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Allegories of neoliberalism: contemporary South Asian fictions, forms of appearance, and the critique of capitalism

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Allegories of Neoliberalism: Contemporary South Asian Fictions, Forms of Appearance, and the Critique of Capitalism

by

Zayed Sarker Hasan Al

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ABSTRACT

In his book *After Critique*, Mitchum Huehls writes that neoliberalism is “*the* socio-cultural dominant” of our contemporary moment. In this study, I ask: if neoliberalism is indeed the socio-cultural dominant today, how have contemporary South Asian fictions responded to it? Drawing upon Fredric Jameson’s hypothesis that all literary works are allegorical, I argue that in contemporary South Asian fictions, the representation of neoliberalism has often taken two different historical trajectories: apprehension of it as a structure of feeling, and critique of its corrosive effects on society and the planet. Drawing upon contemporary scholarship, I outline a Marxist theory of neoliberalism. In the body chapters, I engage with South Asian fictions from writers such as Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Aravind Adiga, H. M. Naqvi, Mohsin Hamid, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh, whose works offer representations of some the most pervasive features of neoliberal capitalism: the monetization of consciousness and the subjugation of affect; uneven spatial development and the suppression of utopian impulses; the financialization of economy and the systemic production of the surplus population. In my concluding chapter, I point towards a paradigm shift, suggesting that the destruction of the planetary web of life and the systemic production of xenophobic racism allow us to see how the effects of neoliberalization have snowballed into a set of calamitous crises in today’s late neoliberal era—crises that have been compellingly explored by some recent works of fiction. Standing amidst the ruins of neoliberalism, I argue, South Asian fictions in the last three decades have provided penetrating, and at times conflicting, accounts of our lives and times. The neoliberal allegories I analyze in the dissertation, afford us a critical vantage on the contemporary modes through which capital relentlessly exploits labor; they also bring into purview the “optimism of the will” of the ordinary people who dare to envision a post-neoliberal future and put in efforts to create a world built on the foundations of economic justice and empathy.
DEDICATION

To my teachers—
Bret Benjamin, Paul Stasi, Glyne Griffith, Fakrul Alam and Azfar Hussain

gratitude galore!
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Any dissertation is a fruit of collective labor—present and past. That I am finally able to bring this long stretch to an end has been made possible by the generous support and encouragement of my committee. My committee chair, Dr. Bret Benjamin, has been pivotal in getting me to finish this work. It is his deep compassion that has allowed me to withstand the pressure of the deadline. He has been a rock and a source of inspiration, and I have leaned on his support every time I faced difficulty. Much of what has been written here has come under his constant guidance and supervision. Professor Benjamin has been a mentor of the supreme kind—one who has inspired me to dive into the treasure trove of Marx and patiently work through the difficult sections to find what I need. I owe him much more than he knows. This work would not have been possible without his patience, kindness, and exhaustive comments. My numerous in-person and Skype conversations with Professor Benjamin paved the way for the completion of this work. I will never be able to fully articulate the depth and breadth of my gratitude to him.

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My third chapter stands on the foundation of an essay I published in 2016 in a volume titled *South Asian Racialization and Belonging after 9/11*. This chapter makes significant departure from that early essay and retains very little of what was published in that volume.
Introduction

Allegorizing Neoliberalism

The idea that contemporary South Asian fictions can be read as neoliberal allegories was perhaps first advanced by Betty Joseph, who, in her essay “Neoliberalism and Allegory,” argued that the Indian writer Aravind Adiga’s novel *The White Tiger* should be read as an allegory of neoliberalism because it satirizes India’s neoliberal development by placing the rhetoric of economic development in the mouth of a murderer who attains his entrepreneurial success through violence. Since its publication, Joseph’s essay has attracted both hostile and favorable responses,\(^1\) exposing, in the process, the difficulty of carrying out an allegorical reading without risking passionate contestation. Responses to her essay, in some ways, demonstrate how neoliberalism itself is understood differentially by scholars. But, simultaneously, these responses also signal the risk of engaging in allegorical reading, because what is allegorized in a text remains open to interpretation. Not only is allegory itself deeply dialectical, but also the process of carrying out an allegorical reading is intrinsically ideological. In the words of Marxist thinker and cultural critic Fredric Jameson, “allegory itself is allegorical” (*Allegory and Ideology* 1).

The etymology of the word ‘allegory’ suggests a Greek origin. Conjuncture of two different expressions—‘*allo*’ (other) and ‘*agoreuo*’ (to speak openly, or to speak in an *agora* or marketplace)—allegory implies the articulation of something ‘other’ than what has been said (Mucci 298). Northrop Frye writes in *Anatomy of Criticism* that allegory is “a structural element in literature” and cannot be added to a work by “critical interpretation” unless it is there (54). Jameson, expanding the horizon of Frye’s hypothesis, goes further, suggesting, “everything is allegorical” and “all allegory is utopian” (*Allegory and Ideology* 215). Such a broad understanding
of a category, especially when it comes from Jameson, needs to be taken in with a pinch of caution. A relentless dialectician, he also notes how structural relations manifest themselves not in the broad spectrum of philosophical abstraction but in “fragmented social life,” for the universal as such is never available in its abstract totality to subjects for cognition and interpretation (The Political Unconscious 290). The “Utopian” in political struggles, therefore, is an expression of the “unity of a collectivity”—inscribed in shared dreams and visions—which allegorical readings often strive to unearth.

The proposition that I advance, extrapolating from Jameson, who hypothesizes about allegories and their relationships to literature as such, is less ambitious: some contemporary South Asian fictions can be read as allegories of neoliberalism, specifically as allegories of the struggle between labor and capital. While I closely follow Jameson’s line of thought that all literary works can be read allegorically, in this work, I advance more selective readings, engaging with those fictional representations where a critical schema is already present in the narrative, where a latent discontent against capitalism is voiced either directly or tropologically in concealed forms. Such a normative understanding, of course, risks being seen as affected and can be contested on the basis of the question: who decides what is critical? Despite the risk of being seen as a normative thinker, I choose to persist with the following premise: although all literary works are allegorical, there are some that are more invested than others in the process of unmasking the structural limits of the dominant mode of production and as such can be read as critiques of the relations of production that are hegemonic and ubiquitous. In this study, I advance the readings of selected fictions that apprehend neoliberalism critically—works that explore, either through narrative presentation or through parody and satire, South Asian people’s traumatic encounters with neoliberal policies and its built environments.
Neoliberalism is approached in this work as a set of policies emerging out of the capitalist class’s desire to establish and absolutize their control over the workers by restricting the latter’s bargaining power. As an ideology that has become hegemonic because of a historical windfall—the fall of the socialist block and the withering away of the Keynesian state—neoliberalism has settled down in almost all corners of the world in a way that makes it appear as the only possible worldview (*Weltanschauung*), as the capitalist utopia *per excellence*. Instead of seeing it as a new logic of governance, which many Foucauldians do, I consider it, following David Harvey, Prabhat Patnaik, John Bellamy Foster, and others, as a class project whose main objective is to concentrate all social wealth and power in the hands of the capitalist class so as to bring every atom of the universe within the circuits of value and exchange. I also contend that as the “historical dominant” of our era, neoliberalism has given rise to a specific kind of culture whose effects on the polity and the collective imaginary can be traced in the monetization of affect, the fetishistic disavowal of the global ecological crises, a complicit endorsement of uneven development and the unquestioning acceptance of capitalism as the only possible lifeworld.

Literary representation of neoliberal capitalism and its culture has in general taken two different directions that, rather than being two different visions, are instead two overlapping historical modalities: the path of anticipating neoliberalism’s cultural cognates as a structure of feeling, as an aesthetic intuition of the emergent; and the path of satire and critique. A number of Bangladeshi fictions written in the 1990s show prescient alertness about the ascending neoliberal world order, whereas the novels written in the twenty-first century, ring a pessimistic alarm about the way neoliberal policies and culture affect the fabric of life. I pay attention to both modalities of apprehensions of the neoliberal and try to explain how these representations are expressive of something more fundamental and foundational, namely, the struggle between labor and capital.
Before I explain these two modes of apprehensions of neoliberalism and its culture, let me first clarify why I reject the premise of Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism, and how neoliberalism has expanded historically in South Asia. Although I advance South Asia as a category, my engagement with it remains limited by my unfamiliarity with the vast territorial and linguistic expanse of South Asia. I also desist from engaging with Bhutan and the Maldives, very important locations in South Asia, for the same reason. Afghanistan—the latest member of the SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation)—and its literature, has not been discussed here for a different reason: despite my familiarity with its history and culture—which I confess is nominal and cursory—I am not entirely convinced that I can apply my normative understanding of neoliberalism to Afghanistan which, I feel, exists as a territory yet to be conquered by neoliberal ideologies and values.

In my dissertation, I read national literatures symptomatically, as markers of the broader organization of society around capitalist relations of production. However, neoliberalization is also schematized in this work as a process that is contested, and against which many of the cultural productions are positioned. What is offered in the rest of the discussion are elaborations of this idea. I first explain, branching off from this narrow premise, how neoliberalism is approached in this work, and what its theoretical perimeters are. Then I engage with a few aesthetic works—works whose critical compass points towards the emerging neoliberal values—to explain how they anticipate and critique neoliberalism. What I also address here is the relative reluctance with which postcolonial academic circles address the questions of capitalism and class—an issue that has been raised by a number of academics whose own works fall within the purview of postcolonial literary and cultural studies. The general tendency of Foucauldian and postcolonial academics to prevaricate on the questions of class and capital is, if not a marker of their outright complicity,
certainly a symptom of their alienation from the very subjects and sites they claim their familiarity with.

