellectuals could stretch back to pioneers such as Raj Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) and Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831). The latter did not live in an anglophile milieu, but were later looked upon as initiators of the Indian-Bengali literary tradition. They cooperated in the foundation of the Calcutta Library and the prestigious Hindu College in Calcutta, now known as Presidency College. Raj Ram Mohan Roy is essential in our discourse as he also initiated a new phase of Hinduism by proposing a form of syncretic religion that he called Brahmo Samaj. The Brahmos professed a monotheistic religion that brought together Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a kind of spiritual brotherhood. In the intention of the founder, this religion should unite the different traditions of the subcontinent. The literary revival and the religious reform shared the same roots and underpinned each other (Iyengar 1983, 43).

It may be argued that Anglophilia was first kindled by colonial mimicry, amplified by "a sound colonial education," as Derek Walcott once put it. Still, it sparked the Hindu renaissance, which would soon prompt generations of Indian intellectuals to start their education in English and go back to their own Sanskrit—and to a lesser degree Persian—roots. Harish Trivedi argues that the Indians paradoxically rediscovered Sanskrit literature thanks to English translations: "Initially meant to serve as an instrument of more effective colonization, translations of Indian works into English, as appropriated by the Indians themselves, eventually contributed in a significant measure to nationalist resurgence and decolonization" (2004, 353). Toru Dutt is a case in point: she studied English and French, and was the first Indian woman to be educated in England and France, where she dwelt for three years before moving on to Cambridge, where she attended the "Higher Lecture for Women." She returned to her Calcutta abode after four years in Europe and, unable to find a German teacher, she took on Sanskrit. Her finest poems are collected in the *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, published posthumously in London in 1832. The title's ballads and legends are stories from Sanskrit classics loosely translated for modern European and Indian readers. The Dutt family had turned Christian, and such was Toru, who often refers to the Gospel in her letters. Nonetheless, her renditions of ancient Hindu myths testify to a rather syncretic approach to matters of the spirit, both in the choice of the subject matter and its treatment.

Religion, culture, and liberal politics were thus welded in the *Zeitgeist* of the late nineteenth century, sharing a sense of cosmopolitanism that took the shapes of world literature, syncretic forms of religion, and general acceptance of a "liberal" brand of colonialism, assuming that the empire would provide for the welfare of all its subjects. English was the koinè of men of culture throughout the British empire and even throughout India; the Brahmo Samaj or similar attempts at a world religion would cater to their spirituality. It goes

without saying that individual positions varied greatly in all three ambits. Thus, while some writers would seek recognition abroad by writing in English, others, like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, soon turned to their native tongues and independentist sympathies. Rabindranath Tagore wrote essays in English but never fiction, poetry or dramas, although he often personally supervised the translation of his works or translated the verses himself. The importance of these intellectuals lies not in their number, which remained relatively small, but in their ability to organise cultural events and promote ideas. For the first time in Indian history, they came together in the name of cultural affinities disregarding castes and religious affiliations (Torri 2007, 449).

***

Besides the Brahmo Samaj, initiated by Raj Rammohan Roy in 1828, another association, namely the Dharma Sabha founded by Radhakant Deb (1794-1867) deserves mention. While the Brahmos had a spiritual purpose, the Dharma Sabha had a political agenda connected with the defence of Hinduism. Unlike Rammohan Roy, Radhakant Deb defended *sati*, and probably for this reason history has largely forgotten him. Seen with today's eyes, Deb was quite a contradictory character: he founded the Calcutta School Society, opening his own family house for the year's exams, wrote several treaties dealing with science and literature, upheld women's education, which would make them better wives and mothers. The Dharma Sabha, of which Deb was the chief promoter, was inaugurated in 1830 with the aim of defending *sati*. The problem for Deb and his acolytes was not so much the *sati* itself, but the right of a foreign government to make any decision upon Hindu traditions. The Sabha was the first Indian political association; its members kept account books and minutes of the meetings, and would pay a subscription fee, which gave them the right to participate in the board election. From the initial narrow aim of protecting the Hindus from external interferences, the Sabha would soon draw a programme that included social aid to farmers and the urban poor. Historically, the Dharma Sabha is notable especially as a model for the constellation of Hindu conservative organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (aka RSS), which gave rise to today's political Hindutva (Torri 2007, 422-25).

After the death of Raj Rammohan Roy in 1833, the lead of the Brahmo Samaj was taken by a prominent entrepreneur, Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846). When he died, his son Debendranath (1817-1905), the father of Rabindranath, succeeded him. Debendranath abandoned the path of social reforms undertaken by Rammohan Roy and focussed on religion alone, proclaiming the superiority of the *Vedas*, i.e. the most ancient part of the scriptural canon. For some time Debendranath led the Samaj with the help of Keshub Chunder

Sen, who, however, was a reformist and would bring the Brahmo Samaj closer to Christianity. Indeed, he had an original attitude towards Christianity, as he pointed out that Jesus and his first followers were Asian, and thus his religion was better felt and understood by Asians then it could ever be by Europeans. His leadership led to the first of several schisms; a more conservative Hindu wing remained with Debendranath, while the more progressive stayed with Keshub, who also campaigned for social reforms, including the age of consent to contain child marriages. These campaigns brought the colonial government to approve a progressive marriage act, which, however, applied only to the members of the Brahmo. Inexplicably, a few years later, Keshub Sen married off his thirteen-year-old daughter to a maharaja. This choice provoked a scandal, and the Brahmo Samaj was once again divided. The movement lost momentum but left behind a critical heritage: it was possible and even desirable to resort to reason in order to discuss religious matters; rituals and superstitions must be overcome; so should the caste system; the position of women must be improved. Such tenets became an essential part of the Indian middle-class mindset in the following decades (Torri 2007, 453).

The Brahmo Samaj was not the only religious and cultural movement in this period. A different kind of religiosity was propounded by Ramakrishna (1836-1886). His roots lay in the *bhakti* tradition, so he advocated a spirituality that would do away with dogmas and rituals, foregrounding the personal relationship with God. Ramakrishna came from the countryside and was not an educated intellectual; nevertheless, he was very charismatic and soon won the admiration of urban intellectuals such as Keshub Sen himself. Among his urban followers was one Narandranath Datta (1863-1902), son of an attorney, who would later be known by the name of Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda was to Ramakrishna what St Paul was to Jesus of Nazareth: since the prophet had left no writings, the disciple would systematise the doctrine within a Vedic framework and popularise it. While Ramakrishna was indifferent to religions, Vivekananda emphasized the superior qualities of Hinduism. He also pointed out that while Westerners had primarily focused on science and technology, Indians had developed a more profound spirituality. It was therefore only logical that Indians would learn science from the Europeans, while the latter should look to the east for spiritual enlightenment. In 1893 Swami Vivekananda left India to represent Hinduism at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, where he gave a most acclaimed speech. Subsequently, he spent four years on a lecture tour in the US and Britain and was welcomed like a hero as he came home to Calcutta in 1897. In the following years, he worked to bring relief and basic instruction to the poor peasants of his native Bengal. The Ramakrishna mission he founded in 1886 is to this day one of the most reputed cultural centres of Hinduism.

While the Brahmo Samaj and the Ramakrishna mission developed in the East of India, on the West coast another reformer, Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), founded a society called Arya Samaj (1875). Dayananda was a reformer of Hinduism. He campaigned against idolatry, caste division, child marriage, polytheism. On the other hand, he believed that Hinduism was far superior to every other religion, especially Christianity, and for this reason he criticised the Brahmo, accusing them of compromising Hindu values with Western ones. Dayananda's platform was not so much theological as anthropological and social. He believed that Hinduism as a civilisation was superior to any other, including Indian Muslims. Therefore he advocated the rise of a nationalist spirit based on Vedic Hinduism.

Religion and *Swaraj*

Even from the foregoing necessarily brief sketch, it is clear how the rise of Indian nationalism and the first steps of *Swaraj* were germane to a reformative religious spirit. The most famous champion of this spirit was, of course, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948). Like many Gujarati Hindus, Gandhi was strongly influenced by the Jain notion of *ahimsa*, usually translated as non-violence. Starting from *ahimsa*, Gandhi elaborated his political strategy, which he called *Satyagraha*, literally "strength of Truth." Thus, while Truth was the foundation of his spiritual reflection, *ahimsa* was the weapon to fight for freedom. The name of this fight was *Satyagraha*, but *Satyagraha* was, at the same time, a political ploy and a devout way of life. Gandhi was a formidable writer; his collected works amount to ninety-eight volumes. However, two were the books that most inflamed his followers, *Hind Swaraj* (1909) and his autobiography called *The Story of my Experiments with Truth* (serialised between 1925 and 1929). The former is written as a Socratic dialogue between a Reader and the Editor. The Reader expounds on the most common beliefs on Self-Rule, while the latter explains the kind of struggle and the kind of India he has in mind. Here Gandhi rejects the temptation to mimic the English and replicate the Raj without the English. In other words, the Mahatma believed that self-rule could not simply substitute the British as the head of the Indian system but should change the whole system instead. In chapter XIII, the Editor describes a seamless Indian civilisation that harks back to the wisdom of the *Vedas*, which was not yet "polluted" by the railway and new-fangled Western values. The author does not deny that many evils, injustice, and inequalities still exist in India but, he claims, these will be swiftly addressed once the bad Western influence has gone.

The Story of my Experiments with Truth is not a manifesto but a kind of spiritual autobiography. However, as there was no difference to Gandhi between political work and spiritual advancement, it contains political and spiritual matters

alike. The influence of this book on generations of Indians is beyond telling. Amitav Ghosh in the "Preface" to his *Incendiary Circumstances* (2006) writes that

> the Mahatma […] was for my generation of Indians what Freud had once been to Central Europeans—that is to say, a ghost who was proof against all attempts at exorcism. His ideas had to be contended with, precisely because they were so strangely at variance with the disorder and violence of the world we lived in. (Ghosh 2005, 6)

It is well known that Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu zealot who belonged to RSS. The spiritual leader of that association was also suspected of being involved in the murder, but the accusation fell for lack of evidence. The assassin believed that the Mahatma had been too tolerant with the Muslims both from a political and a religious viewpoint.

Gandhi was acutely aware of the double edge of mimicry. As Homi Bhabha (1994) suggests, it entails an imitation of the coloniser, but not quite an identity. "Mimicry reveals the limitation in the authority of colonial discourse, almost as though colonial authority inevitably embodies the seeds of its own destruction" (Ashcroft et al. 2013, 125). Thus Gandhi encouraged Indian freedom fighters to rebel against their oppressor in the name of liberal principles that had come from West, but he also exhorted them not to compromise on their religion and culture to achieve political independence. By referring to religion, Gandhi achieved several aims at once: firstly, it fulfilled his earnest pious aspirations; secondly, it provided a language to speak to the Indian masses that former politicians had not been able to use; thirdly, counteracted the cultural denigration brought forward by the English in order to create a hegemonic power; fourthly, religion provided a narrative (that of the *Ramaraj*, the Hindu Golden Age) that would help most Indians to understand the rationale of *Swaraj* (home rule).

It is a matter of debate to what degree the English colonisation honed the swords of religious intolerance. The old principle *divide et impera* was probably one of the British strategies to buttress their power (Ratti 2013, 9). Lord Curzon's proposed partition of Bengal along religious lines in 1905 is a case in point: East Bengal would be Muslim and West Bengal Hindu. However, in front of the local opposition, the proposal was dropped as the British feared civil disorders and riots more than a united Bengal. This same fear also explains why they would not encourage religious antagonism between different communities. According to Copland (2013, 188 ff.), the British were more catalysts than actual causes of communal enmity. Indeed Nicholas Dirks (2001) maintains that the English anxiety about control brought them to crystallise division even where the social texture was rather fluid. The historian argues that there was hardly any enmity among castes before the English used them as a means of control. As the Indian society was based on the sense of caste rather than the sense of

the state, the British worked to make the traditional Indian social structure into a modern state in order to govern it.

One of the reasons for social unrest and religious discord must be sought in the very idea of the nation, which is a typical European construction and was brought to India with the notion of state. Nations are built upon common history, language, religion, traditions. In India and Pakistan, this communality was interpreted as a common religion opposed to colonial Christianity, but inevitably it also opposed Hindus and Muslims to each other. Furthermore, the religious revival of the late XIX century, at which we have hinted, fostered purification and radicalization. Hindu practices should be validated by the *Vedas* alone, purging themselves of spurious later customs, which often included infamous practices like *sati*, child marriage, caste discrimination. Likewise, the Muslims would insist on the four pillars of Islam, and became wary of idolatry and the cult of *pirs* (Muslim saints), which had been quite common in the past.

Another element that unwittingly brought religious unrest was the use of religious language in the political discourse. While the Congress Party was officially secular (*viz.* it would not favour any religion over the others), some of its most prominent members often resorted to religious discourses. Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920), for instance, made the most of the celebrations of Hindu festivals to further a political agenda. He would often refer to the *Bhagavad Gita* in calling people to action, just like Krishna had incited Arjuna to take arms against the Kauravas. He called this political action *karma* yoga, spiritual action. In 1928 he openly declared that the democracy he believed in is described in the *Ramayana* (Copland 2013, 191). Neither Tilak nor Gandhi meant these messages to be read communally, but they certainly created embarrassment in secular spirits like Muhammad Ali Jinnah, later the leader of the Muslim League and Pakistan's first Prime Minister, and Jawaharlal Nehru, later the first Indian Prime Minister.

According to Gyanendra Pandey (1990, 235 ff.), nationalism was arguably communalism driven into political channels; once the common enemy, the British, was gone, it would turn on fellow communities. Congress leaders began to apprehend this danger in the early 1920s; alarmed, they would address the issue of Hindu-Muslim relations directly. Some leaders, like Gandhi who kept insisting on the centrality of religion, tried to manoeuvre to deflate communalism while retaining nationalist sentiments as a path to *Swaraj*. Gandhi argued that some non-essential parts of religion should be freely given up to achieve the higher goal of national unity. Thus, he proclaimed that while it was his *dharma* to visit the temple, it was not his *dharma* to play music, especially in the vicinity of mosques, because his religion "demands that I live in peace with the whole world, [and because] the cornerstone of *Swaraj* is Hindu and Muslim unity" (cit. in Pandey 1990, 237)—a concept often repeated by the Mahatma. "Nationalism is greater than sectarianism," the Mahatma famously said in 1921, continuing,

"in that sense we are Indians first and Hindus, Mussulmans, Parsis, Christians after." (cit. in Pandey 1990, 238).

An altogether different reaction was that of Jawaharlal Nehru. A socialist at heart, he clearly saw that communalism stood in the way of *Swaraj*. He believed that communalism was upheld by reactionary landowners and aristocrats, who had vested interests to defend. He often insisted on the concept of modernity and genuinely believed that India could only become modern through a thorough process of secularisation. He was convinced that even the days of national cultures were counted, as the modern world was becoming one cultural unit. The real struggle then was not "between Hindu culture and Muslim culture, but between these two and the conquering scientific culture of modern civilization," since everywhere "religion recedes into the background and nationalism appears in aggressive garbs" (cit. in Pandey 1990, 242). Although Nehru did not often use the word "secular," possibly thinking that it implied a process alien to India (Copland 2013, 230), he and his Law Minister, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, were eager to modernize India along rationalistic socialist lines, abolishing casteism and redistributing resources. Ambedkar, who came from a *dalit* family, championed the abolition of castes. Certainly, both Nehru and Ambedkar would have been happy to push religious affiliation to the private sphere of Indian citizens. Nehru started to talk openly of secularism only in the mid-Fifties, partly because the term had gained currency in India, partly because he was eager to impress foreign countries favourably, particularly the USA and the USSR. He positively believed that India was on the way of secularisation and that it would bring emancipation and welfare.

The word "secular," however, did not enter the constitution until 1976, when Indira Gandhi passed the 42nd Amendment Bill, which was meant to give the Prime Minister an almost absolute power. The Bill also changed the preamble where India, previously defined as "sovereign democratic republic," became a "sovereign, socialist secular democratic republic." A socialist pragmatic approach, despite the secular spirit, had no choice but to refer to religions in order to address social inequalities, which makes the Indian constitution different from the Western ones. Thus, at least pro-tempore, it recognises the existence of several different religions and castes with a clear hierarchy and power relations. Indeed, once different classes of citizens are recognised based on religion, it becomes necessary to keep an eye on them and see that no abuses are committed. In this sense "secular" was never intended as in the West, but rather as a kind of equanimity towards different social groups, which happen to be discernible through religious affiliation; the ultimate aim of this policy is equality and prevention of communal tensions. In other words, secularism became synonymous with social peace and minorities' protection. Wedded to democracy, the term secular has sometimes been felt as unfair by those who consider democracy a system that rewards majorities; these people would rather interpret secularism

as a system that should favour the majoritarian religion—Hinduism—or at least remain entirely neutral in the free interplay or religions—a version of economic liberalism applied to religions. In spite of these criticisms and the claims that India should become a Hindu state, mirroring Pakistan, Nehru and Ambedkar managed to keep the country on democratic secular tracks for several decades.

Post-Independence Intellectuals

The effort to overcome communalism was not only political; it mobilised all the progressive intellectual forces in India. These included most academics and artists of the subcontinent. Departing from a millennial practice, Indian intellectuals started writing from a secular position, or at least from a position that could easily be construed as secular by the readers. It is perhaps little surprise that Mulk Raj Anand, who lived years in London and was on friendly terms with writers from the Bloomsbury group, was a self-professed secularist. In his most important novels, *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936), he openly blames Hinduism rather than British imperialism for the predicament of the Indian masses, their backwardness and casteism. Other writers from his generation resorted to different niches that the public could interpret as secular. After his debut novel *Kanthapura* (1938), Raja Rao turned to philosophical fiction, which, though deeply rooted in Hinduism, was too difficult and abstruse to be used as a buttress for fundamentalism. Likewise, R.K. Narayan wrote with a detachment that could be easily mistaken for irony or parody of religious characters. Anita Desai wrote about a world of middle-class losers in a society governed by historical or political forces, which have nothing supernatural. Nayantara Sahgal, a sophisticated member of the Nehru-Gandhi family, wrote social novels where religion has apparently no place. Likewise, none of the major Indian intellectuals after Independence took a religious stance like Rammohan Roy or Tagore had done. For some time, religion remained not only outside the political discourse but also outside the intellectual and artistic discourses. The current occupation of the Indian religious and political space by RSS and Sangh Parivar, both considered Hindu right, was also made possible by the void left by liberals in the religious sphere.

Post-independence intellectuals would also very soon discover that Nehru at bottom was right. In the modern world of "scientific culture and modern civilization," secularism is indeed a shared currency, a kind of common language. Thus, just like scientists talking about physics or biology, also novelists, sociologists, philosophers, economists from India would be able to reach the broader audience of the anglosphere and bring their works not only to the UK and US but to former colonies as well, and hence to rest of the world. This fact, connected with increased physical mobility, allowed Gayatri Spivak or Amartya Sen to be read together with Frantz Fanon, Jacques Derrida, or Edward Said. International

fiction readers likened R.K. Narayan to Anton Chekov and William Faulkner, and Salman Rushdie to Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Günter Grass. Arguably secularism paved the way for the internationalisation of Indian fiction.

Another important phenomenon of post-Independence India should be mentioned here—the diffusion of foreign editions of international authors thanks to Soviet and American propaganda. As Supriya Chaudhuri (2021) has recently pointed out, in the Seventies the two superpowers vied with each other to provide Indian readers with cheap editions of literary classics in English or local languages. The Soviet Union even had a scheme whereby Indian writers were employed in Moscow to translate classics into Indian languages. These resources for a time provided the paragon of world literature in India, which included translations of "Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gorky, Pasternak, Akhmatova, Zweig, Hamsun, Mann, Sartre, Camus, Unamuno, Moravia, Montale, Françoise Sagan, Simone de Beauvoir, Vasko Popa, Miroslav Holub, Paul Celan, Borges. There were no British writers" (Chaudhuri 2021, 162). Surely the bulk of these writers (except for Tolstoy, perhaps) would convey the idea that world literature is mostly secular.

Postsecular Criticism?

The research presented in these pages aims to illuminate an area of darkness in the studies on Indian literature written in English. This area corresponds to the repressed Hindu mindset, which crops up from time to time in the works of novelists as far apart as Raja Rao and Jhumpa Lahiri. The attitude of this research is inclusive; it may be called postsecular in that it moves from a postcolonial, liberal, secular position to include the non-secular. It is still a matter of debate whether postsecularism is a philosophical approach or an "observable social phenomenon" (Huggan 2010). This book can be read as an attempt at ascertaining whether postsecularism (whatever its ascendancy) can be applied to literary analysis like other major currents have been, from structuralism to deconstructionism. Secularism per se is not the target of my critique, and my scope is literary rather than political or sociological, although social anthropology has been enormously helpful in the textual analyses that follow. Postsecularism, as I understand it, is not a return to religion; no more than the postmodern is a return to the pre-modern. It may mark the end of a critical phase, but above all, it signals a desire to move forward, retaining what has already been achieved. I recognise the vital role that the secular has had in allowing a shared space of communication but deprecate that non-secular voices have been banished from it. The liberal idea that religion should be entirely confined to the private sphere of life has shown its limits even in the West (Crockett 2018), where it was first conceived. In India it is simply untenable. I therefore agree with Vincent Geoghegan as he writes that

> the postsecularist perspective no longer feels the necessity to counterpose the secular to the religious. This approach therefore betokens not a rejection of the secular, but a recognition that the achievements of the secular will not be lost by a more nuanced approach to religion. (Geoghegan 2013, 1)

Secularism as a social deal works better in Christian, preferably Protestant, contexts than in South Asia. Desecularising critical approaches when it comes to South Asian novels is therefore a matter of fair interpretation. This work wishes to enrich the reading of Indian English fiction by claiming its connection to the Hindu tradition. By Hindu, I do not refer only to metaphysics but also to ethics, mythology, literature, and lifestyle. I believe that all these dimensions have often been marginalised or overlooked by mainstream postcolonial criticism. A postsecular stance is simply a way to put them back in their place. Nowhere in this book I ever claim that such a writer is more religious than s/he cares to admit; I only try to assess whether such a text resonates with Hindu intertexts more than critics have hitherto noted.

Unlike secularism, the postsecular takes the religious and the non-rational in its stride without prejudice. A postsecular reading does not attempt to rationalise the non-secular, which was once the project of Western anthropology as it worked out patterns and paradigms to encapsulate non-Western behaviours and beliefs. On the contrary, the postsecular looks for alternative world pictures that give birth to alternative epistemologies and aesthetics. In the words of the feminist Egyptian anthropologist Saba Mahmood:

> we can no longer presume that secular reason and morality exhaust the forms of valuable human flourishings. In other words, a particular openness to exploring nonliberal traditions is intrinsic to a politically responsible scholarly practice, a practice that departs not from a position of certainty but one of risk, critical engagement, and a willingness to reevaluate one's own views in light of the Other's. (Mahmood 2001, 225)

When it comes to literary criticism, the postsecular is an attitude rather than a critical school, a position to read and write from rather than a hermeneutic technique. This research relies on Indology, close reading, world literature theory, and narratology as critical tools.

World Literature and Secularism

Translation studies may help to assess the role of secularism in the relationship between Indian literature and world literature. The oldest crux of all translators was possibly identified by St Jerome, who famously claimed that he had translated the Bible "non verbum de verbo, sed sensum de senso" (Jeronim 395)—not word by word but sense by sense. These simple words summarise the

complex train of decisions a translator must make to establish a dialogue between the author and the readers. This dilemma has often been rephrased with diverse metaphors over time, highlighting different obligations of the translator. In the nineteenth century Friedrich Schleiermacher (1813) brought the issue into the realm of philosophical speculation, while in the mid-nineteen-eighties, Gideon Toury rephrased it according to what the Tel Aviv school called a "new paradigm" of translation studies, namely a turn from language to culture. Toury (1995, 70) distinguishes between "acceptable" and "adequate" translations, the former being target-oriented, the latter source-oriented. The novelty introduced by these terms is that they do not apply only to the source and target languages, but also to the cultures related to those languages. Therefore a translation may feel acceptable not only because it does not disturb the linguistic norms of the target language, but also because it does not disturb its cultural assumptions. On the contrary, an adequate translation is bent to give a faithful representation of the culture-specific items of the source culture, which may disturb the target readers, if only because they sound weird or unfamiliar. The diffusion of yoga in the West may provide a non-linguistic example. Even a short internet survey of yoga courses offered in the West will give an idea of how an ascetic form of meditation has been transformed into a kind of gentle gym workout programme, which comes with the inevitable Western merchandising—yoga pants, yoga mats, meditation cushions, eye-pillows and what not. One could say that yoga in the West has been secularised, as it has lost its connection to *bhakti* and meditation. The most coveted yoga guru in the West is someone who comes from India but secularises—or Westernises, or rationalises—the discipline, turning it into a 45-minute class, where *bhakti* is irrelevant and meditation is played out as mindfulness or relaxation. There is nothing wrong with the way yoga is understood in the West, but something has certainly been lost in translating the Pali word *sati* with the English word mindfulness.[4] Nonetheless, all these "translations" of yoga have brought many Westerners in touch with a discipline they would have never heard about had it remained entirely within the realm of dharmic religions.

Likewise, the role played by secularism in bringing Indian literary endeavours into the domain of world literature has been no less relevant than that of the English language. The latter offers access to numerous readers but imposes certain standards and expectations on the writers, which include secularism both as a common language and a shared common platform from which the world is observed. As David Damrosch points out, one of the possible ways of reading world literature consists in looking at literary works as windows on the world (2003, 15). Readers become interested in texts born within remote countries in

4 In Buddhist doctrine *sati* is the first of the seven factors of enlightenment. It is also called awareness of reality and is followed by investigation, energy, joy, relaxation, concentration, and equanimity.

order to observe other cultures and other ways of life. For educated Western readers, this is a kind of surrogate travelling. However, reading remains for most a leisure activity and readers are seldom prepared to spend much effort on a text, like most yoga students would not go through a complete initiation. For this reason, translations often edit out cultural differences and homogenise texts from different cultural and literary traditions. Lawrence Venuti has studied these editorial choices in his *The Translator's Invisibility* (2008, 14), where he positively talks of "violence" to which the foreign text is subjected at the hands of the (Anglophone) editorial system. Such is the situation in the Western book market but, as Pascale Casanova (2004) observes, it is almost impossible for a writer to win the recognition of world literature without the sanction of the Western cultural capitals. In her provocative essay titled *Against World Literature* (2013), Emily Apter proposes a more serious engagement with the issue of untranslatability. Translations, Apter maintains, give the reader the false impression that s/he can understand a foreign text, bringing peripheral literature into the "comfort zone" of the Anglosphere; most of the work that lies behind the notion of world literature is marred by this oversight of the translators' role. Even when the translator adheres to what Lawrence Venuti calls "an ethics of foreignization" (Venuti 2008, 266), gesturing towards a foreign language, readers may think that they are able to understand terms or situations simply because these have a family resemblance to their culture-specific items. The equation of Hinduism and religion is a case in point: Hinduism bears many resemblances to a Western religion, but its semantic field is much ampler than the semantic field of either Christianity or Islam; one may be a Hindu, and a fundamentalist Hindu for that matter, and be an atheist at the same time. Venuti proposes to make the translator more visible in the editorial practice, while Apter's post-deconstructionist essay recommends a different theoretical approach to world literature that does not ignore the biases of translation.

In theory, books originally written in English do not fall victim to translational editing when they travel to the West—it is true, though, that publishers oftentimes negotiate with authors a glossary for non-English terms to make the text more acceptable. It would be grossly unfair to say that Indian novelists who have chosen English as their artistic language did so in order to cater to Western tastes. Obviously, there are other cogent considerations, not least that English is the only language that can be read across India. Writing in English also keeps the author in control of her/his text when it moves into foreign markets. An Indian novel written in English pre-empts editorial interventions by offering a ready-made, take it or leave it, editorial product. However, language alone does not make a translation acceptable (in Toury's sense), it also needs a shift in the text's general attitude. Likewise, a book written from a secular perspective is more likely to cater to a Western audience as readers may find the implied reader more familiar. This is true whether the book is originally in English or translated. In a

certain way, it is as if such books were "born translated." According to Rebecca Walkowitz (2015), who first introduced the notion, a book is "born translated" when it is written for an audience other than the author's countrymen and has already adopted the foreign readers' attitude. The Bakhtinian capability of the novel to include different languages and voices has metamorphosed into the capability to include multiple communities of readers within one text.

In South Asia, where most readers are bilingual, English writing has a connotation that is seldom recognised. Even when an author does not overtly take a stance, a narrative in English sounds more secular than the same narrative in any other South Asian language. This fact may seem strange as English is to most readers no longer associated with the West. However, Indian bilingualism is such that politics, science, and business are mostly transacted in English, while religious rites and ceremonies use neo-Persian or neo-Sanskrit languages. As a consequence, discourses in English are automatically connoted as mundane and secular. Neelam Srivastava (2008, 5-7) argues that the novel in English constructs a cosmopolitan transnationality, that is the opposite of the Hindu nationalism constructed by *bhasha* (vernacular) languages in popular TV series. Thus, especially to expatriate Indians, the position of Indian novels within the canon of world literature corresponds to their own position in a global world.

For two or even three generations of Indian writers, adopting a secular attitude has served two important aims. Firstly, by narrating Indian society to Indians, they showcased the good of a secular (read: rational, modern, and tolerant) attitude and the evils of a non-secular one. An excellent example of this narrative is Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), which was the first novel by a contemporary writer to be included in university syllabi. Here the most secular and cosmopolite Tridib falls victim to a mob blinded by communal hatred. Although the characters are fictional, the riots described in the novel did really take place in 1964. The novel was written as a riposte to the anti-Sikh riots that ravaged Delhi after Indira Gandhi's assassination. A generation of Indian students has read *The Shadow Lines* like Americans read Thoreau or Hemingway. Ghosh's novel never claims that secularism offers a solid epistemic foundation, but he points at it as the most viable antidote against communal violence. Another famous case is Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, written in the same year as *The Shadow Lines*. The reception of that novel, its ban in India and in the Middle East, and the *fatwa* are well-known facts. The accusation of blasphemy levelled at the author targeted the irony and mockery typical of Rushdie's style. However, there is a considerable difference between *Charlie Hebdo*'s irreverent strips on the Prophet and Rushdie's book on the allegedly Satanic influence on the composition of the Quran. The former deride and offend a different and, in France, minoritarian religion just for the fun of it (and for the profits). The latter tries to subvert and secularize Islamic culture from the inside as part of a modernization process. Rushdie deploys his secularism as a cultural critique,

which is a Western attitude; Ghosh refers to it as a means to a more pacific society, which is an Indian attitude—at least it was so in the 1980s.

As we have seen, the second reason for adopting a secular stance lies in the pressure of the Western publishing market. It is no accident that Rushdie's novel was banned in India and Pakistan, but Western readers highly appreciated it. The grandfathers of Rushdie's fans were for some time equally captivated by Rabindranath Tagore, whose *Gitanjali* was probably the most successful translation ever of an Indian work in the West. Interestingly, the Bengali and the English *Gitanjali* do not coincide in many important details; the English edition also contains other material composed at the same time but published elsewhere, and, moreover, it is translated in prose. Tagore worked at the translation himself and brought it to Europe in 1911. In 1913 he was the first non-European Nobel laureate. Tagore was probably eager to translate his work and visit European literary talents because of his conception of world literature, which he considered as the joint effort of different writers who work for the expression of common humanity (Tagore 1907). On this point W.B. Yeats chimed in with Tagore, so the Irish poet was among the most enthusiastic readers of the collection. The following year Yeats wrote a preface for the English version of *Gitanjali*. Certainly, Tagore's affiliation with the Brahmo Samaj appealed to the Irish bard, who sketched Tagore as a great mystic but failed to see his distinctive poetic genius. Coming to the actual craft, he acknowledged that English readers only see a prose translation of poems that were actually written to be sung, as Tagore also composed music for his poetry. "And yet," Yeats observed, "we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood" (Tagore and Yeats 2004). This familiarity of Tagore's poetry and the comparison with Dante Gabriele Rossetti will surprise a Bengali reader, but probably not an English one. Mahasweta Sengupta (1990) argues that, in translating his works, Tagore chose those poems that would best suit a Western audience, and translated them with a Victorian audience in mind. As a result, Tagore appears much less vibrant and rather languid in English. Sengupta points out that where Tagore translated "Away from the sight of thy face my heart knows no rest or respite, and my work becomes an endless toil in a Shoreless sea of toil," the original read something like "My heart finds no peace;/The more I plunge myself in work,/I wander in a sea that has lost its shores" (1990, 56). Though an authorial self-translation, Tagore's own version has aged rapidly indeed!

On the whole, Tagore was unhappy both with his English translation and the reception that he had in the West (Chakravarty 2015): he felt that his muse had been ill-served in translation and he had been misunderstood even by those Europeans who hailed him as a great poet. In 2011, to celebrate the 150th birthday of Tagore, Penguin India commissioned a new verse translation of the

Gitanjali to William Radice. The translator ends his substantial introduction to the collection with these words:

> For those who already know and love *Gitanjali*, this book may offer a novel and perhaps unnerving experience. But if *Gitanjali* is to win new readers and admirers in the second century of its existence, it needs to take on an avatar that is suited to our age, as well as restoring to Tagore "the real *Gitanjali*," a poetic endeavour that he cared about deeply, but which Yeats's editing, the Nobel Prize, the numerous secondary translations and the canonical status that it acquired, rather took out of his hands. (Tagore and Radice 2011, Kindle position 956)

The case of Tagore is paradigmatic because he accepts to change his texts to gratify his target readers' tastes and is rewarded with unanimous appreciation, though not with equal understanding. Almost all the authors considered in this book write in English, and all of them in prose, so their cases are certainly less striking than Tagore's, but as they wished to cater to a wider audience and enter the precincts of world literature, they probably felt the same editorial urge to write in a way that would not challenge the readers' understanding. This is the case with Arundhati Roy's acclaimed *The God of Small Things* (1997), a novel written in English in which most cultural references are made transparent for an international readership, even though the text criticises the cultural dominance of the West. The main goal of the novelist seems to be political rather than aesthetical; hence she exposes Indian casteism to the view of the wide world, the Western in particular, in the hope that this will affect a change (Gallitelli 2013). The very objects of the novel's criticism paradoxically become the reasons for its success in the West, where the caste system is infamous and outrageous; likewise, any critical Western reader may be able to see that there is something wrong in an Indian family where Ammu, the protagonist, listens to the Rolling Stones and reads Kipling to her children, keeping a most precious bottle of Christian Dior's perfume in her closet. Likewise, the novel criticizes the commodification of Indian culture—"toy histories for rich tourists to play in" (Roy 1997, 126)—but owes its fame to a similar relationship with Western liberal-minded secular readers.

The success of *The God of Small Things* can be contrasted to the reception of a novel like Anantha Murthy's *Bhava* (1998), likewise set in Kerala. This text was translated into English by the joint efforts of the author, himself a retired English professor at Mysore, and the American poet Judith Kroll, but it never reached a large audience. Murthy received several Indian literary prizes, including the prestigious Sahitya Akademi and the Jnanpith awards, but not any Western ones. The case of *Bhava* is emblematic; despite its translation, it did not make it into the canon of world literature (it is not translated into Italian or French or German, for example) because of its cultural opacity. The story begins in a train compartment with this description: "Clearly the man opposite

Shastri had taken the vow of Ayyappa—he was wearing a black kurta, a black dhoti, a small black towel over his shoulder; and against these black clothes the amulet around his neck compelled attention" (Anantha Murthy and Kroll 1998, 4). Nothing in the novel, except the glossary, explains that Ayyappa is a divinity, the son of Shiva and Mohini, to whom a temple is dedicated on the top of Sabarimala hill, in Kerala. Pilgrims take the vote to renounce their identity and assume the name of Swami (teacher) as they travel to the place. Such a piece of information, which is unlikely to be known to anyone outside Kerala, is not revealed to the reader, thus exposing an unsettling implied author who not only takes for granted that the reader knows Kerala's religious customs, but refuses to recount them from the detached rationalistic viewpoint of an anthropologist. While Arundhati Roy denounces the backwardness of the caste system, inflaming the reader, Murthy delves into the depths of the Indian tradition but struggles to find a readership outside India.

A pressure to write from a certain position, even if endorsed with conviction by writers, sometimes must have been felt as a limit to the novelist's creativity. This may happen regardless of one's personal beliefs in matters of the spirit; one may be agnostic and yet rely, at least sometimes, on some myths or precepts when discussing ethical issues. The phenomenon has probably escaped notice because of its subtility. It comes nowhere near the censorship of past ages, or the pressure felt by Soviet writers in the Fifties and Sixties. A partiality towards secularism and a kind of moral suasion to avoid references to the religious discourse is all we are talking about. And yet avoiding references to the Hindu culture in a novel set in India is an affectation of a kind. All the more so because the Hindu tradition has created a galore of stories and characters. On these occasions, novelists have reacted like smart writers have always done to dodge censorship: they write "prohibited" parts in the garb of acceptable orthodox stories. The difference with censorship lies in their attitude: Indian authors would not refuse secularism per se, especially not in its political application, but they would arguably feel it as a restraint to their artistic creativity. When closely examined, different writers apparently resist secularism through the deployment of a hidden anti-secular, mostly religious, apparatus. By apparatus, for lack of a better word, I mean images, myths, beliefs, ethics, and the supernatural. I shall therefore consider the creative strategies of novelists who have, in some ways, resisted or complicated the secular/rationalist dichotomy. Obviously, such images can also be utilised in a secular narrative, like Salman Rushdie often does; however, I am interested in those cases when the unacknowledged Hindu imagery chimes with the ethical or aesthetical outlook of the story.

As will become clear in the following chapters, resistance to secularism may be played out through intertextuality, by referring to Hindu myths or stories, as R.K. Narayan does in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1961), or through a subtle reference to names, as the character of Arjuna in Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

(2000). Another instance of non-secularism can be found in ethics; sometimes evil characters are given habits that are censored by Hinduism, but not necessarily by a secular liberal view. For instance, they eat meat, like the old Judge in Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*; elsewhere, it is poetic justice as some evil befalls characters who break religious norm, like Arjun in *The Glass Palace* (2000). The most blatant breach of the secular-rationalistic convention is the insertion of supernatural events in realistic narratives, such is the case with many of Narayan's novels, but also with Ghosh's later production, or, more recently, Neel Mukherjee's *In a State of Freedom*, which begins with a story inspired by Wolfgang Goethe's ballad *Der Erlkönig*. Sometimes it is impossible to say whether this disavowal of secularism is deliberate, whether it is the expression of a creative impulse, the surfacing of an ancestral culture, or a political stance. Certainly, such elements are never totally disruptive, but allow what Edward Said (1993) calls a contrapuntal reading, whose aim may be political, aesthetical, or philosophical. Political in that these novels refuse to conform to the cultural hegemony of the Western-dominated book market. Aesthetical in that they propose a resistance to the dominant models by claiming other poetics, sometimes handed down by the Indian literary tradition, sometimes self-fashioned. Philosophical in that they challenge the dominant epistemic model based on rationalism.

Works Cited

Anantha Murthy, U. R., and Judith Kroll. 1998. *Bhava*. New Delhi; New York: Penguin Books.

Apter, Emily S. 2013. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London and New York: Verso.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, and Bill Ashcroft. 2013. *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Third edition. *Routledge Key Guides*. London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Balakrishna, Sandeep. 2018. *Seventy Years of Secularism. Unpopular Essays on the Unofficial Political Religion of India*. No city: no publisher.

Casanova, Pascale. 2004. *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M.B. DeBevoise. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press. Original edition, La République mondiale des Lettres.

Chakravarty, Radha. 2015. "Translating Tagore: Shifting Paradigms." In *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century: Theoretical Renewals*, edited by Debashish Banerji, 25-35. New Delhi: Springer India.

Chatterjee, Partha. 1994. "Secularism and Toleration." *Economic and Political Weekly* 29 (28):1768-1777.

Chaudhuri, Supriya. 2021. "Which world, whose literature?" *Thesis Eleven* 162 (1):75-93.

Copland, Ian. 2013. *A History of State and Religion in India*. London: Routledge.

Crockett, Clayton. 2018. "What is Postsecularism?" *American Book Review* 39 (5):6-14.

Damrosch, David. 2003. *What is World Literature?* Woodstock: Princeton University Press.

De Roover, Jacob. 2015. *Europe, India, and the Limits of Secularism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Dirks, Nicholas B. 2001. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Eagleton, Terry. 2007. *Ideology: an Introduction*. New and updated ed. ed. London: Verso.

Franci, Giorgio Renato. 2020. *La bhakti: Mistica e devozione nelle tradizioni indiane*. Milano: Edizioni unicopli.

Gallitelli, Eleonora. 2013. "The Contemporary Indian Novel and Its Mediations." *Textus* 26 (3):57-76.

Geoghegan, Vincent. 2013. "Religious Narrative and Postsecularism."

Ghosh, Amitav. 2005. *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Ghosh, Amitav, and Salman Toor. 2021. *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sunderban*. Delhi: HarperCollins India.

Holyoake, George Jacob. 1871. *The Principles of Secularism Illustrated. Third edition, revised*. London: Austin & Co.

Huggan, Graham. 2010. "Is the "Post" in "Postsecular" the "Post" in "Postcolonial"?" *Modern Fiction Studies* 56 (4):751-768.

Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa 1983. *Indian Writing in English*. 3rd ed. ed. New Delhi: Sterling.

Jeronim. 395. "Liber de optimo genere interpretandi." In *San Gerolamo*, edited by Umberto Morrica, 243-245. Milano: Vita e pensiero.

Madan, T. N. 1993. "Whither Indian Secularism?" *Modern Asian Studies* 27 (3):667-697.

Mahmood, Saba. 2001. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2):202-236.

Metcalf, Barbara Daly, and Thomas R. Metcalf. 2002. *A Concise History of India*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Mignini, Filippo. 2016. Croce e la religione. In *Enciclopedia italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti*: Istituto Treccani.

Naess, Arne. 2008. *Ecology of Wisdom*. UK: Penguin.

Nandy, Ashis. 1995. "An Anti-secularist Manifesto." *India International Centre Quarterly* 22 (1):35-64.

Olivelle, Patrick. 2012. "Asoka's Inscriptions as Text and Ideology." In *Reimaging Asoka. Memory and History*, edited by Patrick Olivelle, Janice Leoschenko and Prabha Ray, 157-183. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Pandey, Gyanendra. 1990. *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*. Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pantham, Thomas. "Indian Secularism and Its Critics: Some Reflections." 59 (3):523-540.

Perumal, C. A. 1987. "Nehru and Secularism." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 48 (3):299-306.

Pieruccini, Cinzia. 2013. *Storia dell'arte dell'India*. Vol. II. Dagli esordi indoislamici all'Indipenza. Torino: Einaudi.

Ratti, Manav. 2013. *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge.

Rothermund, Dietmar. 2007. *Storia dell'India*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Roy, Arundhati. 1997. *The God of Small Things*. Delhi: IndiaInk.

Said, Edward W. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.

Schleiermacher, Friedrich. 1813. "Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens." In *Das Problem des* Übersetzens, edited by Hans Joachim Störig. Stuttgart.

Sen, Amartya. 2006a. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. London: Penguin.

Sen, Amartya. 2006b. "Secularism and Its Discontents." In *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. London: Penguin. Original edition, 2005.

Sengupta, Mahasweta. 1990. "Translation, Colonialism and Poetics: Rabindranath Tagore in Two Worlds." In *Translation, History and Culture*, edited by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, 56-63. London and New York: Pinter.

Srivastava, Neelam. 2008. *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English*. London: Routledge.

Swatos, William H. 1981. "The Disenchantment of Charisma: A Weberian Assessment of Revolution in a Rationalized World." *Sociological Analysis* 42 (2):119-136.

Tagore, Rabindranath. 1907. "World Literature." In *World Literature in Theory and Practice*, edited by David Damrosch, 47-58. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell. Original edition, Vishwa sahitya.

Tagore, Rabindranath, and Wiliam Butler Yeats. 2004. "Gitanjali. Song Offerings." In, ed. Viswas G. Chetan Jain, Anand Rao: Project Gutenberg (accessed December 2020).

Tagore, Rabindranath, and William Radice. 2011. "Gitanjali: Song Offerings." In. London: Penguin.

Thapar, Romila. 1961. *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Torri, Michelguglielmo. 2007. *Storia dell'India*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Toury, Gideon. 1995. *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Trivedi, Harish. 2004. "Literatures of the Indian Subcontinent." In *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, edited by Peter France, 340-55. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Venuti, Lawrence. 2008. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge.

Viswanathan, Gauri. 1989. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Walkowitz, Rebecca L. 2015. *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, *Literature now*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Weber, Max. 2020. *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*. Translated by Damion Searls: New York Review of Books.

Chapter 2.
Overtly Religious Novelists: Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Ananta Murthy

The European novel originates in the early eighteenth century; its rise is coeval with the rise of rationalism, Enlightenment, market economy, and modern secularism, as we have seen. Rationalism and secularism are literally congenital to it. There is consensus among scholars that the most influential literary antecedents of the novel were the autobiography, the epistolary, the diary, the tragedy. The Indian classic literary tradition knows nothing of the kind and is rarely written in prose. The novel reached India ready made in the mid-nineteenth century, at the dawn of what we now call the Hindu Renaissance. In engaging with the new literary genre, Indian authors mostly complied with its European-made norms. Supriya Chaudhuri (2012, 103) argues that the very first Bengali narrative that can lay claim to the name of novel is *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (The Spoilt Son of a Rich Family, 1858; serialised in *Masik Patrika*, 1855–57). The scholar underlines its "social realism, its vivid account of the culture of Calcutta and its village or small-town environs" that "lays the foundation for the nineteenth-century novel's commitment to realist representation" (Chaudhuri 2012, 103).

Rajmohan's Wife

Realism and secularism have been the hallmark of Indian English fiction since its inception. The reasons thereof should be sought in the European models on the one hand and the intended audience on the other. The English and European novels that served as master narratives were mostly overtly Christian or covertly secular, as they addressed a self-professed Christian readership. This pattern could not be easily adapted to India, where the readers were not limited to Hindus. It followed that a secularist stance was a viable compromise for Indian novelists. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94) is a case in point. He belonged to the first batch of graduates from Calcutta College, a group of young intellectuals fascinated by Western learning and literatures. His earlier work comprises the first Indian novel ever written in English and looks far more secular than his subsequent fiction in Bangla. It is titled *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) and appeared in instalments in a short-lived journal when the author was in his mid-twenties.

The story is a romance that develops in a mofussil area of East Bengal. The heroine, Matangini, has married one Rajmohan—a lazy, debt-ridden man—while her sister is wedded to the sophisticated, anglophile Madhav. Matangini is beautiful and obedient, but also self-reliant and resourceful; predictably, she is secretly in love with Madhav. The latter, entreated by his wife, offers Rajmohan a position as supervisor of his estate, possibly out of love for the poor sister-in-law. Rajmohan, not content with his job, plans to rob his brother-in-law and benefactor. Thus, he consorts with two dacoits to destroy the testament through which Madhav has acquired his wealth. Matangini overhears her husband's plans and decides to venture by night to warn her sister's husband. Thanks to her forewarning, the scheme fails, the bandits are rejected, and she returns home just before dawn. As she crosses the forest, a monsoon rain surprises her so that she is drenched to the bone on her arrival. On beholding her, Rajmohan understands what has happened and is about to kill her when the dacoits knock on his door and accuse him of betrayal. The heroine seizes the opportunity to escape to a cousin, only to discover that her new protector, Mathur, is in cahoots with the rascals. A vile man, Mathur lusts for her and holds her captive in a secret chamber, hoping to win her by hunger, as he knows that force will not do with such a strong girl. Meanwhile, the dacoits capture Madhav too and bring him to a cell adjacent to the one occupied by Mathangini. The pangs and groans of the heroine scare the bandits, who mistake her for a ghost. Eventually Madhav saves Matangini, who goes back to her father's, while Rajmohan and Mathur are deported according to the British law.

While the romantic plot is typically Victorian, with obvious Gothic overtones, the best part of the novel is the realistic description of country life, with a perceptive sketch of the relationship between women. Meenakshi Mukherjee (1996) detects influences from *kavya*—a classical Sanskrit or Prakrit poetic form—particularly in the metaphor-laden descriptions of feminine beauty. The night voyage of the protagonist through the forest to warn her lover is a classic poetic trope. Matangini emerges as a complex heroine that highlights some typically Indian contradictions stemming from the double standard of the *zenana* tradition and the classic role models celebrated by poets and recently rediscovered by the Hindu Renaissance. The young woman is beautiful and respectful, but also strong-willed, like Radha when she crosses the forest in search of Krishna in the *Gita Govinda*. Is she then to be admired like the mythical Radha is? What is the duty of an honest and resolute woman when she is wedded to an unworthy husband? Should she take the blame for her "disobedience"? The epilogue explains that she goes back to her father and suffers an untimely death: is this a way of indicting women's predicament, or is she being punished for her unorthodoxy; or, third alternative, is she being rewarded by bringing the misery of her present life to a close, thus preparing a new rebirth? The poetical justice of the novel is unclear, and it certainly does not reward the heroine; reminiscent

perhaps of Rebecca's fate at the end of *Ivanhoe*, the narrative leaves readers with more than one dilemma.

The night scene in the forest, when the heroine leaves her home to warn Madhav, might have stirred the narrative towards the precincts of the ghost story, but the author proudly avoids this option. Indeed, in the seventh chapter's subtitle, the narrator declares that "the author narrowly misses an opportunity of introducing a few ghosts and regrets that he cannot gratify his young readers" (Chatterjee 1996, 36). The theme of ghosts, however, is not totally absent, as it is further utilised to emphasise the secular/rationalistic attitude of the novel. When Madhav is kept prisoner by the two dacoits, an eerie sound resonates from the top of the hut. The simpler bandit believes that a ghoul haunts the place, while his master initially appears more composed: "Though, *of course*, equally given to superstition, the much stronger mind of the sardar did not easily yield to such influences" (Chatterjee 1996, 106). This difference between the two dacoits, however, is not due to a rational attitude:

> Generally, their lawless and terrible profession renders people of this class habitually conversant with those scenes which are best calculated to give rise to fears of a superhuman character, and though they as firmly believe as other ignorant people in the existence of superhuman agencies, habit renders them less liable to their impressions. (Chatterjee 1996, 106)

Subsequently, the dacoits search the place but cannot find the origin of the eerie sounds. They are terrified:

> Bhiku cowered with fear and crouched near the sardar.
> "We have no heart to stay any longer," said the sardar to Madhav, "the ways of gods are known to themselves." (Chatterjee 1996, 109)

Eventually, even the frightened sardar runs away, freeing their captive:

> At that moment a heavy clanking of chains, followed by a tremendous clattering sound, came thundering on the already frightened party, and then again issued the same unearthly moan, more loud and piercing. At one bound Bhiku cleared the veranda, and ran out of the house with a scream. The sardar also rose startled and leaped into the veranda. He was petrified with the vision that there met his eyes and, without turning back even to lock the door, precipitately ran out of the house, leaving Madhav entirely free. (Chatterjee 1996, 110)

Madhav—who was educated in Calcutta and reads English books—does not believe in ghosts. Instead of fleeing, he endeavours to determine the origin of the ghastly noises. His courage is rewarded as he eventually discovers that the cries were the distressed heroine's feeble laments. The hero does not beat his

captors through brute force or cunning, but thanks to his mental fortitude, rooted in rationalism.

Another sign of secularism worth mentioning here is the lack of religious activities. None of the women, some of whom are strictly traditional, ever performs a puja or is said to keep any domestic idol. Likewise, the villages described seem to host no temples or templegoers, and religious images are treated with "unusually negative charge" (Mukherjee 2000, 37). When the author describes Mathur Ghose's abode, where two paintings hang: "from one which glowered the grim black figure of Kali," while the other "displayed the crab-like form of Durga" (Chatterjee 1996, 76). *Rajmohan's Wife*'s intended audience may partly explain this exclusion of religious piety from the story. The young novelist may have wished to conceal rustic religiosity, which would have been misconstrued as superstition and therefore an instance of cultural inferiority if seen from the viewpoint of the white masters. More likely, the author chose not to anthropologise mofussil religiosity, even though the rural setting would permit it. Transforming mofussil piety into an anthropological curiosity would have made his heroes the laughingstock of urban readers, both from the English and Indian communities, activating the ancestral distrust of the citizen towards the rustic, which would destroy the narrative tension.

Another element suggesting that the novel was originally written for an international audience is the reputation of the district magistrate, an incorruptible Irishman. Although he does not appear in person, the magistrate is the only European in the narrative. He is reputed as an unblemished overseer who metes out justice without any vested interest—more a deus ex machina than the portrait of a British officer. All considered, it appears an unlikely character destined to change in Bankimchandra's subsequent Bangla novels.

The author probably did not care much for this text, which was serialised in a short-lived periodical and never republished in his lifetime. The slower narrative pace of the first chapters and the hasty winding up of the story at the end suggest that the novelist was losing interest even as he was writing. Possibly Bankim considered his piece a literary experiment of which he grew tired, or he lost interest because of the lack of political commitment. Writing in English implied a kind of subscription to traditional English models and values, which eventually Bankimchandra must have found untenable. His later poetics is far more patriotic and less secular.

***

By the time he came to write *Anandamath* (serialised 1880–1882, published 1882), possibly his best-known novel, Bankimchandra had acquired literary craftsmanship and developed a neat political project that brought together

Hinduism and nationalism, dropping a small grit in the cogs of realism. His historical novel *Anandamath* is an excellent example of the undecidability of the novelist's attitude. The author apparently writes from a rationalistic—though no longer secular—position with straightforward realism in the tradition of the historical novel. The plot revolves around a historical fact, the *sannyasins* rebellion that took place in Bengal during the famine of 1773. Although more than one century had passed at the time of writing, the narrative displays a firm political commitment, to which realism appears congenial. The narrative celebrates the moral nerve of the Indian *sannyasin*, who call themselves *santans* (children) of the Mother Goddess—the motherland, another embodiment of *Shakti*—as they pledge their devotion to the cause of her freedom. Their chant "Vande Mataram" (I hail thee, mother) will later become the battle cry of Indian freedom fighters.

In the depiction of the historical background, the novel is realistic and even pragmatic. Bankimchandra recognises the military superiority of the British army both in terms of technology and military discipline:

> When it comes to warfare, there is a world of difference between the British and the people of India.
> You do not fight these days with mere physical strength. The bullet does not travel faster nor further because a stronger man fires a rifle.
> Then what makes this difference between the British and the Indian soldier?
> Because the English soldier would never run away even to save his life. The Indian soldier runs away when he begins to perspire; he seeks cold drinks. The Englishman surpasses the Indian in tenacity. He never abandons his duty before he finishes it. Then consider the question of courage: A cannon ball falls on one spot. But a whole company of Indian soldiers would run away if one single cannon ball fell among them. On the other hand, British soldiers would not run away even if dozens of cannon balls should fall in their midst. (*Anandamath*, 41)

The novel juxtaposes the moral strength and discipline of the *santans* with the military skill of the English. At the end of the day, the *sannyasins* win the battle, proving that spiritual discipline is stronger than military force. Yet, this success does not bring about the expected prosperity. Bankimchandra depicts a rather grim post-war scenario. Once the British no longer control the territory, anarchy is loosed upon the land; women are in danger, and looters are out seeking personal vengeance. Eventually, a mystic predicts that the English will come back to power and administer the land wisely until an empirical scientific knowledge can purify Hinduism from its present state of degeneration. This partiality towards the British today is surprising and a source of embarrassment for Indian scholars. One of the reasons behind it lies in historical accuracy: there is no historical evidence of the *sannyasins*' victory. This ending may also be construed as a preference for the secular English Raj over the risk of a non-secular

Muslim rule, which was partly responsible for the mismanagement at the time of the famine. However, the fight of the *sannyasins* has not been in vain—the British have learnt a lesson in management, and the Indians in self-reliance.

If the novel's background is realistic, the personal stories of the protagonists—Mahendra and Kalyani, and Jiban and Shanti—teem with supernatural events. While conceding the field to rationalism and pragmatism in matters of history, Bankim brings enchantment to the level of microhistory. Kalyani is told in a dream that she must leave her husband free to fight, which is the first reason that prompts them to take up the cause of the *santas*. Then she and her daughter take poison, but they both are revived somehow. After the last battle, Shanti goes onto the battlefield in search of her husband, Jiban; a mysterious wise man eventually points his body out to her, but he appears dead. The mysterious man, however, insists that she applies some medicaments until he is revived. These two stories of conjugal fortitude and commitment to the cause of Independence introduce a supernatural element into the otherwise realistic narrative. Moreover, these subplots resonate with mythical stories such as that of Savitri in the case of Shanti and Jiban (incidentally a favourite also of Toru Dutt), and the story of Sikhi-Dvaja and Chudala,[1] where the wife becomes the guru of her husband, inspiring him and eventually persuading him to live as hermits.

Thus the novel merges two different poetics: realism at the historical and political level, and romance at the characters' level. This was hardly new; Walter Scott arguably did the same in *Ivanhoe* (1819). However, the fundamental difference between Scott and Bankimchandra is that the Scottish novelist uses quasi-magical elements as a homage to a literary Folk English tradition in representing the Middle Ages, well knowing that his Protestant readers would take exception to it. Scott would never earnestly advocate a return to the Middle Ages. Bankimchandra, on the contrary, undergirds the Hindu beliefs that provide the fantastic edge to the novel. At the same time, he resorts to the genre of the historical novel at a time when history was being introduced in India as a science. Like other reformers, he considered history a suitable foundation for a nationalist discourse. As Supriya Chaudhuri writes, history was both "a subject of empirical research on the one hand and as a site of imaginative freedom on the other" (2012, 106). Historical *sannyasins* heroes proved that Indians did not need to be subjected to other political powers and provided a model of moral fortitude. The latter could literally work miracles. Bankimchandra's nationalism was partly positivistic, partly religious (Flora 1993). This double edge is also discernible in his later essays on the reformation of Hinduism collected as *Dharmatattva* (1888). One of these essays, "Krishnacharitra" (1888), was dedicated to the historical existence of Krishna. Positively discussing the historical existence of Vishnu's *avatar* served a double purpose. On the one hand, it

1 The story is recounted by R.K. Narayan in his *Gods, Demons & Others*, p. 24-33.

offered a rationalistic buttress for Hinduism, which agnostics could scarcely dismiss; on the other, it provided a role model for modern Hindus (Ranjan 2017). To Bankimchandra rationalism did not imply secularism. Thus his cultural project, both in his fiction and non-fiction, is at once positivistic and religious. At the religious level, the novelist merges Vaishnava and Shakti cults creating a rare alliance that has never become popular in Bengal. It is doubtful if it is intended as a possible model to bring together different branches of Hinduism, as a religious message, or as a mere novelistic invention (Mukherjee 1982, 905).

Samskara

Bhava, briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, was not Anantha Murthy's first chance to reach a global readership through translation. His first novel *Samskara* (1965) almost made it when it was transposed into a controversial film in 1970. The movie, directed by Pattabhirama Reddy, though initially rejected by the censor board, was later admitted to Indian circulation, where it won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in the same year, followed by the bronze Leopard in Locarno two years later; it is still considered a milestone of Kannada cinema. In 1975 the Indian poet R.K. Ramanujan translated *Samskara* into English, adding the explanatory subtitle *A Rite for a Dead Man*, which has been retained in the French translation.[2] Ramanujan, whose name appears on the book cover along with the author's, also provided an afterword, which is the most influential piece of criticism on the novel to this day. Although Ramanujan translated the text into standard English, avoiding Indian variants or original coinages, he retained a number of Kannada words, for which he also provided a glossary.

Some passing references to the Congress Party allow us to set the novel in the 1930s; otherwise, it could occur in any previous age. No sign of the English colonisation ever appears. The protagonist is a high-caste Brahmin in his late thirties called Praneshacharya. He is learned and austere, and is looked up to by his peers as a guide in all religious matters. At sixteen, he chose a disabled wife, Bhagirathi, thinking that looking after her would facilitate his detachment from the material world. As the novel begins, Praneshacharya is nursing his ailing wife. She encourages him to marry again and have children, to which he laughs and makes no answer but a gentle pat. As he sits down for his meal, someone calls on him because a man called Naranappa has died. Although he still lived in the brahminic

2 The novel appeared in French under the title *Samskara*: *rites pour un mort* translated by Anne-Cécile Padoux from the English version in 1985. I am aware of one more translation only, in German under the somewhat ironic title *Samskara oder Was tun mit der Leiche des Ketzers, die uns im Weg liegt und das Leben blockiert*. Translated by Gernot Schneider from the original Kannada in 1994 and published in Bern, CH. Neither version was available for purchase in 2020.

quarters—called *agrahara*[3] throughout the novel—Naranappa had long ago given up his brahminhood and led a dissipated and outrageous life: he did not observe fasting, befriended Muslims, ate fish from the sacred pond, and, after repudiating his wife, had taken an untouchable mistress from the *jati* (caste) of prostitutes, Chandri. Furthermore, the other villagers allege that he corrupted young men; under his influence, one has gone to the army, and another has forsaken his wife and become the lover of a low-caste woman. Praneshacharya, the holiest and most venerated of the village Brahmins, in vain visited the sinner more than once to ask for his repentance. Indeed, Naranappa recognised that the *acharya* (venerable teacher) had a claim to speak for brahminism, but he was the only one in a village of hypocritical upper-caste Brahmins, who were interested only in money and appearances. He challenged Praneshacharya by telling him a story of a once devoted follower of his who was led astray by one of the stories that the *acharya* told to the community, that of Shakuntala, the gorgeous heroine of Kalidasa's story. The young fellow on hearing the story was inflamed by passion and "made love" to a woman who had gone to fetch water from the fishermen's quarters, thus re-enacting part of the legend of Satyavati, also known as Matsyagandhi, the fisherwoman seduced by a *rishi* (sage) whom she was ferrying across the river. The story is in the Mahabharata.

It is summertime, and the men face a quandary: Naranappa was not excommunicated, and although he left the Brahmin's ways, Brahminhood did not leave him. He is still a Brahmin; hence no one outside the community can perform his funeral rite (*samskara*); however, he has been a sinner, and performing the rite would defile the Brahmins who do it. In the meantime, no man in the *agrahara* can touch food, and the corpse is rotting in the heat. According to the orthodoxy, a man who is not cremated soon enough can become an evil ghost. What is to be done? Chandri, Naranappa's mistress, offers her jewels to whomever will perform the rite, but Praneshacharya forbids the men to do it and persuades the woman to take her jewels back. Praneshacharya, who has studied the Vedas in Benares and has won the title of Crest Jewel of the Vedanta, takes upon himself to consult the palm leaves books in search of an answer. After a sleepless night spent on the holy texts, he must admit that they have no answer for the present dilemma. He therefore decides to visit Maruti temple and ask the god directly. He places a flower on each shoulder of the holy image and prostrates himself in front of the deity. Should the right flower fall first, the village Brahmins will perform the rites, else other people will be called. He remains there for the whole day, but neither flower falls. Praneshacharya, bewildered and dizzy from the prolonged fasting, heads home, but in the wood next to his village Chandri, Naranappa's lover, meets him and hugs his knees in devotion. Inadvertently the *acharya* lays a hand on the woman's full round

3 *Agrahara* is the name given to any estate or commodity that is donated to a brahmin.

breast, quite different from his ailing wife's. She feeds him some bananas, and eventually the two make love. The Brahmin wakes up after some time with his head on the woman's lap. Later the same night, Chandri persuades a Muslim man who was indebted to Naranappa to bring the body to the riverbank, where the two cremate him.

The following day, while the men, unaware of what has passed, have gone to the monastery to ask about the rites, and the other villagers have left their houses because of the stench, Bhagirathi—Praneshacharya's wife—dies of the same fever that killed Naranappa and others. Praneshacharya performs the funeral rites and starts on a journey leaving behind his house, his earthly possessions, and the certificates of his achievements as a student of the holy scriptures. He does not even take a little ash from Bhagirathi's pyre to scatter into the river as he was supposed to do to ease her passage to the netherworld. On the way, he meets a singular man, Putta, who imposes his company and follows the *acharya* "like a sin from the past." The two arrive in Melige where a car festival is taking place. Putta, who introduces himself as a Malera, namely the son of a Brahmin and a low-caste woman, takes Praneshacharya through the fair. Attaching himself to the bemused Brahmin like a tout, Putta stops by a peepshow, takes him to cockfights and gambling, invites him to coffee houses, and eventually tries to arrange an appointment with a classy prostitute, herself a Malera. Before visiting the prostitute, it is understood that Praneshacharya will eat some food in the local temple—where he should not go because he is still impure from his wife's death and from his encounter with Chandri. He insists on having Putta with him, but the latter refuses as he is not allowed into the temple. While he is having his meal, the waiter recognises the *acharya* and insists on taking him to the chief priest. Praneshacharya runs off and eventually boards a bullock cart heading to his village, leaving Putta behind. The man, however, promises to visit him the following day.

The English edition, in lieu of an epigraph, begins with a dictionary entry that illustrates the polysemy of the Sanskrit term *samskara*. The word carries meaning in diverse semantic fields: funeral rite; forming, perfecting, completing, polishing; forming in mind, conceiving, realising past perceptions, recollecting; preparation, cooking; consecration; purification; rite in general. In his afterword, Ramanujan suggests that all of these meanings should be taken into consideration when reading the novel. Apart from the obvious reference to the funeral rite, Ramanujan exemplifies the centrality of *samskara* in the novel: "Was [Naranappa] Brahmin enough in life to be treated as one in death? Did he have the necessary 'preparation' (*samskara*) to deserve a proper 'ceremony' (*samskara*)? Once a Brahmin, always a Brahmin?" And later: "Naranappa's targets are the strait-laced village Brahmins who attend to the 'rituals' (*samskaras*), but have not earned by any means their 'refinement of spirit' (*samskara*)" (Murthy and Ramanujan 1978, 140). Praneshacharya's own *samskara* (preparation) consists

only of readings and renunciation. He is married, but he has never slept with his wife. Thus his understanding is impaired by two issues: first, he does not really comprehend the traditional texts he reads, as he does not empathise with their sensuality; secondly, he does not really know what he is renouncing. Before his sexual encounter with Chandri, Praneshacharya had not experienced much of what he needed to even understand the holy texts. Interestingly, Chandri does not seduce Praneshacharya with lust, but simply offers herself to him out of devotion with an admixture of maternal fondness (she also feeds him, and he awakes with his head on her lap) and devotion to his superior learning. Eventually she leaves him, lest her presence should induce him to lose his status in the village. He does not feel that he has been weak, but that he has experienced something new, without a self-determined act of his will. He feels that it has just "happened" to him. The physical reality of Naranappa's rotting corpse and of Chandri's luscious body (Rao 2003) oblige the acharya to recognise the shortcomings of his own refinement (*samskara*).

Starting in the first half of the I millennium BCE the *Dharmasutras*, suggest new doctrines that regulate the phases of life. Such ideas find a systematic exposition at the beginning of the common era in the so-called *Dharmashastras*. According to this doctrine, the life of a Hindu man from any of the three upper *varnas* (castes) is divided into four *ashramas*, or stages. The first is *brahmacharya,* or celibate and student's life; the second is *grihastha*, or householder; the third *vanaprastha*, or retirement; the fourth, which very few people reach, is *sannyasin*, or renunciant. Each stage entails different obligations, which are called *ashrama-dharma*. The attainment of the fourth stage grants liberation from terrestrial forms. Although the *ashramas* are not considered necessary to achieve liberation, they are thought to be a valuable aid—like the saddle on a horse, Shankara wrote (Olivelle 1993). Going through these stages can be considered a sort of *samskara* itself, as it is a way of achieving refinement or getting ready for the final passage.

Although the *ashrama* system has undergone several changes over the centuries, and even now it is not understood in the same way by everyone, Nirja Mishra's (1982, 100) insight that the *acharya* is somehow spiritually undeveloped because he has stopped at the *brahmacharya* stage deserves a further comment. Mishra argues that the protagonist has never been a real *grihastha* because he does not "fulfil the *purushartha* of *Kama*, which is essential for the ideal Hindu" (1982, 100). According to Hindu doctrine, a man has four goals (*purushartha*), namely *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, *moksha* (duty, wealth, pleasure, liberation) and should pursue all of them each in its own proper time. However, *moksha* cannot precede the others. Mishra considers the choice of a sick wife like an offering, a kind of shortcut to salvation. Thus, the *acharya* has not learnt to recognise the delusory nature of physical pleasure; on the contrary, he has only repressed his sexuality, which, however, surfaces in his passion for Hindu erotic tales.

According to this reading, the events confronting the Brahmin help him reach a further stage of his spiritual development. The English translation often uses the word "barren" to refer to the community of *Brahmins*; the physical sterility is, in effect, a metaphor for the emptiness of their faith. Even Praneshacharya is not able to read beyond the letter of the holy texts; when he goes to Maruti temple, he does not put himself in the position of listening to the divinity, but expects a tangible sign. The novel does not linger on the character of Chandri, but she may be taken as a moral centre of a kind. Unlike the Brahmins, she is not greedy; although she has just lost her lover, she readily gives up her jewels to have his *samskara* performed. She breaks her fast while Naranappa is still lying dead, but eventually she finds an expedient way to have the corpse cremated. Last but not least, she genuinely loves Praneshacharya, and only leaves him in order not to be a burden to him.

In *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, V.S. Naipaul makes an interesting claim from a sociological perspective. Quoting a letter from a psychoanalyst friend, he suggests that "'the Indian ego is underdeveloped,' 'the world of magic and animistic ways of thinking lies too close to the surface' and the Indian grasp of reality is 'relatively tenuous'" (Naipaul 1977, pos. 1289). Interestingly Naipaul connects this observation with Murthy's *Samskara*, to which he devotes twelve pages. The Trinidadian writer claims that Indians do not "actively explore the world; rather they are defined by it. It is this negative way of perceiving that goes with meditation, the striving after infinite, the bliss of losing the self" (Naipaul 1977, pos. 1305). This is not the place to discuss Naipaul's general insight, but the resemblance between this definition of Naipaul's and the protagonist of *Samskara* is arresting. Praneshacharya, in his striving towards infinity, hinders the development of his psyche. He never makes decisions; he cannot resolve who will perform the funeral; believes that making love to Chandri has happened beyond his will; he leaves his village after his wife's funeral without knowing where he is going; he accepts Putta's guidance, and only decides to go back when he finds that he has been recognised. Naipaul is sharply critical of this lack of energy, which one also sees in his own Mr Biswas, and in many of R.K. Narayan's male characters. It is questionable that such a critique was ever in Anantha Murthy's mind. *Samskara* is primarily a religious novel. Society enters the novel more as a necessity brought about by the literary genre than as a political issue, as the lack of any reference to the world at large testifies.

The *acharya*'s predicament can be understood when compared with another story that influenced its author: Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* (1957), which Anantha Murthy saw when he was pursuing his PhD in Birmingham. The author tells the story of the genesis of *Samskara* in an autobiographical essay:

> It was nearly a little more than twenty-five years ago that I wrote *Samskara*. The process of writing was an intense experience. I was in England as a student, and

> fatigued with speaking the English language most of the time. I needed to recover my mother-tongue, living in the midst of English […].
> It all started when I went to see a Bergman film—*Seventh Seal*—with my teacher, the famous novelist and critic, Malcolm Bradbury. The film had no sub-titles. My incomplete comprehension of it started a vague stirring in me. I remember having told Dr Bradbury that a European has no living memory of the middle ages and hence constructs it through knowledge acquired in books. But for an Indian like me, centuries coexist as a living memory transmitted through oral conditions. This set me off to rewrite a story which I had originally written for a journal. (Murthy 1996, 55)

The novelist then proceeds to tell the story of a plague that hit his village when he was a boy. The doctor inoculated the *brahmins* but not the *dalits*. After a while, they began to die and set fire to their huts just as described in the novel. The *brahmins* told that it was God's punishment for the untouchables who had been persuaded by Gandhi to visit temples. Murthy cringed at this notion, but did not dare to gainsay it openly. Among the *brahmins* there was a young man who had been in the army and seen something of the world. He was considered a kind of hero by the village boys. Apparently, he had an affair with an attractive girl from the low-caste quarters. As the plague came, she refused to accept her destiny and fled away, no one knew where. Murthy elaborated the story in such a way that his elders could not trace it to the actual protagonists, connecting it with the legend of Matsyagandhi, the fisherwoman whose name means "the fragrant one." According to the myth, the heroine was of royal descent but was raised by a fisherman who had found her inside a fish. The interesting part of the story, however, comes later: as she is fishing on the Yamuna river, Parashara, a *rishi* (sage), comes to ask her to cross the river in her boat. Midway, Parashara, fascinated by her beauty, draws a foggy curtain all around the boat and persuades her to make love. At his touch, the woman, who reeked of fish, took on a new fragrance and thus got her new name. From this encounter, Vyasa, the composer of the *Mahabharata*, was conceived. This story, which is often referred to in the novel, gave Murthy the notion of how the touch of a Brahmin could change the life of a simple low-caste woman. Likewise, the liaison between the Brahmin soldier and the *dalit* woman gave her the courage to react and take her life into her hands.

This is only one of the narrative strands that make up the novel. Praneshacharya's doubts recall the doubts of Antonius Block, the knight in Bergman's film, while the character of Putta is admittedly inspired by Jof, the acrobat, in the same movie. The analogies can be stretched further; Bergman based his story on medieval legends, frescoes, and the basic Germanic notion of *Totentanz* (Holland 1959); likewise, Murthy elaborates traditional Hindu themes. However, it is unlikely that Murthy studied Bergman's sources; the analogy must be due to the subject. Like the austere Antonius, Praneshacharya

has more than one antagonist: his old schoolmate Mahabala, Naranappa, and eventually Putta. The Brahmin feels unsure about the conduct he had sworn to in his youth, and wonders if sinners could be closer to the Truth that he cannot see. Bergman dramatises his frustration with the silence of God, who refuses to reveal himself to seekers tangibly. Similarly, Murthy interrogates the origin of Brahminhood, a word that in the novel takes two meanings: that of highborn, and that of purity achieved through austerities and meditation. The story explores what happens when one sheds his natural Brahminhood like Naranappa. Could he really renounce it? Why, then, did he die invoking the holy name, as Chandri alleges? What remains when spirituality is given away? Is it possible to live in a purely material world? Is Putta happy after all? He seems to know his way in the world better than the *acharya*, and his life is made of petty emotions like riddles, jokes, gambling, and yet he does not appear unhappy. Besides, of the two, he is the only one who gives some coppers to the leprous outside the temple. Such doubts are played out in the novel as an encounter of opposites, symbolised by ghosts and demons, but not resolved.

Ghosts are often mentioned in the narrative as revenants; however, according to R.K. Gupta, ghostliness is "a pallid, insubstantial way of life." Ghosts may be frightening, but they have only a "tenuous hold upon the solid world of reality and sensuous experience" (Gupta 1981, 16). The Brahmins of the Agrahara, including the *acharya* himself, are ghosts in that they live aridly and joylessly, caring only for their social standing. The Brahmins are like Gogol's dead souls, caring for nothing but petty things. Praneshacharya is more complex; he believes that he does not care for the same pettishness. Wim Wenders visualises a similar predicament in *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*, 1987), where angels, portrayed in black and white, are given intensely spiritual but ultimately less-fulfilling lives than human beings, filmed in colours. At the other end of the spectrum, Anantha Murty places Naranappa, who delights in physical pleasures. He is similar to an *asura*, a demon. Interestingly Naranappa is not an outlaw; he has never hurt anyone; he only leads his life outside the rules of his caste. Praneshacharya finds in him a "demonic pride" (Murthy and Ramanujan 1978, 21), but fails to realise that it is the mirror of his own.

Indeed Naranappa and before him Mahabala—the old schoolmate evocated towards the end of the novel—have always been Praneshacharya's doppelgangers. He swore that he would never become like them, but be their opposite. Thus they both help the *acharya* define himself, if only in the negative. In renouncing what he deems evil, he also renounces some parts of life's common experience, such as *kama*. When he is obliged to reflect upon his late enemy's life, especially after lying with his former mistress, he finds several examples of broken austerities or material acts in the scriptures, which now challenge him. Honest as he is, he cannot bring himself to pass a sentence on Naranappa, like the other Brahmins hypocritically do. In this context, even his adultery is not

so much a sin, but a *felix culpa* (Gupta 1980), whereby he can move on in his spiritual exploration. Putta represents a further step in exploring a material life because Naranappa's refusal of his roots is ideological, while Putta is spontaneous—even materialism has different degrees.

Ramanujan perceptively observes that in Praneshacharya "Brahminism questions itself in a modern existentialist mode" (1978, 141), which is quite alien to the Brahminical tradition. Indeed there are striking similarities between Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843) and *Samskara*. While the Danish philosopher contrasts the aesthetical and the ethical, connecting the first with pleasure and the latter with duty, *Samskara* hypostatises the same dichotomy as the protagonist and his antagonists. Kierkegaard also criticises the normativity of established religions, which makes people hypocritical and spiritually sterile. However, I disagree with Ramanujan that Murthy has greatly deviated from the Indian tradition in his critique of Brahminism. The novel indeed depicts a decadent community of Brahmins, but this kind of critique of Brahmanical religion has been fairly common in Indian debates since the rise of Buddhism and monasticism. An existentialist analysis would indeed be alien to the Indian tradition, but Murthy does not tackle the issue philosophically; he constructs a story to illustrate his case. The basic aporia—the corpse of a reprobate Brahmin cannot be cremated by either his kinsmen or anyone else and yet cremated it must be—is a typical procedure of Indian philosophy, whereby the aporia forces the mind to take a leap and discover a higher truth. Likewise, the novel often hints at former legends like the stories of Matsyagandhi or Shakunthala to elicit a philosophical reaction. It also recalls a story from the *Rigveda* in which a gambler, grown destitute, earnestly calls to the Gods to ask them why he was cursed with such a vice. The Gods forsook the faithful and their offers to go and answer the sinner's question.[4] From this story the *Acharya* concludes that "The quicker way of salvation was through conflict" (Murthy and Ramanujan 1978, 49). And it is no accident that the novel itself stages a conflict. European readers may well construe Murthy's critique as existentialist—or his ghost/demon dichotomy as a re-enactment of the es/superego conflict, for that matter—but that would be like calling *yoga* callisthenics; the themes and the philosophical procedures of the novel rest entirely within the Indian tradition.

The answers to the theological questions, like the novel's ending, are left open. A religious novel is not supposed to provide answers like a philosophical treaty but only to invite readers to reflect upon such themes, shedding light on the questions, if not the answers. Although some traditional Hindus felt offended by the treatment of the corrupted hypocritical *agrahara*, *Samskara* cannot be counted as a secular novel as Marxist critics suggest (see for instance Aithal

4 In fact the Vedic hymn in the tenth Book of the *Rigveda* is slightly different, as only one God, Savitar, talks to the gambler. It does not mention his leaving other devotees to answer the gambler. This last detail may be an interpolation of the character or the novelist.