Neoliberalism and its Critics

The origin of the word neoliberalism remains a mystery. While most studies point towards the small gathering at the Walter Lippmann Colloquium in 1938 as the place where the term was first used, some conservative thinkers place its origin way back to the 1920s, when the word’s German equivalent began to circulate in Europe. Other scholars credit the German Ordoliberal school, specifically Alexander Rüstow, for first using the term (Chari 21). Not only is the origin of the term relatively vague, its historical emergence likewise is clad in mystery. Although neoliberalism is the historical dominant of our era, very few people, even academics, seem sure about its existence. As the effects of neoliberal policies lie in full visibility, to be seen publicly all around the globe, its name and modus operandi remain obscured, as if its specter-like existence is the only thing that is real about its presence. Noting how the obscurity of its origin as well as its purpose has allowed neoliberalism to silently carry out its business all around the globe, George Monbiot, in The Guardian, writes the following:

Imagine if the people of the Soviet Union had never heard of communism. The ideology that dominates our lives has, for most of us, no name. Mention it in conversation and you’ll be rewarded with a shrug. Even if your listeners have heard the term before, they will struggle to define it … Its anonymity is both a symptom and cause of its power. (“Neoliberalism”)

Part of the anonymity of neoliberal thought can be attributed to its ruling class origin, its curtain walls separating it from public views. As a movement, it has always enjoyed generous support and endowments from the business community, especially corporations. In that sense, it has been the
favored child of the prosperous and the wealthy since its emergence. Friedrich von Hayek, the predecessor of today’s neoliberals, was the son of a physician father and an aristocratic mother who came from a land-owning family. His Mont Pèlerin Society was mostly comprised of old-school liberals and US academics from prosperous backgrounds, whose views, much like his own, were conservative and anti-working class. Hayek’s works in the 1940s and 1950s provided the theoretical foundation for Milton Friedman and James Buchanan to base their economic research on the former’s conjecture about the relation between market economies and personal freedom.

For more than two decades, neoliberalism remained marginal in economic policy making, mostly circulating in some of the most elite universities in the United States, most notably the University of Chicago. It was the economic crisis of the 1972-1973 and the political crises in Latina America and Asia in the 1970s that allowed neoliberalism to gain a foothold in the mainstream policy making (Duménil and Lévy 21; Radice 94-95). The restlessness and crises of the 1970s in the United States and the United Kingdom brought Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan to power, who, aided by economic advisors who themselves were eager to try out the same neoliberal policies that were tested in Latin America, began to liberalize their countries’ economy and impose strict control over organized labor. The fall of the socialist block in 1989-1991, the expansion of US imperialism around the globe in the 1990s and the implementation of IMF and World Bank market reform policies in the Less Developed Countries (LDC) allowed neoliberalism to spread across the globe.

Although neoliberal ideologies have gained traction with a large number of people—even those whose lives have been squashed by neoliberal policies—today it is increasingly critiqued by many who see it as a threat to society and equality. Academic criticism of neoliberalism in recent times have been launched from two camps: those who believe that neoliberalism is mainly a
restoration of class power and those who think that it is a new governmental logic. The
governmentalist approach to neoliberalism, where neoliberalism is seen as the moment of arrival
of a new economic subject, is culled from Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France in 1978-
1979. After long editorial interventions, Foucault’s lectures from 1978-1979 were finally
published in French original in 2004 and in English translation in 2006. Its publication in English
marked a decisive moment in global literary culture because Foucault’s ideas were immediately
picked by a number of academics and intellectuals, most notably by Wendy Brown, who began to
argue that neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic policies but also a new governmental logic
that seeks to undermine democracy. Brown’s arguments were founded on Foucault’s observation
that “neo-liberalism,” advances a new kind of subject, *homo œconomicus*, who threatens the
foundation of juridical power—the power of the sovereign—by negating the sovereign’s right to
control “the economic field” (Foucault 292). Foucault’s discussion of the economic subject’s
relationship with the juridical system is deeply insightful. That he anticipates the catastrophic
outcomes of the introduction of economic logics in other fields governed by their own sets of laws
is demonstrative of his grasp of what was at stake in neoliberalism’s circulation and proliferation.
Characteristic of his typically implicit but nevertheless foundational critique of Marxism,
Foucault’s critique of neoliberalism’s antagonistic relationship to governmentality, however, is
devoid of any discussion on class relations. His criticisms of the “American” neoliberals
notwithstanding, Foucault shows little awareness of the political and economic consequences of
the encroachment of economic reason in every sphere of life; nor does he notice that the desire to
expand economic laws beyond the social boundary of the economic is propelled by the desire for
accumulation of capital and political power not simply as individuals but also as a class. It is here,
in the domain of class struggle, that Foucault’s neoliberal subject fails to present his/her case convincingly.

Much like Foucault, who shows little interest in the question of class struggle in his cognitive mapping of the neoliberal, so Wendy Brown exhibits little concern for the actual sites of oppression and exploitation in her book *Undoing the Demos* (2015). For Brown, what is important in the meteoric rise of neoliberalism is the question of the arrival of a “normative reason” that has the potential for becoming a “governing rationality” (30). The totalizing capability of neoliberal reason is symptomatically present in the figure of *homo œconomicus* who, unlike the same figure in eighteenth-century liberal economic theories, sees himself or herself solely as an economic subject, as “human capital” (35). Understanding the economic exclusively through the lens of subjectivity, however, obliterates the boundary between the dominant and the dominated, proffering a sweeping subjectivist philosophy that totalizes all human subjects living under the conditions of neoliberalism and leaves no space for collectivization and resistance.

In my first chapter, I discuss how Afaz Ali, the protagonist of eminent Bangladeshi writer Akhtaruzzaman Elias’ short story “Kanna” undermines these subjectivist theories of neoliberalism. Although he is constantly forced to think of money, to the extent to which his efforts to earn money look desperate, his reasons for doing so are not bound to his desire for self-enrichment. As the objective world around him succumbs to the culture of profiteering, his desire remains simple: escaping his entrapment in his workplace located in the city of Dhaka and returning to his family who are living in the rural area as fast as he can. A subjectivist theory of neoliberalism fails to account for Afaz’s condition, for what motivates him to earn money is not his desire to become successful—to become entrepreneurial and advance his knowledge for self-enrichment, thus becoming a human capital—but rather the necessity to escape the trap of debt. In
Elias’ story what leads us to neoliberalism is the transformation of the objective conditions of subjection within the capital-relation, not mere changes in the protagonist’s subjectivity. It is the material relation between labor and capital as well as the emergence of the monetized culture that offers us a better theoretical grip on the effects of neoliberalism.

In my reading of South Asian fictions, I posit a Marxist understanding of neoliberalism. When I use the term neoliberalism I do not postulate the advent of a completely new system of governance or a new modality of economic relation. Rather, I understand neoliberalism as a specific moment within the history of capitalism—a moment that is not entirely unique, nor completely like other historical moments either. It is a moment marked by the temporary victory of capital over labor, ushering in an era characterized by imperialist wars and accelerating refugee populations, massive inequality and proletarization, destruction of ecology and species, and dismantling of democratic and welfare state institutions. David Harvey, in A Brief History of Neoliberalism (2005), describes neoliberalism as a project directed towards the goal of achieving “the restoration of class power” (16). In Imperialism and Global Political Economy (2009), Alex Callinicos argues that neoliberalism has given “capitalists and state managers alike the ideological cohesion and self-confidence to force back organized labour” (207). In Daniel Zamora’s account neoliberalism becomes a process of production of the “surplus-population”—the “reserve army” of capital (797) as Karl Marx famously wrote in Capital Volume I—which restricts the bargaining power of organized labor and make high profits (“When Exclusion Replaces Exploitation”). John Bellamy Foster, following Samir Amin, has called neoliberalism the “imperialism of monopoly-finance capitalism” (“The New Imperialism of Globalized Monopoly-Finance Capital”). In the same spirit, Indian Marxist political economist Prabhat Patnaik describes neoliberalism as “a process of ‘primitive accumulation of capital’ which accelerates the process of … ‘centralisation
of capital’’ (‘‘Trends of Centre–state Relations in India Under the Neo-liberal Regime’’ 91). He notes in a separate study that the withdrawal of the state from public procurement, a hallmark of neoliberal policy around the world, has led to the strange phenomenon of an ‘‘acceleration of rate in growth’’ on the one hand and ‘‘an increase in the magnitude of absolute poverty’’ on the other (‘‘Growth and Poverty in the Indian Economy’’ 19, 25). All of these theorists stress neoliberalism’s war on the marginalized and the poor, demonstrating how neoliberal policies in the last four decades have resulted in the creation of a world that is not only extremely unjust but also abusive and restrictive.

In South Asia, neoliberalism began to tiptoe into the economic policies in the late 1970s, with the assistance of US imperialism and World Bank policies on the one hand and the local comprador politicians, economists, and military dictators on the other. In Bangladesh, as I detail in my first chapter, the process of dismantling the Keynesian welfare institutions began immediately after the assassination of Bangladesh’s populist leader Sheik Mujibur Rahman in 1975. In Pakistan, the labor and land reform programs that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was the Prime Minister of Pakistan from 1973 to 1977, carried out to appease the left leaning members of his party, were halted after his arrest and prosecution, leading Pakistan to become a vassal state dependent on foreign aid and imperialist assistance. Just as Bangladesh was during the time of military dictatorship, so Pakistan became a state dependent on foreign aid provided by the US-led coalition that used Pakistan as a launching pad for its proxy war on the communist Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The bizarre quasi-religious state policies taken during General Zia-ul-Haq’s reign were not whimsical steps taken out of piety or spiritualism, but calculated policies to shore up support for Haq’s regime (Talbot 230-233; 262). During his rule, market liberalization was carried out with the same kind of zeal as was done in Bangladesh after 1977,
reducing the public sector share in total investment to just 18 per cent from 73 percent (Brown, n. pag.). After the death of General Zia, Pakistan’s pro-democratic parties continued with the same liberal policies that the military leader pursued during the 1980s. Under the advice of the IMF and the World Bank, the democratic leaders clamped down on public spending and reduced the tax burden on the nation’s capitalist class. Although Pakistani capitalists took almost 103 billion rupees from public banks as loans, they never returned the money, creating a vicious debt crisis from which the nation has never recovered. This is how Brown summarizes Pakistan’s economic trajectory in the decades after Zia-ul-Haq’s death:

Pakistan has had 12 IMF programmes, more than all other South Asian countries combined. None have succeeded in reducing the budget deficit or increasing the tax base. Pakistan still has a tax to GDP ratio of less than 9 percent, half that of India and a quarter of the OECD average. The rich evade paying tax; and the military takes 35 percent of the budget. Throughout the 1990s exports hardly grew and development expenditure fell with a growing layer of aid-funded NGOs in a quasi-welfare state role. Support for foreign reserves came not from increased exports but from loans that continued thanks to US fears of civil breakdown in Pakistan. (Brown, n. pag.)