1981). The position of believers is not made into an anthropological survey, as Naipaul would write, or into a parody, as would Rushdie. On the contrary, this position is meant to be endorsed by an ideal reader. Likewise, the novel takes for granted the knowledge of Sanskrit concepts and Kannada religious practices without explaining them within the narrative. In short, *Samskara*, even more than *Anandamath*, is a non-secular novel. An endorsement of the religious view is essential to its aesthetic functioning. I believe that this is the reason why it has fared so poorly outside India, where, on the contrary, it is considered a minor classic—thanks to the English translation, since Kannada is not spoken outside Karnataka. It has received the attention of several scholars and even a book of essays entirely dedicated to this one novel (Baral, Rao, and Rath 2009). Had it been more secular, *Samskara* could have become a best seller in the West: it portrays a world partly known thanks to R.K. Narayan; a captivating literary technique; a quandary from which the community must find a way out, the compelling putrefaction of a corpse, and the oncoming plague that adds up to the narrative tension. To a Western audience, the situation might be reminiscent of Sophocles's *Antigone*. Interestingly, *The Seventh Seal* might have met the same fate had it not been set in the Middle Ages. The Swedish producers initially rejected the project, and even when they accepted it, Bergman had to work on a low budget with young actors (Bragg 2020). Bergman's way to secularise his film was to remove it from the present and to an age where religion was inescapable, thus making Antonius's religious doubts a metaphor for any doubt or insecurity. On the contrary, Anantha Murthy set his story in a kind of atemporal present and made no effort to put any distance between the implied author and the story. The novel is, therefore, overtly religious, its secularism lying only in the philosophical attitude to the questions it poses.

Works Cited

Aithal, S Krishnamoorthy. 1981. "Of Culture and Cadaver: Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*." *Journal of South Asian Literature* 16 (2):83-88.

Baral, Kailash C., D. Venkat Rao, and Sura P. Rath, eds. 2009. *Samskara. A Critical Reader*. Delhi: Pencraft International.

Bragg, M. 2020. *The Seventh Seal*: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Chatterjee, Bankimchandra. 1996. *Rajmohan's Wife*. Delhi: Ravi Dayal. Original edition, 1864.

Chaudhuri, Supriya. 2012. "The Bengali Novel." In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, edited by Rashmi Sadana and Vasudha Dalmia, 99-123. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flora, Giuseppe. 1993. *The Evolution of Positivism in Bengal: Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Benoy Kumar Sarkar*. Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale.

Gupta, R. K. 1981. "The "Ghost" and the "Demon": An Approach to U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 16 (1):16-24.

Gupta, RK. 1980. "The Fortunate Fall" in U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*." *International Fiction Review*.

Holland, Norman N. 1959. ""The Seventh Seal": The Film as Iconography." *The Hudson Review* 12 (2):266-270.

Kierkegaard, Søren, and Alastair Hannay. 1992. *Either/or: A Fragment of Life*. London, England; New York, N.Y., USA: Penguin Books.

Misra, Nirja, Vijay L. Sharma, and R. K. Kaul. 1982. "*Samskara*: Three Critics on Anantha Murthy's Novel." *Indian Literature* 25 (5):98-122.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. 1982. "*Anandamath*: A Political Myth." *Economic and Political Weekly* 17 (22):903-905.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. 1996. "Afterword." In *Rajmohan's Wife*, 136-155. Delhi: Ravi Dayal.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. 2000. "*Rajmohan's Wife*. The first Indian Novel in English." In *The Perishable Empire. Essays on Indian Writing in English*, 30-50. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Murthy, U.R. Anantha. 1996. "The Dynamics of Textuality." In *Wordsmiths*, edited by Meenakshi Sharma, 52-59. Delhi: Katha. Original edition, Indian Horizons 1992.

Murthy, U.R. Anantha, and A. K. Ramanujan. 1978. *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*. Second edition. ed. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Naipaul, V. S. 1977. *India: A Wounded Civilisation*. London: Vintage. Reprint, Kindle.

Narayan, R. K. 1987. *Gods, Demons, and Others*. New Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad: Vision Books.

Olivelle, Patrick. 1993. *The Asrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ranjan, Ritwik. 2017. "Mimeticism and Historiography: The Making of a Hindu Past in the Thought of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay." *South Asia* 41 (1):1-17.

Rao, D. Venkat. 2003. "Between the Epistemic and the Accursed: U.R. Ananta Murthy's *Samskara*." *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 25 (2):45-56,117.

Chapter 3.
Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*: A Secular Deployment of Religion

It is now time to turn to more secular texts in order to assess their relationship with secularism. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is arguably the best of several novels inspired by Gandhi.[1] Like the Mahatma, Rao resorts to religion to mobilise Indian pride against British rule; he even utilises Gandhi himself as a cultural icon, regardless of historical reality. Raja Rao presents two parallel mythologies of Gandhi: one for simpler people living in India and one for international cosmopolitan readers. Both mythologies are consistent with the Gandhian message and the *Swaraj* project, to which Rao seems to subscribe. Rao does not need to stretch the historical figure of Gandhi to achieve this double goal since Gandhi's sometimes self-contradicting persona easily grants this dual view.

Indeed, outside theocracies, no political leader in the twentieth century has brought together politics and religion as Gandhi did. However, Gandhi was a keenly intelligent and shrewd politician as well as a man of God. Thus, while the connection between religion and nationalism was not new, the connection between spiritual quest and politics was unprecedented. In Gandhi's programme, as in Bankimchandra's a generation earlier, religion also served the purpose of "decolonising the mind." This felicitous phrase, which we borrow from the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, refers to the political action of countering cultural denigration—namely, "the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989, 9). Walter Mignolo has written about decolonisation as those acts that contribute to debunking the "colonial matrix of power" set up by the colonisers (Mignolo 2011). Coloniality exerts its control on epistemology, political power, economy, and even sexuality; for the colonial mentality denigration of indigenous culture is the simplest way to impose the matrix of power. Colonisers create a tabula rasa of the colonised culture in order to superimpose their own values. Gandhi was not the first, but certainly the most effective opponent of cultural denigration in India; he succeeded in juxtaposing the spiritual, non-violent virtues of India to the military supremacy of the British.

Fighting the English guns with the technique of *Satyagraha* was a way to counter the widely circulated idea that the British were the defenders of Hinduism against the decadence brought about by the Muslim invasions. This bizarre

1 For an assesment of Gandhian fiction see: (Niranjan 1979) and (Raizada 1981).

historical notion, sometimes called "Orientalist Triptych" (Arnold 2000, 3-5), gained currency in the late nineteenth century and, discounting the English role, is still held valid by some Hindu fundamentalists. The idea behind the triptych is that Hindu civilisation reached its highest peak before the advent of the Muslims and had ever since been decaying. However, thanks to the science and good government brought by the British, it could flourish again. This paradigm had two advantages for the colonialists: it divided the opposition of the subjects by putting the Hindus against the Muslims and justified their own salvific presence in India. This notion implied that Indians should recognise that their culture was either destructive, in the case of the Muslims, or decadent, in the case of the Hindus. On the contrary, the English depicted themselves as younger, healthier, and wiser. This implied denigration of Indian culture also worked back in London to justify the colonial enterprise in the eyes of liberal or sceptical Englishmen (and women when they were allowed to vote). Often the colonised were equalled to children, who were allegedly unable to look after themselves and were much better off under the English tutelage than they could ever be if they were independent (William 1970). *Satyagraha* was also a ploy to gain self-confidence as well as confidence in the home-rule.

Raja Rao openly stigmatises the orientalist triptych in *Kanthapura* attributing it to a discredited collaborationist who speaks during a public meeting in defence of British rule:

> "What did we have, pray, before the British came—disorder, corruption and egoism, disorder, corruption and egoism I say"—he continued, though there were many shouts and booings against him—"and the British came and they came to protect us, our bones and our dharma. I say dharma and I mean it. For hath not the Lord said in the Gita, 'Whensoever there is ignorance and corruption I come, for I,' says Krishna, 'am the defender of dharma,' and the British came to protect our dharma. And the great Queen Victoria said it when she put the crown of our sacred country on her head and became our beloved sovereign. And when she died […] how many a camphor was lit before the temple gods, and how many a sacrificial fire was created, and how many a voice did rise up to the heavens in incantation. For not only was she a great queen, a mother-queen, but the most courageous defender of our faith. Tell me, did she not protect it better than any Mohammedan prince had ever done? Now I am an old man. You are all young. Things change. But what I fear for tomorrow is not the disorder in the material world, but the corruption of castes and of the great traditions our ancestors have bequeathed us. When the British rule disappears there will be neither Brahmin nor Pariah, Vaisya nor Sudra—nay, neither Mohammedan nor Christian, and our eternal dharma will be squashed like a louse in a child's hair." (Rao 2000, 92-93)

Eventually, it turns out that the speaker is paid by the government, and his arguments convince no one.

Even Bankimchandra's *Anandamath* hardly ever mentioned the spiritual motivations of the freedom fighters, foregrounding their grievances and the romance instead. Raja Rao's is one of the several novels that deal with the historical figure of the Mahatma, but no other contains such a meticulous description of *satyagraha* (Raizada 1981). Gandhi stood out above other politicians for his ability and sincere commitment in bringing together religious piety, Indian pride, and political dedication. These three elements constitute the tripod on which Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* stands. Curiously enough, however, the poetics of this novel is heavily inspired by an Italian novel, *Fontamara*, which was built on these very same foundations, as Rao has often recounted (Naik 1972, 64).

Secondo Tranquilli, better known by his nome de plume, Ignazio Silone, wrote his *Fontamara* in 1933 in Davos, where the Helvetic authorities had confined him. They had refused his extradition to the Italian fascist government, which had already arrested and tortured his brother to death, but were rather wary of his communist sympathies. Silone had arrived in Switzerland from Russia after a profound personal crisis through which he turned politically socialist and spiritually Roman Catholic. The novel is based on the memories of his teens, which for him had a purity ever since lost: "Memories of his infancy and adolescence were 'my only strength, because in them there was a moral and I would even say religious source with which I could face and confront the adversities of life'" (Pugliese 2009, 112).

Fontamara is a small fictional village in Abruzzo, near the Fucino plain, where a small community of peasants, here called *cafoni*, eke out their meagre living from an arid soil. Few *cafoni* possess a small plot of land, but most of them work as daily labourers for the land aristocracy. The advent of fascists, with their new ruling class, worsens their predicament. They fall victim to every kind of vexation; one of the new masters even hijacks the water of the small river that used to irrigate their fields towards some newly (and cheaply) acquired lands of his. The novel recounts the slow process whereby the peasants grow conscious of their plight and recognise the necessity of withstanding the unjust powers.

Silone's novel could not be published in Italian in 1933 and thus it appeared in German (1933), French (1934), and English (1934); eventually it was translated into 27 languages. Almost paradoxically, in Italy the novel remained virtually unknown. Even after the fall of the fascist regime, it was not appreciated in Italy because it sounded too pessimistic, as it had no victory to celebrate, and other books on similar topics were preferred. Besides, as a socialist, ex-communist, and Roman Catholic, Silone was a sort of outsider even before it was murmured that he had collaborated with the fascist police. Abroad, however, *Fontamara* won several admirers, as diverse as Graham Greene, Bertrand Russel, Lev Trotsky, and Raja Rao. The latter was a young Indian student doing a PhD

on the Indian influence over Irish literature at the Sorbonne, where he came in contact with a cosmopolite antifascist intelligentsia. Between 1936 and 1938, three years after the publication of Silone's novel, Rao wrote *Kanthapura* in a hunting château not far from Paris that had belonged to the dolphin. Many years later, in 1963, Raja Rao, who was by then acclaimed as one of the fathers of the Indian novel, published a kind of autobiographical sketch entitled "Books that Have Influenced Me." Rao expounds an original idea of world literature,[2] maintaining that Dante sounds familiar in India, Giacomo Leopardi is similar to a Kannada poet, William Shakespeare is truly Indian. Besides, the author writes that he was strongly influenced by the *Upanishads*, *My Experiments with Truth*, the *Mahabharata*, Gide, Gorki and, unexpected among so many classics, Silone's *Fontamara*, which "combines folklore and politics, raising them to a new level of poetical experience" (Rao 1979, 49)—a definition that could be applied also to *Kanthapura*.

The spiritual development of one character in *Fontamara*, namely the *cafone* Berardo Viola, is particularly noticeable. He also has a female counterpart in his betrothed Elvira, a character akin to Alessandro Manzoni's Lucia in the famous Italian classic *I promessi sposi* (The Betrothed, 1844). At the beginning of the novel, Berardo is a strong young man, full of enthusiasm and energy, but tragically unfortunate. He loses the plot of land inherited by his father, and various misfortunes prevent him from acquiring another. In some ways he resembles a hero from a Greek tragedy: he makes endless plans, but something always prevents him from ever realising them. Towards the end of the novel, some men from Fontamara set out to prepare a riot, but Berardo, who had been rather pugnacious in the past, has now grown gloomier and more individualist. He decides not to take any part in it and go to Rome instead. There he hopes to find a job and put away some money to get married to Elvira. However, once in Rome, he cannot find any employment. Every morning he is out early in search of a job, and every evening comes home more and more dejected, in a progression that distinctly recalls Jesus's Passion. One night a member of the clandestine Communist party invites Berardo to dinner. During the meal, the fascist police break into the inn and arrest the two. In prison, Berardo undergoes his final transformation. He understands that he has at least one last possibility to sacrifice himself for his countrymen. He pledges guilty of publishing

2 Supriya Chaudhuri (2021) argues that there are two basic notions of world literature, one more Western deriving from Karl Marx's definition and connected to the circulation of commodities, including books; David Damrosch and Franco Moretti, among others, seem to uphold this vision. In India a different notion was expounded by Rabindranath Tagore in his essay "Vishwa Sahitya" (1907), where world literature is in fact universal literature that may speak to every human regardless of their nations and languages. Rao expresses this idea in these words: "whatever the rivers that flow, the waters are of the Gangotri," (1979, 49) gesturing towards a kind of World Spirituality besides world literature.

clandestine journals, thus exculpating the nameless communist man who had been arrested with him. The latter will go to Fontamara to help the men organise their Resistance. Berardo has eventually recovered his former fortitude and generosity. Predictably, the fascists beat him to death. Critics have read this as a sort of *imitatio Christi*—a self-sacrifice at once spiritual and political (Bonaventura 2009).

However, this is not the end of the novel. While Berardo is in Rome, his fiancée Elvira back in Fontamara ignores what he is going through. She decides to undergo a pilgrimage to the Madonna della Libera. People from Fontamara wonder at her, as they used to go to that shrine only to atone for particular sins, and yet Elvira appears spotless to them all, as indeed she is. When the young woman reaches the shrine, she asks the Madonna to "intercede for Berardo's salvation." To support her supplication, she offers "the only poor thing [she] possesses, that is [her] life." And the Virgin acknowledges the request. Elvira only asks for herself that she may die at home, and the Virgin grants her this grace, too.

There is no doubt that Elvira meant spiritual salvation and not physical safety, as two peasants later comment:

> "Was Berardo saved? a woman murmured."
> "'Perhaps he was,' old Maria Rosa replied. 'No one can tell.'"
> "Dying in prison is a strange way of being saved," the other woman replied quietly. (Silone 1948, 160)

The example of Berardo triggers a reaction that culminates in a riot of the peasants from Fontamara, who are evicted from their village, but manage to start a clandestine newspaper called *What Is to Be Done?* When the fascists hear of it, they raid and destroy the village; some die, some fly away. Among the latter, the trio that meets the author abroad and tells him the story.

Fontamara, like *Kanthapura*, has an internal narrator, namely two *cafoni* who escaped after the destruction of the village. The story has been taken down by the fictional author who has Italianised it because, as he explains, for the peasants, Italian is a foreign language that they can hardly speak.

> Do not imagine for one moment that the inhabitants of Fontamara talk Italian. To us Italian is a language taught at school, like Latin, French or Esperanto. To us it is a foreign language, a language the vocabulary and grammar of which developed without any connection with us or our way of behaving or expressing ourselves. […] The Italian language cripples and deforms our thoughts, and cannot help giving them the flavour of a translation. […]
> But since I have no other way of communicating what I have to say (and expressing myself is now an absolute necessity to me), I shall make the best job I can of translating, into the language that we learnt at school, what I want everyone to know, the truth of what happened at Fontamara.

> Even though we tell the story in a borrowed tongue, the way of telling it will, I think, be our own. That at least is one of the arts of Fontamara. We learnt it when we were children, sitting on the doorstep, or 'round the fireplace in the long nights of winter, or by the hand loom, listening to the old stories to the rhythm of the pedal. (Silone 1948, 19)[3]

Anyone who has read *Kanthapura* will remember that the "Foreword" to the novel points to similar preoccupations, especially with language:

> One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word "alien," yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. (Rao 2000, v)

Stefano Mercanti (2007) has studied the linguistic choices in the two novels, pointing out how, though different in their experimental intensity, both writers proceed from the same preoccupation. Indeed a comparison between the texts will not reveal a poetic influence, let alone imitation, but a mutual aesthetic preoccupation. C.D. Narasimhaiah (1970, 49) even surmises that the thorough revision of *Fontamara* in the Fifties owes something to the reading of *Kanthapura*. This is impossible because *Kanthapura* had not been translated into any of the languages spoken or read by Silone, whose English was very poor. However, this hypothesis of the eminent Indian scholar proves that a further reflection upon *Fontamara*'s poetic premises would lead even Silone to conclusions closer to Rao's. Arguably, as Silone's preoccupations with language and narrators became Rao's, so did his preoccupation with religion and secularism. Obviously, each novelist would then address the issues with his own beliefs and narrative material.

The author of the foreword is aware that his book will not appear in Italian for a while and is therefore addressing an international readership. Thus he explains that although the setting of the novel is so restricted to the small village of Fontamara and its surroundings, the international reader will not be at a disadvantage in reading about the *cafoni*, since they exist everywhere. Silone foreshadows an approach to world literature based on humanism, akin to the views of Rao. Though the dispossessed are similar the world over, their individuality is likewise unique and justly so:

> Well, then, in many ways, Fontamara is just like every other rather remote southern Italian village between the plain and the mountains, away from the traffic

3 It is not clear whether Rao read the English or the French version of the novel, both published in 1934, though the latter sounds more probable as he was living in Paris. The French version was translated by Jean Paul Samson, a poet and friend of Silone's.

> arteries and therefore a little poorer and more abandoned and backward than the rest. But Fontamara also has characteristics of its own. Poor peasants, who make the soil productive and suffer from hunger—fellaheen, coolies, peons, mujikis, cafoni—are alike all over the world: they form a nation, a race, a church of their own, but two poor men identical in every respect have never yet be seen. (Silone 1948, 11-12)

In sum, besides the obvious antifascist stance, the novel carries a humanist and spiritual commitment that is epitomised by the different but complementary self-sacrifices of Berardo and his feminine counterpart Elvira. These acts of selfless heroism would certainly have appealed to Gandhi, who considered renunciation one of the highest forms of religion.[4] This religious note, however, is far from patent. Neither C.D. Narasimhaiah (1970), nor M.K. Naik, (1972) nor Carlo Coppola (1981), who elaborates on Naik's insights, have recognised it. Naik points out that *Fontamara*'s ending is too pessimistic, and Coppola even accuses the Italian novelist of being disrespectful towards religion, unlike Rao. Coppola's words are interesting for our discourse:

> Religion and superstition are also features which both Silone and Raja Rao handle differently. Silone […] treats organised religion in singularly disparaging terms. In fact, he depicts the Church as an equally corruptive and dilatory influence on the villagers as fascism. (Coppola 1981, 98)

On the other hand, Coppola continues,

> In *Kanthapura* and in all his works Raja Rao treats religion with a great deal of respect. While he does satirise aspects of religion which are not in keeping with what he considers the true nature and spirit of Hinduism, he does not reject religion as outright and as categorically as Silone does. (Coppola 1981, 99)

This last statement is unfair to Silone and short-sighted with regard to Rao, but not surprising. Silone considered himself a "Christian without Church and a socialist without a party" (Paynter 2000, 22), meaning that he did not trust the Roman Catholic establishment, which often sided with the fascists, nor the political organisations of his time. As an intellectual, he could not share the superstitious religion of the villagers, and accused the established Roman Catholic Church of keeping the peasants ignorant, never addressing their spiritual needs. It should be remembered that in the Thirties, during the mass, the Gospel was only read in Latin, with the priest giving his back to the faithful. The novelist does not vilify religion but deprecates the clergy's lack of moral tension and

4 In his *Autobiography*, talking about the readings he conducted in London, the Mahatma writes: "My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the Gita, the Light of Asia and the Sermon on the Mount. That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly" (Gandhi 1982, 78).

missionary commitment.[5] In describing the religious life of the villagers, Silone assumes an anthropological gaze that describes how the year is marked by liturgical festivities connected with agricultural work. He also describes their commitment to the local patron saint, San Rocco. However, being, as a Christian, critical of superstition and the behaviour of the Church, he decries the attitude of fickle prelates primarily through irony. In a famous passage, for instance, the faithful are told that in Heaven there is no need to eat, as saints will be satiated by the contemplation of God. They comment that it is all the more a reason to try and eat something now, and that their parson must be of the same mind, as he appears very fat. At a narrative level, both the anthropological gaze and irony offer the impression that the author is detached, possibly unsympathetic, certainly secular. However, as we have noticed above, the spiritual evolution of Berardo and Elvira points to a spiritual and religious path that they can undertake despite their predicament. And yet, despite the markedly Christian pattern of the two, Berardo's spiritual awakening develops from his newly found political commitment and Elvira's from popular piety. In fact, they both raise these starting points to a higher level. The novel does not foreground their deeper Christian roots, thus remaining outwardly secular. The spiritual pattern followed by the inhabitants of Kanthapura is quite similar. Both *Kanthapura* and *Fontamara* are "texts of community empowerment, both engaged in resistance to a colonial system which is confronted by both extensive and active violent opposition and a considerable internal struggle for self-determination" (Mercanti 2009, 79).

***

Kanthapura is the name of a small village in Karnataka, inhabited by a hundred people. Achakka, the elderly narrator, inadvertently admits at the beginning of her story that the community used to be divided and superstitious: the village was physically divided into different "quarters" where families dwelled according to their caste. The village lived without any political or spiritual self-consciousness, which is symbolised by the cult of the local deity, Kenchamma. The worship of the deity is recounted anthropologically and does not win the admiration of the implied author, who, on the contrary, is subtly ironical:

> Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she. She killed a demon ages, ages ago, a demon that had come to demand our young sons as food and our young women as wives. […] Then there is the smallpox, and we vow that we shall walk the holy fire on the annual fair, and child after child gets better and bet-

5 Incidentally, the most religious of the Italian novelists, Alessandro Manzoni, did the same in the characters of Don Abbondio and Gertrude.

> ter—and, but for that widow of a Satamma's child, and the drunkard Dhirappa's brother's son, tell me, who ever has been taken away by smallpox? Then there was cholera. We gave a sari and a gold trinket to the goddess, and the goddess never touched those that are to live—as for the old ones, they would have died one way or the other anyway. Of course you will tell me that young Sankamma, Barber Channav's wife, died of it. But then it was not for nothing her child was born ten months and four days after he was dead. Ten months and four days, I tell you! Such whores always die untimely. Ramappa and Subbanna, you see, they got it in town and our goddess could do nothing. She is the Goddess of Kanthapura, not of Talassana. They ought to have stayed in Talassana and gone to Goddess Talassanamma to offer their prayers. (Rao 2000, 2)

The status quo is destined to change when a young Brahmin called Moorthappa, who studies in the city, is inflamed by the new Gandhian ideas and decides to become a *satyagrahi*, a "Gandhi-man." He leaves the college, goes back to his village and persuades the other villagers to undertake the cause of Truth and Freedom. In order to coax them into the fight, he invites a bard to sing about the life of Gandhi. Exactly like Rao himself, this *harikatha* man turns Gandhi and *satyagraha* into a story, the only difference being the literary genre. His story goes that Valmiki (the mythical author of *Ramayana*), seeing what happens on Earth because of the Red Men, decides to approach Brahma and ask for his intervention. The passage is long, but it is worth a substantial quotation:

> O Brahma, […] you have forgotten us so long that men have come from across the seas and the oceans to trample on our wisdom and to spit on virtue itself. They have come to bind us and to whip us, to make our women die milkless and our men die ignorant. O Brahma! deign to send us one of your gods so that he may incarnate on Earth and bring back light and plenty to your enslaved daughter" […] "O Sage," pronounced Brahma, "is it greater for you to ask or for me to say 'Yea'? Siva himself will forthwith go and incarnate on the Earth and free my beloved daughter from her enforced slavery." […]
>
> And lo! when the Sage was still partaking of the pleasures Brahma offered him in hospitality, there was born in a family in Gujarat a son such as the world has never beheld. As soon as he came forth, the four wide walls began to shine like the Kingdom of the Sun, and hardly was he in the cradle than he began to lisp the language of wisdom. […] He began to go out into the villages and assemble people and talk to them, and his voice was so pure, his forehead so brilliant with wisdom, that men followed him, […] and so he goes from village to village to slay the serpent of the foreign rule. Fight, says he, but harm no soul. Love all, says he, Hindu, Mohomedan, Christian or Pariah, for all are equal before God. Don't be attached to riches, says he, for riches create passions, and passions create attachment, and attachment hides the face of Truth. Truth must you tell, he says, for Truth is God, and verily, it is the only God I know. And he says too, spin every day. Spin and weave every day… (Rao 2000, 11-13)

The *harikatha* moves the bystanders to tears. After the event, the performer is arrested, but the seed has been sown in the deepest religiosity of the Kanthapuris. "The new nationalistic fervour has not only blended completely with deep-rooted religious faith, but has also revitalised the spiritual springs within," comments M.K. Naik (1972, 63). Shortly after this first encounter with Gandhian ideas, a new event shakes the religiosity of the villagers. Moorthy spots a *shivalinga* half-buried behind a house, and proposes to build a shrine for it on the same spot. This fact completely changes the spirituality of the village; they had worshipped only the local deity, Kenchamma, in a quasi-superstitious way, while now they turned their *bhakti* towards Shiva. Shiva is of course a Brahminical divinity, and he is worshipped more for his power than to obtain any specific grace. The villagers' spiritual conscience comes to a point when they sing *bhajans* (devotional chants) together and discuss the life and writings of Shankara, the father of non-dualistic theology and one of Gandhi's favourite philosophers (Richards 1986). The reference to Shankara is interesting because it suggests that popular piety is moving from a rather materialistic view of religion to a dualistic one and gestures towards a non-dualistic one. This may sound a little naïve, but it is both the strength of Gandhism and that of popular faith. Indeed simple faith and exaggeration are also the hallmarks of the puranic way of telling stories that Rao imitates. Naik offers several examples of this analogy, suffice here to quote one, where Moorthy's meditation brings him into the realm of *advaita* (non-dualistic) philosophy:

> Moorthy loosens his limbs and, holding his breath, says to himself, "I shall love even my enemies. The Mahatma says he would love even our enemies," and closing his eyes, tighter, he slips back into the foldless sheath of the soul, and sends out rays of love to the east, rays of love to the west, rays of love to the north, rays of love to the south, and love to the earth below and to the sky above, and he feels such exaltation creeping into his limbs and head that his heart begins to beat out a song, and the song of Kabir comes into his mind:
> "The road to the City of Love is hard, brother,
> It's hard,
> Take care, take care, as you walk along it."
> Singing this his exaltation grows and grows, and tears come to his eyes. And when he opens them to look round, a great blue radiance seems to fill the whole earth, and, dazzled, he rises up and falls prostrate before the god, chanting Sankara's "Sivoham, Sivoham. I am Siva. I am Siva. Siva am I." (Rao 2000, 66-67)

Naik argues that this way of recounting an ascetic experience is typical of celebrated mystics of the past like Kabir and Mirabai, which makes Moorthy worthy of the same *bhakti* tradition. Asceticism enables Moorthy to take bolder political actions, so the next practical step is to open the shrine to the Pariah. Moorthy uses his newly acquired fortitude to overcome the prejudices of the

Brahmins and his own. Eventually he even brings himself to drink a cup of milk in the house of a pariah. Only at this point, after this last evidence of spiritual achievement, can the actual fight for independence begin. The villagers start the fight against the local Coffee Estate owner and the unjust laws imposed by the local government.

After a major strike, most men are arrested and the burden of carrying on the fight rests on the women's shoulders. Thus they learn *satyagraha*, and to march together and suffer the *lathi* blows without flinching. Later, the women are arrested and feel as if they had "walked the holy fire at the harvest festival" (Rao 2000, 130), finally able to offer their former sacrifice to a higher cause. The latter, however, is not exactly political, as the notion of swaraj is too abstract for them. On the contrary, they fight for Gandhi because he appeals to them through his holiness (Naik 1972, 66). *Bakhti* has shaped their worldviews, it is a habitus and Gandhi as an avatar of Vishnu fits perfectly in their unsophisticated understanding of good and evil.

As in *Fontamara*, the epilogue written in 1938 could not be victorious: many men die, many are jailed, the inhabitants burn down the village so that nothing is left for the policemen to loot. And yet, like *Fontamara*, the novel does not recount a defeat but a moral victory. After centuries of British rule, the citizens become conscious of the value of their own civilisation, their spirituality, and the national freedom fight. The very act of burning the village symbolically shows that the women, once attached to material goods, are now ready to give them up. The novel has two endings: a happy one regarding the spiritual development of peasants and a bitter one concerning the political and material plight. In the first ending, the narrator concludes that something has changed forever: "Kenchamma forgive us, but there is something that has entered our hearts, an abundance like the Himavathy on Gauri's night, when lights come floating down the Rampur corner […]" (Rao 2000, 188). Despite this optimistic note, the narrator must recognise that many things have changed in unpredictable ways or have not changed at all. Some city men have bought lands around Kanthapura and built houses for coolies. "Waterfall Venkamma, it appears, has gone to stay with her new son-in-law, and concubine Chinna still remains in Kanthapura to lift her leg to her new customers" (Rao 2000, 190). The most unforeseen change in this scenario is the secularisation of Moorty, who shifts his pledge from Gandhi to Nehru:

> You know, sister, Moorthy is no more with us. […] And [Ratna] read the letter. It said: "Since I am out of prison, I met this Satyagrahi and that, and we discussed many a problem, and they all say the Mahatma is a noble person, a saint, but the English will know how to cheat him, and he will let himself be cheated. Have faith in your enemy, he says, have faith in him and convert him. But the world of men is hard to move, and once in motion it is wrong to stop till the goal is reached. And yet, what is the goal? Independence? Swaraj? Is there not Swaraj in our States, and

> is there not misery and corruption and cruelty there? Oh no, Ratna, it is the way of the masters that is wrong. And I have come to realise bit by bit, and bit by bit, when I was in prison, that as long as there will be iron gates and barbed wires round the Skeffington Coffee Estate, and city cars that can roll up the Bebbur mound, and gaslights and coolie cars, there will always be Pariahs and poverty. Ratna, things must change. Jawaharlal will change it. You know Jawaharlal is like a Bharatha to the Mahatma, and he, too, is for non-violence and he, too, is a Satyagrahi, but he says in Swaraj there shall be neither the rich nor the poor. And he calls himself an "equal-distributionist", and I am with him and his men.' (Rao 2000, 188-189)

Despite their admiration for Moorthi, the women of the village do not follow him on this new path and remain "for Gandhi." This long entreaty for Nehru's socialism is totally out of tune with the rest of the story. Firstly, it is not based on any real experience and development recounted in the novel, as Moorthy moves entirely out of the story when he goes to prison; secondly, it does not lead to any further development. The most logical wind-up for the story would have been leaving Moorthy in prison and the villagers waiting for his return. Why, then, did Rao decide to insert this letter? Had he simply wanted to introduce Nehru, he could have used another character. Had he meant to uphold Nehru against Gandhi—which is unlikely—he should have followed Moorthy more closely in his "conversion." We can only speculate on this strange turn of events; it could be an instance of realism, whereby the author wanted to signal that some Gandhi-men were becoming Nehruvian. Surely this is not the path Rao himself would follow; Rao, like Gandhi, and unlike Nehru, considered politics inextricable from religion (Mercanti 2015). Until this last page, Moorthy is the moral centre of the novel; does his shift to Nehru mean that the moral centre should shift too? Or is Rao warning the reader that the moral centre should be sought elsewhere? Perhaps in the peasants? A secular reader may think that leaving Gandhism for Nehruvian socialism is the further step that the author advocates for India. However, there is nothing in Rao's subsequent writings or interviews that may bring us to support this hypothesis; quite the contrary. I think that a postsecular approach may offer a more convincing explanation: arguably, the novelist added this instance of secularism for the benefit of his international audience, complicating the religious interpretations of the novel and covering its religious commitment. Another, not conflicting, interpretation may be that Rao was assessing Gandhism from multiple perspectives. The Moorthy who wrote the letter about Nehru could be a forebear of *Comrade Kirillov*, the eponimous Dostoevskian protagonist of Rao's third novel, also written in the 1930s soon after *Kanthapura*, though published in the Sixties. Kirillov is a communist Indian living abroad who has forsaken his Brahmanical past to join the Communist party, and is sharply critical of Gandhi.[6]

6 "I wrote it immediately after *Kanthapura*", Rao told Asha Kaushik in 1983, "though it was published much later. […] In *Kanthapura* I talked as a Gandhian. In *Comrade Kirillov* I am

In its relationship with the divinity of Gandhi, *Kanthapura* resorts to the same poetics as *Fontamara*. Where *Fontamara* features an *imitatio Christi*, *Kanthapura* offers an *imitatio Gandhi*. The name Moorthy means reflection, possibly to suggest that he is a reflection of Gandhi (Patil and Patil 1997, 52). The first edition of *Kanthapura* carried an epigraph loosely translated from the *Bhagavad Gita*, where Krishna proclaims "whenever there is misery and ignorance, I come." The epigraph does not appear in the subsequent editions—possibly because this same quotation is used by a collaborationist fundamentalist Hindu in the novel—but the general idea that there is something godlike in Gandhi remains. Where *Fontamara* hides this imitation beneath a political commitment, *Kanthapura* complicates it with a Nehruvian conversion. Both authors are religious in their different ways; both describe a political and spiritual struggle; both cover their religious views with secular elements. Both novels describe the popular piety of the villagers with anthropological detachment while their materialistic naivety becomes the target of their light irony. Despite its lack of profundity, in both novels such simple faith becomes the foundation for the further development of some characters—the couples Berardo-Elvira and Moorthy-Ratna, which portray masculine and feminine paths to spiritual uplift. Both novels detach the implied author from the religious views of the characters. This detachment creates a space for the intellectual sophistication of the authors, compared with their rustic characters, and grants the possibility of reading the novels from different religious perspectives without coming to a clash with the implied authors. A strictly secular reading may be conducted with both novels, whereby peasants take up a fight against political injustice relying on their cultural means. The political outcome of the struggle is modest, but the peasants find a new class consciousness and unity vis à vis their real enemy.

The strong political commitment, the irony at the expense of Kenchamma, the anthropological gaze, the conversion of Moorthy to socialism are all elements that allow a secular reading of the novel. And yet, as C.D. Narasimhaiah (1970) and M.K. Naik (1972) have well illustrated, the "message" of the novel is eminently spiritual. Although, it should be pointed out, the author's spirituality is not the same *bhakti* of his characters; Raja Rao's philosophical stance, as Stefano Mercanti (2015) convincingly argues, is eminently philosophical and non-dualistic. This aspect is better developed in Rao's subsequent novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1964), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award, but was never a favourite with international readers. Part of *Kanthapura*'s success is arguably due to its secular overcoat.

When we read the novel according to the lines traced in the previous chapter, we perceive that it may be read either as secular or non-secular. On the mimetic axis, neither the choice of characters/chronotope, nor the subject-matter are

talking of Gandhism from the Marxist point of view" (qtd. in Mercanti 2009, 66).

necessarily connected to religion. At first sight, the novel offers a small Indian village in the South, at a time coeval with the writing, whose inhabitants are ordinary villagers—C.D. Narasimhaiah (1970, 45) considers it a microcosm of India. The subject is primarily the struggle against English rule, which the peasants envisage within their ancestral lore. The man who first inspires this fight eventually leaves Gandhi for the more pragmatic, secular, and socialist Nehru. The thematic axis, to which we associate the structure of ideas and the use of poetic justice, shows some fissures in the secular coating, which offers the ground for most Indian criticism. The most selfless characters are eventually rewarded with a deeper understanding and love for one another. However, it is the structure of ideas that most exposes the novel's Hindu side. As we have seen, the movement from village religion to *bhakti*, to selfless action provides the backbone of the narrative. The villagers find the strength to fight because of their spiritual commitment, and the fight against the oppressor is primarily against the oppressive weight of a stagnant tradition and aimed at reforming it. The ability to relinquish material possession marks an important step in ascesis. In this respect at least, the Kanthapuris prove victorious, and the novel has a happy ending.

As for the synthetic axis, intertextuality does not exhaust its scope, but it is the only relevant postsecular parameter.[7] Intertextuality is certainly one of the most evident features of Rao's experimentation. His novel takes the form of a *sthalapurana*, a legend of the place, and that of a *harikatha*, an oral tale. Both these genres can be considered religious as well as delectating. Besides, as Naik notices, some parts, like Moorthy's ecstatic musings during his fasting, recall *bhakti* literature like Kabir's or Mirabai's poems. Likewise, some descriptions of the land or nature recall typical tropes of *kavya* lyricism (Naik 1972, 69). Intertextuality in *Kanthapura* does not take the form of mimicry. It is a conscious experimental form of imitation of which the reader is almost always made aware. The deployment of different genres eventually detaches the novelist from the literary culture he is describing, just like he had detached himself from the peasants' lore. This detachment creates a sort of ambiguity: is the novelist mocking the *puranas* or *harikathas* style, imitating it as a sample of local culture, or does he believe in the ultimate Truth of their messages? In other words, should this imitation be read solely on the synthetic axis, or also on the mimetic and especially thematic ones? I believe that the answer is yes to all these questions: intertextuality detaches the author from the materiality of local culture to point to a higher level of comprehension, just like the puranic literature does. A degree of detachment is achieved also through irony. As we pointed out in the first chapter, a postsecular reading does not obliterate either

7 Phelan describes the synthetic element as everything that the author of realistic fiction tries to make the reader forget, including the characterization, plots incidents, coincidences, words choice (Phelan 2005, 19-20).

the religious or the secular. Rao does not include different genres in the omnivorous form of the novel, but rather the opposite: he adds the novel's form to the established Indian narrative genres. In other words, he does at the narrative, stylistic level what he theorises at the linguistic level in the "Foreword." The following much quoted passage, could be re-read mentally substituting "English" and "language" with "novel" and "genre":

> I use the word "alien," yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it. (Rao 2000, v)

In this context, writing a novel as an Indian means being neither secular (like Europeans) nor completely Hindu (else one would write a *purana*). I believe that Rao has been successful in this respect, and his subsequent novels, though different in many respects from *Kanthapura*, all develop along similar lines. In a later interview, Rao recognises the distinctive puranic form of his novel:

> I like the puranic conception: That is the only conception of novel for me. I don't want to compare my novel with any foreign novel. I don't like to write like a foreign novelist. I am very much an Indian and the Indian form is the Puranic form. Form comes naturally to me. (Interview with Shiva Niranjan 1979, qtd. in Mercanti 2009, 65)

Like its twin commitment to spirituality, this commitment to the puranic form lies hidden behind the frame of modernist experimentalism. Literary genres may be considered a form of *maya*'s deceitful veil, and yet the success that *Kanthapura* has enjoyed since its publication depends so much on that flimsy tag of political, experimental novel. A postsecular reading envisages two different authorial audiences, the secular, rationalistic, cosmopolitan reader who seeks a realist story, with true details and characters, and a spiritually committed reader, striving towards a less material Truth, and possibly even tepid towards the social issues highlighted in the narrative.

Works Cited

Arnold, David. 2000. *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*, *The New Cambridge History of India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 1989. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge.

Bonaventura, Vincenzo Di. 2009. "Fontamara di Silone: Il Verbo e la Parola." *Revista de Italianística* (18):163-176.

Chaudhuri, Supriya. 2021. "Which World, Whose Literature?" *Thesis Eleven* 162 (1):75-93.

Coppola, Carlo. 1981. "Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* - A Contrastive Analysis. An Italian influence on IndoEnglish literature?" *Journal of South Asian Literature* 16 (1):93-100.

Gandhi, M.K. 1982. *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Translated by Mahadev Desai. London: Penguin.

Mercanti, Stefano. 2007. "The Village and Its Story: Indigenisation of the 'Alien' Language in Raja Rao's Kanthapura and Ignazio Silone's Fontamara." *Quaderni del '900* 7:53-63.

Mercanti, Stefano. 2009. *The Rose and the Lotus*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

Mercanti, Stefano. 2015. "From Indianness to Humanness: Raja Rao and the Politics of Truth." *Lingue e Linguaggi* 13:227-234.

Mignolo, Walter. 2011. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Naik, M. K. 1972. *Raja Rao*. Bombay: Blackie.

Narasimhaiah, C. D. 1970. *Raja Rao*. New Delhi and London: Arnold-Heinemann Publishers.

Niranjan, Shiva. 1979. "The Nature and Extent of Gandhi's Impact on Early Novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao." *Commonwealth Quarterly* 3 (11):36-48.

Patil, V. T., and H. V. Patil. 1997. *Gandhism and Indian English Fiction: The Sword and the Sickle, Kanthapura and Waiting for the Mahatma*. Delhi: Devika.

Paynter, Maria Nicolai. 2000. *Ignazio Silone: Beyond the Tragic Vision*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Phelan, James. 2005. *Living to Tell about it: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Pugliese, Stanislao G. 2009. *Bitter Spring: A Life of Ignazio Silone*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Raizada, Harish. 1981. "Impact of Mahatma Gandhi on Indian English Fiction." In *Alien Voices: Perspectives on Commonwealth Literature* edited by Avadesh K. Srivastava, 137-146. Lucknow: Print House India.

Rao, Raja. 1979. "Books that Have Influenced Me." In *Aspects of Indian Writing in English: Essays in Honour of Professor K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar*, edited by M.K. Naik, 44-49. Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta: MacMillan Company, India. Original edition, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 10/02/1963.

Rao, Raja. 2000. *Kanthapura*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Richards, Glyn. 1986. "Gandhi's Concept of Truth and the Advaita Tradition." *Religious Studies* 22 (1):1-14.

Silone, Ignazio. 1948. *Fontamara*. Translated by Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher. London: Redwords.

William, B. Cohen. 1970. "The Colonised as Child: British and French Colonial Rule." *African Historical Studies* 3 (2):427-431.

Chapter 4.
R. K. Narayan's Two Voices

Unlike Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) is neither a political writer nor a reformer in any conventional sense of the word. Narayan's spirituality is indeed as deep as Rao's, but his genius is certainly less philosophical. It finds its expression in stories rather than abstractions. Born to a Brahmin upper-middle-class family in Mysore, where his father was the local school's headmaster, the future novelist spent the better part of his boyhood in Madras with his maternal grandmother, who initiated him to the pleasures of storytelling, folklore, songs, and Sanskrit classics. Like many children of his generation, he received a sound colonial education at Christian English medium schools, which gave him a penchant for European literature and material for his literary debut. He wrote his first novel in the late 1920s but had to strive hard to find a publisher. Eventually, a friend of his put him in contact with Graham Greene, who read the manuscript of *Swami and Friends* and helped him to get it published in England. It was 1935, three years before Raja Rao had published his *Kanthapura*. Two years older than Narayan, Greene became his mentor and lifelong friend, discussing editorial projects with him and suggesting editorial improvements to his manuscripts. Greene is responsible for several of Narayan's best-known titles and for the idea of shortening Narayan's original name, Narayanaswami, too difficult to memorise for an English audience. To reach English readers, Narayan accepted his identity to be "trimmed" (Thieme 2007, 24-25), but he never compromised it entirely.

Narayan's narrative develops like a sonata in two voices: one secular, rational, realistic, and ultimately Western; the other enchanted, religious, mystical, mythical, and traditionally Indian. As we shall see, at the beginning of his career, Narayan considered himself a realist novelist, and therefore the secular voice prevailed over the non-secular one, which was almost totally silenced or remained in the background like a basso continuo. Over time, the mythical enchanted element in Narayan's fiction gained sonority until it became a counterpoint to the realist narrative. There is a general consensus among critics that this process reaches its highest point in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, which foregrounds the religious voice placing it at par with the secular one, and achieving an effect of mutual reinforcement. However, each voice remains distinct and appeals to different audiences, whichever they choose to follow. This chapter focuses on three novels of Narayan's maturity, which grapple with religion and secularism in different ways: *Mr Sampath—The Printer of Malgudi* (1949), *The Guide* (1958), and *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1961). The first contains a sort of programme in which Narayan exposes his poetics of the novel in connection with Vedantic

philosophy. The second covertly utilises a Hindu *Weltanschauung* to reflect upon the essence of sainthood. The third more overtly resorts to the Hindu myth of Bhasmasura to stage—or enchant—a modern conflict.

Even from the inception of his career, Narayan dealt with an international audience. His novels were published in the U.K. and the U.S. long before they appeared in India, where they did not enjoy much circulation before the publication of *The Guide* (Narasimhaiah 1979, 175). In an interview with Panduranga Rao, Narayan gave some sales figures until 1970, the only ones available second hand:

> Polish: five hundred thousand; Russian two hundred thousand; middling in Italian, French, and Dutch; Hebrew: twenty thousand an edition; U.S. paperbacks: one hundred thousand each. Indian: on an average, two thousand a month; one edition of *Lawley Road* sold thirteen thousand; his own (Indian Thought) edition of *The Guide* sold fifty-five thousand; and the Hindi translation of *The Guide* sold over thirty thousand. But this information came later and elsewhere. (Rao 1971, 79)

These figures reflect the peculiar relationship that India entertained with the Soviet Block in the Sixties and Seventies, suggesting how a number of readers are neither Anglophone nor Indian. Narayan knew his audience and adjusted to it. In an article published three years later, the novelist laments that "foreign publishers expect an Indian writer to say something close to the image of India they have in mind" (cit. in Ahluwalia 1984, 60). Like Raja Rao, Narayan must have faced the problems of an Indian emergent novelist: how to write for an international audience in English without compromising one's Indianness? What language to choose? Even when he decided that he would write in English, whose English? Furthermore, what kind of *Weltanschauung* should he refer to in developing the ethical framework of the novel? Unlike Raja Rao, who addressed these question in the preface to *Kanthapura*, Narayan sidestepped them by writing in a plain variety of Victorian English, such as not even Rudyard Kipling would use in *Kim* (1901), and assuming a detached and apparently secular attitude. Arguably both strategies are in fact devised to be accepted by a global English readership, which would remain oblivious to the underlying "translation effect" and the Hindu world picture.

In his two most mature novels, *The Guide* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, the novelist was consciously moving upon a ground stretched between India and the West, disguising Indian influences beneath a Western mode of telling. Indeed, he was recounting India to Indians in a way only they could understand while pretending to be speaking to an international audience like a kind of entertaining native informant. His friend and well-wisher Grahame Greene upheld this approach in an essay comparing Narayan to Lev Tolstoy, Henry James, Ivan Turgenev, and Anton Chekhov. "R.K. Narayan—Greene wrote—more than any of them wakes in me a spring of gratitude, for he has offered me a second

home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian" (Greene 1981). Even though it is disputable whether Greene knew what it is like to be Indian, this reader's response is relevant in that it voices a widespread attitude towards the Malgudi novels, where India appears accessible and even familiar. In his preface to *Malgudi Days,* Narayan underlines the universality of Malgudi: "If I explain that Malgudi is a small town in South India I shall only be expressing a *half-truth*, for the characteristics of Malgudi seem to me universal. I can detect Malgudi characters even in New York" (Narayan 1972b, 20; our italics). The notion of "half-truth" is consistent with our metaphor of the two voices, one playing an Indian tune, the other a Western one aimed at a world-wide audience, even though they develop within the same story.

***

Scholars who have considered Narayan's commitment to Hinduism—such as William Walsh (1982), Lakshmi Holmström (1973), K. Chellappan (1994), John Thieme (2007), Mohan G. Ramanan (2014), and Chitra Sankaran (2007), to list just some—have highlighted two main ambits in which it is displayed. The first is linked to his brahminhood and the importance of the *varnashrama dharma*, the second to his use of Indian myths. The *varnashrama dharma* depends on one's caste and one's place in society. There is widespread critical consensus that the Hindu notion of *ashrama* underlies most of Narayan's novels, especially in his early production. William Walsh (1982) and John Thieme (2007), for instance, maintain that most of Narayan's early novels deal with the passage from *brahmacharya* to *grihastha*, which are the first two out of the four steps into which the life of a Hindu man is divided. The *brahmacharya* is the student who follows a teacher and has no family duties and obligations. At the end of this period, a boy gets married and becomes a *grihastha* or family man. While Swami in *Swami and Friends* remains a *brahmacharya* to the end of the novel, Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* finds it difficult to actually become a family man, so much so that even after his marriage, his wife does not live with him. The protagonist of *The English Teacher* is reaching this stage when his wife's demise obliges him to reconsider his *dharma*. While it is likely that Narayan would think of his characters' predicaments in terms of *ashramas*, he must have been conscious that such predicaments were not necessarily peculiar to Indians, and that they could be described in different terms. Indeed, reversing the viewpoint, many Western *Bildungsromane* could be described in terms of *ashrama*, from *The Sorrows of Young Werther* to *Great Expectations*, to *The Idiot*. While Narayan thought of the passages between different life stages through an Indian traditional perspective, he must have been aware that his international audience would read them as familiar, secular, coming of age narratives.

The second way Hinduism influences Narayan is through references to narrative kernels originally belonging to myths (Mukherjee 2001). Scholars have pointed out sometimes more, sometimes less convincing analogies between Narayan's plots and Indian myths, the most obvious one occurring in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. Yet no previous knowledge of Indian mythology is ever necessary to read and enjoy the texts. Indeed, when such knowledge may help the reader, the myth is succinctly summed up in the novel. Such is the case in *Mr Sampath—The Printer of Malgudi*, which deals with the incineration of Kama by Shiva, and in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, which rewrites the myth of Bhasmasura.

There is arguably a third way Narayan grapples with Hinduism, which is more similar to Anantha Murty's or Bankim's, namely a more active engagement with tradition and modernity. This engagement is by no means explicit, and many readers (even Hindu ones) may easily overlook it. It must be sought in the musings of some characters or some implicit indictments. In *The Dark Room*, for example, Narayan deplores the role of traditional Indian women in a patriarchal society, while a close reading of *Sampath* or *The Guide* may reveal a Vedantic approach to Hinduism and a certain fastidiousness with ceremonials that mix the sacred and profane. We shall concern ourselves especially with this third line of thought in some of his novels and the way it is concealed from a general audience, allowing wide space for a secular reading.

***

Considering the Malgudi novels as a whole, the first concession to the tastes of a worldwide readership concerns the way Narayan depicts and foregrounds his characters. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh discusses his former review of Abdul Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984) vis à vis John Updike's earlier review. Updike criticises the novel, arguing that

> it is unfortunate given the epic potential of his topic that Mr. Munif […] appears to be […] insufficiently Westernised to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel. […] There is almost none of that sense of individual moral adventure—of evolving individual in varied and roughly equal battle with a world of circumstance—which, since *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe*, has distinguished the novel from the fable and the chronicle. *Cities of Salt* is concerned instead with the men in the aggregate. (qtd. in Ghosh 2016, 75).

As a novelist, Ghosh strongly disagrees with this notion. He considers the word "moral" inadequate to describe the scope of the novel as a genre, and likewise untenable the notion that a novel should deal with an individual; this definition does not apply to writers like Lev Tolstoy, Charles Dickens, John Steinbeck, or Chinua Achebe, Ghosh argues. However, he concedes that Updike

captures an interesting trend of modern Western novels, which "have become more radically centred on the individual psyche while the collective—'men in the aggregate'—has receded" (Ghosh 2016, 78). Such a trend may be connected to the individualistic forces at work in the Protestant West. It is no coincidence that all the counterexamples cited by Ghosh may be considered anti-capitalist. We might as well add Bankim, Anantha Murthy, and Raja Rao to Ghosh's list; would R.K. Narayan fit here too? When one considers Narayan's books singularly, the answer would be in the negative, as each novel deals with one protagonist only, often identified through his profession. This last detail, which probably owes much to Greene's editing, only partially fits in the English tradition of *Robinson Crusoe, Emma*, *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, *Adam Bede*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Lord Jim*, *Stephen Hero,* down to *Harry Potter*. It is true that, behind each profession mentioned in Narayan's titles, there is a protagonist with an individual name, but apparently these individual qualities are less important than he hero's relationship with the rest of Malgudi. In fact, Narayan's Malgudi macrotext does not concern itself with a single individual, but rather with the community at large, in which every individual is a node in a network. As Binayak Roy perceptively writes, Narayan's "protagonists aim at submerging the individual will in the universal will" (Roy 2012, 95). Singularly taken, his novels are more similar to the poems in *The Spoon River Anthology* than to any major Western fictional biography.

Thus, while each of Narayan's novels reads like an English novel focusing on an "individual moral adventure," his macrotext betrays a different interest for the "men in the aggregate." Although this has nothing to do with religion, it testifies to Narayan's desire to reach Western and Indian audiences on their own terms. The same may be said of Narayan's seemingly unproblematic use of the English language. Consider, for example, the following dialogue, taken from "Missing Mail" in *Malgudi Days*.

> The postman asked, "I hope it's good news?" He leaned against the veranda pillar, with a stack of undelivered letters still under his arm. Ramanujam said, "My father-in-law thinks I am not sufficiently active in finding a husband for my daughter. He has tried one or two places and failed. He thinks I am very indifferent…" "Elderly people have their own anxiety," the postman replied. "The trouble is," said Ramanujam, "that he has set apart five thousand rupees for this girl's marriage and is worrying me to find a husband for her immediately. But money is not everything…" "No, no," echoed the postman; "unless the destined hour is at hand, nothing can help…"

While Ramanujam, as the name and the dialogue suggest, is a man from an upper caste, the postman is certainly from a lower caste and barely literate, as he must be able to read the addresses. And yet, there is no difference between the language they use. Any English writer from Henry Fielding onwards would

have used some kind of dialect to mark the difference between the postman's and Ramanujam's speech. Narayan does not. The text looks exactly like a translation of the Fifties, where every shift of dialect or register is normalised to read like standard English.[1] C.D. Narasimhaiah (1979, 196) aptly compares Narayan's prose to the polished quality of Tagore's English translations. Narayan's choice, which is the opposite of Raja Rao's, somehow reminds the more sophisticated, Indian, reader that the dialogue does not occur in English, and that something has been lost in translation, while it remains unproblematic for the average English reader (Vescovi 2023). The linguistic choice contributes to the apparent accessibility of Narayan's world. This is the characteristic already described in chapter one as "born translated." Indeed, Rebecca Walkowitz (2015) considers "born translated" those texts that appear to be written for a foreign audience like a translation; Narayan had seemingly thought his stories in Tamil and then translated them into the English "originals." As G.J.V. Prasad felicitously writes, "Narayan is an accomplished writer, a great translator, one who needed all his translatorial skills in his original writing." (2016, 124). Narayan, Prasad argues, aims at pan-Indian intelligibility even when he uses non-English words. In this case, he often chooses the Sanskrit term over the Tamil one when a choice is given:

> Narayan has a straightforward strategy—try to use English as far as possible. When that doesn't work out, go for pan-Indian intelligibility by using Hindi words that have currency even in Tamil country. And only when that fails the test of people like him understanding without difficulty does he decide to move to Tamil. (Prasad 2016, 38)

This linguistic strategy is coherent with Narayan's construction of a universally accessible text built on a hidden South-Indian structure. Readers who know this structure well-enough may care to follow it, those who are unfamiliar with it, or do not care to follow it, may as well be content with the English rendition. To resort again to a musical metaphor, it is as if Narayan had a quartet play an Indian *raga* with variations. Indian connoisseurs would easily detect it, but a Western audience would consider it just like any other concerto, with some interesting alterations.

***

Young R.K. Narayan did not plan to create Malgudi when he attended to his earlier novels, nor did he plan to incorporate classical Indian narrative material in them. He never thought of developing the fictional city of Malgudi until

1 On this issue Lawrence Venuti has written extensively in his *The Translator's Invisibility* (2008).

later in his career. His debut, *Swami and Friends*, was written as an imitation of Western comic novels, and it was not conceived as a first step in the construction of Malgudi; it did not even have a plan from the start. In *My Days* (1974), Narayan explains that his first novel is "episodic." "Each day as [he] sat down to write," the author recalls, he "had no notion of what would be coming" (Narayan 1974, 88). The novelist also hints that this attitude changed over time, as he became "established" and gained an "awareness of [his] publishers, methods, transactions, the trappings of publicity and reviews, and above all a public" (Narayan 1974, 88). John Thieme (2007), who is ever sensitive to the poetics of space, discusses the geography of Malgudi as it develops through the subsequent novels, but he can only find a coherent development starting with Narayan's fourth Malgudi novel, *The English Teacher* (1945), which concludes a loose trilogy comprehending *Swami and Friends* and *Bachelor of Arts* (1937), and closes the novelist's early phase. Indeed, Narayan's middle period novels—his best achievements according to Thieme—are characterised by a coherent arrangement of Malgudi's socio-cultural spaces. Malgudi's urban plan became so complex that Narayan included a map of the fictional town in his 1972 edition of *Malgudi Days*. The city has grown disorderly ever since, every time the writer needed a new landmark, but the overall arrangement of spaces has remained constant (Kumar 2011).

Together with the awareness of Malgudi social spaces, Narayan developed his poetics to include more traditional Hindu elements, both philosophical and literary. His first two novels contain references to Hindu customs but do not require much knowledge of them to be enjoyed, and they do not distinguish between customs, religion, and spirituality. The satire of Swami's bigot Christian teacher who blasphemes Hindu deities or the complicated astrological calculations that prevent Chandran from marrying Susila are cases in point. These religious elements are primarily plot incidents that assume comical overtones. Definitely they do not offer philosophical insights nor expound any particular viewpoint, nor metaphysical or ethical dilemmas. In *The Bachelor of Arts* there comes a moment when the protagonist decides to leave his family and become a *sannyasin*. The whole sequence looks like an early draft of *The Guide*, where the author exploits the comical possibilities of the incident, but fails to convey the drama of values. At the end of the day, Chandran's decision is described as an adolescent crisis rather than a true religious vocation.

John Thieme (2007) describes the trilogy comprehending *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher* as a dramatisation of the coming of age in a new India. The passage from *brahmacharya* to *grihastha*—that is from apprentice to family man—becomes problematic at a time when secular and modern forces vie with tradition to define the status of a family man. The characteristic open ending of Narayan's novels leaves the protagonists' struggle to grow up largely unfulfilled. Only *The English Teacher* ends on a more positive note as

the widowed protagonist leaves behind his grief and his juvenile ambitions to finally take his life into his own hands and look after his motherless daughter. Although the plots of these novels may be related to the *ashrama* system, that pattern of reference is not incompatible with a secular reading. The case of *The English Teacher* is interesting also in that it is patently autobiographical. The novel appeared a few years after the demise of Narayan's wife and recounts the author's experience in coping with the loss thanks to the help of a medium. The protagonist, originally an English teacher, goes through the same ordeal. He is not particularly pious, and indeed following his wife's death he does not seek solace in religion but in séances, which are not part of the Hindu orthodox tradition. Despite the autobiographical inspiration, the implied author may still appear secular, or agnostic, in that he only asks for a suspension of disbelief when it comes to communicating with the dead. Such a technique is not incompatible with a secular reading as it does not call for an acceptance of the protagonist's or narrator's views, unlike overtly religious novels. Interestingly, in *My Days: A Memoir*, the author assumes the same secular attitude, disavowing his protagonist's enthusiasm for séances:

> All the factual side seemed to me immaterial. Even if Mr Rao [the medium] had had his own sources of inquiry and was dashing off information at the sitting, even if Rao caught telepathically whatever went on in my or anyone else's mind, it did not matter to me. Even if the whole thing was a grand fraud, it would not matter. (Narayan 1974, 140-141)

Thus, both the *English Teacher* and *My Days* offer themselves to an effortless secular empathy with the author, despite their supernatural content.

***

In *My Days* Narayan overtly declares that, although he had come in touch with Indian myths and epics ever since he was a child thanks to his grandmother, they did not interest him much when he started his career as a novelist. He corroborates this assertion with the story of an uncle of his who, from his deathbed, invited him to read Kamban's version of *Ramayana.* Narayan summarises the old man's last piece of advice thus: "You will profit by it. Your writing will gain seriousness and weight" (Narayan 1974, 98). Young Narayan, however, did not care for this advice. He and Kamban were "poles apart." He was "a realistic fiction writer in English, and Tamil language or literature was not [his] concern" (Narayan 1974, 99). Three decades later, the anecdote continues, Narayan became interested in Kamban and spent three years reading the Tamil version of the epic. The experience proved so delightful that he felt "compelled" to write a prose narrative recounting the *Ramayana* in English (1972).

In fact, this was not Narayan's first foray into the realm of Indian mythology: in 1964 he had published a volume of Hindu myths to which he gave the title *Gods, Demons and Others*.

Interestingly, the book on Indian mythology came out soon after *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1961), which is Narayan's most overtly Hindu novel. Arguably Narayan's epic retellings are not a point of departure but a point of arrival. He never left the "realistic fiction in English," but his writings "gained seriousness and weight" over time as he brought Hindu plots, values, and concerns into his prose—a hallmark of his middle-period works. These works may still read as humorous realistic fictions, but they also reward a reader interested in Indian spirituality.

Mr Sampath—The Printer of Malgudi: A Poetical Programme

The first reflection on Narayan's new poetics found its way in *Mr Sampath—The Printer of Malgudi* (1949), which contains a few passages that can be considered programmatic. The novel tells the story of the relationship between Srinivas, journalist and editor of a weekly called *The Banner*, and Mr Sampath, his printer who, in the second part of the novel, closes down his activity and embarks upon an enterprise with cinema, deserting his family for the film's prima donna. It may not be irrelevant to point out some similarities between Srinivas and Narayan himself. The latter had also been editor of a short-lived literary magazine called *The Indian Thought*, which was printed by one real Mr Sampath. Affirming that Srinivas is Narayan's alter ego would be wrong, but he certainly is the novel's moral centre and bears distinct similarities with his creator. Unlike most titles, which focus on the protagonists, *Mr Sampath* curiously foregrounds a comparatively minor character, possibly to downplay the novel's autobiographical elements. Narayan had indeed utilised autobiographical material in previous novels, such as *Swami and Friends*, and most notably *The English Teacher*, but none of these protagonists was as religious as Srinivas. Srinivas's mission as a writer of journalistic prose is not far from Narayan's. Before Srinivas goes to Malgudi and starts his journal, a dialogue occurs between him and his elder brother in which the latter asks Srinivas what he plans to do with his life. The young man has been reading the *Upanishads* in his room, and his reply is laconic: "Don't you see? There are ten principal Upanishads. I should like to complete the series. This is the third" (Narayan 1949, 12). Despite the defiant answer, his brother's question stirs something in Srinivas, who decides to start a journal as his most congenial occupation. His journalistic programme consists in translating the wisdom of the *Upanishads* into articles that anyone can read.

> He had tried to summarise, in terms of modern living, some of the messages he had imbibed from the *Upanishads* on the conduct of life, a restatement of subjective value in relation to a social outlook. This statement was very necessary for his questioning mind; for while he thundered against municipal or social shortcomings a voice went on asking: Life and the world and all this is passing—why bother about anything? The perfect and the imperfect are all the same. Why really bother?" He had to find an answer to the question. And that he did in this series. He felt that this was a rather heavy theme for a weekly reading public, and he was doing his best to word it in an easy manner, in terms of actual experience. It was no easy task. (Narayan 1949, 30-31)

Srinivas's story is a metaphor for the constructive encounter between traditional and modern India. The brahmin, engrossed in his spiritual research, finds a congenial employment that reconciles his pursuits with his responsibilities towards himself and his family. He finds a compromise whereby he can use his genius to convey his speculations, possibly helping people with them. The protagonist strives to balance the spiritual and the mundane throughout the novel. His paper teems with news about the city and often harpoons local administrators. The journal has a regular feature called "An Open Window," which

> stood for the abolition of slums and congestion. It described the tenements, the pigsties constructed for human dwellings in the four corners of the town by rapacious landlords. It became an enemy of landlords. In fact, it constituted itself an enemy of a great many institutions and conditions. Within twelve pages of foolscap it attempted to set the world right. (Narayan 1949, 6)

This political commitment, however, is counterbalanced by Srinivas's perception of the ultimate futility of reality. A case in point is Srinivas's attitude towards the impending war:

> In 1938, when the papers were full of anticipation of a world war, he wrote: "*The Banner* has nothing special to note about any war, past or future. It is only concerned with the war that is always going on—between man's inside and outside. Till the forces are equalized the struggle will always go on." (Narayan 1949, 6)

This is yet another example of Narayan's careful dealing with secularism. In the first part of the novel, Srinivas's religious commitment appears poised between seriousness and comicality. The grossness of overlooking the crisis that led to the Second World War is comical, and such comicality also extends to Srinivas's comment on the struggle between inside and outside. And yet, the war between inside and outside is a way to describe one of the novel's central concerns: the contrast between spiritual aspirations and the many commitments of material life. Srinivas perceives the ultimate futility of practical life—which he considers "embarrassing as a physiological detail" (Narayan 1949, 11)—and

tries to dignify it by looking for a moral lesson in the stories he covers. A few pages later, his interest in the *Advaita Vedanta* surfaces again as he wonders: "Life and the world and all this is passing—why bother about anything? The perfect and the imperfect are all the same. Why really bother?" (Narayan 1949, 30). The context in which this last sentence appears is not humorous. If poetic retribution is any guide, the implied author views these questions with sympathy and respects the editorial policy of *The Banner*. Indeed, the journal has a good circulation and is usually favourably received in and around Malgudi—even though Srinivas's novel-addicted wife finds it boring. The author's bias appears when one compares the moderate but steady success of *The Banner* with the disastrous outcome of the film *The Burning of Kama*. Narayan grants a deserved success to the former but dooms the latter.

To realise his programme, Srinivas must learn to deal with the practicalities of his job: finding a printer, meeting deadlines, raising subscriptions, finding financial support, etc. In these tasks he is helped by two eminently practical men: his brother and Mr Sampath, his printer, who becomes a foster brother to Srinivas until he can do without him (Rothfork 2018, 28). The practical, even materialistic attitude of Sampath will involve him in an unpleasant adventure with cinema when he, for some time, leaves his job as an editor and becomes a screenwriter. Sampath is involved *malgré lui* in Sampath's film. The story goes that when Kama, the god of love, hit Shiva with his shafts interrupting his meditation, the ascetic opened his third eye and incinerated Kama. The film's subject is interesting in that it is the kind of secularisation of a Hindu story that Narayan would never approve of. The story is told with songs, Latin American music (sic), and improved with everything the public may appreciate: a romance with a sexy actress in the role of Parvati and some comic intermezzos, thus transforming a myth into a feuilleton. The improvised nature of the enterprise and Sampath's passion for the leading actress prove fatal to the project; Srinivas leaves the production not without a sense of relief. The novel comes full circle when Srinivas finds a new, more professional printer, who does not offer to solve the editor's practical problems but enables him to resume his weekly paper.

The first editorial published by *The Banner* as it resumes publications talks about the editor's experience with the world of cinema, where literature is degraded to mere escapism. The article, entitled "Nonsense—An Adult Occupation," is resumed thus:

> He analysed and wrote down much of his studio experience in it. Adulthood was just a mask that people wore, the mask made up of a thick jowl and double chin and diamond earrings, or a green sporting shirt, but within it a man kept up the nonsense of his infancy, worse now for being without the innocence and the pure joy. Only the values of commerce gave this state a gloss of importance and urgency. (Narayan 1949, 200)

This piece, which encapsulates the gist of the whole novel, shows that Srinivas has completed his passage from *brahmacharya* to *grihastha* and as such is ready to bring India's classical philosophy to modern Indians. After some days, his former associate Somu, the film producer, visits Srinivas to confront him about his editorial policy, which, he laments, damages the film industry. Talking to the businessman, the editor persuades him to read the article in question, where no reference to the Malgudi studio is ever made. Interestingly he adds that the paper is written exactly for people like him, and that they should find the time to read it as they find the time to eat and sleep. Only by reading the whole paper will he understand his point of view. We know that the paper contains many practical articles concerning local events and politics. According to the editor's view sketched here, they are of no importance in themselves, but acquire significance when accompanied by his philosophical commentaries. In other words, *The Banner* can be read at two different levels—one practical and one philosophical. The former is mostly entertaining, the latter speculative. The two parts support each other, although readers may choose to read it only for the news.

Srinivas offers another glimpse into his understanding of Hinduism as he describes Malgudi and its human comedy as if through enchanted eyes. The epiphanic passage calls for a full quotation despite its length.

> Srinivas shut his eyes and let himself drown in the luxury of inactivity. Mixed sounds reached him—his wife in the kitchen, his son's voice far off, arguing with a friend, the clamour of assertions and appeals at the water-tap, a pedlar woman crying "Brinjals and greens" in the street—all these sounds mingled and wove into each other. Following each one to its root and source, one could trace it to a human aspiration and outlook. "The vegetable-seller is crying because in her background is her home and children whose welfare is moulded by the amount of brinjals she is able to scatter into society, and there now somebody is calling her and haggling with her. Some old man very fond of them, some schoolboy making a wry face over the brinjal, diversity of tastes, the housewife striking the greatest measure of agreement, and managing thus—seeing in the crier a welcome solution to her problems of house-keeping, and now trying to give away as little of her money as possible in exchange—therein lies her greatest satisfaction. What great human forces meet and come to grips with each other between every sunrise and sunset!" Srinivas was filled with great wonder at the multitudinousness and vastness of the whole picture of life that this presented; tracing each noise to its source and to its conclusion back and forth, *one got a picture, which was too huge even to contemplate*. The *vastness and infiniteness* of it stirred Srinivas deeply. "That's clearly too big, even for contemplation," he remarked to himself, "because it is *in that total picture we perceive God*. Nothing else in creation can ever assume such proportions and diversity. *This indeed ought to be religion*. Alas, how *I wish I could convey a particle of this experience to my readers*. There are certain thoughts which are strangled by expression. If only people could realise what immense schemes they are components of!" (Narayan 1949, 49-50 our italics)

This description of Malgudi's chaotic disorder re-enchants the world of Malgudi. Besides, this is the closest Narayan has ever come to a poetical programme. His protagonist's worldview is close to his own, with the only difference that one is a journalist and the other mainly a novelist. Srinivas's spirituality develops when he gives up his solitary reading of the *Upanishads* and becomes an observer of life. His speculation consists of a close reading of humanity with the benefit of the *Upanishads* as a reference point. The knotty part of his task is sharing his insights with other fellow beings. Narayan's *svadharma* is not different: he enjoys the same background and observes the same reality, only his insights are expressed through stories instead of editorials. In his preface to *Malgudi Days*, Narayan hints at a similar situation as he writes:

> The material available to a story writer in India is limitless. Within a broad climate of inherited culture there are endless variations: every individual differs from every other individual, not only economically, but in outlook, habits and day-to-day philosophy. It is stimulating to live in a society that is not standardised or mechanised, and is free from monotony. Under such conditions the writer has only to look out of the window to pick up a character (and thereby a story). (Narayan 1972b, 24)

This position of writer at the window allows Narayan to develop his narrative along three different axes. The first is the anthropological axis of the "endless variations" within the "broad climate of inherited culture." This is what world literature readers often look for—David Damrosch metaphorically talks of world literature as a "window on the world" (2003, 15). This first axis develops throughout the macrotext. The second axis is the often comical story concerning a single character and his/her vicissitudes. The third axis is the spiritual observation of a character's life within his/her milieu—the contemplation of forces at work, their ineffability and their ultimate futility. The first two axes cater to a secular audience, while the third presupposes a more speculative, non-secular attitude. It would be a fallacy to argue that the third axis is a necessary complement of the first two; it is an adjunct, which is hardly detectable in Narayan's earlier novels. At the beginning of his career, the novelist envisaged a secular readership, and only over time he added a religious one, which, however, never supplanted the former, remaining so to speak covered by the former. The speculative axis starts tentatively with *The English Teacher*, receives programmatic attention with *Sampath*, and becomes an established feature in *The Guide* and *The Man-eater of Malgudi*.

***

Interestingly none of the comments available on the Goodreads website while I am writing (January 2023) mentions either Hinduism or religion in connection with *Sampath*, although some of them vaguely refer to the author's depth and wisdom. Most reviews are by Indian readers (or at least readers with Indian names) who praise Narayan's fine irony and empathic qualities. Apparently, most readers overlook the third axis, or consider it advisable not to mention it in a public review.

This oversight is hardly surprising when we consider the testimony of a perceptive, if often controversial, interpreter of India: V.S. Naipaul. In *India a Wounded Civilisation* (1977), the Trinidadian writer recounts that he read *Sampath* twice, the first time as a comedy and the second as a Hindu fable. Although Naipaul is highly critical of Narayan's Indianness, his insights are precious to understand the Tamilian writer. "I felt that his comedy and irony were not quite what they had appeared to be, were part of a Hindu response to the world," Naipaul notes (1977, 12). Focussing on *Sampath*, he criticises Srinivas as an idler lacking energy. I disagree with Naipaul especially as he comments the passage on cinema concluding that Srinivas, and Narayan through him, "sees 'adulthood' as a state of nonsense, without innocence or pure joy, the nonsense given importance only by 'the values of commerce'" (Naipaul 1977, 13). As I have tried argue, Narayan's response is far more complex than Naipaul cares to admit, and I do not agree that Narayan's Hinduism is "parasitic and quietist," as Naipaul contends (1977, 14). Furthermore, the author of *A Wounded Civilization* implies that an Indian fable is not compatible with Western social comedy, which is not warranted. As Thieme points out, "they operate together and there is no real suggestion that the presence of the one need involve the erasure of the other" (Thieme 2007, 70). Naipaul's reading, however, proves three points: that a secular reader may easily overlook the spiritual implications of the narrative; that the same reader may be disturbed by religious overtones; and yet that the same reader may appreciate *Sampath* as a social comedy. Naipaul writes:

> It astonished me that, twenty years before, not having been to India, taking to *Mr Sampath* only my knowledge of the Indian community of Trinidad and my reading of other literature, I should have missed or misread so much, should have seen only a comedy of small-town life and a picaresque, wandering narrative in a book that was really so mysterious. (Naipaul 1977, 15)

As Naipaul's initial response shows, Narayan's ironic detachment and social comedy are the first qualities that appeal to secular readers, while his involvement with Hindu elements is less overt. Arguably something prevented Narayan from being more explicit.

In fact Narayan's involvement with religion is not vague. Not only does his protagonist state what religion should be—the full perception of the total picture in which humans and non-humans alike live and die every day. He is also

critical of some traditional forms of Hinduism. He is somewhat sceptical of *sannyasin*, who never fare well in his novels, from *Bachelor of Arts*, to *Mr Sampath*, to *The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs*, where they are suspected to be greedy charlatans. In *Mr Sampath* the landlord is a case in point; a miser who often twists the scripture to suit his convenience, and never refuses a cup of coffee and the tiffin prepared by his tenant's wife. His untimely death appears as a case of poetic justice. Furthermore, the landlord believes in horoscopes, whose value had already been questioned by Narayan in *The Bachelor of Arts*. Likewise, Srinivas is impatient with his wife's casteism and her obsession with the purity of food, when she obstinately refuses viands that have not been cooked by a brahmin. One cannot say that *Mr Sampath* is a novel about the reformation of religion like *Samskara* or *Bhava* discussed in chapter two; however, Hinduism is not the contemplative idleness indicted by Naipaul, nor is it an anthropological and ironic feature of the Malgudians. Narayan indeed takes a stand on Hinduism satirising some practices that he considers untenable while discreetly suggesting a reflection on those elements he considers fundamental. The scene in which some pundits come to bless the film studio is probably the most hilarious of the whole novel. A group of priests has been selected, and duly paid, to bless the new studio:

> The holy men sat before them with their foreheads stamped with ash and vermilion and their backs covered with hand-spun long wraps. They each wore a rosary around the throat, and they sat reading some sacred texts. In front of them were kept trays loaded with coconut, camphor and offerings for the gods. A few minutes before the appointed moment they rose, lit the camphor, and circled the flame before the gods, sounding a bell. Then they went to the camera and stuck a string of jasmine and a dot of sandal paste on it. De Mello trembled when he saw this. They seemed to be so reckless in dealing with the camera. He felt like crying out: "It's a Mitchel, so—please… It costs Rs 40,000," but he checked himself as he confessed later: "In this country, sir, one doesn't know when a religious susceptibility is likely to be hurt. A mere sneeze will take you to the stake sometimes—better be on the safe side." (Narayan 1949, 132)

Here Narayan satirises a combination of tradition and modernity, religion and economics that he deeply deplores. The scene per se appears staunchly secular as it ridicules both new-fangled entrepreneurs and old-fashioned pundits. And yet, considered within the novel's context, it takes on a different meaning. It is the *pars destruens* of Narayan's discourse on religion and modernity. While the novelist approves of the editor combining his dharmic search with his daily job and family responsibilities, he strongly disapproves of the simoniacal attitude of those who transcribe myths for the screen and those who bless it.

Towards the end of the novel, Srinivas experiences another epiphanic moment that places him in the footsteps of Hindu reformers such as Raj Rammohan Roy or Swami Vivekananda. It follows an exorcism, of whose outcome Srinivas appears somewhat sceptical; the priest presiding over the ceremony, he notices, "looked very much like Shiva in makeup." (Narayan 1949, 204). During the ritual, the editor mutters to himself: "the whole thing is too silly for words." After a while, recollecting the "tribal worship" that inaugurated the studios he reflects that "this is no worse. At least this is more innocent and uncommercial." These comments prepare the epiphanic enchanted moment in which "Srinivas suddenly said to himself: 'I might be in the twentieth century A.D. for all it matters, or 4000 b.C.'" At that moment Srinivas sees his house, his daily routine and suddenly, with a cinematic technique, the city vanishes and reverts into the past and becomes a little village by the river, where Rama is passing on his way to Lanka to rescue his wife, Sita. Then, as the river flows on, the time moves forward again, the forest gives way to tilled fields, the Buddha passes through the village "preaching his gospel of compassion." Then appears Shankara, the *Advaita Vedanta* philosopher who "preaches the identity and oneness of God and his creatures." Then come the Christian missionaries and the British with their banks. "Dynasties rose and fell," but the country "always had its rebirth" (Narayan 1949, 206-207). At the end of this vision, Srinivas perceives his smallness and finitude, and smiles at it. Then he leaves the room and walks into the street, reflecting upon the immateriality of the real world, and the insignificance of it in front of eternity. However, as Ravi's mother reaches out to him to ask whether she should take her son to a temple in a nearby town, where he can be healed, the editor replies: "'By all means,' and added with conviction: 'He is bound to be well again. Even madness passes. Only existence asserts itself'" (Narayan 1949, 209). This dénouement of Srinivas's epiphany is ironic. The editor had just proclaimed the futility not only of rituals, but also of looking for a cure for insanity. His answer, however, is not contradictory; it is his first step as the new man he has become: he is aware of the notion of *samsara*—a word never used in the novel—but he is also aware of the necessity of exerting oneself in this world. The two notions may well amount to a paradox, but the protagonist's *dharma* lies in precisely accepting this paradox.

Oftentimes Srinivas strives to find the words to express his intuitions. "I wish I could write all that stuff here," (Narayan 1949, 7) he once exclaims, and elsewhere "The intensity of the experience seemed to be disintegrating now in commonplace expressions (Narayan, 1949, 212). Commenting upon this latter exclamation, Thieme suggests that "*dharma* in Narayan's novels is rooted in commonplace expressions" (2007, 76). The same scholar suggests that the spiritual attainment is rooted in a mundane quest, which, we shall add, can easily be construed as secular. In fact the mundane experience of the protagonist is the only one that Narayan cares to detail in the novel; Srinivas cultivates

his spirituality also through Shiva *bhakti*. His most treasured possession is a statuette of Nataraja (a form of Shiva dancing), which he worships daily with a special prayer. Often the attainment of illumination is the reward of ethical choices: for Krishna, in *The English* Teacher, it is his helping at the kindergarten; for Raju, in *The Guide*, it is his decision to help villagers, open a school and make a sacrifice for them; for Srinivas it is his decision to turn his back on the commercial world of cinema and revive his journal, taking care of Ravi and his family, and his private devotion to Shiva—an apt foil to the simoniacal Shiva presented in the film.