Unlike Bangladesh and Pakistan, however, India’s neoliberalization took a different trajectory, beginning in the 1990s with the opening of India’s markets for corporate institutions from around the world. As early as 1996, Marxist thinker and literary critic Aijaz Ahmad warned that India’s market reforms, instead of following the traditional liberal trajectory, were moving towards an exploitive neoliberal trajectory that would reduce the state to a managing committee of the bourgeoisie, making it disappear from the realm of guardianship overseeing “social good.” The nation, he writes, “no longer represents the interests of the nation in the world of international
competition; it comes to represent, rather, the interests of ‘globalization’ to the nation” (213). That Ahmad’s caveat was not a false alarm can be understood when we read Arundhati Roy’s Walking with the Comrades—a book that catalogues corporate atrocities in India’s heartlands, especially in areas populated by indigenous communities. In her compelling essay “Mr. Chidambaram’s War” she describes how multinational corporations, in cahoots with the Indian state, have been orchestrating one of the most atrocious evictions in South Asia, pushing the indigenous communities out of the hills which have been their homes for hundreds of years, hills which the mining corporations must exploit for rare minerals so they can make big profits. Unable to resist the power of the state and the corporations, these evicted people have been organizing themselves deep in the forest, launching counter-attacks on the marauding forces. Indicting the vacuous market growth oriented neoliberal economy, Roy writes:

The real problem is that the flagship of India’s miraculous ‘growth’ story has run aground. It came at a huge social and environmental cost. And now, as the rivers dry up and forests disappear, as the water table recedes and as people realize what is being done to them, the chickens are coming home to roost. All over the country, there’s unrest; there are protests by people refusing to give up their land and their access to resources, refusing to believe false promises any more. Suddenly, it’s beginning to look as though the 10 per cent growth rate and democracy are mutually incompatible. (33-34)

Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan each offer a more complicated national economic history. Sri Lanka, a nation state that was built on the principles of socialism and a welfare state system, began to sway towards market capitalism in the late 1970s, when J. R. Jayewardene’s nationalist government initiated market reform policies. Instead of the strong welfare system which most people sought, what Sri Lanka received was a fractious identity politics which spawned its three-
decade-long civil war between the north and the south (Wickremasinghe 317-318). Although the long civil war upended its society and political system in a fundamental way, its economic policies have remained market friendly since the late 1970s. In recent years, after the violent uprooting of the Tamil resistance, Sri Lanka has begun to move more decisively towards market capitalism, carrying out massive gentrification programs with public money, leaving out large parts of the population from economic benefits that state has begun to enjoy. Nepal, on the other hand, has swayed from one direction to another, moving from being a kingdom to a social democratic nation state. Because of its large agrarian population on the one hand and its politics and dependency on foreign aid on the other, Nepal seems to stand at a fascinating juncture where it has been able to stave off neoliberal encroachment so far but is, in terms of dependency and foreign policy, constantly summoned to lean towards either India or China, the two powerful nation states that surrounded it. The Indian influence on Nepalese economy and culture and Chinese influence on its politics has made it difficult for Nepal to unilaterally decide its own economic policies. Although private enterprise is gradually increasing, Nepal, in general, remains astutely committed to state sponsored development because of the strong Maoist pushback against workers’ exploitation in the last two decades. It is this feature of Nepal, its strong commitment to state mediated development, that has resisted neoliberal South Asia’s efforts to rope it in. Bhutan, likewise, has resisted the temptation of giving itself over to the forces of the market. Although mainly dependent on agriculture, Bhutan’s small population enjoys relatively better life conditions and security than do most other people living in more prosperous nations of South Asia.

Reading South Asian Fictions Allegorically
As I explained earlier, the allegorical presentation of neoliberalism can take two different trajectories: representation, and critique. Many of the fictions written in the 1990s can be read as allegorical presentations of neoliberal structure of feeling—anticipations of the ascending neoliberal culture. Bangladeshi novels written in late 1980s and early 1990s flash the symptoms of anxiety about monetization and corruption—an anxiety that is at once peculiar, pervasive, and profound. The new managerial class, entrepreneurs, and political beneficiaries of military dictatorship appear in these fictions as upstarts who threaten the foundation of Bangladeshi society. The general sense of anxiety observed in Bangladeshi literary representations corresponds to the broader social and cultural reshuffling that was going on in the country in the 1980s and the 1990s. As neoliberalism was yet to become the historical dominant, I see such representations as an apprehension of the general structure of feeling. Since I analyze this issue in detail in my first chapter, let me turn to other fictions that communicate similar kinds of anticipation of neoliberal cultural transformations.

Take, for instance, Nepalese fiction writer Samrat Upadhyay’s short story “The Good Shopkeeper.” On its face, the story seems to have very little to do with neoliberal form or content. A realist short story narrating the crisis of an old-fashioned accountant’s life, “The Good Shopkeeper” registers little formal challenge. Its plot also seems far removed from a critical presentation of the neoliberal structure whose effects can be immediately identified. Upadhyay’s Kathmandu is not a space of intense capitalist activity marked by rural to urban migration, nor a fast-paced city characterized by postmodernist culture and newly erected malls and apartments. The chaotic madness and greed that characterizes The White Tiger’s Delhi or Home Boy’s New York City (discussed in my third and fourth chapters) are also absent in Upadhyay’s narrator’s Kathmandu. His tone, throughout the narration, remains subdued, echoing the city’s relatively
calm and slow-paced life, its unpretentious simplicity, and its feudal culture. Nepal at that time was still formally a monarchy, although its constitutional reform was carried out in 1990. And yet, even here, we detect traces of the manifest features of neoliberalism.

The story’s plot moves around the misfortune of an old-school accountant. Having been let go by his firm, Pramod, the protagonist of Upadhyay’s story, sees his coherent life fall apart and his hopes dwindle. Unable to find another job—a thing difficult to come by in Kathmandu—he seeks comfort in the temples of the city. What is rendered visible through Pramod’s numerous visits to “Shambhu-da,” his wife’s prosperous cousin, is the structure of favoritism; jobs are only available if one has an influential guardian ready to use his political/financial influence to find one a position. Pramod’s recurrent visits to his powerful relative, however, yield nothing substantial and he grows bitter as he struggles to find a job. His wife who also struggles heavily with their seven-month old daughter, advises him to sell a plot of land they own and set up a shop. Pramod, thinking shop-keeping is beneath his social class, rudely declines to do so despite his wife’s entreating, and despite his own repeated social humiliation. Deeply frustrated and vegetating in the parks of Kathmandu, he meets a “young woman” at the city park—a woman far below his social rank, who works in an affluent house as a “servant” (10). Pramod’s relationship with the “servant woman” can be interpreted in a number of ways, most effectively as his patriarchal revenge on his wife as well as a neurotic reaction against his self-perceived emasculation through joblessness. His relationship with the maid can also be seen as a symbolic prefiguration of being declassed, which takes a fetishistic form expressing itself through the symptom of his ritualistic vegetation at the park and lazy afternoons spent inside her tiny room. Read as such, “The Good Shopkeeper” appears to stage an anachronistic feudal fantasy, mirroring the persistence of the
feudal life that the city was still caught up in, the monarchy that was still ornamentally present when the story was written.

Yet, as I would like to argue here, a new schema emerges when this story is read as an allegory of Nepal’s inscription in the global capitalist structure. Pramod, we are told, has lost his job to “a young man who knows computers” (5). We are also told about Nepal’s new social structure when Pramod, wary of Shambhu-da’s avoidance, imagines himself “as a feudal landlord, like one of the men who used to run the farmlands of the country only twenty years earlier,” punishing him (8). This moment, which appears as fantasy, is evocative of Pramod’s yearning for a long-gone feudal past, when society was hierarchically organized and where people like Shambhu-da had little relevance. It is against this backdrop that Upadhyay’s story attains its allegorical relevance. Pramod’s acceptance of his future existence as a shopkeeper allegorically represents Nepal’s acceptance of its new class and social structure dominated not by landlords who ran the farmlands twenty years ago but by people like Shambhu-da whose newfound wealth comes from “shady businesses” and construction jobs in the city (2). Likewise, the specter of computer-educated accountants replacing old school clerks also implies the nation’s changing technological landscape, moving in synchrony with the global technological changes. Written in the late 1990s when the effects of neoliberal global restructuring in Nepal was still in its nascent stage, Upadhyay’s story bears witness to impending social and technological transformations whose contours were still too distant to make out. It is Shambhu-da who mediates that distant horizon symptomatically embodying the emerging class which will accumulate through private trade but is also willing to employ violence, theft and dispossession as a means to secure wealth. What is deeply suggestive here is that the victim of Shambhu-da’s
violence is a policeman. It is, after all, the body of the semi-feudal welfare state that the country must dump before entering the circuit of late capitalism run by advanced computing machines.