The Guide

The Guide (1959) is by far R.K. Narayan's best-known novel, both in India and abroad. Part of its popularity is due to the film that Dev Anand produced in 1965, on which we shall return. Raju, a former tourist guide, falls in love with Rosie, a *Bharatanatyam* dancer and the wife of his customers, and becomes her lover and impresario. Eventually he is sentenced to three years imprisonment for forging a signature and when he comes out, he becomes, quite involuntarily, a spiritual guide for the inhabitants of a small village along the Kaveri river. Finally, he undergoes a fast to appease the Gods and put an end to a severe draught. While the structure of Narayan's novels is usually quite linear, *The Guide* presents a double alternate narrative in the first and third person, which marks a deviation from the typical oral pattern of his previous novels. An omniscient narrator tells the story of the present time, whereas the protagonist, Raju, recounts his own story from his birth until his imprisonment, where the omniscient narrator begins. The two narratives run parallel in the novel. In *My Days* the author reveals that he first conceived the story due to a real event:

> At this time I had been thinking of a subject for a novel: a novel about someone suffering enforced sainthood. A recent situation in Mysore offered a setting for such a story. A severe drought had dried up all the rivers and tanks; Krishnaraja Sagar, an enormous reservoir feeding channels that irrigated thousands of acres, had also become dry, and its bed, a hundred and fifty feet deep, was now exposed to the sky with fissures and cracks, revealing an ancient submerged temple, coconut stumps, and dehydrated crocodiles. As a desperate measure, the municipal council organized a prayer for rains. A group of Brahmins stood knee-deep in water (procured at great cost) on the dry bed of Kaveri, fasted, prayed, and chanted certain mantras continuously for eleven days. On the twelfth day it rained, and brought relief to the countryside. (Narayan 1974, 164)

The best part of the anecdote is that it is impossible to say whether the narrator believes that the rain eventually fell thanks to the rituals or not. Some details, like the parenthetic specification of the cost of water and the phrase "certain

mantras," seem to disclose a sceptical view, but the final "brought relief to the countryside" apparently counterbalances it. We have already observed how, in *Sampath*, the novelist wrote critically of special ceremonials, yet this undecidability between a secular and a supernatural interpretation of the event must have appealed to him because it is a perfect objective correlative for the protagonist's disputed conversion. Narayan wrote *The Guide* during his sojourn at Berkeley as a visiting professor. He had discussed the story outline with Graham Greene in London, where he stopped on his way to America, before anything had been written, and Greene insisted that the novel should end with the protagonist's death. Narayan was unsure, and eventually decided to leave also this ending open. As he was writing, however, he took Greene's advice very seriously. In an extract from his journal published in *My Days*, he wrote:

> Graham Greene liked the story when I narrated it to him in London. While I was hesitating whether to leave my hero alive or dead at the end of the story, Graham was definite that he should die. So I have on my hands the life of a man condemned to death before he was born and grown, and I have to plan my narrative to lead to it. This becomes a major obsession with me. (Narayan 1974, 165)

As he was completing the story, Narayan must have felt that his narrative could not be as final as Greene recommended. An open ending about the fate of Raju's mortal body reverberates the open ending about Raju's immortal soul and about the actual rainfall, which he senses before "sagging down." "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs—" (Narayan 1958, 220). Raju's last words are reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which also leaves the reader wondering whether the rain will or will not fall. The commonality between the two texts lies not only in the dry lands and Indian settings (actually Eliot mentions the Himalayas) but mainly in the space of doubt that both disclose. One cannot say if rain will once more fecundate the Waste Land and bring relief to its spiritually arid inhabitants; likewise, it is impossible to say if Raju's soul has been cleansed of his selfishness and has reached a state of enlightenment.

This space of doubt hosts the development of both the secular and the religious narrative axes. The first-person narration, which reads like a social comedy including a love story and generational conflicts, is apparently the more secular, even though the narratee's response casts doubt on this interpretation. At the end of his confession, Raju expects an outraged retort and asks Velan what he makes of his story, but his reply is mystifying: "Velan looked quite pained at having to answer such a question. 'I don't know why you tell me all this, Swami. It's very kind of you to address at such length your humble servant'" (Narayan 1958, 207-208). There are at least two different possible interpretations for Velan's reaction, a secular and a supernatural one: the first is that the villager's simplicity prevents him from taking the story in the secular

way that Raju expected. The second interpretation is that, though unconsciously, Velan actually sees farther than Raju and senses something in the latter of which Raju himself is still unaware. In his narrative Raju once comments: "It seems to me that we generally do not have a correct measure of our wisdom" (Narayan 1958, 47), which appears as a clue to his new situation. Even a truthful confession, as Binayak Roy (2012, 101) points out, is the sign of a righteous self. However, Raju is appalled by the other's humble response: "Every respectful word that this man employed pierced Raju like a shaft. 'He will not leave me alone,' Raju thought with resignation. 'This man will finish me before I know where I am'" (Narayan 1958, 208). This crucial scene develops simultaneously along the secular and supernatural axes, thus creating different ironies. In the shaft metaphor, a secular reader will see Raju's annoyance at being misunderstood; to a religious reader the same may suggest that Velan's faith is opening a breach in Raju's heart, while the latter is still unaware of it. Raju's thoughts are even more ambiguous. A secular reading may point out a certain degree of irony: Raju complains about the simple villager who does not understand that he is a charlatan, and he literally and unconsciously foresees his doom—though the reader will not find it out until the end. A mystic reading must recognise that Velan is actually pushing Raju towards sainthood, which the simpleton has perceptively seen before the saint. It is as if Raju possessed a disposition, the positive *karma*, to become a saint but lacked the willpower, which Velan generously provides. Commenting on this passage, Chitra Sankaran (1991, 131-132) suggests that the relationship between Raju and Velan should be interpreted within the scope of the *bhakti* tradition (see chapter one and three). *Bhakti* entails a relationship based on love and devotion towards a divinity, as in the case of Srinivas in *Sampath* or, in the case of Velan, a guru. The devotees love a deity or a guru, and the deity loves them back. Such is the relationship between Velan and Raju. The former's devotion remains unwavering even after Raju's confession. While this is comical from a secular perspective, from a religious one it makes sense as it reveals a profound, if simple, faith on the part of Velan. It is the strength of this love that eventually completes Raju's conversion. He had already begun showing his love to the villagers when he proposed to set up an evening school.

The novel's title exemplifies the duplicity of interpretations to which it lends itself. To secular readers, it is a comedy telling the story of a tourist guide whom people unwittingly mistake for a spiritual guide. To religious readers, it is the story of the mysterious ways whereby a man may achieve enlightenment and become a teacher of wisdom. This latter interpretation raises an interesting question: is wisdom less valuable when uttered from the lips of someone unworthy? Again, the answer depends on the reader's viewpoint. On the one hand, one can say it is nearly impossible that an unworthy man expresses worthy concepts, as it is impossible that someone who ignores astronomy says something innovative on

black holes; therefore Raju's wisdom is made of trite platitudes. On the other hand, as we have already remarked, "*dharma* in Narayan's novels is rooted in commonplace expressions" (Thieme 2007, 76); thus wisdom is not so much in the mouth of the teacher as in the ears of the disciple. One can be a vehicle of truth even unknowingly, it is for the readers to decide who they are facing. To the wise listener/reader, wisdom may speak even through simple characters and platitudes. Indeed, a character's actions confer meaning to his words.

A similar incident occurs in *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), one of Narayan's later novels. The story is recounted in the first person by the tiger, who has come to conquer his instincts and attain a superior wisdom thanks to his master. The tiger's love for the master is unwavering, but the narrative casts a doubt on the latter's selflessness. The ascetic used to be a family man who deserted his family to enter his new life, leaving everyone to believe that he was dead. When his devoted and loving wife learns that the *sannyasin* living in the mountains with a tiger is indeed her husband, she traverses the forest at her peril to meet him. Admitted to his presence, she asks him to allow her to live with him and share his new life, but he is adamant in denying that he is the same man and heartlessly sends her away. The tiger narrator does not pass any judgement on the episode, but quotes a proverb that would suit Raju too: "Don't probe too far into the origin of a river or a saint! You will never reach the end" (Narayan 1983, 121). As in the case of Raju and Velan, the master's shortcomings pass unnoticed to the eyes of the loving disciple, and matter very little to the latter's attainments.

***

The social comedy, the secular axis of the story, does not cater only to a Western audience, in fact it is the interpretation underpinning the film directed by Vijay Anand and starring Dev Anand. Earlier, Satyajit Ray—who has filmed several stories by Tagore and other writers—had written to Narayan arguing that *The Guide* was too complex to be filmed, and he did not feel equal to the task. Yet filmed it was, and fairly successfully in India, where it certainly helped this novel to become a best seller. Predictably, however, Narayan did not like it; he reviewed the adaptation in *Life Magazine* under the title "The Misguided Guide," later reprinted in a collection called *A Writer's Nightmare*. Here Narayan, who depicts himself with traits reminiscent of Srinivas in *Sampath*, explains how the whole business of the filmmaking slipped out of his hand, and the story was eventually utterly distorted. Narayan mainly complains about the location chosen for Malgudi, which he imagined to be in south India, while the movie was shot in Jaipur and Udaipur. Likewise, the shrine on the fictional river Sarayu, which Narayan himself had imagined after a village on the Kaveri river,

was built on a stretch of sand by the Yamuna a few kilometres from Delhi. Narayan's dislike of the film is surprising if one takes some of his statements at face value; one such is that Malgudi can be anywhere in India and almost anywhere in the world. Another such one is that what counts to him is just the story and nothing more, and therefore Malgudi is a convenient setting because, being non-existent, it provides a flexible space. Actually, the film's plot is not significantly different from the novel's. Surely something else has been lost that Ray had perceived and Narayan cherished, but many spectators did not notice. I believe that such loss consisted of the spiritual axis of the story, which has disappeared from the movie. It is as if an anamorphic painting was photographed from one angle only.

While general readers enjoyed the social comedy, scholars have searched Hinduism to address the most urgent questions that the novel leaves unanswered: whether Raju is in earnest, whether he eventually attains enlightenment, and whether he lives or dies. Thus they have unearthed covert elements in *The Guide*, suggesting diverse Indological interpretations that they often associate to Narayan's alleged partiality to a traditional and unchanging India.[2] These insights focus on anthropological features of Hinduism, its ethos, or its mythology. Among the former, the *ashrama* theory stands out. The character of Raju goes through four different phases in his life story (Kirpal 1988). He is first a *brahmacharya*, who works as a tourist guide and learns his way in the world; then, when he becomes Rosie's manager, he acquires the status of *grihastha*. Later, here interpretations diverge slightly, he goes through the phase of a *vanaprastha* when he is in prison and lives as a *sannyasin* on the banks of the Sarayu, or, alternatively, he lives as a *vanaprastha* by the river until his *kismet* draws him to confront the higher task of becoming a *sannyasin*. Accepting that a man's life is divided into *ashrama* attributes a certain ethical agency to the character. He may have made mistakes, but in the end, we see him on the right path. In contrast, those who read *The Guide* as a picaresque novel will question whether Raju can ever reach perfection.

According to the *ashrama* interpretation, the open ending is not really open: if we finally see Raju as a *sannyasin*, his life-cycle is complete, his being dead or alive is immaterial. Greene probably failed to grasp this detail and considered death a kind of seal to the story. Pace Bob Dylan, in Western literature, death is commonly perceived as the end. In an essay devoted to Nicolai Leskov, Walter Benjamin writes: "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death" (Benjamin 1968, 94). The idea behind this statement is twofold: a dead character cannot disprove the story

2 This view, argued by V.S. Naipaul among others, is convincingly disproved by John Thieme, who underlines the tensions and the modern elements in Narayan's fiction. In fact a distinction should be drawn between the social and the philosophical aspects of Hinduism. While Narayan seems to subscribe to the latter, he is often at odds with the former.

told by the storyteller, and the death of the protagonist orients past deeds, giving them a direction, like a candle burning on a scratched surface seems to impose a circular order on the otherwise random scratches. On the other hand, death in a Hindu context is much less definitive. Philosophically, it just preludes to a new incarnation, in a literary context, it may close a chapter, but it often opens another one. Death is indeed quite uncommon in Narayan's novels. Even in *The English Teacher*, it does not preclude a relationship between Krishna and his late wife Susila, while in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, a dead character revives. As for the *ashrama* theory in *The Guide*, while it is convincing that Narayan could think of a man's life as the succession of steps, it is hard to think of Raju's life with Rosie/Nalini as that of a *grihastha*.

On the philosophical level, Sohan Pain (2012) maintains that the *Bhagavad Gita* undergirds the ethics of *The Guide*. It is in the *Gita*, he argues, that renunciation is not only an end in itself but is beneficial to humanity at large. *Svadharma* (individual duty) is important in relation not only to the individual, but also as a part of a well-functioning society. While it remains undecided whether Raju's fast brings rain, it certainly brings unity among the villagers where there was division and discord. Michel Pousse (1995) maintains that Narayan's Hinduism, which is often pre-conscious, should be sought in his views of the basic pillars of society—marriage and family. Sohan Pain (2012) and Ranga Rao (2017) also insist on the centrality of the *gunas* theory in Narayan's construction of characters. According to this notion, there are three basic principles called *gunas*: *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*, that to English readers may recall the Elisabethan theory of humours.[3] The first is lethargic, associated with sleep and death; the second is hectic, associated with movement and restlessness; the third is the most balanced, associated with well-being and wisdom. Rao maintains that many characters can be described according to this pattern, especially when they are viewed as opposites, as in the case of Sampath and Srinivas or Nataraj and Vasu. This opposition holds true also for the first and second versions of Raju; one complements the other, the former is partly *rajasic* partly *tamasic*, the latter is definitely more *sattvic*. Sohan Pain remarks that the kind of food consumed by rajasic or sattvic characters often suits their type, which is precisely what happens in the novel. He also concludes that a renouncer—*sannyasin*—is beyond this classification.

A thought-provoking position is propounded by Sr Mary Beatina Rayen (1993), who considers the novel from the viewpoint of the binary mundane and transcendent—a distinction akin to our secular and supernatural axes. The mundane refers to simple, ordinary, frail human nature seen in its potentiality. The transcendent is a form of spiritual, often religious, experience, which

3 Amitav Ghosh divides his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, in three parts each named after a guna, thus offering a secular version of this theory.

comes unexpected and moves beyond the ordinary. The movement towards the transcendent begins with a dissatisfaction with ordinary, selfish life. Rayen aptly points out that the traditional opposition saint/sinner is unwarranted. A saint may well have been a sinner, and there can be something saintly in a sinner—incidentally, a position that reminds one of *Samskara*. *The Guide* does not portray a moment of conversion, but rather the slow process that takes a mundane man towards transcendence. This view also explains why Narayan leaves the end open: he was not interested in some cathartic event, like a Western tragedy, but in the process leading to it.

Coming to the intertextual, mythological influences, many sources have been cited. Chitra Sankaran (1991, 2007) argues that the character of Raju is modelled after the tradition of the trickster sage, a figure that features frequently in the *Puranas*. Narayan himself offers some examples of this tradition in his *Gods, Demons, and Others* (1987); for whatever reason, it may come to pass that *rishis* (superhuman sages) play tricks on humans, to either punish or test them. Mostly, these *rishis* meet their victims incognito and reveal themselves only at the end of the story. The theory of the trickster sage, often cited by scholars, is suggestive but not entirely persuasive; *rishis* are usually conscious of their superior status, unlike Raju, and have a purpose other than procuring food for themselves. Indeed Raju's attitude is far closer to that of a Spanish *picaro*, as Thieme suggests. Sankaran also offers a remarkable catalogue of Hindu elements that connect Raju to traditional Hindu mythology and iconography. At the narrative level, these elements explain why Velan has good reasons to believe that Raju is a true guru: he appears by the sacred river, has fixed his abode by a ruined temple, can guess what Velan's family problems may be, and is knowledgeable in the scriptures. At the poetic level, these elements tie the realistic character of Raju to a number of Sanskrit antecedents, inextricably entangling the Western and the Indian. Sankaran also argues that the double narrative of the novel—one starting in *medias res*, the other from Raju's birth—is reminiscent of the non-linear form of the Indian epic. In effect, from a narratological perspective, Western models—such as Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, or Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*—are more similar to Narayan's narrative than Indian epics that frame stories within one another, but hardly ever tell two parallel stories at once. Thus, it is hard to say that Narayan fashioned his story in this way, inspired solely by the form of Indian mythology. However, the non-linear narrative form seamlessly merges East and West into the novel, donating to it the profundity advocated by the author's far-sighted uncle on his deathbed.

Among the epic antecedents, Valmiki, the mythical author of *Ramayana*, deserves closer scrutiny. Narayan recounts his story in *Gods, Demons, and Others,* starting with his previous life when the future saint was a highway robber called

Ratnar.[4] According to Narayan's rendition of the myth, the bandit robbed a brahmin of his sandals on a day when the sun was scorching and the river sand blistering. As he saw his victim hobble along the shore, the thief took pity on the brahmin and returned his sandals. The holy scholar, moved by this compassionate attitude, revealed that it was due to "a vestige of merit left from your previous incarnation" (Narayan 1987, 128). The brahmin told the story of the other's previous life: he had been a great scholar who had mastered the Vedas, but unaccountably fell for a prostitute, contracted a venereal disease and died cursing his careworn and dutiful wife. As a punishment for the latter part of his life, he became a bandit, but "the first phase of [his] life, when [he was] enlightened, has left in [him] a vestige of compassion" (Narayan 1987, 129); for this reason, he returned the sandals to the poor brahmin. Valmiki's next birth was from the womb of a *naga kannika*, a beauty from the netherworld of serpents,[5] who had enticed a *rishi* in the forest. The boy went astray and was found by some hunters who brought him up and gave him the name Ratnakara. In his new life Ratnakara acquired a large family and became a hunter to feed his dependents; when the game became scarce, he turned once again into a robber. Once he robbed seven sages who challenged him with a question: "Why are you acquiring such a load of sin, robbing people and causing pain to all God's creatures? What do you hope to gain thereby?" (Narayan 1987, 131). The sages prove to him that no one in his family is willing to share the bad *karma* he is accumulating and invite him to sit by a rock and meditate. Ratnakara meditates for a thousand years, during which an anthill submerges him; as he finally comes out as Valmiki, which literally means "the one from the anthill," he has a vision of the *Ramayana*, which he later writes down in verse.

The notion that the pattern of Valmiki's myth may be behind the composition of *The Guide* has far-reaching implications that, to my knowledge, no one has investigated yet. The first implication is that the time frame of the whole novel may be based not on the *ashrama* but on metempsychosis. Raju lives two different lives: one as a tourist guide and one as a spiritual guide. Apart from himself, none of the characters of Raju's first life appears in the second; his name changes from Railway Raju to Swami; the time he spends in prison is hardly recounted, as if he had been dead to the world.

This interpretation becomes even more poignant when one thinks of the *karma* accumulated by Raju. In his first life, he had been a good boy, a captive listener to his mother's tales and teachings, and proved a good guide besides.

---

4 This name, not mentioned by Narayan, appears in Nandini Bhattacharya's *R.K. Narayan's* The Guide*: New Critical Perspectives* (2004).

5 Sankaran capitalises also on this part of the story, considering how Rosie is associated to serpents. It is only natural, her reasoning goes, that Velan accepts that Raju was seduced by such a woman, considering that also sages may fall for serpent women. A *naga kannika* is similar to the Greek Lamia.

As a tourist guide, he was dedicated and selfless; above all, he wanted to make his customers happy: "anything that interested my tourists was also my interest. The question of my own preferences was secondary," he explains to Velan (Narayan 1958, 55). Raju also explains how he would fret about on behalf of his customers "with detachment" (Narayan 1958, 52). Although becoming a tourist guide is an adjustment to modernity, the custodian of orthodoxy, Raju's mother, does not complain about it as long as he promises that he will not neglect his father's business. The lady is only upset when Raju takes Rosie to live with him and becomes her lover-manager. Initially Raju is attracted to the girl's beauty, but he is also sincere in appreciating her art: "I could honestly declare that, while I watched her perform, my mind was free, for once, from all carnal thoughts; I viewed her as a pure abstraction" (Narayan 1958, 110). However, this artistic interest is intermittent; later he appears attracted primarily to the girl's body: "I watched her [dance] critically, but what I watched were the curves that tempted me to hug her on the spot" (Narayan 1958, 144). In effect, to be fair to Raju, one must say that Rosie's kind disposition is another reason why he falls in love with her: she is dedicated, unassuming, submissive, soft-spoken. Another turning point occurs when Raju, who devotes all his time to the girl, faces financial straits. His predicament makes him see Rosie in a different light: "I outlined […] a plan to utilise Rosie's services and make money. The thought of her warmed me up. 'She is a gold-mine,' I cried" (Narayan 1958, 143). From now on Raju no longer loves nor even covets Rosie; he exploits her art out of greed for money and a position in the jet-setting elite of Malgudi: "My philosophy was that while it lasted the maximum money had to be squeezed out" (Narayan 1958, 173).

Raju's first life is reminiscent of Ratnakara-Valmiki, who had been a scholar gone awry for a prostitute and had therefore become a highwayman in his subsequent life. Similarly, Raju turned his back on his *dharma* to become a manager. In fact the protagonist commits a double sin: firstly, he abandons his *dharma* out of greed, becoming an impresario; secondly, he transforms Rosie's spiritual art into money.[6] Narayan here indicts the sin of simony as he had done in *Sampath*. A similar theme is recounted also in two short stories: one entitled "Selvi," where the protagonist is a singer whose talent is exploited by her husband to gain money and social prestige (Vescovi 2011), and one entitled "Musical Commerce," which deals with a businessman and a singer (Thieme 2007). In *A Tiger for Malgudi*, a character called The Master explains to a Raja, the tiger, the laws of *karma* in words that mark the continuity across different rebirths:

6 A similar situation occurs in *God of Small Things,* where *Kathakali* dancers reduce their performances to short intermezzos for tourists. "On their way back from the Heart of Darkness [dancers] stopped at the temple to ask pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encashing their identities. Misappropriating their lives (Roy 1997, 229).

> You probably in a previous life enjoyed putting your fellow-beings behind bars. One has to face the reaction of every act, if not in the same life, at least in another life or series of lives. […] People only follow their inclinations, and sooner or later find their reward or retribution. That's the natural law of life. (Narayan 1983, 38)

Later, the Master explains to Raja the notion of *vasana* (imprinting from a former life): "whatever one had thought or felt is never lost, but is buried in one's personality and carried from birth to birth" (1983, 130). This is precisely what happens to Raju.

Though it lasts only two years, the time in prison is a watershed. Raju talks about it as if it had not been real: "Have I been in a prison or in some sort of transmigration?" (Narayan 1958, 18). In his second life as Swami, the good *karma* accumulated as a dutiful son and a good tourist guide, manifests itself when the protagonist arrives in Mangala. Here, on the banks of the river, the former tourist guide develops his spirituality and helps people around him. He slowly re-discovers his old *dharma*: "the old, old habit of affording guidance to others asserting itself" (Narayan 1958, 7). The second part of the story may be described as a self-discovery, whereby Velan acts maieutically, helping Raju to regenerate himself. Raju himself is "surprised at the amount of wisdom welling from the depths of his being" (Narayan 1958, 40). When Raju teaches the *Ramayana* to the village children, "no one was more impressed with the grandeur of the whole thing than Raju himself" (Narayan 1958, 40). His spiritual education culminates in the much-quoted observation: "For the first time in his life he was making an earnest effort; for the first time he was learning the thrill of full application, outside money and love; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested" (Narayan 1958, 212).

Albeit covertly, Narayan pushes the limits of fictional life-writing to include metempsychosis. Contrary to the realistic tradition, the novelist brings enchantment back into his narrative. Formally *The Guide* remains nonetheless a realistic novel and gets nowhere near a fantasy or a myth. The enchantment woven into the fabric of the text is not supposed to amuse—the most entertaining part remains the social comedy—but to drive attention onto religious issues. The realistic axis of the novel describes modernity coming to Malgudi thanks to the railway, and the establishment of a new social order where new jobs flourish and a young brahmin can affirm that he does not "believe in class or caste" (Narayan 1958, 73). Narayan does take a position about this social modernity, although he apparently approves of Rosie's attitude towards her artistic vocation. She is described as a very dedicated scholar, who practices her art and studies the classics with a pundit to perfect it. On the contrary, the novel is profoundly critical of the academic attitude of Marco—the man is not even given a real name!—who studies antiquities like an anatomist would study life. Regarding religion, Narayan seems to view simple village piety with respect, but appears sceptical

of caste traditions as represented by Raju's mother and her brother. As in the case of *The English Teacher* and *Sampath*, individual salvation comes through a diligent application to *guru bhakti*, individual *dharma*, and renunciation. Raju's *guru bhakti* is unconventional because Velan is not a recognised *guru*, yet it is basically out of love for him that Raju lets himself be persuaded to undertake his fast. Individual *dharma* is implied in the full realisation of his *karma* as a guide and teacher. Renunciation is fully achieved when Raju gives up food after blithely renouncing most of the privileges he had enjoyed in his previous life only two years earlier—after all, he could have sought out Rosie or tried to go back to his former job, but he does neither.

Though not so explicitly as *Sampath*, *The Guide* offers a few insights into the role of the artist and the poetics of the novel. While, in the former, such reflection was associated with Srinivas' work as an editor, in the latter, it is connected to Rosie's dance. Obviously, dance and novel writing are farther apart than journalism and fiction, but they are both creative arts; besides, Narayan himself was an excellent *veena* player who could have undertaken a professional career, which brings him close to the world of Karnatic music and rhythms. Rosie's artistic outlook is enhanced by the contrast with her husband. Marco is a Westernised scholar: nothing to do with a *pandit*. He has an antiquarian interest in Hindu culture, which appears completely secular. His affected lack of interest in the caste of his bride is quite different from Raju's genuine belief that caste is unimportant. Through his marriage, Marco wants to prove his secularism to his peers; he is not even interested in having sex with Rosie: her beauty too appears more a matter of status. His advertisement in the paper is revealing: "Wanted: an educated, good-looking girl to marry a rich bachelor of academic interests. *No caste restrictions; good looks and university degree essential*" (Narayan 1958, 74). Marco basically remains a bachelor whose interests are merely academic. Elsewhere, Narayan writes pungent words about academics, their inability to confront reality and their sophisticated, phoney attitude.[7] Despite all his learning, Marco could be described as a *brahmacharya* unable to fulfil his duty as *grihastha*. When he discovers some music notations painted on the wall of a cave in Mempi Hills, he is thrilled by the discovery and the essay he can write on it. His wife volunteers to sing out the music for him, to which he replies bluntly: "I doubt if you can. It's more difficult than you imagine" (Narayan 1958, 111). Rosie's proposition to interpret the music for Marco is part of her

7 I am referring chiefly to his description of his American sojourn in *My Days*, where he jokes on being a visiting professor and on the expectations that students and faculties have of himself. In *A Writer's Nightmare*, there is an essay on "Love and Lovers," where a non-descript academic chides him for lacking a "national aspiration," unlike Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky. In particular, what he seems to resent most is that academic outlooks seem to depend more on American and English viewpoints than on Indian ones. Very broadly speaking, philosophical secularism falls into this category.

own understanding of the Indian cultural heritage, which to her makes sense only as long as it is alive. Indeed it should be remembered that Rukmini Devi (1904-1986), who is credited with the resurrection of classical *Bharatanatyam* in the early XX century, worked hard at Chidambaran temple (in Tamil Nadu) to interpret, classify and eventually restore to the stage the terracotta panels of *devadasis*, holy dancers, in different postures there conserved.

When Rosie is finally free to pursue *Bharatanatyam*, she hires a *pandit*—i.e. a non-secular, traditional scholar—to learn about ancient myths and transform them into choreographies, which is typical of the aesthetics of *Bharatanatyam*. She also studies Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*, which is the oldest and most authoritative treatise on Indian dance and aesthetics, in order to "keep the purity of classical forms" (ch. 7).[8] The word "purity" referred to a dancer coming from a disreputable caste is not casual. As John Thieme argues (2007, 111), Rosie undergoes a transformation parallel to Raju's. Her dedication as an artist and her research of perfection in dance is her *karma yoga*, a way of pursuing enlightenment through action. The reference to the *Natyashastra* is also revealing because Bharata Muni brings together the physical and spiritual dimensions of experience. The *Natyashastra* expounds the aesthetic doctrine of *rasa*, a word that literally means "taste" or "juice" and refers to the inexpressible aesthetic experience in front of a work of art. This experience can only be felt by a *sahridaya*, literally a man of heart, i.e. someone who is not "dry," but responsive. According to Abhinavagupta, one of the most reputed interpreters of the *Natyashastra*, the *sahridaya* is one who has cleansed his soul so that his heart becomes one with the artist's. The aesthetic experience, which is spiritual and takes one closer to the *Atman*, is the sublimation of worldly experience that offers its substance to it. Thus the *Natyshastra*:

> Just as the *rasa* of food is an essence derived from cooking the raw material of the ingested food by the action of the digestive fires, the *rasa* of aesthetics is a fine emotion born of the transformation of gross and mundane experience by the multistage extractive and distillative deliberation involving *anubhava* [extension of the stimulative process by suggestive behaviour such as glances and body movement], *vibhava* [external stimulus], and *vyabhicharibhava* [an instance of ancillary or transient emotion: the joy in love]. (Seneviratne 1992, 182; cit. in Thieme 2007, 111)

Marco is a "dry" man, unresponsive to art, while Raju responds to it for a brief moment but cannot detach himself from its mere physical stimuli. Considering the holiness of art, Marco can be likened to those symoniacal priests who only care for the rituals and the offerings that come thereby, as we saw in *Sampath*, while, initially at least, Raju is simply a sinner. Over time, Raju too develops a

8 This is the same attitude Rosie shows when she sees a cobra dancing. She keenly observes the animal, probably because she wants to imitate its flexuous movement.

symoniacal attitude, and poetic justice meets him like it did Marco. The *rasa* theory can be easily applied to literature. Young James Joyce came to an analogous conclusion as he reflected on the aesthetics of the short story. In a letter to his brother Stanislaus, James wrote:

> There is a certain resemblance between the mystery of the mass and what I am trying to do [...] to give people a kind of intellectual pleasure or spiritual enjoyment by converting the bread of everyday life into something that has a permanent artistic life of its own [...] for their mental, moral, and spiritual uplift. (cit. in Scholes and Litz 1969, 255)

Like Rosie turns ancient myths into material for new, vibrant choreographies, enacting them through the materiality of her body, so does Narayan with narrative material. The author takes inspiration from ancient myths like those of Valmiki, Shiva and Parvati, or Savitri in *The Dark Room*, and by shaping them by means of the worldly material of realism, offers them to his readers. While in his earlier production, the relationship with Hindu ideas and myths was either undeveloped or clouded by a secular stance, over time, Narayan has become more confident in his possibilities, gaining in depth, as his uncle predicted on his deathbed. Possibly, as Thieme suggests, this development may be due to his sojourns in the United States, where Narayan for the first time met Western readers other than Graham Greene. His next novel, *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, brings this technique a step further, foregrounding the underlying myth of Bhasmasura.

The Man-eater of Malgudi: The Novel Meets the Puranas

In *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, Narayan overtly rewrites the myth of Bhasmasura using the technique of the comic realistic novel. The interplay of the traditional genre and the Western form of the novel recalls the pun between the tourist and the spiritual guide. The story features a first-person narrator called Nataraj, a printer by trade, who conducts his establishment with the help of one man named Sastri, a sort of factotum who often takes the lead in conducting business. Nataraj is pious, timid, indolent, unsuited for business; he loves sitting on the veranda in front of his shop, entertaining odd friends and would-be customers. One day a foreigner called Vasu comes to Malgudi. He is a no-nonsense, practical man whose business is taxidermy. He wants to take station in Malgudi as it is not far from the Mempi hills, where wild animals abound, and he turns to Nataraj to print visiting cards. Soon Vasu coaxes Nataraj into giving him his attic, formerly used as a storeroom, and starts killing animals both on the hills and in the city for his business. He shoots all kinds of animals, including stray cats and pet dogs. His most precious piece is a tiger cub, which he

values at 2000 rupees. Apparently he derives as much pleasure from his job as from the money he can make out of it.

Vasu is a highly manipulative man, stemming from an unusual background. He holds an MA in Arts and Business from the prestigious Presidency College in Calcutta, and has acquired an extraordinary physical strength through relentless training that has endowed him with a formidable fist capable to splinter a three-inch panel of seasoned teak and pulverise granite slabs. After exhibiting his abilities for some time in fairs and festivals, he has learnt taxidermy from a specialist and made it his main business, which he pursues with the greed of a merchant and the passion of an unscrupled artist. His art, he boasts, can rival God in creating animals. His violent activities include the killing of an eagle, which—Nataraj points out—is sacred to Vishnu; the stench emanating from his workshop convince the printer to try and get rid of the man. This proves no easy task because Vasu sues Nataraj for evicting him without reason. The paradox is that Vasu pays no rent, but not even Nataraj's lawyer believes it, and, he assures, no judge would believe it either. The action reaches its climax when Nataraj learns from Rangi—the temple dancer and Vasu's mistress—that the villain has decided to shoot the temple elephant during a procession. Nataraj tries to change the course of the march, but no one listens to him. Eventually, unable to do anything, he falls asleep and is awakened by the parade marching towards his house. He climbs the stairs to the attic and finds Vasu asleep in his armchair with his rifle by his side. On the spur of the moment, Nataraj takes up the rifle and plans to hold Vasu at gunpoint until the elephant has passed by. Suddenly an alarm clock goes off, frightening him so that he drops the gun and runs away. The next morning, the postman finds Vasu dead, his head hit by a blunt object. Police investigations do not come to any conclusion. However, Nataraj remains suspect number one, and everyone shuns him. He even comes to fear that he has actually killed the man and forgotten his crime. After some time, Sastri comes back from a relative's marriage and explains what caused Vasu's death. Rangi, the temple dancer, had been at Vasu's, bringing him the dinner. He fell asleep while she was fanning him to keep off mosquitoes, but she had fallen asleep as well, and some mosquitos had landed on Vasu's forehead. As Vasu swatted the mosquitos with his formidable fist, he inflicted himself the fatal concussion.

If it was not for Narayan's own statements and Sastri's references to Vasu as an *asura*, the influence of myth behind the plot would be hardly noticeable. Narayan ensures that the story can be read from an entirely secular perspective, as a social comedy. Ironically, however, the non-secular worldview of the novelist and the apparent secularism of the novel have merged seamlessly to produce a wonderfully nuanced literary work. The plot is simple and repeats the basic conventions of fables or *Puranas* (Mishra 1993): an atavist order is suddenly disrupted by a newcomer, and it is eventually restored through a

kind of superhuman intervention. In a lecture for the students at Columbia University, Narayan summed up his novel (mentioning only the character of Vasu) and explained that it was the rewriting of the mythical story of Mohini and Bhasmasura, which he recounted thus:

> Bhasmasura was a demon who possessed a rather special kind of power. Anything he touched with the tips of his fingers was reduced to ashes even without the intermediary stage of fire or flame. He revelled in this peculiar gift and turned to ashes whatever or whoever caught his fancy. He also enjoyed the boon that no one could kill him. When there seemed to be no hope for humanity from the ravages caused by this asura, Vishnu assumed the form of Mohini, a dancer of great beauty. When she appeared before Bhasmasura and danced, he became infatuated; but the dancer would agree to yield to his advances only on condition that he also danced as she did, repeating exactly every gesture and movement of hers. Bhasmasura, blinded by lust, executed all the movements of the dancer, including the one when she placed the tips of her fingers on her own head, and thereby reduced himself to ashes. (Narayan 1972a, 47)

Narayan proceeds to explain that *asuras* usually live in the netherworld; however, one of them may grow restive and come to the surface, where he usually wreaks havoc. To acquire special powers, such a demon, endowed with uncommon willpower, undergoes severe austerities (*tapas*), thus obtaining a boon by Brahma or Shiva, which should make him invincible. Why the gods grant such a boon is disputable; possibly because they cannot see its medium-term consequences or possibly because they see much farther than that. In the same lecture, Narayan observes that "every evil carries within itself the tiny seed of its own destruction," resorting to the same metaphor utilised by Sastri in the novel.[9] *Asuras* are easily governed by six evil impulses,[10] which eventually bring about their destruction. In the case of Bhasmasura, the evil impulse is *kama*, Narayan points out, but he does not say what the impulse was that brought Vasu to destruction. This oversight is not without meaning, and we shall return to it. Interestingly, Indian mythology offers two classes of evil creatures, called *asuras* and *rakshasa*. The former are anti-gods, and usually contend with the gods only. *Rakshasas*, on the contrary, are ugly monsters—although capable of changing their shape on occasion—that mostly deal with humans. While Bhasmasura is an *asura*, as the name suggests, the novel refers to his literary alter ego as *rakshasa* (Narayan 1961, 72). As he writes in English, Narayan uses the word demon, which can be an equivalent for either being. The fact itself would be hardly worth mentioning if it were not that it shows a certain detachment on

9 "Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self-destruction, and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment" (173-174).

10 *Kama* (lust), *krodha* (anger), *lobha* (greed), *mada* (selfishness or arrogance), *moha* (attachment to delusions), and *matsarya* (envy)

Narayan's part from the fine points of philology and mythology, thus highlighting his deeper interest in the abstract evil principle and its manifestations rather than tradition for its own sake. In other words, the novelist is not interested in the artistic game of re-writing the classics, but in exploring the dynamics of evil through his own medium.

Talking to American students, Narayan explains that "It is *inevitable* that a writer, though he may be a 20th century product, should see the world and its affairs through the concepts of these myths and read their symbolism in modern terms" (Narayan 1972a, 50).

Thus the reader is left with two questions: why, if it was "inevitable," did Narayan wait until *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, his ninth novel, to respond to the challenge of seeing the world through the myth? Secondly, how do the comic realistic and mythical modes relate?

In an essay entitled "The Reluctant Guru" (1974), Narayan recounts his American experience, when students believed that he was a spiritual guide, and would conduct an ascetic life. Furthermore, American students expected that he would be a teacher of wisdom and talk about Hindu spirituality. Although Narayan makes light of it, John Thieme considers this experience pivotal in convincing Narayan that he could talk to a Western audience also through the language of Hindu sacrality. Narayan changed his idea of the intended (Western) audience from former narrowminded colonisers, potentially disturbed by Indian "heathenish" myths like the teachers he had met as a child, to naïve pre-hippie readers ready to welcome Indian mythology with secular enthusiasm. Narayan's earlier novels aimed to amuse English readers without disturbing their complex of superiority (or their horizon of expectation) when it came to narrative modes. Narayan had probably felt the limitations of his position as a "realistic fiction writer in English" and welcomed the possibility of opening his narrative to Tamilian mythology. In other words, the American experience taught Narayan that it was unnecessary to conceal his religious and cultural heritage to reach a Western audience. Western secularism was not necessarily in contrast with Indian mythology, and he could overtly write from a non-secular position, provided he did not deny a non-secular reading to readers that were so bent.

In *The Man-eater of Malgudi* Narayan combines the best of both worlds: social comedy and spiritual reflections on the nature of evil. Like an anamorphic painting, the novel appears different to those who look at it from the West or the East. Indeed, this novel offers an insight into the mind of the Indian writer who sees the "world and its affairs through the concepts of these myths and read their symbolism." This is a two-way process. As Narayan explains, he cannot help thinking of myths when he observes the modern world, where he sees different forces at play that remind him of opposite principles of good and evil, order and disorder, pure and impure. On the other hand, he overtly bases the

plot of his novel on an ancient myth, that is, he uses modern realism to interpret the myth. In fact, although the story of Bhasmasura and Mohini is the chief source behind the novel's storyline, it is not the only one. Indeed, before telling the story of Bhasmasura, he compares Vasu to Ravana and Mahisha—whose stories are both included in Narayan's *Gods, Demons and Others*. This suggests that Narayan did not mean to rewrite that particular myth, but rather compose a modern myth based on the narrative pattern of *Puranas*. As we have seen, this procedure is not new for Narayan, who had also used it in *Mr Sampath* and *The Guide*. The difference is that while in former novels he referred to Indian myths covertly, in *Man-eater* he invites a mythical reading quite overtly.

The encounter between *Puranas* and novels brings us to the second question about the relationship between the comic realist and the mythical modes of writing. In *Man-eater*, the two do not annihilate each other, nor vie for critical appreciation, or seem to suggest mutually exclusive interpretations; on the contrary, these modes are mutually reinforcing. Far from being covert, the reference to the myth of Bhasmasura is made explicit twice in the novel. In both cases, it is Sastri—Nataraj's employee and in fact moral centre of the novel—who mentions it.

While *Puranas* usually offer a single point of view, even when they lend themselves to different interpretations, novelistic techniques allow for the deployment of multiple viewpoints. *The Man-eater of Malgudi* features three different points of view: the first is given pride of place being that of Nataraj, the narrator. He sees in Vasu a problem that he does not know how to solve. He is too involved in the material world and, to an extent, is captivated by Vasu's *rajasic* energy. Nataraj's temperament is passive (*tamasic*) and, although he counts himself very religious, he is unable to either take action or a step back and see things more philosophically. Nataraj even comes to identify himself with Vasu, whose determination and freedom he envies (Alam 1988). Sastri—whose name means learned one—provides the second viewpoint: to him it is clear that Vasu is a demon, and it is therefore inevitable that he brings mischief and disorder; however, he knows that it is only a matter of time till he destroys himself, so he does not fret about the unwelcomed visitor. He invites the readers to consider the story as a *Purana*, taking a step back and contemplating the disruption and restoration of cosmic order. The third viewpoint is the author's—or the implied reader's—who are aware of the double nature of the narrative and contemplate the interplay of literary genres, which complement and explain each other, and their equal commitment to different truths: social and philosophical.

Basing a realistic novel on a myth does not make it less realistic. According to Franco Moretti (2001), realism does not depend on the plot, but on the "fillers." A novel, Moretti argues, is perceived as "serious" and realistic when it portrays a certain milieu, lingering on the description of petty incidents largely unrelated to the plot. Moretti argues that this technique fulfils the desire of

middle-class readers to see themselves represented in literary works. Thus, mirroring Seymour Chatman's (1978, 53-56) famous distinction between kernels (necessary turning points of the narrative) and satellites (minor subplots that do not change the story), Moretti distinguishes the narrative "scaffold," which provides the plot, from its "fillers," which provide contextual descriptions. By mirroring society and its idiosyncrasies, the fillers confer a patent of authenticity to the narrative. Creative rewriting entails reducing a text to its bare scaffold and adding new fillers to give it a new form.

Likewise, Narayan has reduced the *asura* myth to its essentials, where an evil individual endowed with energy and willpower becomes so strong as to threaten the general order. At that point, through an extraordinary intervention, the character turns his very evil power against himself and succumbs, thus restoring the pristine order. This thin storyline suits both the myth and the novel. The choice of the context, and consequently of the fillers, determines the poetics behind the novel. There are basically three ways in which the author can relate himself to the original story: it can obliterate it completely, like Kurosawa's *Ran* does with Shakespeare's *King Lear* (and Shakespeare did with his sources), he can acknowledge the former narrative affirming that the newer version must substitute the old one, like Aimé Césaire does with William Shakespeare's *Tempest,* or it can let both stories live alongside, which is Narayan's choice. Thus, the two tellings of the story complement and even validate each other. Narayan's rewriting validates the myth because it shows how it can be true in the real world, and the myth validates Narayan's story because it shows how the forces he describes have an existence beyond contingency and novelistic imagination. This mutual validation is not necessarily religious, but it is not secular either, as the resolutions of the conflicts described in the novel are firmly rooted in Hindu ethos (Naik 1976, 66) and hint at supernatural forces. The double narrative makes the story of Vasu and Nataraj exemplary and sparks a reflection on the elusive nature of good and evil.

Narayan's careful choice of new fillers for an old myth is not without importance. Many scholars, for instance, have pointed out that Vasu is a typical Western capitalist, energetic but unsustainable and destructive. He shows traces of all the six evils typically associated with *asuras*, even though greed and selfishness seem to prevail. He is also aggressive, but never gratuitously, he resorts to violence only when he can gain something from it. He claims that he has never stricken a man first. His hypocritical self-righteousness and bullying arrogance towards Nataraj, his defiance of the laws, and exploitative attitude towards the environment make him a perfect colonial type. Even his education and scientific approach to taxidermy vouchsafe the analogy with English colonisation. Taxidermy was an obsession of many English colonisers, who collected hundreds of stuffed animals (Walther 2015). This equation of colonisers and *asuras* adds a sharp edge to the novel, but does not overwrite the power of the myth.

Another interesting authorial intervention consists in the choice of the narrator. In the original myth, Bhasmasura obtains his boon from Shiva. However, the ungrateful *asura* turns against the god and tries to incinerate him. Shiva begs the help of Vishnu, who intervenes in his avatar as Mohini, the sensual dancer, who seduces the demon into the self-destructive dance. The name "Nataraj" refers to a form of Shiva as dancer, which may be a vague reference to the original players. However, the real protagonists of the myth are Bhasmasura and Vishnu as Mohini. The choice of the first-person narrator enhances the comic potential of the novel. Not only is Nataraj an unfit antagonist for Vasu, he fails to understand that he is not the protagonist of his story. Like the Talkative Man often found in Narayan's tales, Nataraj magnifies his own presence even when his part in the story amounts to nihil. At the beginning of the novel, Nataraj speaks so much about himself and his printing business that the reader is induced to share his belief that he has an important part in the story. In fact, this narrative is not autodiegetic but heterodiegetic, although the narrator fails to understand it—incidentally a trait that foreshadows *Midnight's Children*. Nataraj is unable to see that the real antagonists of Vasu are Sastri and Rangi. Rangi is treated with sympathy, despite her low social position. Unlike Rosie in *The Guide*, she does not abandon her profession as a prostitute. On the contrary, she explains that she accepts her lot almost proudly. When Nataraj hints that she may have taken opium, she replies: "'Sir, I am only a public woman, following what is my *dharma*. I may be a sinner to you, but I do nothing worse than what some of the so-called family women are doing. I observe our rules. Whatever I may do, I don't take opium'" (Narayan 1961, 115). Her dedication to the temple and possibly her views on *dharma* make her a perfect realistic Transposition of Mohini. Sastri understands the true nature of Vasu, Nataraj and Rangi better than the narrator, but he has very limited narrative agency. Oftentimes he prods his principal into urgent work even when the latter has no mind to do it. As Nataraj obliquely recognises, Sastri is the real asset of his establishment. He never calls him his staff or employee, but rather his well-wisher. In spite of his subordinate position, Sastri takes his job much more seriously than his boss, so much so that the traditional roles are reversed:

> Sastri, when there was any emergency, treated me as a handy boy; I had no alternative but to accept the role. Now my duty would be to fix the block on the machine and put the second impression on all the labels and spread them out to dry—and then he would come and give the third impression and put out the labels to dry again. He explained some of the finer points: "The blocks are rather worn; you'll have to let in more ink." "Yes, Mr. Sastri." He looked at me through his silver-rimmed small glasses and said firmly, "Unless the labels are second-printed and dry by three o'clock today, it's going to be impossible to deliver them tomorrow. You know what kind of a man K.J. is… (Narayan 1961, 14)

Not only is Sastri more competent in business and other instances of practical life, he appears more responsive than Nataraj. When his master faces the problem of evicting Vasu from his attic, Sastri lectures him on *rakshasas* almost resorting to psychoanalytic jargon:

> [Vasu] fits all the definitions of a *rakshasa*, persisted Sastri, and he went on to define the make-up of a *rakshasa*, or a demoniac creature who possessed enormous strength, strange powers, and genius, but recognized no sort of restraints of man or God. He said, every rakshasa gets swollen with his ego. He thinks he is invincible, beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him. He stood expatiating on the lives of various demons in *Puranas* to prove his point. (Narayan 1961, 72)

Sastri cites several stories and eventually tells Bhasmasura's myth in detail. He returns to it in the very last paragraph of the novel, when he expounds his *rakshasa* theory again and recaps the story of Bhasmasura, stressing that, despite their power, "the universe has survived all the *rakshasa* that were ever born." It must be so, "otherwise," Sastri concludes, "what is to happen to humanity?" (Narayan 1961, 174). Sastri seems to imply that *rakshasas* are not destroyed because they disturb human or even divine tranquillity, but they are annihilated when they threaten to destroy the world. At that point only, an unforeseeable *deus ex machina* saves the situation by destroying the demon.

Narayan's re-writing of the myth allows for two different interpretations: the first is Sastri's explanation that Vasu unwittingly broke his skull to swat a mosquito. Nataraj unquestioningly believes it because it lifts a weight off his heart. To my knowledge, no scholar has ever criticised this conclusion, considering it the closest equivalent to the original myth. However, this explanation is utterly unrealistic, and arguably various details in the text suggest another one, namely that Vasu has been killed in a more ordinary way. There is no evidence of this, but some clues: firstly, Rangi the prostitute is really concerned about Kumar, the temple elephant; secondly, Rangi and Sastri have known each other for decades, being neighbours and Sastri being in the temple committee; thirdly, Sastri had anticipated that "to deal with a *rakshasa* one must possess the marksmanship of a hunter, the wit of a pundit and the guile of a harlot" (Narayan 1961, 72), which may refer to himself and Rangi; fourthly, Rangi is the last person who sees Vasu alive, as she brings him the dinner and allegedly fans him asleep; fifthly, quite unexpectedly, Sastri leaves Malgudi during the police enquiry and returns only when it is over, claiming that he had gone to the marriage of a relative and had made a pilgrimage on the way back, though he had never mentioned such intention before.

That Sastri and Rangi may have a hand in Vasu's death never crosses Nataraj's mind, who is also the narrator, but then he does not possess a critical mind and is content with Sastri's explanation. Could it be that Rangi hit Vasu's head

with the butt of his rifle, as Nataraj imagined to do for a moment? She wanted him to sleep over the procession, not necessarily his death. The death, official reports say, was caused by a concussion on the right temple of the frontal bone (Narayan 1961, 163), which does not fit exactly Sastri's reported version, mentioning the man's forehead (Narayan 1961, 173). In sum, the narrative does not warrant such a conclusion but does not exclude it either. The point is not to guess whodunnit or what Narayan may have had in mind, but rather to appreciate that the novel foreshadows more possibilities than Nataraj takes into account and that these interpretations are different ways of translating the myth into realist fiction.

Supposing my reading is not entirely incorrect, how does it affect the relationship between the realistic and the mythical narratives? This interpretation widens the gap between secular and non-secular versions but, in practice, vindicates Sastri's energetic attitude against Nataraj's passivity. That a pious and tranquil man like Sastri may conceive a plan to destroy Vasu consorting with a meek temple dancer is as unlikely as the descent of a deity. The bottom line of the novel is that Vasu's greed and selfishness are such that he brings death upon himself through unlikely instruments. What can they be? We noticed earlier that Narayan does not specify which of the six evils causes the death of Vasu. Indeed, it is difficult to establish it with precision. If Sastri's version is to be believed, it might be *krodha*, anger, since he is irritated at being disturbed by mosquitos. Surely Narayan could have found a more realistic way to kill Vasu through his own vices; after all, he is surrounded by weapons and chemicals. The choice of the self-inflicted concussion by necessity leaves space for doubts, inducing the readers to look for a more realistic explanation, which the author did not voice explicitly. To both Rangi and Sastri, Kumar the elephant is holy, and the sacrilege of killing him sounds intolerable. Would that justify the murder of Vasu, or at least the attempt to smother him into unconsciousness? Indeed, Narayan prefers to kill his fictional protagonist rather than his fictional elephant. If we suppose that Vasu was murdered, we must take a metaphorical view of Narayan's understanding of self-destruction. A possible interpretation is that evil produces evil, which kills him who first introduced it into the small community. Vasu's unholy violence transforms Sastri and Rangi, who turn violent for a brief moment before returning to normalcy. After all, even Vishnu and Saraswati do not usually kill people, unless an exceptional *rakshasa* threatens cosmic order.

The interpretation just delineated is based on circumstantial evidence and cannot be proved. However, it should be contemplated alongside Nataraj's "official" version. It brings a covert religious element into the picture that complements and enriches the binary of good vs evil. Moreover, it foregrounds the role of *shakti*, the feminine energy. Rosanne Kanhai-Brunton (1993) offers a fascinating alternative to the Bhasmasura myth as underlying frame of

reference. Indeed, she contends that Vasu resembles Shiva both in his discipline and his power (160). His mistress then can be equated with Parvati, who may be meek, but may also appear as terrific as Durga or Kali. The scholar then stresses the role of Rangi in the death of the villain. Rangi, besides reminding one of Mohini, is herself an embodiment of *shakti*. Like Devi, who slew the demon Mahisha,[11] Rangi is both destroyer and preserver, her energy being released to slay demons and maintain the status quo.

In conclusion, *The Man-eater of Malgudi* is overtly based on a pattern quite similar to that of the *Puranas*. However, the novel's non-secular axis is not exhausted by the analogy with the story of Bhasmasura and Mohini; it goes far beyond it. The text creates a singular anamorphic effect: depending on the point of view, it caters to three kinds of readers, two of which secular: the train traveller, who is content with social comedy; a more sophisticated reader who enjoys the almost post-modern superimposition of a mythical narrative over a modern sketch—or vice versa; a spiritually bent reader uncomfortable with the futility of literary genres who sees in either narrative an echo of the human predicament, poised between illusion and infinity.

Conclusion: Irony and Detachment

In his comprehensive study on Narayan's irony, M.K. Naik (1983) perceives an evolution in the use of irony. While Narayan's earlier novels were humoristic, in *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide* and *Man-eater*, irony becomes "a vision." In his mature phase Narayan is no longer faltering in front of the eternal question what man can do with himself and his life; his fiction takes an enormous leap from irony as a device to irony as vision, from "ironic filigree to ironic architectonics, as a result of which his work gains in moral richness" (Naik 1983, 3). Naik also complains that the last phase—comprehending *Vendor of Sweets* and *The Painter of Signs*—shows signs that that vision has been blurred. Naik praises Narayan's "Ironic vision" as he considers it a reflection of life's irony. Indeed, Naik foregrounds the paradoxical predicament of humans with their petty strivings and aims against universal fate. In this sense, Narayan's irony is a "moral discovery" (Naik 1983, 44-78). In his close readings, Naik also points out how the comic irony of the earlier novels persists in the novelist's best works; however, he seems to suggest, their contextual cosmic irony bestows on them a deeper meaning. Naik's monograph is probably the most comprehensive, but not the only full-length study that has called attention to Narayan's

11 In *Gods, Demons and Others*, Narayan tells the story of how Devi challenged and killed the evil buffalo *rakshasa*, matching with her weapons all the different forms that he could take.

irony; at the turn of the century other scholars devoted their attention to ironic characteristics of Narayan's prose.[12]

According to Wayne Booth (1974), irony always implies a kind duplicity. An ironic statement asks the addressees to realise in their minds the object of the statement as well as its opposite, and to choose between them. Booth also distinguishes between overt and covert irony. The first is clearly indicated by the text with phrases like "it is ironic that…" the latter leaves the task to recognise the ironic meaning to the reader, which sometimes gives rise to different interpretations. Booth also argues that the ironic situation implies an ironist, a victim of irony, and a spectator. In some cases, the first and the third may coincide; when the first and the second coincide, one speaks of self-irony, a condition in which the subject estranges himself from his plight—a narrative mode that Narayan often adopts in his autobiographical sketches, but not in the novels. To be capable of an ironic view, the ironist must detach himself from the situation and from the victim of the irony. This is the typical situation that we see in *Swami and Friends*, where the young hero is often left bewildered by the incomprehensible ways of adults. In fact their behaviour is quite normal for general readers. G. G. Sedgewick (2019), in a seminal essay, discusses ironic detachment with reference to Lucretius and Francis Bacon. Both authors point out the pleasure of contemplating a situation from the vantage point of a superior truth. However, Bacon maintains, the ironist's attitude must be one of "pity" and not "swelled pride" (Sedgewick 2019, 14). Even more importantly for our discourse, discussing Goethe's romantic attitude, Sedgewick concludes that "sympathy and detachment are not mutually exclusive terms" (Sedgewick 2019, 16).

Sometimes the characteristic double-sidedness of an ironic situation is born of a double standard, when the reader is compelled to hold two views at once. The dialogue between Hamlet and Polonius is a case in point, as the spectators know that both characters draw their own different conclusions from their exchange and perceive what the words mean to the characters, who have little idea of the other's mind. In *Swami and Friends* the pleasure of an ironic reading stems from the simultaneous contemplation of the child's and the adult's viewpoints. The difference between the Elisabethan drama and the Indian novel is that in the former the ironist and the audience are authorized to feel superior to both Hamlet and Polonius, while in the latter the author seems to sympathise with both children and adults. The same can be said for the three novels considered here. The author is detached from his characters and their conflicts, and views their predicaments with equal sympathy. None is too mean for him, none too great—with the exception, perhaps, of the historical figure of Gandhi in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Thus Narayan is equidistant from Sampath and Srinivas, Raju,

12 See for instance Olinder (1989); Raval (1993); David and Abidi (1982); Kain (1992); Thieme (1993); Chellappan (1994); Gupta (2008).

Rosie and Velan, and Nataraj and Vasu. This is the same attitude attributed to Srinivas in his epiphany about the world, in which the speculative journalist distances himself from petty daily cares and is filled with wonder at the sheer energy of the world (Narayan 1949, 50). The open ending of these novels is yet another way to invite a detached reading of the characters' vicissitudes. No denouement is required to bring about a catharsis; the telling itself is cathartic because the reader is not emotionally involved in the conflict.

The empathic detachment mustered by Narayan would probably be taken as a kind of romantic irony if he were a European author. However, considering that this detachment operates on the secular and supernatural axes simultaneously, it will not be idle to view it from a Hindu philosophical perspective. Vedantic Hinduism invites one to consider the world as an illusion, Maya's veil covering the ultimate truth with the delusion of strife and attachments. The savant knows it and tries to move beyond the world of illusion, while less enlightened people believe in the reality of facts. The world of Malgudi reflects this situation: a wise reader will observe it with a smile and remember its fictitious character, while the railway traveller desirous to forget the monotony of his journey will empathise and identify with the characters.

The position of the author then appears paradoxical as he knows that realist fiction is the imitation of an illusion. What is the point of writing it? In the case of Narayan, one could say that to him writing was a playful activity; Narayan plays with his Malgudi and the fate of its inhabitants, giving them aims, passions, conflicts, and observing how they react. This kind of play has a name in the Hindu tradition: *lila*. The Sanskrit word points to a kind of divine intellectual activity. God (Brahma) has no need to live in the world, he suffers neither *karma* nor *samsara* (Coomaraswamy 1941, 98), he is under no external constraint and yet he creates the world because he conceives a "form of transcendent desire that expresses itself in the divine acts of pure play, or *lila*. These include the desire to establish divine order, or *dharma*, within the material world, as well as a yearning to enable salvation and liberation from *samsara*" (Schweig 2017). *Lila* is therefore an "epiphany of the spirit," (Coomaraswamy 1941, 101) which creates the material universe, or the illusion thereof, and it is a crucial tenet of *Vaishnava* theology—arguably the closest to Narayan's—where it is applied especially to Krishna. According to the notion of *lila*, God is both attached to, and detached from, the world he has created. Furthermore, Graham Schweig (2017) explains, the absolute freedom of God that makes *lila* possible can assume a didactic purpose, "conveying a teaching for souls who are absorbed in *samsara*." Narayan's relationship with the world of Malgudi is the same. It is a textual embodiment of his spirit, which he contemplates, and in which he sometimes intervenes in ways that must appear incomprehensible to his characters. One should not push the parallel too far, but Narayan's detachment towards his characters, should be understood as a spiritual or philosophical stance rather than a mere literary

technique. However, as in the case of secularism, Narayan must have been aware that his characteristic detachment can be taken as a humorous device as well as a spiritual one. While railway readers enjoy watching the strife of the Malgudians from a safe distance, the readers willing to follow Narayan on the speculative path may find in his irony a spiritual exercise, a kind of "yoga" that helps to develop detachment from the illusionary fictional world.

Works Cited

Ahluwalia, Harsharan S. 1984. "Narayan's Sense of Audience." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 15 (1):59-65.

Alam, Fakrul. 1988. "Plot and Character in R. K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*: A Reassessment." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 19 (3):77-92.

Benjamin, Walter. 1968. "The Story Teller." In *Illuminations*, 83-110. Schocken.

Bhattacharya, Nandini. 2004. *R.K. Narayan's The Guide: New Critical Perspectives*. Delhi, India: Worldview Publications.

Booth, Wayne C. 1974. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Chatman, Seymour Benjamin. 1978. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Chellappan, K. 1994. "The Dialectics of Myth and Irony in R. K. Narayan." In *R. K. Narayan: Critical Perspectives*, edited by A. L. McLeod, 22-32. New Delhi: Sterling.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. 1941. "Lila." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 61 (2):98-101.

Damrosch, David. 2003. *What is World Literature?* Woodstock: Princeton University Press.

David, P. C., and S. Z. H. Abidi. 1982. "Levels of Irony in the Short Stories of R. K. Narayan." *The Literary Endeavour: A Quarterly Journal Devoted to English Studies* 3 (3-4):39-44.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2016. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, *The Randy L and Melvin R Berlin family lectures*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Greene, Graham. 1981. "Discovering Narayan." *The New Republic* (April 24).

Gupta, G. S. Balarama. 2008. "R. K. Narayan, the Ironist (with Focus on His Short Stories)." *Literary Criterion* 43 (3-4):34-44.

Holmström, Lakshmi. 1973. *The Novels of R. K. Narayan*, *(A Writers Workshop Greybird Book.)*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop.

Kain, Geoffrey. 1992. "Eternal, Insatiable Appetite: The Irony of R. K. Narayan's Baited Hero." *The Language Quarterly* 30 (3-4):47-60.

Kanhai-Brunton, Rosanne. 1993. "Kali as Man-Eater and as Goddess: Myth-Making in R. K. Narayan's The Man-Eater of Malgudi." In R. K. Narayan: *Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Geoffrey Kain, 155-165. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Kirpal, Viney. 1988. "Moksha for Raju: The Archetypal Four-Stage Journey." *World Literature Written in English* 28 (2):356-363.

Kumar, Malreddy Pavan. 2011. "'Cosmopolitanism Within": The case of R.K. Narayan's fictional Malgudi." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47 (5):558-570.

Mishra, Ganeshwar. 1993. "The Novel as Purana: A Study of the Form of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and *Kanthapura*." In *Publisher: Michigan State UP*, edited by Geoffrey Kain, 9-23. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Moretti, Franco. 2001. "Il secolo serio." In *Il romanzo. La cultura del romanzo*, edited by Franco Moretti, 688-725. Torino: Einaudi.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. 2001. *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*. Delhi: Pencraft International. Original edition, 1971.

Naik, M. K. 1976. "Theme and Form in R.K. Narayan's: *The Man-eater of Malgudi*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 10 (3):65-72.

Naik, Madhukar Krishna. 1983. *The Ironic Vision: A Study of the Fiction of R.K. Narayan*. New Delhi: Sterling.

Naipaul, V. S. 1977. *India: A Wounded Civilization*. London: Vintage. Reprint, Kindle.

Narasimhaiah, C. D. 1979. "R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*." In *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*, edited by M.K. Naik. Delhi: MacMillan.

Narayan, R. K. 1949. *Mr Sampath—The Printer of Malgudi*. London: Vintage.

Narayan, R. K. 1958. *The Guide*. London: Penguin. Reprint, 1988.

Narayan, R. K. 1961. *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. London: Penguin. Original edition, Viking Press. Reprint, 1983.

Narayan, R. K. 1972a. "Gods, Demons and Modern Times." *The Literary Criterion* 10 (3):47-54.

Narayan, R. K. 1972b. *Malgudi Days*. London: Penguin. Reprint, 2006.

Narayan, R. K. 1974. *My Days. A Memoir*. London: Penguin. Reprint, 1989.

Narayan, R. K. 1983. *A Tiger for Malgudi*. New York and London: Penguin.

Narayan, R. K. 1987. *Gods, Demons, and Others*. New Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad: Vision Books.

Olinder, Britta. 1989. "Irony in R. K. Narayan's Short Stories." In *Short Fiction in the New Literatures in English*, edited by Jacqueline Bardolph. Aarhus: Eaclals.

Pain, Sohan. 2012. "The Doctrine of Karma-Samniasa and the Theme of Renunciation in R.K. Narayan's Fiction." In *Modern Perspectives on Vedanta: Proceedings of the 20th International Congress of Vedanta*, edited by Girish Nath Jha. New Delhi: D. K. Printworld.

Pousse, Michel. 1995. *R.K. Narayan: A Painter of Modern India*, *Studies of World Literature in English, vol. 4*. New York: P. Lang.

Prasad, G. J. V. 2016. *Writing India, Writing English: Literature, Language, Location*. London and New York: Routledge.

Ramanan, Mohan G. 2014. *R. K. Narayan: An Introduction*: Foundation Books.

Rao, Ranga. 2017. *R.K. Narayan: The Novelist and His Art*. First edition. ed. New Delhi: Oxford Univsersity Press.

Rao, V. Panduranga. 1971. "Tea with R. K. Narayan." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 6 (1):79-83.

Raval, Suresh. 1993. "Irony, Structure, and Storytelling in R. K. Narayan's *The Financial Expert*." *Publisher: Michigan State UP*.

Rayen, Sr. Mary Beatina. 1993. "The Guide: A Study in Transcendence." In *R. K. Narayan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Geoffrey Kain, 55-77. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.

Rothfork, John. 2018. "The Hindu World of R. K. Narayan's Mr. Sampath." *Comparative literature--East & West = Bi jiao wen xue--dong fang yu xi fang*. 2 (1):24.

Roy, Arundhati. 1997. *The God of Small Things*. Delhi: IndiaInk.

Roy, Binayak. 2012. "The Making of a Saint: A New Reading of R. K. Narayan's The Guide." In *A Talent for the Particular: Critical Essays on R. K. Narayan*, edited by Raymond-Jean Frontain and Basudeb Chakraborti, 92-124. New Delhi: Worldview Publications.

Sankaran, Chitra. 1991. "Patterns of Story-Telling in R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 26 (1):127-50.

Sankaran, Chitra. 2007. *The Myth Connection: The Use of Hindu Mythology in some Novels of Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan*. 2nd ed. Bern: Peter Lang.

Scholes, Robert, and A. Walton Litz. 1969. "Epiphanies and Epicleti." In *Dubliners*, 253-256. New York: Viking.

Schweig, Graham M. 2017. Līlā. In *Oxford Bibliographies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Sedgewick, G.G. 2019. *Of Irony: Especially in Drama*: University of Toronto Press. Original edition, 1935.

Seneviratne, H. L. 1992. "Food Essence and the Essence of Experience." In *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*, edited by R.S. Khare. Albany, N.Y.: State of New York University Press.

Thieme, John. 1993. "Irony in Narayan's *The Man Eater of Malgudi*." *The English Review* 3 (4):13.

Thieme, John. 2007. *R.K. Narayan*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Venuti, Lawrence. 2008. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge.

Vescovi, Alessandro. 2011. "R.K. Narayan's «Selvi» as a Reflection upon the Feminine Self." *Acme: annali della Facoltà di filosofia e lettere dell'Università statale di Milano* LXIV (I).

Vescovi, Alessandro. 2023. "The Language of Translation as an Ironic Strategy in R.K. Narayan's Novels." *Prithvi Academic Journal* 6 (1):146-154.

Walkowitz, Rebecca L. 2015. *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, *Literature now*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Walsh, William. 1982. *R.K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation*. London: Heinemann.

Walther, Sundhya. 2015. "The Nation's Taxidermist: Ungovernable Bodies in R. K. Narayan's The Man-Eater of Malgudi." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 84 (4):74-89.

Chapter 5.
Myth and Food Culture as a Narrative Backbone[1]

This chapter considers three novels written at the turn of the century: *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) by Anita Desai, *The Glass Palace* (2000) by Amitav Ghosh, and Man Booker Prize winner *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai. All three deal with Indian modernity. Ghosh addresses the issue through a historical gaze, while the two Desais highlight the contradictions of the post-Independence Indian middle class poised between Indian and Western values—the daughter being more optimistic than the mother. The three narratives are all overtly secular and do not address religious issues. Nonetheless, traditional Hindu elements underpin the narrative structure in similar ways, especially with reference to food culture and traditional myths. Food and myths are an integral part of Hinduism, which is not simply a religion but a lifestyle encompassing most human activities. Hindu ethical values are used in these novels to underline secular values.

Food is a universal experience for human beings, which traverses cultural, national, political, gender, and caste boundaries. To a writer it may offer a vantage point to observe society, marking analogies and differences. On occasion, it may serve as an objective correlative of the characters' plight—or even a clue to the author's viewpoint. Moreover, food culture is an excellent background for narratives that aim at worldwide circulation; it is both local and global, a mark of uniqueness which is intelligible to most readers. Food is a crucial token of identity in every society; in India it plays a significant role in ethics and cosmology. According to Olivelle (2011), on a supernatural level, food is a means to connect humans with gods. On the social level, sharing food is a must of Indian culture, which considers avarice and greed as the roots of all evils. On the other hand, food is also the knot that binds human existence to the *samsara* (Cavaliere 2016, 226), and it is therefore necessary to learn to detach oneself from it. Like *dharmic* duties, food rules do not apply to everyone in the same way; they depend on *varna*, *jati*, and *ashrama*—class, caste and stage of life. Brahmins, for instance,

1 The observations on *The Glass Palace* and *Fasting, Feasting* appeared in an earlier version of this article entitled "A Man Is What He Eats (and what he doesn't): on the Use of Traditional Food Culture in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*," in *A World of Nourishment. Reflections on Food in Indian Culture*. Edited by Cinzia Pieruccini and Paola Rossi, Milano, Ledizioni, 2016. I thank the editors for allowing me to republish this material.

must follow specific dietary prescriptions that do not apply to lower classes. Likewise, according to normative texts, hermits are supposed to live solely on what they find in the forest, and *sannyasins* only on alms (Olivelle 2011).

According to Dipesh Chakrabarti (2000), the dichotomy between modernity and tradition developed in the early phases of the *swaraj*. Before Indian intellectuals ever dreamed of getting rid of the British, they went through a period when they reacted to the cultural denigration of which they had been victims by imitating their masters (see chapter one). The rising Indian Anglophone middle class welcomed such innovations as cricket, novels, tea parties, and the possibility to equal the English in military or administrative positions. This proximity with the Europeans and involvement in administrative—if not political—life nurtured the seeds of *swaraj*. However, even to oppose the English Raj, Indian intellectuals had to compromise with Western notions. To inculcate in their fellow countrymen the secular notion of fatherland, early freedom fighters had to dismiss *varnas*; and to foster social mobility, they had to dismiss *jatis*. In the public sphere, they had to adopt the English ways. This compromise with the aliens had to be counterbalanced somehow, so it fell to the women to become the custodians of tradition (Narayan 1997). If men could suffer pollution in the public arena during the day, they needed a domestic sanctuary to return to in the evening. This attitude, Uma Narayan maintains, is amply visible in the treatment of food; men under the necessity of leaving the house to attend to business are allowed to forego daily rituals and to eat forbidden food, if necessary, while it falls to the women's lot to remain at home and preserve *grihalakshmi* (domestic harmony), cooking traditional meals for their husbands as they repair to their abodes at night.

Fasting, Feasting

Predictably, such division of roles and attitudes toward food did not end with Independence; the new Indian middle class has consolidated these customs despite the apparent contradictions that emerged in the unprecedented contexts of post-Independence India. This is exactly what Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is about; in her novel, food is both a motive and a theme, which develops throughout the story, underlying the paradoxical and sometimes toxic relation between tradition and modernity. Desai is a good example of post-secular novelist in that she offers a critique of the secularism that has been embraced as a mimicry of the West. The text exposes its awkward implementation in India but does not advocate a return to pristine Hindu customs, which are untenable, patriarchal, and divisive.

The novel explores intricate family dynamics across two countries: India and the United States. The story revolves around Uma, the elder daughter, growing up in a traditional secularised Indian household. Despite her failing grades, Uma loves attending her convent school, which her parents consider wasted money.

Other family members appear more successful, but eventually, they are victims of patriarchy just like the protagonist: Uma's younger sister Aruna receives many marriage proposals, and eventually faces a facade marriage, her cousin is murdered, and her brother is stranded in the South of the United States.

The novel is sharply divided into two parts, one set in India and the other in the USA. Both parts portray dysfunctional families whose difficulties become manifest through their attitudes to food. The family described in the first part is the epitome of the crisis of the Indian middle class, while the overfed American family reflects Western decadence; their attitude to food is grossly unbalanced and their eagerness for more is literally crippling them. Their unhappiness and dysfunctions, however, do not depend on food, but are realistically revealed and poetically symbolised through their dietary habits.

Anita Desai's Indian middle class appears poised between tradition, decorum, and *kismet* on the one hand, and modernity, progress, and welfare on the other. Contradictions become starker when it comes to children, especially daughters, who are educated as if they were to go into the world, but are actually never free to decide for themselves (Oliver 2000). The case of Uma's cousin Anamika is emblematic. She is a clever young woman and an outstanding student; she wins a scholarship to Oxford, but her family does not allow her to leave, and ironically the declined "award" is filed to build her curriculum as a bride-to-be. Later, as she becomes a victim of bride burning, her native family must accept the verdict of the official enquiry: domestic accident. The mingling of tradition and modernity has patently failed; had Anamika's family been an older clan, they would have been able to protect their relative even within another household, but a modern nuclear family proves powerless in the face of old discriminations.

As is customary in India, food rituals are utilised to enforce the power relations within the family (Appadurai 1981; Khare and Rao 1986) and as a battlefield on which tensions come to the fore. From this point of view, a significant character is Uma, the daughter of the house. Unlike her cousin Anamika, she is just an ordinary girl without any particular quality; as such she is denied any personal choice. Her uneasiness with patriarchy is first hinted at during a family outing when the girl craves some sweets but cannot bring herself to ask for anything since she knows that she cannot have them anyway; as a well-behaved girl, she is supposed to eat frugally and never show any greed for food (Khare 1986). After this emotionally charged but unexpressed renunciation, Uma vents her discontent and tries in vain to defy her parents during a meal (Ravichandran 2005).

> "UMA, pass your father the fruit."
> Uma picks up the fruit bowl with both hands and puts it down with a thump before her father. Bananas, oranges, apples—there they are, for him.
> Blinking, he ignores them. Folding his hands on the table, he gazes over them

> with the sphinx-like expression of the blind. Mama knows what is wrong. She taps Uma on the elbow.
> "Orange," she instructs her. Uma can no longer pretend to be ignorant of Papa's needs, Papa's ways. After all, she has been serving them for some twenty years. She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in strips, then divides it into separate segments. [...] One by one, he lifts them with the tips of his fingers and places them in his mouth. Everyone waits while he repeats the gesture, over and over. Mama's lips are pursed with the care she gives her actions, and their importance.
> [...]
> "Where is Papa's finger bowl?" she asks loudly.
> The finger bowl is placed before Papa. He dips his fingertips in and wipes them on the napkin. He is the only one in the family who is given a napkin and a finger bowl; they are emblems of his status.
> Mama sits back. The ceremony is over. She has performed it. Everyone is satisfied. (Desai 1999, 23-24)

Although no religious values are attached to the "ceremony," it is clear that the position of the *pater familias* is connected to an order where male family members were considered closer to the divinity than females. The subtle way in which the text introduces the issue mediates the cultural differences for the non-Indian reader. Uma is conscious that she is breaking a rule as she does not peel the oranges for her father, but a non-Indian reader needs a more explicit explanation, which comes from the mother. Another traditional issue is implicit here, namely the distinction between pure and impure: the father cannot touch food that has not been prepared for him and is given a purifying bowl of water after his repast, which is not considered necessary for women. The issue of purity is all the more strident because Uma's father takes pride in his secular views. The lack of a religious justification for the prominence of the father makes the whole situation even more violent. Within a religious attitude, Uma would be rewarded for her devotion to her father, who—according to the Hindu view—allows her to gain merit by suffering to be served. Within a traditional view, she would not be serving an arrogant father, but her *dharma*. Lacking the notions of *karma* and *dharma*, the whole affair becomes abusive and grotesque.

The contradictory position of Uma's family surfaces again when the newborn son, Arun, refuses to eat meat. In a modern, secular society, this should be interpreted as a natural dietary preference—indeed, he is not vegetarian by choice; he naturally dislikes meat—but vegetarianism in his family is not simply a matter of taste; it is interpreted as a defiance of the family status and identity:

> Papa was confounded. A meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes brought about in his life, and his brother's, by their education. Raised amongst traditional vegetarians, their eyes had been opened to the benefits of meat along with that of cricket and the English language: the three were linked inextricably

> in their minds. They had even succeeded in convincing the wives they married of this novel concept of progress, and passed it on to their children. Papa was always scornful of those of their relatives who came to visit and insisted on clinging to their cereal and vegetable eating ways, shying away from the meat dishes Papa insisted on having cooked for dinner.
> Now his own son, his one son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life. Papa was deeply vexed. He prescribed cod liver oil. (Desai 1999, 32)

Predictably enough, the task of administering cod liver oil to the unruly child falls to Uma, the unmarried sister. Apparently, the elders' generation has been able to embrace modernity only by mimicking the West, and even so in some aspects of their lives only, which makes things all the more complicated for those who have to bear the brunt of keeping up the tradition. The situation is paradoxical; in his youth, papa had to assert himself by changing his diet in order to become modern; now his son has to assert his vegetarianism against the patriarch. Uma never actually asserts herself, but she only appears happy when she follows her aunt Mira-masi to an Ashram, where she lives on very little food and green berries.

Uma and her brother Arun grow up amid these contradictions symbolised by food. Eventually Arun is sent off to America to complete his education—another sign of Anglophilia. At least there, he hopes, he will get rid of the constrictions he has endured at home. He is wrong. His contradictory identity follows him, and once again, his plight is described and highlighted through his impossibility to comply with food codes in the new land. In fact, he is not peculiar in any way, but he falls victim to the unbalanced attitudes of other people, be they Indians or Americans. The novel dramatises the contradictions of the international middle class, whose relation with food mirrors its unbalanced attitude to life in general. The narrative in the first part is in no way nostalgic, but it may be construed as a critique of the way secularism has been implemented in India. The genealogy of the father's secularism suggests that it has been pursued for the wrong reasons and has unbalanced the previous Indian religious modus vivendi, here symbolised by Uma's life in the Ashram, where she retires for some months, possibly the only peaceful time she has in her life. The American part of the novel, on the other hand, proves that even if they were able to complete the transformation into a Western secular family, they would not be free from the danger of dysfunctions.

The Glass Palace

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) is a historical novel that spans three countries—India, Burma, and Malay—recounting a family saga that unfolds transnationally within a rising secular Indian middle class. The contradictions

of modern India are captured here, as it were, in their making. As in the case of *Fasting, Feasting*, the ethical relationship with food builds upon moral values of the Indian tradition. Like Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh does not advocate a return to religious values, nor does he overtly illustrate them like Raja Rao, and yet does deploy traditional moral values, often associated with food, to underpin the anticolonial ethos of his novel.