If Upadhyay’s story allegorizes neoliberalism by absorbing all the trivialities of a changing culture and by projecting onto the body of the nation the shadow of a distant world whose political and economic transformations are affecting lives in a relatively quiet part of the globe, Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy critiques neoliberalism more overtly, by exposing the vacuousness of the rhetoric of freedom and invisible hand of the market—neoliberalism’s ideological foundations. The trilogy does so not by directly engaging with the present moment but by reimagining a turbulent period of the nineteenth century, which, despite its apparent historical remove, functions as a mirror image of the world in which we live today. Ghosh started writing his trilogy in 2004, soon after the beginning of the Iraq war, and finished it in 2014, more than six years after the great financial crisis of 2008. At the center of its narrative stands a ship and its occupants whose lives the trilogy’s intricate plot follows. One of the characters that Ghosh’s novels closely pursue is the schooner’s carpenter from Baltimore, Zachary Reid. It is his remarkable transformation from being a mere carpenter to a partner in the firm that bought that ship that signifies the imperial cooperation in the form of Euro-American co-authorship in the opium war, thus anticipating the Iraq war in whose aftermath the novel was written. Reid’s partnership with the British trader Benjamin Burnham also suggestively points towards the expanding brotherhood of free-trade ideologues who have the power to dictate what course their nations may take and against whom their nation must wage a war. Reid thus holds the key to novel’s allegorical presentation of the pre-Iraq war political climate through the trope of the Opium War, whose re-narration allows us to see the connection between the present and the past.
Ghosh himself was interested in tracking this homology, this correspondence between what happened before the beginning of the Opium War and what happened almost two centuries later. How free trade became the rallying cry for the opium traders has been described by Ghosh in an interview, where he suggests that what inspired him to write the trilogy was the strange semblance between the past and the present. This interview, where Ghosh gestures towards the axis between imperial war and free trade, clearly lays out the connection between The First Opium War and the second Iraq War. Noting the strange similarity and how it inspired him to write the trilogy, he states:

I started writing this trilogy in 2004, soon after the start of the Iraq War; and the Iraq War was of course fought in the name of freedom and free trade and son and so forth. When I looked at the historical material on the Opium War it soon became clear that there were many similarities between that war and the Iraq War of 2003; it extends to the point where it’s almost uncanny.

With the First Opium War, too, talk of freedom was constantly in the air; there’s all this talk about overthrowing the tyrant, the Manchu tyrant. The British merchants who cheer-led the war would say: We’ll be welcomed with open arms on the streets of Guangzhou, there’ll be fireworks in the city and so on. The similarities with the discourse around the Iraq War were eerie. And not only that, the similarities extend much, much deeper. As in the Iraq War, private companies played a huge part in the Opium War, the supply chain was subcontracted out to merchants, and there was an incredible amount of corruption on the British side. (“The Opium Wars, Neoliberalism, and the Anthropocene”)
When we read Ghosh’s interview, the correspondence between the past and the present, Free Trade imperialism and Neoliberalism, and nineteenth-century primitive accumulation and the twenty-first century accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism* 91-92) begins to emerge. If, to travesty Fredric Jameson, the object of allegory is not meaning but structure itself (*Allegory and Ideology* 10), these transhistorical homologies gesture towards a broader structural relation between then and now—a relationship that allows us to see these multiple temporalities as coexisting moments within the broad historical expanse of capitalist modernity, where expropriation, exploitation, imperialism and war exist as concurrent processes of accumulation.

To understand why I perceive Ghosh’s trilogy as a critical presentation of neoliberalism let us first turn to the most explicit feature of the trilogy’s critique—rhetorical similitude. In her recent work *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* (2019), Brown shows how the neoliberal discourse on free market is deeply invested in Hayek’s insistence on the conjunction between the market and the moral, which now features in most conservative discussions about “God, family, nation and free enterprise” (89). In *River of Smoke* (2011), the second novel of the trilogy, we see similar rhetorical strategies from Benjamin Burnham, the owner of the *Ibis*. When the Chinese, determined to prosecute those Hong merchants who persist with the opium trade, make their intentions public, Burnham, who hears the news from a fellow British trader, is infuriated, calling the Chinese commissioner “a monster” (431). Hearing Burnham’s comment, Mr. King, an American businessman, quips whether Burnham sees anything monstrous in his own actions. The latter responds:

No, sir … [b]ecause it is not my hand that passes sentence upon those who choose the indulgence of opium. It is the work of another, invisible, omnipotent: it is the hand of
freedom, of the market, of the spirit of liberty itself, which is none other than the breath of God. (432)

This idea that no mortal has the authority to intervene in market because its freedom has been warranted by God himself validates Foucault’s observation that neo-liberals do not accept the jurisdiction of the sovereign in the matter of trade. To them, market exists outside political jurisdiction and, therefore, cannot be governed by the same laws that operate in the nation or society.

By invoking the rhetoric of the free hand of the market, Burnham is not indeed leaning towards Adam Smith and classical liberalism, whose worldviews remained more or less secular; he is, rather, aligning himself with the Evangelicals and the moralists like Hayek who sought to connect freedom of the market with Christianity. It is there that the novel’s critique of neoliberalism explicitly comes to view. By putting the discourse of neoliberalism in the mouth of Burnham—a conservative British free trader—Ghosh is performing what Adiga does in his first novel: exposing the duplicity of neoliberal discourse by putting it in the mouth of an unworthy practitioner. The difference between the two novels lies in the manner in which these two preachers of neoliberalism practice their own preaching. Whereas Balram, Adiga’s quizzical protagonist, practices it to the best of his ability by remaining true to the neoliberal mantra of entrepreneurship which proclaims that our relationships are all transactional, Burnham applies his credo selectively, validating the premises of the Marxist interpreters of neoliberalism who claim that neoliberalism is a rhetorical empty shell underwritten by class interest and imperial ambition. Two examples, I hope, will suffice. In Sea of Poppies, we see Burnham quickly and efficiently shelving the costs of economic loss on the shoulders of his local partners (80), thus bending the laws to avoid the cost of his business decisions. In River of Smoke (2011), the British
traders collectively change the rules of business so they can monopolize the shipbuilding trade (422), putting the gospel of God’s free hand to rest in a quiet corner. Both instances attest to how
the trilogy effectively sees free market ideology as a discourse underwritten by class and
imperial relations of power, as rhetorical exercises they are not only rehearsed sporadically but
also applied unevenly, making sure that concentration of capital in the hands of the imperialists
accompanied by a surfeit of logic that defends their right to accumulate wealth freely.

Ghosh’s trilogy can be approached in another way as well—by way of the object. Once
we approach these novels through the trope of opium, which serves as a master metaphor in
them, their relationship to capitalist modernity becomes clear, allowing us to read the trilogy as
an allegorical exposé not only of the capitalist production process itself which is marked by
inequality and decrepitude but also of the risk of commodity circulation. As value in motion, the
commodity’s exchange and conversion into the money form must be performed without delay in
order to avoid crisis. An inability to convert its valorized commodity form into money, we are
shown, leads towards calamity and mortal conflict. In Sea of Poppies, the crisis ushered in by the
deprecation of value of “American bills of exchange,” which results in the reduction of the price
of opium, forcing the Burnham Bros. to face financial loss for the first time in its history (80). It
is this loss that sets Benjamin Burnham to encroach on Raja Neel Ratan Halder’s estate, driving
the latter into exile. In River of Smoke, a chain of crises is unleashed when the Chinese
government bans the sale of opium, resulting in a log of unsold opium which leads the British
opium merchants to wage war on the Chinese. The tragic death of the Bombay merchant Bahram
is the consequence of the loss emanating from unmaterialized surplus value of opium—an
economic loss which drives him towards frustration and then addiction, finally causing his death
(503-510). Flood of Fire, the last novel of the Ibis trilogy, can be read as an allegory of
overcoming the crisis of conversion by waging war and expanding the market even further. What
is laid bare in the process is that war is a necessary strategy for overcoming capitalism’s crises.
The entire trilogy, thus, can be read as a story of capitalism’s crisis of overproduction and price
deprecation, and the violent means through which capitalism overcomes its crisis.

In *Capital Volume II*, Karl Marx writes how, once converted into commodity, capital
must perform its “commodity functions” before returning to its owner in money form (122). The
inability to do so, writes the German revolutionary, leads towards crisis and stagnation. Marx
identifies various reasons for capitalism’s crises, most notably the delay in moving from one
circuit of capital to another. “If capital” he writes,

> comes to a stand still in the first phase, $M\cdot C$, money capital forms into a hoard; if this
> happens in the production phase, the means of production cease to function and labor-
> power remains unoccupied; if in the last phase, $C'\cdot M'$, unsaleable stocks of commodities
> obstruct the flow of circulation. (133)

The crisis that unfolds in the *Ibis* trilogy is the crisis of the third stage, when “unsalable stocks of
commodities” begin to pile up because the Chinese decline to allow their markets to be swamped
by opium. The question that is raised in the process is not about the essence of opium and its
objeckhood, but rather how its valorization through production and exchange allows this object to
become a commodity. It is here, in its willingness to tell how the commoditization of poppy
leads towards crisis and war, the destruction of life as well as the environment, that Ghosh’s
trilogy’s critical tenor is heard most clearly.

Among the many discussions that are available on the trilogy, only a handful pay
adequate attention to its representation of capitalism, especially how the trilogy brings the
moment of free trade imperialism to map onto our present neoliberal moment. Paul Stasi’s
excellent essay “Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* and the Question of Postcolonial Modernism,”
a notable exception, does indeed clearly point to this historical similitude by claiming that *Sea of Poppies* accords us a view into the “similarities between our own moment and that of an emergent modernism” (326). Most of the other discussions on the novels, however, show very little interest in noting how the aesthetic explorations of the works remain tangled with an overtly political content that seeks to re-investigate the past from the vantage point of the present.

The general lack of interest among the practitioners of postcolonial studies to address the question of capital was pointed out by a host of thinkers on the left, especially by Aijaz Ahmad, Arif Dirlik, and E. San Juan Jr., in the 1990s, during the heydays of postcolonialism. As has been noted by Vivek Chibber, postcolonialism emerged to become dominant as an academic discipline at a moment when working class politics and socialist states in different parts of the world were being upended by the forces of the market capitalism (2). Despite postcolonialism’s pedigree of left politics—Edward Said, the discipline’s most eminent figure, mentions in the “Afterword” of *Orientalism* that thinkers such as “Anwar Abdel Malek, Samir Amin, and C. L. R. James” were the forerunners of postcolonialism (349)—it began, at the turn of the century, to quickly shed its radical politics and moved to incorporate the issues that appealed to the fin de siècle “cultural turn” of theory (Chibber 1). Gayatri Spivak, the academic movement’s other figurehead, categorically points towards what she sees as postcolonial theory’s oversight, explaining how the fetishistic retreat into colonial discourse analysis in the era of “financialization of the globe” may be a sign of the diasporic postcolonial academic’s complicit participation in the process (3).
As I seek to establish through my short textual readings of Upadhyay and Ghosh’s works, a critique of contemporary hegemonic practices can be carried out if one is invested in the task of unmasking the traces of oppression explored and presented in literature. In other chapters of my work, I engage in more in-depth readings than the ones I have advanced in this introductory chapter. The idea that motivates these readings is this that there is a genuine need to re-establish the bond between anti-capitalist politics and aesthetic/critical pursuits. Despite the urgent need to address the massive expropriation process that is going on in the world, a huge body of academic work today feels no obligation to address injustice and immiseration. Literary studies’ failure to engage theoretically and textually with the struggles of the majority of the people marks its alienation from the ordinary folks it alludes to every now and then. One of the objectives of this study is to establish that it is possible to bridge the gap between aesthetic readings and lived life. Social, political, ideological, and economic relations are already present in the text because the writer’s, the text’s, and the critic’s worlds are shaped by those relations; however desperate one may be to run away from them, one cannot ignore, let alone escape, the traces of historical conditioning. Indeed, the desire to escape the processes of historical determinations by willfully disengaging from the sites of struggle more forcefully establishes the presence of socio-economic inscription. Hence the overtly political title of this work. The idea is to critique and unmask the effects of neoliberal economic and cultural strategies by examining how contemporary fictions have represented and aestheticized these effects.

Neoliberalism is approached in this work in three definitive ways. First of all, as a historical moment within the broad capitalist history. Giovanni Arrighi, in his masterful study of capitalist longue durée in *The Long Twentieth-Century*, has convincingly established how capitalism’s long history is marked by different propensities and short-term events. The
telescoping of long history into a singular totality has been critiqued by Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*, which suggests that historical difference does not allow the history posited by capital to subsume the history that does not belong to capitalism’s life process (63-64). However, the idea of ignoring capitalism’s “universality” by positing two histories of capital itself is marked by an anti-dialectical fetishization of historical difference. My argument about neoliberalism is premised on capitalism’s globalization—a moment when certain visions of capitalist relations have become ubiquitous. In the wake of capital’s global economic crisis that emerged in the 1970s, neoliberalism’s political expressions began to take hold of states and institution in the 1980s and their reach has grown ever since.

Secondly, neoliberalism here is approached theoretically as a set of policies informed by the capitalist class’s desire to expand their fortune by squeezing the working class which had experienced some gains from the 1950s till the beginning of the 1970s. These policies are steered towards curbing the bargaining power of the working class by eating away at welfare state provisions and through the constant production and manipulation of crisis. Often involving deregulation, privatization, bankruptcy, wage freezing, and relaxing of labor regulations, neoliberal policies have been used all around the world to transfer social wealth and property to the hands of private entrepreneurs. Often referred to as “austerity measures” or “market reforms,” the underlying principles of these economic measures are to enrich economic elites and multinational corporations by reducing facilities for ordinary people. The presence of coherent and often-replicated practices imply that neoliberalism has coherent theories informing and regulating political and economic actions. The coherence of actions taken by states across different parts of the planet testify to the homogeneity of neoliberal policies. Those market
reform policies imposed on various nations of South Asia, for instance, look eerily similar, suggesting the uniformity of neoliberal theory and praxis.

Finally, neoliberalism is approached in this work as both ideology and culture. In most of the theoretical discussions by the figureheads of neoliberalism such as Hayek and Milton Friedman, not only is a specific notion of liberty advanced but a particular vision of life is also put forward. How Hayek’s writings proffer a particular vision of morality has been discussed in detail by Brown, who in her book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, describes the conjunction between the kind of conservative morality articulated by Hayek and the fascist right wing politics that sees market freedom essentially tied to conservative Christian values. Since I discuss this book in my concluding chapter, let me dwell on the reason why I see neoliberalism as an ideology accompanied by an attendant culture. The World Bank, writes Bret Benjamin, begot a specific kind of vision of the world which was accompanied by what he called a World Bank culture. “The Bank,” He writes, “traffics in culture,” disseminating “Fordism” and circulating ideas of “mass cultural commodities,” which later provided the basis of the Bank’s “ideological tools of development” (xiii). The parlaying of a particular vision of the world (culture) to advance a specific notion of development thus became the Bank’s method of its institutional expansion. Although differently, Brown has also argued in *Undoing the Demos* that neoliberalism has given birth to a new kind of subject, *homo œconomicus*, who sees himself/herself as human capital. Invested as she is in her consequentialist project, Brown does not look fully into the kind of culture that cradles the birth of this subject. The reason why neoliberalism does not appear as a striking rupture with other forms of capitalist thinking is because it essentially expands the horizon of capitalist individualism, thus normalizing itself within the perimeters of bourgeois individualism. Its spectral presence remains visible only in the
way it puts liberal individualism on a hyperdrive by insisting on the primacy of profit over all other forms of human actions. Neoliberal culture thus offers worldviews and practices that separate out the individual from the rest of the community, while simultaneously normatively positioning the market as the absolute horizon of value against whose backdrop successes and failures are weighed out. Any kind of solidarity, any form of non-value producing work, appears dubious to its suspecting eyes. I make elaborate reference to it in my first and third chapter, explaining how such a culture depends on the notion of value. It is no surprise then that monetization and atomization remain two fundamental conduits through which it smuggles out its ideologies. Both are fetishized in neoliberal culture because without them the idea of the free market cannot be legitimized.

The readings that are advanced here are deeply influenced by the major tenets of Marxist thought. Although the name of Marx has become an anathema to certain circles of South Asian academics, I feel neoliberalism’s economization of the cultural sphere demands a close reading of Marx, especially of *Capital*, because in the absence of a discussion of capital, any theoretical exploration of neoliberalism becomes anemic. How can one understand human capital without understanding what capital actually means and how it is formed? Most of the chapters of this dissertation draw upon the rich cornucopia of Marx’s works to explain how neoliberalism’s entrenched visions are manifestations of something more fundamental, deeply rooted in the historical development of capitalism itself. What is put forward in the next part is a map of what is explored in the rest of the chapters.

**Conclusion: The Map of the Work**

In the first chapter of this work, I offer a reading of a relatively ignored short story by one of the finest, and perhaps technically most sophisticated, Bangladeshi writers, Akhtaruzzaman
Elais. If the Ibis trilogy successfully portrays the crisis of converting the commodity form into money form, Elias’ short story “Kanna” depicts, in depth and breadth, the crisis of the money form itself. Marx in the first chapter of Capital Volume I, describes the commodity as a “social hieroglyphic” (167) whose value form conceals the exploitative relation under which commodity is produced. Abstract labor, the quantification of which allows the value form to emerge, is the reason why it becomes possible to mediate all products of labor as values. It is the same thing that contributes to the fetish character of commodity. Private labor which appears as the aggregate labor of society through abstract value and exchange is what results in the “material relations between persons and social relations between things” (166). The agency of the commodity—its power to mediate social relations—attains material form in Elias’ story “Kanna.” Titled “From ‘Kanna’ to Necropolis and the Culture of Neoliberalism in Bangladesh,” my first chapter thus explains how Elias’ remarkable story can be read as an allegory of money’s agency and mediating power over the protagonist’s subjugated affect. That the protagonist, despite losing his son to a rather innocuous disease, is unable to mourn for his loss because of his debt can be read allegorically as a depiction of symbolic power of money in a capitalist society. Particularly because this story was written at a historical moment when neoliberalism had just begun to set in, I read this depiction as an example of the structure of feeling that was pervasive at that time. That Elias’ protagonist fails to perform his responsibility as a father not because of his lack of inclination but because of material necessity, I argue here, is evocative of a momentous shift in the objective conditions with whose norms Afaz Ali is wrestling.

The first chapter uses as its materials literary works written in Bengali [Bangla]. All the translations used in this chapter are my own. Only a tiny portion of the rich body of literary work that has been produced from Bangladesh has been translated in English. Although untranslated,
many of these works demand careful attention not only because they offer new insights into Bangladeshi society and culture but also because they advance conflicting and challenging visions of the world and human history. Often pushed to the fringes of collections of South Asian literary anthologies, Bangladeshi literature, especially its extremely versatile landscape of fiction, has not drawn the kind of sustained scholarly attention that it deserves. Given India’s political domination in South Asia, it is no surprise that the biggest South Asian nation’s literary and cultural productions also eclipse the literary works coming from other parts of the region. In Sheldon Pollok edited *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (2003), Bangladesh is mentioned only once, in passing, as if Bangladeshi literary culture is already contained in the body of Indian literary history requiring no special attention. The same patterns can be located in Paul Brians’s *Modern South Asian Literature in English* (2003), Diana Dimitrova edited *The Other in South Asian Religion, Literature and Film* (2014), and Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul Kumar edited *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature* (2007), where Bangladesh exists only as a footnote. Such ostracisms testify to Anglophone India’s hegemonic presence in the map of South Asian literature and culture. They also point towards our general lack of interest in anything that has not been vetted by South Asia’s powerful literary establishment.

By engaging with the untranslated works from Bangladesh, I wish to draw attention to the body of work that exists outside the reach of contemporary Anglophone literary scholarship, especially the kind that is interested in insurrectionary literature. The sinews of Bangladeshi literature were formed through its numerous encounters with the oppressions of the Pakistani state, and by Bangladeshi writers’ desire to lend their voice to the Bangladeshi nation’s struggle for independence. Oppositional practices are thus built into the fabric of Bangladeshi literature,
especially the work that was produced in Bangla language from the 1950s through the 1990s. My focus on Bangladeshi fictions is thus informed, on the one hand, by the necessity to address the reduction of Bangladeshi literature to mere footnotes in the map of South Asian literature, and, on the other, by the urgency to draw attention to the radical aesthetic experimentations and political content of Bangladeshi fictions. In my first chapter, I include a discussion Bangladeshi history—both political-economic and literary—to make available a historical parallel between neoliberalization and literary representation. It is through the avenues of history that I seek to establish the relation between Bangladeshi fictions and neoliberal culture.