At the beginning, the protagonist, Rajkumar, is a teenage Bengali orphan stranded in Mandalay. Even though he is still a boy, the narrative suggests that he has the stamina and the self-discipline to become a successful businessman. As he gets into the city of Mandalay, he looks for a job at a food stall run by a woman who is said to be half-Indian. When he arrives, she is busy chopping vegetables and berates him for begging a job from her. Rajkumar does not waver and remains silent.

> She began to shout at the top of her voice, with her eyes closed: "What do you think—I have jobs under my armpits, to pluck out and hand to you? Last week a boy ran away with two of my pots. Who's to tell me you won't do the same?" And so on.
> Rajkumar understood that this outburst was not aimed directly at him […]. He lowered his eyes and stood there stoically, kicking the dust until she was done. (Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*, 5)

Eventually the boy's impassive behaviour wins over the woman, and she hires him; soon the discourse turns to food:

> "All right. Get to work, but remember, you're not going to get much more than three meals and a place to sleep."
> He grinned. "That's all I need." (Ghosh, 2000: 6)

The woman is afraid lest Rajkumar be a thief or vagrant, but his being content with little food, and his lack of greed—like an ascetic—convince her. Obviously, I am not suggesting that Rajkumar reveals ascetic qualities, only that his discipline is of the same kind as that required of Hindu asceticism, which values fasting as a highly commendable virtue. As Patrick Olivelle (2011) puts it, one's relationship with food mirrors one's behaviour in life. Rajkumar appears trustworthy because his relation to food appears balanced, which is a Hindu notion, even though it is not made explicit.

Later, the novel will introduce two characters whose attitude to food appears problematic, and indeed, both will eventually die because of their failure to establish a positive relationship with life. In both cases, by mimicking the British, they compromise with the colonial administration and cuisine, failing to overcome the contradictions that this compromise implies for them as Indians. I am referring to Collector Dey and Arjun—the latter one generation younger.

Both are basically good men who have only one fault: they unwittingly believe the English propaganda about the civilising mission of the colonisers. Dey is the District collector in Ratnagiri. Educated in England, he marries Uma, a Bengali woman some 15 years younger, hoping to develop a romantic and equal relationship with her, for which she is utterly unprepared. Besides, his anxiety about his precarious position within the British administration casts a shadow even on his domestic felicity. A dinner party epitomises his familiar predicament. Rajkumar, the orphan we met in Mandalay, is by now a successful Indian businessman based in Burma, who comes to the Collector's house as a guest. In the letter that recommends him to Uma, the Collector's wife, Rajkumar is introduced as a self-made man, only "slightly uncouth." When he disembarks from the ferry, Uma receives a report of "the dishevelled untidiness of his attire, his crumpled longyi, his greasy vest and his uncombed hair." So that "Uma was left with a sense of lingering unease. Was it prudent to invite someone like this to dinner? What exactly did he eat?" (Ghosh 2000, 139). Unable to figure out what kind of man he may be, Uma cannot imagine his dietary habits. She is doubly worried because her husband insists that she takes responsibility for the dinner. The collector's insistence on Uma's supervising this particular dinner has a didactic purpose: he wants his wife to learn to behave like a memsahib. This is an awkward position, not unlike that seen in *Fasting, Feasting*, where transition to Western modes is imposed with the patriarchal ways of the Hindu tradition. Uma cannot be the traditional Indian wife she was trained to become, but must obey her husband to develop the equal mutual relationship he dreams of. To avoid blunders, she decides to ask the cook to do exactly what he had prepared two weeks before according to the Sahib's instructions: "shepherd's pie, fried fish and blancmange" (Ghosh 2000, 139). The Collector is exasperated by his wife's ineptitude with English food codes; even before the dinner begins, he scolds her because the fish knives were not in the proper position and, during dinner, he publicly makes light of her, much to her exasperation, when she inadvertently drops a fork.

On the contrary, during that self-same dinner, the ever successful and self-assured Rajkumar, annoyed by the profusion of cutlery, is at a loss how to cut the fish, so he does something that leaves everyone astonished: he snaps his fingers nonchalantly in the middle of a sentence, and his attendant hurries to show him the right knife to be used.

The collector's fastidiousness and Uma's clumsiness with food mirror two opposite sides of the same real-life difficulty: they are importing an alien culture into their household. It comes as little surprise that Uma wants to divorce Collector Dey and that he is dismissed when the British administration needs a scapegoat to blame for a supposed scandal in the Burmese Royal Family exiled in Ratnagiri. Needless to say, defiant Rajkumar will not fall victim to the colonisers' contradictions, even though he too will later be crushed by the war.

Another character in *The Glass Palace* appears trapped in a cultural contradiction, leutenant Arjun (Sonia 2013). To any Indian this name immediately suggests Arjuna, one of the five Pandavas brothers, the great warrior and hero of the *Mahabharata*. Arjun is also the protagonist of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is technically a chapter of the great epic, in fact one of the most important texts of Hinduism. Here Arjuna descends onto the battlefield with Krishna (an incarnation of God Vishnu) as his charioteer. As he beholds the two armies ready to begin the mortal combat, Arjuna hesitates. Should he really commence a war that will kill so many valorous soldiers? Krishna reassures him, expounding the notion of *dharma* and the illusionary quality of life. The gist of his discourse is that since Arjun was born a warrior, his duty is to fight, yet he must do it without hatred and without passion, serving his *dharma*, not his passion.

Ghosh's choice of the character's name obliges the reader to compare him with his eponym. In the novel, Arjun is Uma's nephew, and one of the first Bengali cadet officers in the British army. He and his comrades are proud of their position, which they see as a significant achievement for themselves and for all Indians that they feel they represent. In fact, their predicament is far more awkward than they care to admit, as we shall see. Eventually, he will face the dilemma of whether to join the INA (Indian National Army) led by Subhash Chandra Bose, taking up arms against the English beside the Japanese, or remain loyal to the British. He decides for the former, but the inner conflict, far more than the actual war, consumes and kills him. As it happened in the case of Collector Dey, with Arjun too, the first warning signs that something is not quite as it should be are connected with food codes.

In his letters home, cadet Arjun goes to great lengths to explain how lucky he and his friends have been to be chosen for that position. He also explains that they feel as if they were the first true Indians as they live together regardless of religion and caste. They can "eat beef and pork and think nothing of it." "Every meal at an officers' mess, Arjun said, was an adventure, a glorious infringement of taboos," writes the cadet with juvenile enthusiasm (Ghosh 2000, 278). However, Arjun explains, it is difficult for many of them to get used to consuming these revolting viands. All of them have tasted for the first time food that they never had at home. But consuming it is a sort of test to prove that they are worthy of their new rank, that they have left behind all their ancestral divisions. In the army, the only way to be accepted by the English as equals is to eat like the English. On the contrary, the lower ranks eat according to the dietary prescriptions of their different communities.

Arjun's best friend, a Sikh called Hardidayal and duly dubbed Hardy, is incapable of going without his daily *daal* and *chapatis*, a staple in Indian lower classes. So he surreptitiously goes to the troop's mess for a morsel of this forbidden food. When he is eventually appointed company commander, Indian soldiers refuse to serve under a younger man coming from their own village. When the

Commanding Officer rebukes them for their insubordination, they complain with these words: "How can we respect this boy as an officer? He cannot even stomach the food that officers eat. He steals secretly into our messes to eat *chapati* " (Ghosh 2000, 282). The revelation is enough to suspend Hardy's appointment.

Later in the novel, the harsh reality of World War Two brings all these contradictions to the fore. When the Japanese seized Singapore, Subhash Chandra Bose exhorted the Indian soldiers to desert the English and join the Japanese as Asian friends against the English invaders. Hardy and Arjun gradually come to their senses and realise that their allegiance to the English has been a mistake all along. Whatever they did, they would never be equal to the English as long as the latter remain masters in India. This realisation dawns slowly during the campaign in Malay, where for the first time they experience trench warfare and, most importantly, endure racial discrimination. Even this transition phase is marked by a shift in the food code. Hardy and Arjun disbanded along with other officers find shelter in an abandoned house in the forest where, after many privations, they can cook some food and eat a proper meal: ham and herring to begin with. After a while, Hardy excuses himself from the table and goes to the kitchen, where the subordinates were cooking, emerging after a while with a tray of chapatis and *ande-ka-bhujia*—scrambled eggs. On seeing the steaming dishes, Arjun becomes hungry all over again and asks for some, to which Hardy replies: "'It's all right, yaar.' [...] 'You can have some too. A chapati won't turn you into a savage, you know' " (Ghosh 2000, 415).

Just as with Rajkumar and the District Collector from Ratnagiri, personal changes are realistically and symbolically anticipated by a certain attitude towards food. Like Uma in *Fasting Feasting*, Hardy asserts himself primarily through food, defiantly eating the "forbidden" chapati in front of his Commanding Officer. Reverting to Indian traditional food is a first timid atonement for the betrayal committed in serving the British and sanctioned by eating roast beef. Unsurprisingly, it is Hardy who first deserts the British army for the INA. A few hours later, he entreats Arjun to do the same in a dramatic dialogue. Like his epic namesake, Arjun is puzzled, unable to see where his duty lies. Unlike his eponym, he has no God's incarnation to turn to and finds himself mired in a quandary. He agrees that Indians should fight to get their freedom, but he is unsure whether it is right for him to leave the British army at that particular moment. Besides the Japanese are allied to the Nazis. Eventually he realises that what they believed to be their modernity has in fact estranged them from the country. It is as if eating English food has turned them into Englishmen of a sort.

> "Just look at us, Hardy—just look at us. What are we? We've learnt to dance the tango and we know how to eat roast beef with a knife and fork. The truth is that except for the colour of our skin, most people in India wouldn't even recognise us as Indians." (Ghosh 2000, 439)

Eventually, Arjun makes up his mind and passes over to the Indian National Army, too. In the end, he dies under English fire, refusing to surrender; but just before this tragic epilogue, it is again his attitude towards food that foreshadows his redemption. Dinu, a distant relation, meets him in the jungle. Arjun is gaunt and emaciated, on the brink of starvation, but when Dinu gives him some rice, he declines to eat any and distributes it among his soldiers instead. The war is over, the Japs have lost and long forsaken them, but they are still fighting, albeit hopelessly. He is fighting on because he feels this is the only right thing left for him to do. For the first time Arjun has reached a higher moral standard than his interlocutor; he has renounced his glamorous post as an English officer, he has become a forest dweller, has renounced going back to a comfortable middle-class life after the end of the war, and he has renounced food. After this, only death can follow. Mutatis mutandis, his predicament is not so dissimilar from that of Raju in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*.

The postsecular elements of this novel do not lie in a speculative attitude, but in a very secular anticolonial commitment, in which dedication to Swaraj and loyalty towards India take on the characteristic of *varnashrama dharma*—the duty connected to one's station in life. Young men such as Arjun and Hardy were right when they thought that they represented the future of the Indian nation, but were utterly wrong when they believed that Indians could free themselves by mimicking the English. They spent their juvenile ardour on the wrong cause, beguiled by English honours and personal advancement. Collector Dey's and Arjun's deaths are the epitome of wasted lives if considered from a materialistic viewpoint, but a spiritual achievement when we think that collector Dey has atoned for his mistake and Arjun has finally fulfilled his duty. Even though he knows that it will not make any material difference, Arjun keeps fighting, thus selflessly realising his *dharma* of freedom fighter. By this point, Arjun fights more out of duty than out of any actual passion.[2]

The Inheritance of Loss

The third novel where traditional Indian food takes on a moral value influenced by traditional Hinduism is Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). As in the preceding cases, the novel's subject matter appears to be very far from religion. It tells the story of the Gorkha movement in Kalimpong during the Eighties, when the insurgents defied the Bengali army and, for some time, gained military control over the area. This rebellion brings the contradictions between Judge Jemobhai and his granddaughter to a crisis point. At the same

2 Arjun's predicament is very similar to that of the Burmese rebel fighter described by Ghosh in *At Large in Burma*; for a comparison between the two see my article in *Postcolonial Texts* (2023).

time a parallel story unfolds, in which Biju, the son of the Judge's cook, migrates to New York in search of a better job and lives the life of the clandestine migrant. Most critics justly highlight the cosmopolitan, global, postcolonial, and diasporic issues of the novel (Shands 2009; Concilio 2010), or the issues of migrancy (Thakur 2011). The captivating way the novel grapples with these issues has won it the Man Booker Prize in 2007.

Although the novel is written for an international audience and by a diasporic writer then based in New York, it deplores the loss of Indian values; its poetic justice punishes those who turn away from Indian culture.[3] Such is the case of the old Judge Jemubhai, who studied in England during the colonial period and remained an Anglophile throughout his life. Although the judge suffered racist discrimination when he was in England, he has never found the strength to blame the English. On the contrary, he tries to become as English as he possibly can, speaking only English, eating pudding and shepherd's pie, drinking whisky and, worse, hating his wife, who cannot cope with his European pretensions. His character is reminiscent of the district collector in Ratnagiri, as depicted by Ghosh. The judge projects onto his wife his own despised Indianness and distances himself from it by abusing her, eventually causing the woman's death (Spielman 2010, 77).

The judge is not the only mimic man in the narrative; the cook's son Biju, who migrates to New York, finds himself in a similar plight: he worships the West and hates his own people, along with other migrants. The loss of self-confidence and confidence in one's culture is arguably inherited by the next generations. Sai, the judge's orphaned granddaughter, has been educated in a convent school; she speaks only English and is unable to eat without silverware. Yet she never had to endure any discrimination and takes her international identity for granted—the Indian national anthem and the Latin school motto, neither of which she understands.

Gyan, the young math teacher who has a romance with her pupil Sai, represents the opposite force: he clings to his Gorkha identity even when he is unsure about the righteousness of the Gorkha cause. Even though he is in love with Sai, he estranges himself from her on account of her cosmopolitan education. His identity, however, is flimsy, built as it is on nationalist notions and the desire to be accepted by his associates. Once he thinks to himself: "[H]ow could you have any self-respect knowing that you didn't believe in anything exactly?" (Desai 2007, 260). The Gorkha movement puts a strain on him so that, by and by, he commits the same mistake the judge did before: he projects

3 Kiran Desai (b. 1971) lived in India until she was fifteen, then moved to the UK and US. In an interview, she declares that she set her novel in the 1980s because that is the period she remembers best. Furthermore, she tells, she went to Kalimpong while she was writing the novel (seven years in the making) to refresh her memories of the place (Smriti and Desai 2007).

his insecurities upon his lover and blames her for them. Their first fight occurs when Sai casually tells Gyan that she is preparing a Christmas party; the young man gets upset and shouts, "Why do you celebrate Christmas? You're Hindus and you don't celebrate Id or Guru Nanak's birthday or even Durga Puja or Dussehra or Tibetan New Year" (Desai 2007, 163). Sai candidly replies that she feels free to have fun by celebrating any festivity she likes, and her nationality should not bind her to celebrate or not celebrate Christmas.

As Carmen Concilio (2010, 90) rightly observes, *The Inheritance of Loss* is a choral novel without a central hero—hence no fictional moral centre. However, it does not follow that there is no moral set of values. Despite his clumsiness, Biju is appreciated for his attempt to cling to his values, for instance, as he refuses to work in a restaurant where he must deal with meat or muses on a colleague's callous behaviour. Likewise, Sai seems to be commended for her openness and rejection of stereotypes in spite of her simplicity.

Maria Camilla Di Tullio (2018) lists a series of Hindu elements in the novel, offering an original interpretation. She argues that the cook is the moral centre of the story because he is the only character who knows his *dharma* and strives to follow it. Although he is far from perfect, as his confession in the last pages of the novel reveals, he can clearly see where his duty lies and repents of his weakness:

> Sahib. I drink. I'm a bad man. Beat me. [...] I've been drinking I ate the same rice as you not the servant's rice but the Dehradun rice I ate the meat and lied I ate out of the same pot I stole liquor from the army I made *chhang* I did the accounts differently for years… (Desai 2007, 227)

The enumeration of his sins occupies two or three lines more with petty trespasses, such as not looking after the dog when he took it for a walk. Interestingly, the first sins he acknowledges are those connected to his *varnashramadharma* (the duties connected with his caste and position in the society), in which his master is not in the least interested. Indeed the cook is not really talking of the judge, but seeking his own atonement. Else, he would not mention drinking and eating the same food as his master, which implies that his master is equally deplorable.

As in the case of *The Glass Palace*, food preferences foreshadow the ethical solidity of the characters. On his outward voyage, Jemubhai throws overboard the meal his mother packed for him, already impatient with Indian traditions and even affections: "undignified love, Indian love, stinking, anaesthetic love" (Desai 2007, 45). After his English experience, even on his way to India, the judge is said to be sipping beef tea (Desai 2007, 126). Oftentimes in the novel, he orders mutton with mint sauce or chocolate pudding.

In America, Biju finds a job in a steak house but feels uneasy dealing with beef and awkward serving cow meat to Indian customers (Desai 2007,

142-143). After cooking beef for some time, he is disgusted and looks for a new job in a vegetarian restaurant. His means of expression may be limited, but his mind is clear:

> Job no job.
> One should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them. No, no matter what.
> You had to live according to something. (Desai 2007, 143)

This self-taught moral integrity prepares him for his final redemption.

The novel also offers an interesting postcolonial revisitation of the sin called *samudrayana* (ocean voyage). In the past it was believed that a Hindu who left the country crossing the *kalapani* (black waters) would lose caste. This precept is indeed a minor one and is to be found in the *Baudhayanasutra* (Book II. 1.2.2), where the text prescribes that rituals must be performed in pure places to atone for *samudrayana*. In the nineteenth century, the prohibition of leaving India became a matter of interest for two classes of people: the impoverished coolies who would subscribe to indentured labour since the 1830s and, a generation later, the anglophiles who would go to England to take the exams to become barristers or civil servants (Bates and Carter 2021). While the first group already belonged to a lower class, the second was usually composed of wealthier families, so that the precept lost force in the twentieth century, especially in northern India (Carroll 1979). The rationale behind this prohibition of leaving the Indian soil is not well defined in the *shastras*, but scholars agree that it must be related to the difficulty of performing the appropriate rituals, and the necessity of coming in contact with polluted food and people (Menski 2002; Clémentin-Ojha 2011). However, it was possible to atone for the sin through some rituals, which would sometimes be so disgracing as eating cow dung, sometimes limited to offering a feast for the local brahmins. Whatever the origin of the *samudrayana* stricture, it is important to underline that it was mostly felt in Bengal. The debate at the turn of the century shows that religious prescriptions and sociological considerations were mingling in the debate, as the social prestige of those who studied abroad was increasing (Clémentin-Ojha 2011, 206).

Kiran Desai never overtly mentions the concept of *samudrayana* in her novel; however, it is impossible not to see that the two characters who go to the West seeking fortune and social advancement are contaminated by it and lose part of their Indianness. The judge comes to despise India and, what is more, the Indian in himself: "He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred" (Desai 2007, 119).

One generation later, Biju, the cook's son, falls easy prey to American materialism, too:

> [He] possessed an awe of white people who arguably had done India great harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India. (Desai 2007, 84)

Both Jemubhai and Biju endure racial discrimination during their stay in the West, but they react differently: the judge becomes a mimic man, Biju, much like the prodigal son, decides to spend all his money on a ticket to India and go back to his father in his native village. Before he gets there, he is robbed twice of everything he had got in America and arrives at his father's naked and empty-handed. While some scholars consider Biju a discomfited man at this point (Spielman 2010, 82; Nanda 2018, 82), Di Tullio (2018, 182) contends that Biju takes his physical and psychological sufferings as a penance, replacing the resentment against the American society with the relief of being home again—no longer an outcast. Being robbed of everything material he had acquired in the USA stands as an expiation to regain his lost "caste." Thus the old notion of *samudrayana* becomes the bedrock for the postcolonial ethics of the story.

Some scholars have underlined the prominence of landscape in the story, set in the scenic area of Kalimpong at the foot of Himalaya (Ferguson 2009; Monaco 2017). According to Di Tullio, even this element may resonate with Hindu myths. The novel opens with a reference to the Kanchenjunga, "briefly visible above the vapour" (Desai 2007, 8). The mountain is mentioned fifteen times in the novel, often in connection with mist or clouds or glowing at sunset. It appears also in the last sentence, for the first time at dawn:

> The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent.
> All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it. (Desai 2007, 331)

This last sentence, like the mentions of the peak, is reminiscent of Satyajit Ray's 1962 film entitled *Kanchenjunga*, where the mountain remains veiled until the end, and its unveiling is the objective correlative of the old pater familias' change of heart. Likewise, in the novel, the image is arresting, a *darshan* that occurs just at the time when Biju reaches home, a kind of blessing. The Kanchenjunga appears as a lay version of Mount Meru, the mythical dwelling of the Gods. So much pain and troubles have not been in vain, Biju and possibly the other characters on stage at that moment—namely his father and Sai—have all made a step forward in their personal development. Such moment is described with a religious lexis as a glimpse at truth. A truth that is "apparent" as in the Vedantic tradition.

***

In conclusion, the three novels considered in this chapter address the problem of Post-independence Indian modernity. They articulate a critique of Indian values at the turn of the century and consider the position of India and Indian culture in a world scenario. All three novels resort to food to metaphorically mirror what they consider an ethically sound Indianness. Food, however, is an integral part of the Hindu ethos, and cannot be considered separately from other spheres of life. Thus, Hindu traditional concepts are deployed here, devoid of their liturgical but not of their spiritual meaning, to pinpoint the ethical substance of the novels and offer a scaffold for the narratives.

There is no way to know whether or to what extent such references are intentional; certainly, they are not meant to be overt. It follows that they do not undermine the secular attitude of their respective implied authors; Hindu ethos here should not be considered as one of the themes of the novels, but rather as motive, or hidden skeleton on which the narrative material is arranged. In the case of the two Desais, however, it is possible to descry a critique of the way the Indian middle class has sometimes understood secularism. Unlike R. K. Narayan, the three authors do not try to suggest anything about Hindu spirituality; their province is secular, although their deeper roots reach back into certain Hindu tenets and myths.

Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun. 1981. "Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia." *American Ethnologist* 8 (3):494-511.

Bates, Crispin, and Marina Carter. 2021. "Kala pani revisited: Indian labour migrants and the sea crossing." *Journal of Indentureship and Its Legacies* 1 (1):36-62.

Carroll, Lucy. 1979. "The Seavoyage Controversy and the Kayasthas of North India, 1901-1909." *Modern Asian Studies* 13 (2):265-299.

Cavaliere, Stefania. 2016. "Eating and Fasting to Liberate the Mind: Some Remarks on the Theme of Food in Keśavdās' Vijñānagītā." In *A World of Nourishment: Reflections on Food in Indian Culture*, edited by Cinzia Pieruccini and Paola M. Rossi, 215-229. Milano: Ledizioni.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, *Princeton studies in culture/power/history*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Clémentin-Ojha, Catherine. 2011. Travel Regulations. In *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, edited by Knut A. Jacobsen. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Concilio, Carmen. 2010. "From West Bengal to New York: The Global Novels of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai." In *Urban Cultures of/in the United States: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Andrea Carosso, 87-119. Bern: Peter Lang.

Desai, Anita. 1999. *Fasting, feasting*. Large print ed. Thorndike, Me.: Thorndike Press; Bath: Chivers, 2000.

Desai, Kiran. 2007. *The Inheritance of Loss*. London: Penguin Books.

Ferguson, J. P. 2009. "Violent Dis-Placements: Natural and Human Violence in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 44 (2):35-49.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2000. *The Glass Palace*. London: HarperCollins.

Khare, R. S. 1986. "The Indian Meal: Aspects of Cultural Economy and Food Use." In *Aspects of South Asians Food System: Food, Society and Culture*, edited by R. S. Khare and M. S. A. Rao, 159-183. Durham, NC: North Carolina Academic Press.

Khare, R. S. Ed, and M. S. A. Ed Rao. 1986. *Food, Society and Culture: Aspects in South Asian Food Systems*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

Menski, Werner F. 2002. „Review of 'Kālāpāni: Zum Streit über die Zulässigkeit von Seereisen im kolonialzeitlichen Indien by Susmita Arp'." Review of Kālāpāni: Zum Streit über die Zulässigkeit von Seereisen im kolonialzeitlichen Indien, Susmita Arp. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 65 (3):604-607.

Monaco, Angelo. 2017. "The Aesthetics of the Green Postcolonial Novel in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*." *Le Simplegadi* 15 (17):314-324.

Nanda, Aparajita. 2018. "The Pastiche of Discrepant "Minoritarian" Voices in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*." In *New Cosmopolitaisms, Race and Ethnicity: Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Ewa Barbara Luczak, Samir Dayal and Anna Pochmara, 76-87. Berlin, Warsaw: De Gruyter.

Olivelle, Patrick. 2011. "From Feast to Fast. Food and the Indian Ascetic." In *Ascetics and Brahmins: Studies in Ideologies and Institutions*, 71-90. New York: Anthem Press.

Oliver, Pamela. 2000. "Victims and Survivors in the 'Sugar-Sticky Web of Family Conflict': A Reading of Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*." In *The Novels of Anita Desai*, edited by Manmohan K. Bhatnagar and M. Rajeshwar, 247-255. Delhi: Atlantic.

Ravichandran, T. 2005. "Entrapments at Home and Abroad in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*." *Indian English Literature: A Post-Colonial Response*:80-89.

Shands, Kerstin. 2009. "Hyperfabula of Gains and Losses: Immanent and Transcendent Narrative Perspectives in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*." In *India and the Diasporic Imagination*, edited by Rita Christian and Judith Misrahi-Barak, 165-178. Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée.

Smriti, Daniel, and Kiran Desai. 2007. "Kiran Desai: *The Inheritance of Loss*." *The Sunday Time of Sri Lanka*, 21 January 2007. Accessed 23 November 2022.

Sonia, M. A. 2013. "Fragmented Identities: a Study of Amitav Ghosh's the *Glass Palace*." *Language in India* 13 (11):316.

Spielman, David Wallace. 2010. "'Solid Knowledge" and Contradictions in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 51 (1):74-89.

Thakur, AK. 2011. "Loss of Human Values in *The Inheritance of Loss*." *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies* 2 (4).

Tullio, Maria Camilla di. 2018. "Traditional Hindu Elements in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*." *Le Simplegadi* 18:180-190.

Vescovi, A. 2016. "A man is what he eats (and what he doesn't): on the Use of Traditional Food Culture in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*." In *A World of Nourishment Reflections on Food in Indian Culture*, edited by Cinzia Pieruccini and Paola Rossi, 329-338. Milano: Ledizioni.

Vescovi, Alessandro. 2023. "Amitav Ghosh as a Secular Essayist." *Postcolonial Text* 18 (1-2):1-19.

Chapter 6.
Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth": When the Twain Do Meet[1]

The pure Walden water is mingled
with the sacred water of the Ganges.
H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*

"Oh, East is East, and West is West,/and never the twain shall meet." Surely, when Rudyard Kipling wrote this line in 1895, he could not imagine that, a century later, it would sound hilarious to two million Indian migrants in the USA, who have become an unprecedented blend of the two civilisations. "Unaccustomed Earth" by Jhumpa Lahiri is a story that tells precisely this: how East and West are meeting. Jhumpa Lahiri herself is an embodiment of the East-West encounter in that she was born in London to Bengali parents and subsequently brought up in Rhode Island within a circle of expatriate Bengali academics.

As Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung (2011) point out, Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the few writers widely read by the general public, academics, and ethnic minorities. Her success probably depends on Lahiri's inability to define herself as either an American or an Indian woman, let alone an American or an Indian writer. Recently the novelist has spent a long time in Rome, where the Italian language is a kind of third space that Lahiri has chosen to inhabit and write from. While migration, exile, displacement, and generational conflicts are nothing new in the literary panorama, the experience of second-generation high-caste Bengali migrants in the US is unprecedented. For the first time in history, a group of highly educated and well-to-do people have sought migration out of a deliberate act, retaining the possibility of keeping in touch with their motherland. Since they always had the option of returning to India, they renewed their choice of living in America year after year, postponing their return until retirement. We shall consider her short story "Unaccustomed Earth" (2008) from the homonymous collection because it contains an excellent example of convergence between Indian and American spirituality—Hinduism and Transcendentalism.

Indian migrants of the 1970s and 1980s in the USA were emotionally poised between enthusiasm for the professional possibilities that opened up in America

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published with the same title in *Anantaratnaprabhava studi in onore di Giuliano Boccali*, edited by Alice Crisanti, Cinzia Pieruccini, Chiara Policardi, Paola M. Rossi. Monographic issue of *Consonanze* 11.2 (2020): 249-259. I thank the publisher for kindly granting the permission to include it here.

and nostalgia for the land they had left behind; in fact, in the first generation this division is also gendered: men would be more likely to pursue a career, while women would rather stay at home to mourn and make up for their loss. Their equally privileged children, the generation to which Lahiri belongs, were the first to grow up polarised between East and West, between American playmates and Indian families, rock bands and Bollywood music, consumerism and frugality, hamburgers and curry, individualism and family commitment. Most of Lahiri's migrant stories—with the notable exception of *The Lowland* (2013)—describe dichotomies whereby house and family are the domain of the woman of the house, and men go out to earn a living, according to a scheme that we have already mentioned in the previous chapter. Women keep up traditions and connections with the homeland, cooking Indian food, wearing Indian clothes, and observing festivities; men are supposed to be more integrated into the host society, working within the American establishment to support the family. As an adaptation of the notion of *grihalakshmi*[2] to the migrant condition, women took it upon themselves to foster familial ties in order to preserve the clan's vitality. They were likewise supposed to uphold the traditions and educate children within them, making home a little India, fragrant with curry and sandal paste. However, as it happened also in Bengal, this division of work created tensions, if we are to believe the fictional worlds depicted by Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni. Indeed, it came to pass that men urged their wives to become more westernised and less steeped in traditional Indian habits, especially when it came to social occasions when American colleagues were involved. The tension at play in *The Inheritance of Loss* and formerly described by Rabindranath Tagore in *The Home and the World*—where the newly wedded Nikhil urged Bimala to leave the purdah and go into the world—was bound to repeat itself over and again in America.

Jhumpa Lahiri's world is a cosmopolitan space; it has its centre in New England but stretches from the Andaman Islands and Kolkata to Canada, including Europe (and Italy in particular), and is inhabited by first and second-generation Bengali bhadralok expatriates. Through her novels and short stories, readers become conversant with this third space (Farshid 2013) to the point of finding it familiar, as it happens with Narayan's Malgudi or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County (Caesar 2005).

The characters inhabiting this "unaccustomed earth," which is at once Indian and American, strike the reader with their very normalcy. Yet, the exceptional predicament of their surroundings offers a kind of laboratory where ordinary passions and conflicts can be tested and viewed in a new light. Possibly because she belongs to a cultural elite, or because the turmoil of colonisation and decolonisation is too far from New England, Lahiri is neither a postcolonial

2 *Grihalakshmi* literally means "Lakshmi of the house"; indeed, women were supposed to possess all the virtues of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, including fecundity, beauty, silence and tolerance.

nor an engaged political novelist; she is a cosmopolite intellectual committed to humanism (Cardozo 2012; Srikanth 2012). Her characters face ordinary illusions and delusions, encounter love and death and all the usual adventures and misadventures that life has in store for the middle class, but to a general reader they look fresh and fascinating. Besides Lahiri's ability as a writer, there are two reasons why readers that are neither Indian nor American are beguiled by her stories. The first is that they shed light on the unique predicament of these Bengali migrants; the second that this very predicament, once absorbed, allows a deeper understanding of ordinary life even outside that setting. The first crush, a misalliance, or a generational conflict become all the more poignant when observed in this unique *milieu*. What makes the experience even more interesting is that Lahiri's characters cannot rely on any older generation; they experience things for the first time and discover the exceptionality of their predicament with the same eager curiosity as their readers.

Considering the privileged position of New England in the map of Lahiri's world, it is no wonder that three *genii loci* surface in her stories time and again; I am of course referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)—three nineteenth-century intellectuals that shaped the American collective attitude towards metaphysics, literature, and Nature.

Hawthorne, the renowned author of several collections of short stories, among which the celebrated *Twice Told Tales* (1837), presides over Lahiri's second book from the very cover. The title phrase "unaccustomed earth" comes from a passage of "The Custom House," the apocryphal preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, where Hawthorne's fictional narrator states:

> Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Lahiri 2008, 3)

This quotation serves as an epigraph to the whole collection. As Jeffrey Bilbro (2013) justly points out, the predicament of Hawthorne was in a way similar to that of second-generation migrants, who do have a venerable tradition behind them, but feel that they have to move on, finding new individual paths without totally rejecting their fathers' heritage.

The title story, which will form the object of the present essay, consistently recounts the different but somehow symmetrical uprootings of the two main characters, Ruma and her father—a second- and first-generation migrant, a woman and a man. Ruma is in her late thirties, at a time when she has just left New England and her job as a lawyer to follow her husband to Seattle, in Washington State; her first son, Akash, was born three years earlier in New York, where she worked, and she is now expecting another baby. Adam, her

American husband, has a corporate job and is often away on business, so Ruma feels lonely in her new house, without friends or relatives. Besides, her mother has recently and unexpectedly died. Consequently, Ruma's father, whose name never appears, has moved into a smaller apartment and found a new companion, the independent widow Mrs Bagchi, during a European tour.

The short story covers seven days when the elderly man is visiting Ruma and Akash in their new abode. Before her father's arrival, the woman was worried that he expected to move in with her on the assumption that it was her filial duty to look after him in old age. Things turn out to be quite different; the seventy-year-old parent has found a new balance in his life and has no desire to move into his daughter's household. However, during his time there, he proves a perfect father and grandfather, always caring but never obtrusive. He looks after Ruma's garden, buying flowers and plants and tending them with little Akash. In her loneliness, Ruma wishes that her father would stay on, but he declines. The narrative's point of view shifts continuously from Ruma's to her father's, revealing their present thoughts and their different pasts.

While Ruma thinks back to her adolescence as a period when she had to assert herself against her parents' vetoes, seeking American rather than Indian values, she is surprised to see that, after all, her life ended up not unlike that of her secluded mother. She has become a homemaker with two children to raise in an alien land and suffers from solitude. Ironically enough, it is her father who alerts her to the risks of losing contact with American values. Halfway through his stay in Seattle, he finds the opportunity and the words to vent his preoccupations about her career. The ensuing dialogue is the very opposite of what Ruma might have expected.

> "And you? Have you found work in the new place?" "Part-time litigation work is hard to find," she said.
> "In order to practice here you will have to take another bar exam?" her father asked.
> "No. There's reciprocity with New York."
> "Then why not look for a new job?"
> "I am not ready yet, Baba." […] "maybe when the new baby starts kindergarten."
> "But that's over five years from now. Now is the time for you to be working, building your career." (Lahiri 2008, 36)

The absence of exclamation marks in the dialogue shows that both Ruma and her father are trying to keep a calm, almost casual tone, especially since this dialogue is taking place in a car, in the presence of little Akash. Still, after a few hours, the old man resumes the discussion, comparing Ruma to himself and not to her mother, as Ruma often does:

> "Work is important, Ruma. Not only for financial stability. For mental stability. All my life, since I have been sixteen, I have been working."
> […]
> "Self-reliance is important, Ruma," he continued. "Life is full of surprises. Today you can depend on Adam, on Adam's job. Tomorrow who knows." (Lahiri 2008, 37)

The compound word "self-reliance" has a venerable tradition in America well beyond New England; it is the title of the second essay in the collection that Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the fathers of American Transcendentalism, published under the bare title of *Essays*. Emerson—a former minister, teacher and preacher turned independent lecturer—reformed Puritanical doctrines with the notions that he derived from William Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle and German thinkers like Johann G. Fichte and Novalis. The "essays" that form his book were nothing new for the people of Concord, where he lived, as he had been expounding his ideas in the form of lectures for years, but his words, once printed, have entered the DNA of Americans.

Harold Bloom (2006) singles out Emerson's "Self-Reliance" as the constituent of a distinctly American religion. According to Bloom, while Puritanism posited a God outside Man, Emerson, through his idea of Nature, for the first time in the West, preached a religion whereby God is within Man. In the published version, Emerson took care to maintain a vivid style, full of imperatives that unfailingly surprise and excite a response in the readers. In the collection, he juxtaposed essays in order to create the maximum contrast: the opening chapter is a meditation on the collective experience of the race ("History"), immediately followed by an essay on the individual ("Self-Reliance"); an advice for worldly success ("Prudence") is compensated by an exhortation to despise it. Nevertheless, the paradoxical nature of the essays is such that they do not contradict but rather reinforce each other in a dialogue reminiscent of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. According to Emerson, self-reliance is a ploy to overcome the obstacles that forestall the development of the human soul. The first of these obstacles is fear of common opinion so that, instead of pursuing Truth (or their own nature, which is all the same to him), people end up pursuing general acceptance. "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (Emerson 1988, 35) runs a much-quoted aphorism from this essay. It is not important what we do, but why we do it; as long as we follow our nature and not the general opinion in doing things, we are developing our soul and attaining spiritual freedom. "The only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it" (Emerson 1988, 36) Emerson proclaims.

As for work, a subject very close to the heart of Ruma's father, Emerson writes that "A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and has done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him

no peace" (Emerson 1988, 33). Work is the propelling force that saves man from the abyss and makes him closer to God. In a more secular but not altogether different way, Ruma's father worries that his daughter might not feel well because she apparently finds little pleasure in staying at home and is not even looking for a job. It may seem contradictory that the man who had suffered his wife to stay at home all the time while he was at work is now advising her daughter against it, but the contradiction is only apparent. Ruma's mother relished her staying home and looking after the house; this is what she had expected as a bride and the work in which she "put her heart." In Emerson's words, we could say that she was following her nature; in Sanskrit, we could say that she was following her *svadharma*. Ruma's case is different because she does not enjoy being at home and would feel better, so her father thinks, if she did the job for which she was trained. Now Ruma is trying to resemble her mother, which can only end in disaster.

Emerson and Ruma's father would doubtless agree with the *Gita's* precept that

> One's own Law (*dharma*) imperfectly observed is better than another's Law carried out with perfection. As long as one does the work set by Nature, he does not incur blame. (*Bhagavad Gita* 18.47, transl. van Buitenen 2013)

This dharmic attitude is hardly surprising in a high-caste Indian man. In effect, Indian and American doctrines chime even if they do not perfectly overlap—while the American self-reliance foregrounds individual identity, Hindu *svadharma* foregrounds an identity depending on caste and age, but even in modern India this distinction is blurring. Emerson expresses almost the same thought as the Gita as he advises:

> Accept the place that the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connexion of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age… (Emerson 1988, 33)

Apparently, the American Unitarian tradition can accommodate at least part of the *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy. In depicting Ruma's parent, Jhumpa Lahiri was probably thinking of her own father, about whom she wrote:

> In many ways [my father] is a spiritual descendant of America's earliest Puritan settlers; thrifty, hard-working, plain in his habits. […] He also embodies the values of two New England's greatest thinkers, demonstrating a profound lack of materialism and *self-reliance* that would have made Thoreau and Emerson proud. (Lahiri 2008b, 397; our italics)

These words are contained in a short prose piece entitled *Rhode Island*, which appeared in 2008, the same year of *Unaccustomed Earth*. Here Lahiri mentions

that her father loves gardening, another point of contact with the character. Gardening is also a matching image for a story about roots (Bhattacharya Saxena 2012) and the activity that most intimately connects the old man with Henry David Thoreau, who used to live in a cabin next to Walden Pond—a place explicitly mentioned in another short story from the same collection entitled "Hell-Heaven"—and cultivate his own food. In his influential journal published under the title *Walden or Life in the Woods* (1854), the American transcendentalist writes:

> In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta [sic], since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial […]. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. (Thoreau 1854 (1997), 279)

In his essence, Ruma's father embodies a modern, secular version of a renouncer. Once his life as a family man is over, he retires to a tiny apartment, where he brings only a few things. He no longer cares for a big house "that would only fill up with things over the years," he muses. "Life grew to a certain point. The point he had reached now" (Lahiri 2008b). From this moment on, he is trying to strip himself from all life connections, be they objects or people. He has a very loose affair with a Bengali woman, Mrs Bagchi, whom he only sees when they are on organised tours, and they are both content with this distant relationship. At a point, he feels tempted to settle in Seattle and build a solid relationship with his grandson, but he knows that it is no longer the time to depend on other people and decides to leave instead—to accept his new position.