The second chapter of my work pores over Aravind Adiga’s Booker winning novel *The White Tiger* so as to look intently into its representation of India’s uneven geographical development. An important element of Marxist critiques of capitalism, uneven development has been explored using both temporal and spatial frames. Earlier proponents of the theory, such as Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, posited uneven geographical relations as the temporal progression of capitalism through spatial conflict and contradiction. They also offered to see it through a World Systems theory where national competition was subjugated under the capitalist world system in which a few capitalist centers enjoyed structural privilege over both semi-peripheral and peripheral nations. *The White Tiger*, which is often read as a satirical novel critiquing neoliberal India, problematizes not only the dominant discussions about space under neoliberal capital but also the Indian nation’s relation to its internal and external spaces. Critiquing some of the Foucauldian readings of the novel which advances the idea that the relation between India’s privileged and less privileged spaces is a temporal one, I argue in this chapter that under capitalism spaces themselves are developed unevenly, ensuring that the infrastructural development of one space necessitates the retardation or restriction of
development in peripheral regions. As such, uneven geographical relations mirror capitalism’s own fundamental contradiction in which capital enjoys privilege over labor. It this relationship that mediates spatial relationship under capitalism.

I chapter three, I advance a reading of two fictions whose protagonists, unable swallow the humiliation and restriction imposed on them after the terror attacks of September 11, decide to leave New York City and return to their cities of origin in Pakistan. On the surface, both novels appear to tell stories of struggles of Muslim men in NYC in the climate of antipathy. As has been pointed out by some critics, these novels expose the paradigms of precariousness in the US where the Manichean rhetoric that pits Muslims against the rest of the nation unleashes a normative culture whose logics move around the effusion of empathy for a selective group of people and antipathy for those who are cast as enemies. The young narrators who also suffer losses and are left to weather the growing hostility on their own, both blame the city for withdrawing its hospitality from them. To them, NYC appears as an inhospitable city, an uninhabitable city, whose transformation is marked by nationalist and xenophobic zealotry. However, another narrative, which is less pronounced but equally powerful, begins to emerge from the shadows—a narrative that describes the city’s cabbies, its prostitutes, and its less prosperous migrant population. It is this other narrative of the city’s working class and surplus population that allows us to grasp the systemic exclusion that preceded the transformation, leaving us with ghostly demarcation of the city’s neoliberaally organized life. In my reading, I try to disinter this buried parallel narrative which hangs at the background like a silhouette and tells us how finance and class informs the city’s culture as well daily life. Once read through this other lens, Hamid and Naqvi’s fictions cease to appear simply as a narrative of precariousness.
and seem more like novels whose stories offer a close view of systemic class and racial oppression.

In recent years, what has become acutely obvious is that decades of neoliberal policies have cast us into a terrible economic and ecological crisis, the likes of which the world has never known. According to the 2019 Oxfam report, the wealthiest 26 people own more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the world’s population, more than what 3.5 billion people own. The unprecedented gap between the rich and the poor has started catapulting into a massive social crisis. What has also become apparent after the financial crisis of 2008 is that the social and economic cost of the failure of large corporations and financial institutions now must be borne collectively by the rest of the population. Dumping financial responsibility on the shoulders of ordinary folks and young people in the form of debt and corporate bailout has become the steroid on which capitalism depends for managing its crisis. As the global surplus population, most of whom are refugees, increases, neoliberalism’s measures to exploit poor people become more drastic and draconian. The same attitude is noticed in relation to nature and climate. Mining, fracking, burning of fossil fuel, poisoning of rivers, decapitation of hills, burning of forests, production of industrial waste—all seem to point towards capitalism’s reluctance to change and adopt technologies that are less harmful for the planet. Human-induced pollution has resulted in the increase of surface and ocean temperature, causing largescale damages not only to people but also to a large number of other species. What has accompanied these twin crises of neoliberalism is xenophobic fascism which, aided by the platforms provided by the neoliberal corporations, has become mainstream.

In the fourth and concluding chapter of my work, I look into the fictions that thematically explore the crises of neoliberalism and, simultaneously, imagine a world beyond its control. In
Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* (2019), a novel thematizing environmental crisis and the threat to the planet, an old Bengali myth is reconstructed to launch an adventure that moves through four continents, unveiling the trail of global ecological devastation. Ghosh’s novel explores the global production of refugees either through natural catastrophes or through social issues, especially through imperialist wars. In Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), the costs of India’s religious and nationalist fundamentalisms are recounted, laying bare the processes of local manufacturing of surplus population. What is also made available in Roy’s novel is a narrative of courage and resistance. Instead of only looking into the strategies through which the state, its corporations and its favored religion oppress and traumatize people, *The Ministry* also represents the manner in which oppressed and traumatized people produce counter-sites and counter-culture imbued with utopian visions and qualities.

Taken together, the novels that I describe here as allegories of neoliberalism, ask some probing questions about our world and the conditions we live under. They tell us how money and capital build a self-centered universe where the pursuit of happiness gets subsumed by the desire to possess unlimited wealth. They also show how the processes of capital accumulation create a disturbingly unequal and splintered world, where war and oppressions exist not as exceptions but as the very norms of life. Neoliberalism’s war on the poor extends far beyond the human society and reaches the quiet corners of the planet where its search for compound growth decimates the web of life and drives plants and spices towards extinction. Since almost all the novels discussed here deal with trauma and struggle, it is difficult to avoid the pessimistic overtone of their themes and representations. Yet, as I point out in my readings, the overlaid sense of grief and pessimism that we encounter in them is simultaneously underwritten by a nascent optimism about the future. What initially appear as idiosyncratic impractical acts of defiance are indeed complex
expressions of a utopian desire for a better society, which, having found no collective outlet, has sought to express itself as a trivial private actions. These works, thus, gesture towards our collective utopian potential, narrativizing the constant efforts of the oppressed to rebuild the society from below. The gloomy prognoses of neoliberal assault on life, therefore, is not simply a pessimistic call for resignation but also a masked articulation of optimism and possibility.
Chapter One

From “Kanna” to Necropolis and the Culture of Neoliberalism in Bangladesh

Introduction: From Socialist Nationalism to Neoliberalism

When the Pakistani army surrendered in Dhaka on 16 December 1971, they left behind not only a huge mass of dead bodies but also an economically devastated country. They massacred millions—both adults and children—and raped hundreds of thousands of women, leaving behind deep scars on the body of the aspiring nation. They also blew up bridges as they scurried towards the capital city after being defeated, and emptied the banks, so a cash crisis would follow. Two days before Bangladesh’s independence, they exterminated every single oppositional intellectual they could lay their hands on and dumped their bodies in a ditch not far away from the park where the official surrender ceremony took place. Their plan was to leave behind an economically, socially and intellectually broken country which would not be able to recover from the ravages of war.

After Bangladesh’s independence, it fell on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—the nation’s charismatic leader who is popularly known as “Bangabandhu,” the friend of Bangladesh—to collect all the broken pieces and put together a nation whose loss was beyond repair. The task at hand was not easy. One of Bangladesh’s closest allies was the USSR, whose socialist ideals had already instilled in the hearts of a large section of the nation’s youth the dream of socialism. Then there was India—Bangladesh’s biggest supporter during its liberation war and also a beneficiary of its independence—whose welfare state system served as a model for the emergent nation state. And, of course, there was the United States, which had conspired to keep Bangladesh under Pakistan’s boot, and now wanted the new nation to join the forces of market economy.
Bangabandhu chose the middle path, turning the nation into a national socialist country and joining the non-aligned movement that Nehru and Marshal Tito had brought into being. While this step helped Bangabandhu forge a strong relationship with India, it made both socialists and privateers unhappy. The problem was further compounded by the emergence of a scavenging national bourgeoisie who were quick to seize upon the opportunity created by the power vacuum. They grabbed hold of the properties left behind by the fleeing non-Bengali residents and used the power of the state for personal gain. Lamenting the betrayal of the principles of the liberation war by the burgeoning nationalist bourgeoisie, eminent socialist intellectual and political leader Badruddin Umar wrote the following in an opinion piece in 1973:

[People] thought that the surrender of the Pakistani forces on 16th December was a sign of victory, a sign of their economic, social and political emancipation. But when they saw their ‘emancipators’ pouncing on the personal properties of non-Bengalis, to turn those people’s houses, cars, land, shops, furniture, factories into their own properties, to enact a price hike by market manipulation and licensing fraud, people realized that the military victory that Awami League celebrate on 16th December every year was not a victory for everyone. This was a victory of a new group of oppressors whose hunger for wealth knows no limit.¹⁰ (681)

Umar’s dissent alerts us to the fractures within the newly independent nation whose political struggles were now played out on its own body, among its own people. It also makes clear that Bangabandhu’s efforts to nationalize abandoned properties and institutions was thwarted from within. His own party, in cahoots with “wealth hungry” powerful individuals, was disrupting the political strategy of the nationalization of services and industries. Left wing militancy was on the rise and Bangabandhu further polarized the political map by unleashing the terror of the state on
the supporters of a socialist revolution in Bangladesh. In 1974, his war-ravaged nation experienced a devastating flood—“the worst in the history of the region” (Reaz 54). Unable to tackle the food shortage, the Mujib government leaned on the United States which had strengthened its diplomatic ties with Bangladesh despite widespread suspicion about its intent. Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State, promised to deliver 2.2 million tons of “foodgrains” in time but the ships carrying the grains never reached Bangladesh’s shore, triggering a devastating famine that further submerged Bangladesh’s hope for peace and prosperity.\(^{11}\) This human-induced catastrophic event claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, although the government’s estimation stood at a meager 26,000. With growing discontent at home and conspiracies abroad, Bangabandhu Seikh Mujibur Rahman sought to bring the whole country under one party rule by nationalizing every institution that was functional. This move further divided an already riven, struggling nation, infuriating Bangabandhu’s socialist oppositions as well as the mass of people who, by then, were wary of violence and corruption of the ruling party (Schendel 193). Yet, when Bangabandhu was assassinated in a military coup, it was not the left-wing militants but the defeated right-wing counter revolutionaries, backed up by the US, who came to power.

On 15 August 1975, a band of renegade army officers stormed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s private residence and killed every single member of his extended family. His two daughters, who were in Germany at that time, survived not because they were spared but because they were out of reach of the architects of the *coup d’état*. From August until November, there were coups and countercoups where all the warring factions flexed their muscles and tried to pull the state towards their direction. On November 7, Major-General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) emerged as Bangladesh’s new ruler after suppressing a left-wing coup and hanging its leader Colonel Abu Taher who freed Zia from his imprisonment (Schendel 193). Zia’s ascension to power ushered in
a fifteen-year-long military dictatorship. He began to denationalize “nationalized enterprises” and, through the liberalization of the national economy, align his nation with the forces of market economy led by the United States and liberal democracies of Europe. Politically, Zia also established strong bureaucratic relations with the US, China, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern nation states who opposed Bangladesh’s independence during the nation’s liberation war. The political ramification of this gravitation towards the right was two-fold: first, the pro-Islamic and anti-secular forces who collaborated with Pakistan against their own country now devoted their energy to the task of Islamization of Bangladesh (Sikand 339-40), and, second, the welfare state policies that the Bangladeshi state adopted after its independence were shed so that more private enterprise-friendly economic policies could be accommodated (Karim 111). This was the period when donor agencies and NGOs became enormously powerful, dictating state policies and overseeing the liberalization process in general (112-15).

In many respects, the events leading to Bangabandhu’s murder resemble General Auguste Pinochet’s coup d’état in Chile. In Chile too, economic crisis and social disturbances were used to whip up discontent against Salvador Allende’s national socialist government which then led to the CIA-backed coup in which the Chilean president was assassinated. Pinochet’s military rule led to economic liberalism (deregulation, opening up of public properties for private usurpation, dismantling of social safety nets and so on) and social conservatism. Albeit in different forms, a similar historical unfolding followed in Bangladesh too. If Chile was the laboratory in which neoliberal policies were tested and perfected, Bangladesh was a peripheral test case where the features of a South Asian neoliberal experiment was given form. The coup against Bhutto in Pakistan in 1977 and the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1982 set in motion the same denationalization processes that finally brought almost all of South Asia into the orbit of free
market economy which became the *de rigueur* economic ideology after the fall of the Soviet Republic. When Lieutenant General Ziaur Rahman came to power, the first step that he took was to suppress the left-wing militancy that existed within and outside army ranks. His next mission was to carry out a massive denationalization program under the capacious title of “Revised Investment Policy,” claiming the state should not occlude the growth of the private sector by nationalizing “private enterprises” (Karim 111). Zia’s government also opened up Bangladeshi market to foreign investment and executed World Bank/IMF structural adjustment policies which required the government to “reduce the budget deficit, reform the public sector, [and] withdraw subsidies on such items as food, fertilizer and petroleum” (qtd in Karim 111). In other words, Zia’s government initiated the liberalization process that, in later years, provided the basis for the predatory neoliberal strategies that corroded the foundation of the welfare state that Bangladesh aimed to be during its long independence struggle.

Renowned Marxian economist Anu Muhammad believes that the roots of Bangladesh’s neoliberalization lies far deeper, in the Pakistani state itself, whose military and bureaucratic traditions Bangladesh historically inherited at the moment of its independence; military dictatorships of the 1980s only accelerated Bangladesh’s integration into the global capitalist economy (*Development or Destruction?* 24). Although his observation is accurate, what needs to be added as a rejoinder is that there exists a difference between what happened to the Bangladeshi state before 1975 and after. Muhammad himself notes in the same passage that in the early 1980s, Bangladesh’s integration into “the globalization process” was expedited by World Bank brokered Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) that demanded “import liberalization, reforms in exchange rate systems, and the creation of a financial sector that is designed to establish a congenial atmosphere for private investors” (24-25). Ali Reaz points out that the “socialist posture” that the
Mujib government maintained at that time to appease the left leaning members of his party was not a genuine step towards the direction of socialism; it was, rather, an empty gesture devoid of true socialist intention (46). Although his observation has merit, that the post-liberation war Bangladeshi state chose nationalization over liberalization should be seen as a rupture, and not a continuity, between what existed before 1975 and what followed it.

Zia’s assassination in 1981 set the stage for another coup d’état in which his Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad came to power. Ershad continued with the same economic and social policies of the Zia regime, liberalizing the economy and allowing foreign companies to reap profit at an unprecedented rate. His government introduced a “New Industrial Policy,” which, within its first year alone, “transferred the ownership of 60 jute and textile industries to the private sector” (Karim 112). Between 1981 and 1986, the two regimes sold about three-fourths of Bangladesh’s “profit-making public enterprises” to the private sector (ibid.), stripping the state of its resources. General Ershad is also well-remembered for his state sponsored corruption. It was under his auspices that corruption became ubiquitous. A social phenomenon that became the quintessential form of all state mediated transactions, corruption was the means by which the wealthy and the powerful of the country bankrupted state-owned institutions so they could later transfer state-owned wealth to private hands. Many of the state-owned banks that went bankrupt later on during Khaleda Zia and Seikh Hasina’s tenure as Prime Ministers of Bangladesh, followed this strategy to undermine the state’s control over the nation’s economy. A pro-democratic uprising in 1990 ended Ershad’s dictatorship but the subsequent democratic governments since then have continued with the same policies that Zia and Ershad followed. Indeed, Seikh Hasina, who was the daughter of Bangabandhu, and Khaleda Zia, the widow of General Zia, have alternately ruled Bangladesh for about three decades now, continuing the same
policies that Zia and Ershad introduced while in power. During the tenure of the so-called “democratic” governments who, barring the two years between 2006 and 2008, have ruled Bangladesh since 1991, the concentration of public wealth into private hands accelerated so much that the process has led towards an unprecedented increase of social inequality (Khan and Rahman 1-2).

The withdrawal of the state from public procurement, and the infiltration of the private and for-profit businesses in every nook of social, economic and cultural life, leaves no confusion that the Bangladeshi state has gradually transmuted into a neoliberal state in the last three decades. In his description of Bangladesh’s transformation in its first thirty years Anu Muhammad writes:

[A]fter the first three decades, we find Bangladesh is more marketized, more globalized, and more urbanized; and has a good number of super rich and increased number of uprooted poor people. We also smell increasing role of international agencies in governance of the state, see increasing presence of funding organizations including NGOs. Role of the state in major policy formulation is rather marginal. Bangladesh is now dominated by a power oligarchy. Criminal activity, including grabbing public resources, has become the main mode of capital accumulation. (Development or Destruction? 67)

Muhammad’s critical summary of Bangladesh’s progression in the first three decades after its independence paints a sorry picture. The story of pillage and corruption will seem all too familiar to those who have lived through these years and seen the country’s income-inequality increase by leaps and bounds. It is true the country has made noticeable progress as reflected in some economic and social indicators, but it is also beyond dispute that those whose labor has made such progress possible—agricultural and industrial workers at home and migrant workers abroad—have benefitted very little from the development that has been achieved in the last forty-eight years.
Muhammad’s narrative leaves us with a history of Bangladesh’s development in the last four decades—a history that informs us about the simultaneous creation of the “super rich” and the homeless, and tells us the truth about the vanishing (neoliberal) state, whose only role is to serve and protect the interest of multinational corporate capital and a very small segment of powerful people at home.

**Bangladeshi Fiction and the Culture of Neoliberalism**

Although discussions about Bangladeshi state’s neoliberal economic policies abound, the penetration of neoliberalism’s culture in Bangladeshi social life remains almost uncharted. Powerful as it is as an ideology, neoliberalism needs to be understood in terms of its corresponding culture as well. Mitchum Huehls, in his book *After Critique* (2017), describes neoliberalism as “the socio-cultural dominant of our contemporary moment” (ix). Huehls’s other extrapolations on neoliberalism, especially his description of it as an insurmountable force, seem exaggerated and overblown, but his willingness to characterize it as “the socio-cultural dominant” of our time appears an exact description of the world we live in today. If the neoliberal is indeed the socio-cultural dominant of our era, I ask, how has Bangladeshi literature, especially fiction, responded to this dominant? Given the Bangladeshi state’s long history of implementing World Bank policies and proliferating neoliberal values and ideologies, many of the most important fictions written in the late-1980s and 1990s reflect an emergent sense of anxiety about the transformations in socio-cultural spheres. In this chapter, I briefly discuss some of these works to suggest that the anxiety about liberalization was a generational imaginative impulse, capturing the social anxiety about the accelerating pace of neoliberal transformation as a structure of feeling. After a brief survey of literary works that thematically explore the issues of privatization, development, commoditization, and educational reform, I engage with Akhtaruzzaman Elias’ remarkable short story “Kanna”
which symptomatically represents some of the most complex emotional effusions arising out of one’s encounters with the effects of economic liberalization. This compelling story stands out for a number of reasons, but most importantly for depicting the corrosive effect of monetization on relationships and affect, and for verbalizing some of the most significant cultural transformations taking place at the moment of the broad reorganization of the nation’s economic and political life. Elias’ dense narrative texture captures some of these complex changes and it is because of its rendering of this thorny social reality that it demands our close scrutiny.