Comparing his past life with the life of his three-year-old grandson, he cannot help thinking that the boy will eventually leave his family and realises that "he, too, had turned his back on his parents by settling in America. In the name of ambition and accomplishment, none of which mattered anymore" (Lahiri 2008b, 51). His relationship with food is also interesting in this respect. Most migrants tend to retain their culinary habits in the host country, but Indians, as we have seen in the previous chapter, are particularly susceptible to this subject (Martin-Rodriguez 2000; Roy 2002; Kunow 2003; Mehta 2011). Thus, food and clothing become a space of confrontation between mothers and daughters. Typically, second-generation teenagers would steal more or less secretly to some fast-food restaurant to eat hamburgers with their American peers, wearing jeans, while their mothers would rather have them in the kitchen folding *samosas* and rolling *gulab jamuns*, wearing a *shalwar kamiz*. Ruma's mother had been no exception; being a scrupulous cook, she used to prepare elaborate meals for the family. Although not so dramatically as in *Fasting, Feasting*, even in Ruma's house

dinners served to mark family hierarchies (Sekaran 2011); no one, the narrator points out, was allowed to eat until the father arrived. During her father's stay, Ruma tries to please him with Indian meals that, predictably, do not turn out as good as her mother's.

> Her mother had been an excellent cook. […] Ruma's cooking didn't come close, the vegetables sliced too thickly, the rice overdone, but as her father worked his way through the things she'd made, he repeatedly told her how delicious it was. (Lahiri 2008, 22)

And yet, to Ruma's astonishment, it hardly seems to matter to her father now.

> "Sorry the begunis (deep fried aubergines) broke apart," she added. "I didn't let the oil get hot enough."
> "It doesn't matter. Try it," he told Akash. (Lahiri 2008, 23)

There may be three reasons why the father has become so casual about food; the simplest is that he really appreciates his daughter's efforts and tries to be supportive as he sees that she is having a rough time. This is all the more remarkable considering his former attitude towards food. Following Ruma's train of thought, the narrator recounts that her father had been rather fastidious about meals cooked by people other than his wife: whenever they were invited to some friends', he would complain about the food on the way home. However, through a conversation about what he ate during a trip to Italy, he again appears uninterested in any particular delicacy; indeed, he admits candidly that he mostly ate pizza. His lack of interest in food should then be searched in his new plight as (Non-Resident) Indian retired widower. Since he is no longer a family man (*grihastha*), he does not care to establish his position within the family hierarchy or even to show appreciation for his feminine counterpart, *grihalakshmi*. The third reason, not unconnected with the foregoing, has to do with the *ashrama* system, which we have seen in previous chapters. The *vanaprastha*, the third stage of the system, retains some family obligations but with a view to his final liberation from earthly objects; this is a preparation phase like the *brahmacharya*: a man must train himself to become a complete renouncer. He remains part of the family, but has given up all major responsibilities; in the next phase he will leave the family altogether. As Patrick Olivelle (2011) points out, for renouncers food should only come in the form of alms, in some cases even raw, in order to afford bare nourishment, but not physical pleasure. Therefore, *sannyasins* who live on alms cannot expect to eat what they like, nor can they be fastidious about what they get. Similarly, as though in preparation, Ruma's father now cares little for the pleasure of food, even when he is on his own or on holiday.

Before leaving at the end of his sojourn in Seattle, Ruma's father briefs the daughter about the work he has been doing in the garden, giving advice on how often to water the flowers and how to use the fertiliser. Eventually, he warns her about the hydrangea, which "won't bloom much this year. The flowers will be pink or blue depending on the acidity of the soil. You'll have to prune it back eventually" (Lahiri 2008b, 51). It is hard not to think of the hydrangea as a metaphor for young Akash, the grandson, or for any second-generation migrant, whose roots have stricken into an unaccustomed earth and whose future is therefore unpredictable. The story, however, provides insights also into the transformative power of alien soils for those who reach them after their maturity; Ruma's father has certainly been changed by the new surroundings, so much that his frugality can be read as nihilism, individualism, or Puritanism.

Through Uma's father the story hints at a fecund encounter between Indian and American spirituality. The story itself is a kind of non-academic essay in comparative philosophy, which examines different systems not within their own milieu, but as it were at work—in the actuality of people's lives. Ralph Waldo Emerson was aware of the analogies between Transcendentalism and the *Vedantic* tradition, so that he found the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* a most inspiring reading. He has also authored a poem entitled "Brahma" (1856), inspired by the *Bhagavad Gita*, and another called "Hamatreya" (1847), which is modelled on a passage from the *Vishnupurana* (Narayanan 2013). However, it must be said that he became aware of the analogies only after developing his own system (Goodman 1990). Similarly, at the end of the century, Gandhi developed his *Satyagraha* before reading Thoreau's seminal essay *Civil Disobedience* (1849), written as a response to the Mexican war. In both cases, one cannot talk of any direct influence, but rather of convergence.[3] The latter may well be disappointing to historians but assumes paramount importance for humanists. Such is Jhumpa Lahiri, who, in her text, offers an insight into a successful migration story that is deeply grounded in culture and not simply—as it more often happens—in personal failure or success. If ever migration was traumatic to Ruma's father (Ling 2014), he has been able to overcome it by relying on himself.

The case just described differs from those mentioned in the previous chapters because Lahiri does not rely on a Hindu pattern to support a secular story like Ghosh or the Desais do; she writes a story that may be interpreted either

3 Emerson had a very limited contact with original Hindu texts, but was an avid reader of English and German philosophers, who did know them. Thus, he was acquainted with at least part of the *Book of Manu* at an early phase. Even when he could read further into Hindu writings, his attitude was never that of a scholar interested in another civilization, but that of a "practical" philosopher who would re-interpret and re-use others' ideas. Incidentally, this is another point of contact with Gandhi.

through a Hindu or an American value system. Both are covertly referred to in what might appear as a secular story about modern migrants. As in the case of Narayan's novels discussed in chapter four, American and Indian readers are likely to offer different responses to the narrative. However, Narayan's and Lahiri's poetics diverge. The former foregrounds the timelessness and potential ubiquity of Hindu myths, which are a fundamental part of his identity, and therefore a way of interpreting the world. Lahiri explores the potential in the convergence of the two systems that form her identity as a second-generation migrant. While her protagonist Ruma is going through a time of distress, the story ends on a positive note as she posts the postcard that her father had left behind. Although she has not realised her full potential yet, she seems to catch a glimpse of it. Soon she or her children will understand what a privilege it is to live at the convergence of two great cultural traditions.

Works Cited

Bhattacharya Saxena, Neela. 2012. "Peopling an Unaccustomed Earth with a New Generation: Jhumpa Lahiri's Supreme Fictional Journey into Human Conditions." *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal* 2 (1):129-150.

Bilbro, Jeffrey. 2013. "Lahiri's Hawthornian Roots: Art and Tradition in 'Hema and Kaushik'." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54 (4):380-394.

Bloom, Harold. 2006. "Emerson: The American Religion." In *Emerson's Essays*, edited by Harold Bloom, 93-123. New York: Chelsea House.

Caesar, Judith. 2005. "American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri." *English Studies in Canada* 31 (1):50-68.

Cardozo, Karen M. 2012. "Mediating the Particular and the General: Ethnicity and Intertextuality in Jhumpa Lahiri's Oeuvre." In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, edited by Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung, 1-26. Lexington Books.

Dhingra, Lavina, and Floyd Cheung. 2011. *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Lanham, Md. and Plymouth.: Lexington Books.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1988. *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson: First and Second Series Complete in One Volume*. New York, NY: Perennial Library.

Farshid, Sima 2013. "The Fertile "Third Space" in Jhumpa Lahiri's Stories." *International Journal of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies* 1 (3):1-5.

Goodman, Russel B. . 1990. "East-West Philosophy in Nineteenth-Century America: Emerson and Hinduism." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51 (4):625-645.

Kunow, Rüdiger. 2003. "Eating Indian(s): Food, representation, and the Indian diaspora in the United States." In *Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food*, edited by Tobias Döring, Markus Heide and Susanne Mühleisen, 151-175. Heidelberg: Universitatsverlag Winter.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. 2008a. "Rhode Island." In *State by State: a Panoramic Portrait of America*, edited by Matt Weiland and Sean Wilsey, 391-401. New York, NY: Ecco.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. 2008b. *Unaccustomed Earth*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ling, YUN. 2014. "Diasporic Trauma in Unaccustomed Earth." *Cross-Cultural Communication* 10 (2):141-144.

Martin-Rodriguez, Manuel M. 2000. "The Raw and Who Cooked it: Food, Identity and Culture in US Latino/a Literature." In *US Latino Literatures and Cultures: Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Francisco A. Lomelì and Karin Ikas, 37-52. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Carl Winter.

Mehta, Binita. 2011. "Bhaji, Curry, and Masala: Food and/as Identity in four films of the Indian Diaspora." In *India and the Diasporic Imagination*, edited by Rita Christian and Judith Misrahi-Barak, 351-370. Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée.

Narayanan, Vasuda. 2013. United States. In *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, edited by Knut A. Jobsenac. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Olivelle, Patrick. 2011. *Ascetics and Brahmins: Studies in Ideologies and Institutions*. London: Anthem Press.

Roy, Parama. 2002. "Reading Communities and Culinary Communities: The Gastropoetics of the South Asian Diaspora." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 10 (2):471-502.

Sekaran, Shanthi N. author. 2011. "*The Prayer Room: A Novel* and *The Salt of Another Earth*: A Critical Study of Food and Culinary Practice in Indian-American Narratives of the Immigrant Experience." [Great Britain]: University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2011.

Srikanth, Rajini. 2012. "What Lies Beneath: Lahiri's Brand of Desirable Difference in Unaccustomed Earth." In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, edited by Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung, 51-71. Lanham, MD: Lexington.

Thoreau, Henry David. 1849 (2002). *Civil Disobedience*. København ; Los Angeles: Green Integer.

Thoreau, Henry David. 1854 (1997). *Walden or Life in the Wood*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Vyasa. 2013. *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata (1981)*. Translated by J. A. B. van Buitenen. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Conclusion
Notes for a Postsecular Narratology

Winding up this postsecular cavalcade through Indian novels, it may be interesting to re-examine the narratives just discussed from a narratological viewpoint. The creation of a non-secular space within a secular narrative requires sophisticated techniques, which deserve a closer look. We shall therefore refer to James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz's notion of theorypractice (1994). This is both a principle and a method. As a principle, the idea behind theorypractice is that there should be no unwarranted statement about a text and that every observation should be coherent with the existing theory. On the other hand, theory should not be conceived as a static, abstract corpus of ideas but rather as a body in progress, which is enriched by every contribution that discusses any narrative. According to this principle, this chapter ends by suggesting some parameters that may help analyse the relationship between implied author and reader in secular and covertly religious novels.

We shall now grapple with audiences and rhetorical strategies that breach the secular shell of Indian English fiction. From the foregoing chapters, it should be clear that the texts analysed deal with religious issues in different degrees. We can distinguish three of them for the sake of the discussion that follows here: overtly religious novels (Bankimchandra and Ananthamurthy), covertly religious novels (Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan), secular novels with covertly religious elements (Desais, Ghosh, Lahiri).

A Postsecular Audience

Any discourse on the perception of the non-secular in narrative depends on the rhetorical relationship between author and readers or, better, that streamlined version of the author that Wayne Booth (1974) calls implied author and its various reading counterparts. Although authorial statements may be enormously helpful, for the purpose of this chapter, we shall be working mainly on implied authors. Flesh-and-blood authors are far less free than their implied authors when it comes to religious discourses. We have already mentioned that religion and secularism are highly tense subjects in post-independence India, so that intellectuals may feel compelled to keep a low profile in their public statements to avoid disputes, while leaving to their implied authors the task of suggesting more nuanced positions. Thus the poetical and rhetorical strategies deployed in the texts should be ascribed to the implied author in his relationship with the intended audience.

The implied author's choices create a corresponding implied reader.[1] Unlike national literatures, which are defined, broadly speaking, by the nationality of the authors, world literature is defined by actual readers: if the flesh-and-blood audience is not international, a work cannot be rubricated as world literature. Novelists may strive to reach an international audience, may even address an international audience at the time of writing, but their work will not enter the canon of world literature unless it is actually translated and read in other countries.

Flesh-and-blood readers naturally try to identify themselves with the authorial audience. As a rule of thumb, the shorter the distance between the intended and actual reader, the smoother the reading—and hence, at least in the short term, the more successful the work. If the authorial audience's shared values are far from the flesh-and-blood readers' ones, the latter will resist identification and the reading experience will be disappointing. This is a distinctive feature of world literature; an international audience may find it too hard to share the knowledge and worldview of implied readers with a local viewpoint. Two kinds of difficulties may arise: the first related to lack of knowledge, the second to different sets of values. Thus some writers may write for an international audience from the start, trying to design an implied reader who is already proficient in world literature. Their texts patiently explain local cultural issues, offering readers new knowledge. The pleasure of reading may then derive from the encounter with different people and from new perspectives.

As a matter of fact, the identification between authorial audience and flesh-and-blood readers is never total. The gap between an average reader and the authorial audience provides a space for literary critics to do their job. Every reader learns to live with these gaps, which are due to different ideologies, different epochs, imperfect understanding, oversights. This elastic space between the flesh-and-blood reader and the authorial audience allows the insertion of filigree elements that most readers would overlook. This is the space where dumb censors may be tricked, and the space where the non-secular Hindu elements highlighted in the previous chapters are ensconced.

---

1 The first definition of the implied reader is found in Iser (1974); Peter Rabinowitz (1977) anatomises the implied reader distinguishing four different kinds of audiences that constitute the implied reader: 1. flesh-and-blood audience; 2. authorial audience, those intended by the author; 3. narrative audience, those intended by the narrator, who read the novel as if they lived in the fictional world; 4. the ideal audience presupposed by a narrator, those who understand and react to the narrator exactly the way the narrator desires. To these, James Phelan (2007) proposes the addition of a fifth figure, i.e. the narratee, who does not necessarily coincide with the ideal audience of the narrator. It is reasonable to believe that the 1. and 2. audiences will largely coincide at the publication of a work and diverge as time passes. For the purpose of our reflections, though, Iser's intuition of an implied reader will suffice. We shall also think of Umberto Eco's "model reader" (1994), an interpreting agent whose prerogatives are created by the text. The model reader is an abstraction that possesses all the knowledge necessary to rightly interpret the text and reacts to it exactly as the implied author wishes.

The construction of the implied reader is relevant in assessing the relationship of a narrative with religion or secularism. In chapter two, we saw that Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* does not try to showcase the *Agrahara* community as an anthropological token. The rationale behind this claim is that the implied reader is invited to contemplate the quandary of the *brahmins*, and somehow pick a side. The ideal reader must share a fair amount of knowledge with the protagonist: must know what a Keralite village looks like, what an *agrahal* is, what a *samskara* is, etc. The text does not provide explanations for these concepts. Intertextual references are never explicit except in one case, that of the gambler in the *Rigveda* who summons the gods to answer his question. However, the narrative strategy in that case easily justifies such a choice: the narrator is reporting the musings of Praneshacharya, who is more learned than most pundits, and most readers for that matter; the audience is supposed to react with a sense of wonder at the immense knowledge of the *acharya* who recalls stories that few other people would know. And yet, even wondering at his learning requires a thorough knowledge of the context. The same is true of the choice of the subject matter. By portraying a village where every character occupies a rank on the social ladder, the implied author takes for granted that the narrative subject—the essence of Brahminhood, or purity—is relevant to the audience, too. In theory, the status of each villager depends on one's spiritual achievements; in practice, the story complicates this statement but does not reject it altogether as secularism would. Ideally, the reader should be critical of the caste system, but not cringe at it as Westerners often do. Flesh-and-blood readers who do not share a Hindu—or even Brahminical—background may struggle to identify themselves with the implied reader. Phelan (2005, 19) justly argues that some narrative audiences are easier for the actual readers to identify with than others; surely it is easier for an international secular readership to identify with the narrative audience of Herman Hesse than with that of Bankimchandra or Anantha Murthy. Thus an implied reader who sympathises with the religiosity of characters or feels strongly about religious issues is a clear sign of a religiously engaged narrative. Conversely, a secular narrative does not expect any emotional reaction to religious issues on the part of the implied reader.

Poetic Justice

James Phelan (2005) also offers another approach to the rhetoric of the narrative that may help to define our point. The scholar argues that a narrative text develops along three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and ethical. These dimensions are investigated through some fundamental questions. Cognitive: "how do we understand a narrative text?" Emotional: "How do we feel about it?" Ethical: "What are we asked to value in these stories?" In sum: "How are we supposed to respond?" Whatever answer we offer to these questions, in the case

of Bankimchandra and Anantha Murthy, we cannot escape religion; it concerns all three axes. One understands these texts only if one knows Hinduism and has an emotional relationship with it. Moreover, one is asked to evaluate one's relationship to Hinduism. Consequently, we have good reason to call these novels "overtly religious." Religion is inescapable because of the particular nature of the intended audience (Rabinowitz 1977). Both Bankimchandra and Anantha Murthy evidently thought of an audience of like-minded readers who would share their ethical preoccupations—be they political or spiritual.

Secular novels dealing with religion may consider it from the cognitive viewpoint, but usually ignore it at the emotional and ethical level. The case of covertly religious novels is not different, because these three axes are mostly filled with secular concerns. In the case of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, religion is more relevant on the cognitive axis and less on the remaining two. In other words, a certain knowledge of Hinduism may be useful to understand the narrative, which, however, does not necessarily entail an emotional response, let alone a personal commitment. To understand *The Guide*, one must know something about dharma, but one does not need to be Hindu. In the case of covertly religious elements in secular novels like *Fasting, Feasting*, *The Glass Palace*, and *The Inheritance of Loss*, religion develops only along the ethical axis as a rhetoric strategy, a metaphor, but not as an overtly recognised commitment. The same can be said of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story. Interestingly, the response that these novels require is basically secular, but the rhetorical strategy to elicit this response relies on religious tenets.

According to Phelan (2005, 20), readers develop interest and responses of three broad kinds: mimetic, thematic and synthetic. These three "narrative components" refer respectively to how a text describes the context, how characters move in the cultural and ideological space they are placed in, and how the narrative is crafted as an invention and an artificial construct. Different narratives may foreground any of the three components: most *dalit* literature, for instance, focuses on the context, *Bildungsromane* focus on the ideas and their interplays, and postmodern metafiction on the aesthetic artefact. Broadly speaking, the Indian novels that prove more successful abroad belong to the first and third category, or at least, reward a reader who concentrates on those components. The novels by Bankimchandra and Anantha Murthy previously considered, on the contrary, seem to invite a reading that focuses on the second component—how characters react to the ideas and culture of their land. The ethical dimension of these texts lies in this fraught relationship with the cultural norm, which can be fully understood only in as much as such norm is known to the reader. Since the cultural norm in both these novels is Hinduism, and the characters react to it, the empathic reader is invited to reflect on the questions that plague the characters. In short, these novels are not secular because they presuppose

a knowledge of Hinduism and a genuine interest in its ethical subtleties. Their rhetoric tries to elicit a response on the part of the reader.

Obviously, references to Hinduism are not limited to the thematic; the mimetic and synthetic narrative lines are likewise involved, mainly through descriptions of the social milieu and intertextual references, some of which we have highlighted in the previous chapters. These novels grapple with religion, more particularly Hinduism, in five ways that we shall see surface also in other more secular works, though not with the same force: (1) Choice of the chronotope/characters; (2) Subject matter; (3) Structure of ideas; (4) Use of poetic justice; (5) Intertextuality. (1) and (2) pertain to the mimetic axis, (3) and (4) to the thematic, and (4) and (5) to the synthetic. These parameters may be employed to proceed to a postsecular reading of secular novels. We have spoken about these parameters in the previous chapters, and it would be redundant to examine them again here. However, it is worth considering in closer detail poetical justice, which emotionally binds author and readers.

Poetic justice refers to the fitting retribution apportioned to characters by the almighty author. The term was first used by the critic Thomas Rymer in his *The Tragedies of the Last Age Consider'd* (1678) with reference to Elizabethan drama. Poetic justice is all the more visible when dealt out by fate rather than the realistic events set in motion by the plot. A villain killed in a duel is less significant than a villain stricken by lightning. There are two basic kinds of retribution: prize and punishment. *Oliver Twist* (1839) offers good examples of both: generous and mild-hearted Oliver is determined to avoid a criminal life, and he inherits a fortune. Conversely, Sykes accidentally hangs himself as he is trying to escape. Both actions do not depend on the characters, but are set up for them by the author, who takes the form of chance in the secular world of the novels. Poetic justice, even more than human justice, fulfils a psychological need to see virtue rewarded and vice punished, thus contributing to the cathartic effect of the narrative. However, vice and virtue—and, to a lesser extent, even prizes and punishments—are not exactly universal; they depend on the value system which appraises them. In *Anandamath* no hero is ever slain, and when one is wounded, he is miraculously restored to life, which is what the reader would like to see. In *Samskara* the death of the antagonists may be considered an instance of poetic justice only if we accept that Naranappa's life is indeed immoral and outrageous, to which a liberal secularist might object. It is difficult to say if anyone receives a prize in the novel. Arguably Praneshacharya is helped by external events to abandon his former life and move on in his spiritual search.

It is difficult to identify instances of poetic justice in *Kanthapura.* One is possibly connected to the poor outcome of the first action against the Skeffington Coffee Plantation. The novel seems to put it down to the imperfect motivations of the leader, Moorthy. Indeed, his political actions turn out better after he starts fasting and attending the *pariah*'s abodes.

The case of Narayan is possibly the simplest, as poetic justice is embedded in his poetics. It is covert in *The Guide*, and overt in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. In the former, whatever poetic justice there is seems to coincide with the law of *karma*. Raju is punished for recklessly abandoning his *swadharma* and is rewarded when he goes back to it. Moreover, his past good actions seem to help him become a renouncer and lose his life following a fast, which is a reward from a Hindu viewpoint. *The Man-eater of Malgudi* is based on a myth according to which greed and dissolution are punished, so poetic justice and plot are consubstantial.

The case of the overtly secular novels considered in chapters five and six is more complex. In Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth," it is impossible to detect any poetic justice connected with Hindu values. These are, at least from this point of view, the most secular of the novels here considered. The case of *Glass Palace* is slightly different: we have already considered the parallel deaths of Inspector Dey and Arjun, both punished for mimicking the British and collaborating with them. There is another interesting side of the novel, which seems to adopt a religious rather than secular ethic. According to Fiona Moolla (2021, 35), "the relationships forged by sex in *The Glass Palace* appear doomed." The scholar brings two examples: the story between Dolly and Savant and the one between Dinu and Alison. "In the case of Dinu and Alison, the sex scene […] is the poignant prelude to Alison's death—she shoots herself to avoid falling into the hands of the Japanese soldiers" (Moolla 2021, 35). It is difficult to say whether there is a Hinduist element behind this, but certainly the choice almost certainly points to the superior quality of spiritual relationships. Contrary to *Inheritance of Loss*, *The Glass Palace* does not identify the loss of Indian values with a voyage outside India but rewards those families that bring their Indianness beyond the borders.

We have already mentioned the sin of *Samudrayana* in Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*, which brings disgrace to those who abandon Indian values for Western ones. Biju's decision to go back to his native Kalimpong like a prodigal son is rewarded with a *darshan* (apparition) of the Kanchenjunga. In this case both the action sanctioned or rewarded and the retribution resonate with a religious system of values, albeit covertly.

In conclusion, poetic justice may be a rhetorical ploy to covertly assert ethical values. In a realistic narrative there is no way to prove that a certain twist of the plot is connected to poetic justice rather than simple fate or reality effect. However, this characteristic may be interesting to observe the implied author's set of values even when the flesh and blood author denies any accountability for whatever befalls the characters.

Narrative relationships

In accordance with the principles of theorypractice, it is now time to consider some characteristics of the relationship between the implied author and the implied reader with reference to covert religious elements. To this end, we shall design an ad hoc pattern that dovetails with Phelan's narratology.

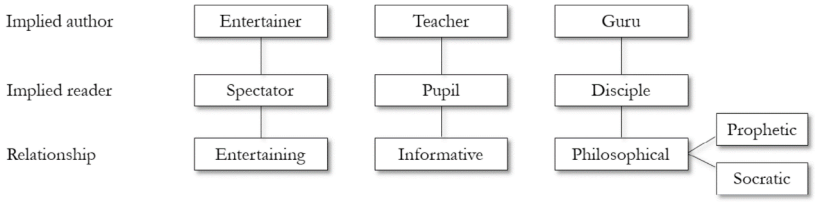
All texts do not affect readers in the same way. Some texts produce a perturbing effect—Damiano Rebecchini (2023) calls them "crucial readings." Such readings may become a substantial part of the readers' identity. However, not all readings are bound to play such a role. The audience intended by the novelist should be willing to react to the narrative changing their lives or at least their ideas or attitudes towards a certain subject, if ever so slightly. In other cases, the implied reader is amused but not perturbed, which means that the implied author is not trying to elicit any particular reaction. Implied author and reader establish different relationships, in which the author acts primarily as (1) entertainer; (2) teacher; (3) guru. The first will not try to perturb the readers, the last will perturb them most. The entertainer tells a story whose gist does not surprise the reader, delighting the audience with subtle variations in the *sjuzhet* or with inventive prowess. The entertainer's chief end is to amuse the audience, not to elicit a response other than admiration for the work. A classic example of entertainer is the implied author of *Pickwick Papers*.

The teacher is a divulger of knowledge comparatively new to the intended audience, but common among the experts of a given subject. The teacher-author writes for a reader who is delighted to acquire new learning. *Ivanhoe* offers a good example of such an author; Walter Scott studied life in the Middle Ages and created a story that illustrates a historical setting whose features are common knowledge among historians but not among general readers. Obviously, the teacher retains some features of the entertainer, even though the pleasure of reading does not come solely from the author's inventiveness, but also from learning new things. The author of world literature who writes for an international audience while focussing on local issues automatically assumes the role of teacher. Readers will be interested in the details of a country and culture they know little about. The often cited precept of creative writing that a novelist should write about something s/he knows well encourages young authors to assume the position of teachers.

The guru offers fresh insights and previously unknown knowledge. This author has reached personal conclusions—we may as well call it wisdom—that s/he shares with readers. The guru retains the entertainer and teacher characteristics, but communicating wisdom remains the principal object of this narrative relationship. The guru utilises two basic strategies, often in combination: offering readers insights or eliciting such insights from them. We shall call these strategies "prophetic" and "Socratic," respectively. The prophetic strategy

consists in sharing one's insights with captivated readers, enlightening and delighting them through enlightenment. The Socratic strategy maieutically elicits conclusions from the readers. The prophetic guru is usually more assertive than the Socratic one. The authors of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or *Remembrances of Time Past* write in a prophetic mode in that they tell their readers what to think about art and life, while the guru authors of *Crime and Punishment* or *Middlemarch* are more Socratic, in that they bring the readers to draw their own conclusions.

The three implied authors set up as many corresponding implied readers, which we shall call respectively (1) spectator, (2) pupil, and (3) disciple. Rather than distinctive units, implied authors and readers form relations, communication patterns. One presupposes the other; it is impossible to be a disciple without a guru, as it is impossible to be a teacher without a pupil. Obviously, each pair constitutes a prevalent narrative mode; hardly ever a novel relies on one relational mode only. It may be useful to give a name to each relationship; hence we shall call them (1) entertaining, (2) informative, and (3) philosophical modes; the philosophical mode may be prophetic or Socratic. The following diagram represents the whole pattern:



The three different implied authors perturb their readers in different degrees. The entertainer affects the audience the least—and likewise spectators are not prone to be much perturbed by a performance. The teacher perturbs learners by inviting them to belong to an established community where their knowledge is common; however, no particular reaction is expected from the readers, who are glad to simply store the newly acquired knowledge. The guru perturbs readers most by trying to change their established attitude towards something, possibly even changing their lifestyles. Oscar Wilde tries to win his audience to the notion of the superiority of art over ethics; George Orwell warns them against the dangers of totalitarian societies. The philosophical mode of writing is political and performative as it tries to bring about a change in a community of readers, or even a whole society.

The informative relationship is the most conducive to the status of world classic because flesh-and-blood readers from different cultures delight in being taught and taken through the lore of different people but may find it

harder to be entertained by alien genres and will not easily be captivated, let alone perturbed, by gurus from another culture. The guru-disciple relationship in world literature works only within restricted communities of readers, often for a limited time, such is the case for instance with Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) or Wilhelm Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). While a religious attitude may create disciples, secularism may set up entertaining or informative relationships, more rarely philosophical ones. Bankimchandra's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) develops along the informative line. It portrays the ways of rustic people and the rural equivalent of city intellectuals in nineteenth-century India. Conversely, *Anandamath*, even when it teaches about the *Sannyasin* rebellion, inflames the readers' hearts and tries to mobilise them against the British occupation, creating disciples-readers rather than pupils. As we have seen, the former was aimed at an international audience, the latter at Indians alone—almost exclusively at Hindu Bengalis.

While *Anandamath* is an excellent example of prophetic relational mode, Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* is likewise philosophical but more Socratic than prophetic. Indeed, Murthy sets up a sort of test tube in which he reacts an *Acharya* community, a dilemma, a holy man, and some sinners, inviting the readers to witness the experiment and draw their conclusions.

The novels by Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan are notable in that they apparently create a teacher-pupil relationship but hint at some less overt philosophical Socratic guru-disciple relationship. Raja Rao's prevalent modalities are the informative and sometimes the entertaining ones. The latter when the implied author indulges in ironic descriptions of Kenchamma's power at the beginning of the novel, or when he invents a tale in which Gandhi is a divine portent even as a child. The prevalent relational mode, however, is informative; the novel illustrates Gandhism and the life in an Indian village. Even in the end, when Moorthi becomes a follower of Nehru, leaving Gandhi, the prevalent mode remains informative rather than philosophical. However, covert references to religion sometimes activate the philosophical Socratic mode. One instance is the incident of the *shivalinga*. Only after Moorthy builds a shrine for the newly found *linga*, and the community starts to worship it, they find the strength to stand up for their rights and become *satyagrahis*—Gandhi's followers. It is the spiritual power derived from worship and meditation that grants them this strength, the reader must conclude. Another interesting passage is the moment when Moorthy visits the *pariah*'s shack. The disgust of the Brahmin in the poor house and his effort to drink a few drops of "polluted" milk is recounted in detail. Here, the author seems to abandon the oral narrator for a while, and it sounds as if told by an omniscient narrator instead. This shift in the narrator highlights the viewpoint of Moorthy, inviting the reader's empathy, and possibly a change of heart in high caste readers.

> Rachanna's wife quickly sweeps a corner, and spreads for him a wattle mat, but Moorthy, confused, blurts out, 'No, no, no, no,' and he looks this side and that and thinks surely there is a carcass in the backyard, and it's surely being skinned, and he smells the stench of hide and the stench of pickled pigs, and the room seems to shake, and all the gods and all the manes of heaven seem to cry out against him, and his hands steal mechanically to the holy thread, and holding it, he feels he would like to say, 'Hari-Om, Hari-Om.' (Chapter 8)

A Western reader may ascribe the hyperbolic description to entertainment or teaching, but a non-secular reader may consider it as an invitation to consider the prerogatives and duties of Brahminhood. Here the author is speaking to his high-caste countrymen, asking them if they are really ready to fight alongside Gandhiji, while informing world intellectuals of the peculiarities of the Indian struggle for Independence.

Also R.K. Narayan's fiction develops across the whole spectrum of relational modes, from entertaining to philosophical. As in the case of *Kanthapura*, however, the three modes are not simply juxtaposed but mutually exclusive. The implied reader cannot be an amused spectator and a disciple simultaneously—though the same flesh-and-blood reader may fill these roles in different moments. This simultaneity is possible in novels like Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, where the implied reader is supposed to enjoy the plot, the hypnotic prosody, learn about oriental spirituality, and even feel uplifted by the Buddhist implications, without relinquishing their European background. Nothing of the kind happens in Narayan's novels, where religious commitment and social comedy are mutually exclusive. Raju in *The Guide* is a case in point; one cannot simultaneously laugh at him as a lucky impostor and reflect upon the mystery of his spiritual enlightenment. The first reaction pertains to the entertaining mode, and the second to the philosophical. Narayan's detachment is either irony or the detachment of the sannyasin who knows the delusionary quality of the world; it cannot be both at once. Likewise, in *Mr Sampath* one cannot empathise with Srinivas's insights into the illusional nature of the world and laugh at his lack of worldly wisdom. Scholars who have pointed out Narayan's Hindu references[2] have often considered them as a hidden source, a kind of learned divertissement for sophisticated readers, or delight for scholars. In *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, for example, the underlying myth of Bhasmasura is often presented more as a piece of *bravura* in which the author has been able to adapt the old tale to modern times, like a postmodern writer would do. On the contrary, my contention is that Narayan is actually inviting the reader to contemplate the timeless truth of the myth in the story of Vasu and Nataraj. This reading is incompatible with the enjoyment of the social comedy, like scepticism is incompatible with faith. Midway between the entertainer and the guru stands the

2 See chapter four for a detailed discussion.

teacher. The latter acts as a guide for those who venture to an unknown land. This is the implied author favoured by Graham Greene, as he stated that he had come to know India through Narayan's novels. Unlike the guru, the teacher is not incompatible with the entertainer. The pupil-reader may appreciate the entertainer's humour and the teacher's realism at once. Likewise, the teacher is not incompatible with the guru, as the first plays the part of a keen observer, who deploys the facts on which the guru builds his observations. Thus, both the pupil and the disciple are aware of a previous relational modes, which provide a background for their status. Narayan's supreme irony lies in his ability to use the three relationships simultaneously. He can talk to his spectators, pretending he is deploying Malgudi just for them; at the same time, he addresses Indian middle-class readers, who delight in seeing their own class portrayed, or international readers eager to learn about India; lastly, he offers food for thought to disciples with little inclination to amusement, rewarding their ability to go beyond the entertainment of his novels. In fact, as we have seen in chapter four, this very irony is a reflection of a Hindu world picture, where every myth is true and delusive at the same time.

The prevalent relational mode in Anita and Kiran Desai, and Amitav Ghosh is informative. However, the undercurrents of Hindu ethics highlighted in chapter five gesture towards a guru-disciple relationship of the Socratic kind. All three novels offer information on the historical predicament of the middle class (Anita Desai), the colonisation of Burma, the exile of the royal Burmese family, the Second World war (Amitav Ghosh), the Gorkha movement and the situation of migrants during the Raj and in contemporary New York (Kiran Desai). This enormous amount of information is organised in all three novels in order to capture the attention of non-Indian as well as Indian readers. All three narratives offer complex plots that mingle entertainment and information. The novels also deploy a secular philosophical component, whose purpose is mostly political, especially when read by a world audience. Anita Desai deals with the aporias of the modern middle class both in India and in America; Amitav Ghosh deplores colonialism and its legacy; Kiran Desai deals mostly with class division and migration. Such secular values are upheld through a partly Socratic, partly prophetic strategy. However, as we have seen, the three novels all covertly hint at a non-secular set of values, more Indian than cosmopolitan. Such values are not upheld to be endorsed; the authors do not mean to convert their readers, and such covert references are always handled in Socratic mode. These implied authors seem to invite the readers who are willing to follow to consider the wisdom of ancient Hinduism from a secular perspective. Eating meat may not be wrong in itself, but considering some kind of food as morally corrupting may make sense. Likewise, leaving India to go abroad does not constitute a sin, but giving up on one's values for Western consumerism or power is a moral error that resonates with Hindu precepts. These authors would

not endorse Hindu myths or precepts, but recognise that they may have some fundament that may be utilised to describe some insights, much like Sigmund Freud did with Greek myths and psychoanalysis.

The case of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story is similar to the three novels studied in chapter five. Taking for granted the entertaining and informative relationships established by the text—which are by far prevalent for most readers—the story resorts to the philosophical relationship with a mixed reliance on the prophetic and Socratic attitudes. Indeed, though not less secular, Lahiri is more prophetic than the novelists in chapter five. It is as if her text asserted the convergence of Transcendentalism and Hinduism, justifying the migrants who found a second house in America to the countrymen who have stayed in India, and the second generation who merges Indian and American values to their parents—especially mothers—who refused to compromise with the West. If we read this story alongside Kiran Desai's novel, it sounds like a rejoinder to the accusation of *Samudrayana*: there is no sin because the core values are basically the same in India and America. Obviously, it holds true only for the educated upper middle class, but it is nonetheless an interesting stance. Lahiri's rhetoric and stylistic choices, which cite Transcendentalist thinkers and Hindu customs, are equally prophetic and Socratic.

***

In the novels considered in this research, references to Hinduism, be they overt or covert, can be detected through poetic justice and mostly coincide with the relationship between implied author and reader that we have called philosophical. In realistic fiction, however, poetic justice can be employed only sparingly, like coincidences. Even when it is used, authors hardly ever owe that they resort to it lest they are perceived as moralists unable to describe reality as it is. However, when poetic justice appears in a novel, it will be apparent only to those readers who share the author's values. Often it remains unregistered in the background, though contributing to the cathartic effect. Readers with a different *Weltaanschauung* may safely ignore poetic justice. Similarly, the philosophical relationship is often subordinated to the informative one, allowing flesh-and-blood readers to ignore the philosophical relationship if they feel uncomfortable in it. This subordination is more common in the novels that aspire to a world readership, and therefore rely on secularism and pragmatic information exchange as a common discussion ground with foreign readers. Postcolonial criticism—which is mostly based on Western premises even when conducted by non-Western scholars—has often emphasised the informative relationship. Possibly a keener attention to non-Western values in world literature may help

to see hitherto hidden nuances in world classics and help the academia to educate a more catholic and perceptive generation of readers.

Works Cited

Booth, Wayne C. 1974. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Eco, Umberto. 1994. *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press.

Iser, Wolfgang. 1974. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Moolla, F. Fiona. 2021. "Time, Space, Love in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*." In *Amitav Ghosh's Culture Chromosome*, 25-41. Brill.

Phelan, James. 2005. *Living to Tell about it: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Phelan, James. 2007. "Rhetoric/ethics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, edited by David Herman, 203. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Phelan, James , and Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds. 1994. *Understanding Narrative*. Ohio: Ohio State University Press.

Rabinowitz, Peter J. 1977. "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences." *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1):121-141.

Rebecchini, Damiano. 2023. Letture cruciali. Libri che cambiano la vita. *Apice. Archivi della parole, dell'immagine e della comunicazione editoriale*. Accessed December 2023.

Rymer, Thomas. 1678. *The tragedies of the last age consider'd and examin'd by the practice of the ancients and by the common sense of all ages in a letter to Fleetwood Shepheard, Esq*. London: Printed for Richard Tonson.

Covert Hinduism, Overt Secularism

A Postsecular Reading of the Indian English Novelistic Tradition

Alessandro Vescovi

In this book, the term "postsecular" does not denote a rejection of secularism; rather, it parallels the "post" in "post-modern" or "post-structuralist." Vescovi argues that secularism has helped Indian fiction to reach an international audience but, at the same time, has forestalled the recognition of Hindu elements covertly woven into the narrative fabric of several modern Indian classics. His close reading is an attempt at tracing traditional elements, such as plot patterns, naming, ethics in otherwise secular narratives, countering the hegemony of rationalistic interpretive paradigms often employed by postcolonial criticism.

ISBN 979-12-5510-105-5 (print)
ISBN 979-12-5510-106-2 (PDF)
ISBN 979-12-5510-107-9 (EPUB)
DOI 10.54103/milanoup.143