Elias was not the only writer exploring the complex social and cultural reorganization of that time, although he was certainly the most eminent one. A number of exceptionally gifted fiction writers of the last century depicted in their works the corrosive effects of the emerging social order, but none with more vitriol and sarcasm than Ahmed Sofa who in his satiric novel *Gabhi Bittanto [The Chronicle of the Cow]*\(^{13}\) exposes the complicity between higher education and mainstream politics. The “miraculous” (360) rise of Abu Zunayed, a meek and introverted Chemistry professor who unexpectedly becomes the Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University, is the object of Sofa’s satiric gaze in the novel. Zunayed’s bizarre affection for a cow which he receives as a present from a construction businessman symbolically represents the unethical, transactional relationship between Bangladesh’s intellectuals and its ruling elite, the national bourgeoisie.\(^{14}\) While Zunayed’s accidental rise gestures towards a definitive cultural shift marking the inscription of the academic within the neoliberal lifeworld, the quiet efficiency of Seikh Tobarak Ali—the construction mogul who monopolizes the university’s construction works by bribing and rewarding different groups who have a stake in that institution’s power hierarchy—hints at the silent neoliberal takeover of Bangladeshi public institutions. If Zunayed represents uninquisitive and docile intellectuals who have suddenly risen into prominence because mediocrity/docility has
a purchase in the ascending neoliberal culture, Ali embodies the shrewd entrepreneurial class whose control over the institutions remains hidden. It is only the quiet efficiency of his transactional world—that he is able to glide easily among different groups of people and use them to his benefit either by bribing them or by giving them presents—that bears witness to his power.

In Sofa’s creative universe, *Gavi Bittanto* is not the only satiric work taking aim at the corrupting influence of the national bourgeoise. Five years before completing it, Sofa wrote another damning satirical novel, lampooning the ruling elites of the Bangladeshi state. Titled *Moron Bilash* [Death Fantasy], this novel delves deep inside the psyche of a minister who divulges, through intriguing death bed revelations in the confessional mode, the violent pre-history of his life before his ascent as a nationally important political figure. It is no coincidence that Sofa sees political power as inextricably linked to the accumulation of wealth on the one hand and to brutal violence on the other. As is the case with Adiga’s *The White Tiger*—a novel I will discuss in the next chapter—Sofa’s *Moron Bilash* too, depicts the interpenetration of wealth and violence. Fazle Elahi’s violent history is not merely the narrative presentation of a depraved person; it is, equally, an allegorical representation of an entire class whose political and economic preponderance has allowed them to paper over their collective history of exploitation using violent means when necessary, which now can only be accessed through their dissolute confessions. In *Gavi Bittanto*, overt brutal display of subjective violence remains absent. Instead, we notice students and low-level political actors engaging in gruesome acts of violence, while powerful politicians and businessmen quietly complete their transactions. Fazle Elahi’s power to affect other lives—his agency—remains visibly missing in Abu Zunayed’s case. The latter’s apprehension of his own powerlessness is more of an acknowledgement of a neoliberal ordering and organization of daily life where his agency is lost to institutional rituals than a cognizance of his emasculation
by his wife and the rest of the faculty who take issues with his newfound power. Abu Zunayed’s emotional investment in the cow, then, is an instance of his efforts to restore his lost agency; having been denied personhood within an ordered world, he has re-invested his libidinal energy in an animal with the hope of regaining his agential comfort. The loss of that cow, therefore, marks the end of his fight against an already ordered system where he must learn to live as a docile executor of the ruling party’s policies.

Unlike Ahmed Sofa, whose critique is directed at Bangladesh’s internal corruption and the decrepitude of the nation’s ruling elite, in Jyotiprakash Dutta’s short story “Gram O’ Shohor Unnoyoner Golpo” [“A Story of Rural and Urban Development”]\(^\text{16}\) the targets of his irony are the external purveyors of liberal developmental policies whose naïve optimism about the superiority and efficacy of Western development models fall flat in the face of reality. Dutta’s story describes the predicament of Wilbur Schramm—an imaginary communication and development scholar—whose dream of radically transforming the communication system of rural Bangladesh is frustrated because of his ignorance and ineptitude. Although he blames the local culture for his failure, it is his own alienation from the place and its culture that makes him incapable of thinking of something effective. The story exposes the superficiality and greed of local politicians who profit from their proximity to foreign developmental activists. However, the real object of Dutta’s critique in this story is not local politics but rather the NGO-led developmental projects that have failed to usher in sustained and balanced development in the nation state. The story narrates the miraculous rise of Afaz, a rural entrepreneur’s son, who runs away from home so he can escape his community’s restrictive culture. Years later, after meeting Schramm, who tells him about the revolutionary prospect of communication, he comes back to the same community to carry out the American specialist’s development programs. His familiarity with a man of Schramm’s stature accords him
prominence in his community, allowing him to amass wealth and political power in the process, but, his personal enrichment notwithstanding, the community itself remains distant and poor, not benefiting from the developmental activities that are going on around it. The story ends in a pessimistic note, with Schramm looking outside from his five-star hotel room and noticing all the chaotic construction work going on in the city that displays highways and skyscrapers but cannot hide the extreme poverty that lies underneath such uneven development.

Dutta’s story deploys a rather atypical narrative strategy, telescoping three decades into a single monologue, where, along with Schramm’s four visits, Afaz’s political rise is also described. In Dutta’s characteristically highly stylized and elliptical narrative, the development of the national bourgeoisie and the underdevelopment of the entire nation state appears to comprise one flat temporal juncture, allowing the totality of the liberal development in Bangladesh to appear in one single platform. What is made available in the process is the relationship between developmental theories and underdevelopment, a systemic relationship whose beneficiaries are on the one hand the local compradors and on the other foreign development professionals. The failure of liberal development models is ironically referred to in the story by the narrator who comments, “bottles and bottles of cool developmental aid that they made starving nations drink … has resulted in the affluence of only a handful of individuals and the starvation of everyone else” (42). It is during his fourth and final visit that the outcome of his development policies is revealed to Schramm, these policies’ architect. Looking out through the window during an interview with a local journalist, the American sees the following:

the streets of a megacity, its high-rise buildings—some of which are trying to touch the sky. When he gazes below, right underneath his hotel room, he sees sacks, cracked tin
roofs, myriads of shelters covered in polyethene. They are called ‘shanties’ in other places; here they are called *basti*. (45)

The story ends with Schramm and a journalist sitting down together, trying to analyze that “development model from different angles” (45). When the journalist asks him how Schramm plans to tackle the issue, he answers: “We can discuss it in the next Hawaii conference” (45).

The failure of NGO-brokered development projects and state-sponsored liberalization programs have been critiqued in other Bangladeshi novels and short stories written in the last three decades. The entire body of Shahidul Zahir’s long narratives can be read as allegory of post-liberation war Bangladesh’s political and social struggles. His repeated use of collective narrators, like Old Dhakaites—residents of the city that is the favored setting of many of his major works—appears more like a homage to a lost world than a mere narrative strategy corresponding to a stylistic invention. Written in the 1990s and early 2000s, when liberal values began to segregate communities by injecting the ideology of individual freedom in the veins of the nation, Zahir’s fictions thematize the trauma as well as the resilience of people whose culture and livelihoods came to collide with the changes taking place in the economic culture of the state. The collective narrative voice of Zahir’s *tour de force* “Amader Kutir Shilper Itihash” is thus an anachronistic and disrupting voice bemoaning the loss of collective practices within culture. In the context of Bangladeshi history, this voice that chronicles in circular motion how watermelon-selling small vendors get displaced by a watermelon juice factory is a deeply suggestive one. On the one hand, it points towards a historical moment—the long struggle for independence—that created a collective utopian space which was lost as soon as nationalist leaders failed to deliver on their promise of equality and prosperity. This utopian moment must now be constantly invoked in every collective struggle and the atomized individuals who, assaulted by the new socio-economic
conditions, apprehend their neoliberal present as dystopian reality, must seek this moment out from
the ashes of the past. One can easily identify this general sense of loss in novels like *Jibon O’
Rajnoitik Bastobota* [*Lived Life and Political Reality*] and *Abu Ibrahimer Mrittu* [*Abu Ibrahim’s
Death*], both of which bewail not only the loss of the utopian universe but also the advent of a new
era devoid of comfort and decency.

Among more recent works of fiction, Mamun Hussain’s *Necropolis* demands attention not
merely because its titular metaphor likens contemporary Bangladesh to a burial ground full of
decimated bodies but also because its fractured narrative assembles images that construct a counter
history, challenging the dominant discussions about Bangladesh’s economic growth and tolerant
culture. In *Necropolis*, the whole of Bangladesh is imagined as a graveyard—a slaughterhouse—
where even an innocuous wish such as desire for a natural death appears like a utopian dream.
Hussain’s narrative strategy is to create a maze of events and narrative collages, and to invite his
readers to construct their version of the story. Who is speaking remains remarkably opaque in
*Necropolis*. By deliberately desisting from chasing a coherent story, Hussain’s novel is able to
make available vast swathes of Bangladeshi history since independence by deploying narrative
collages, projecting onto the canvas of its thematic surface the issues of mass hysteria, religious
extremism, consumerism, military dictatorship, microcredit, political opportunism, intellectual
dishonesty and cultural putrescence. *Necropolis*’s narrative is held together by collective trauma
verbalized through reminiscences of unnamed narrators who blurt out, incoherently, their
experiences of unpleasant experiences and terror. The novel’s closure, where an unnamed narrator
describes the funeral procession of a poet, leaves readers with even more despair:

And, all of a sudden, we hear someone from Shimulpur Village has died last evening,
sitting at the balcony of Bangur hospital, chewing bread and banana, nibbling on biscuits
given by a nurse, composing a secret poem about the chronicle of a bird. We, the rest of his friends who are alive, follow his casket. We see crows everywhere, eating Singaporean bananas—our friend’s favorite—and see his poems too, written at the hospital. Watching the beauty of crows—crows in a wheat field—we then forget the way to Shimulpur forever; and, like possessed men, with wet trousers, while reading the special edition of Diaspora, keep walking through the yards of an unknown necropolis, so death descends on us kindly, happily.19 (96)

The visceral and morbid descriptions of the nation’s wounds, together with a mazelike narration, produce the unmistakably bitter undertone of Necropolis. It is difficult to read this work as anything other than a tormented aesthetic exploration of contemporary Bangladesh, whose hidden wounds have now come on to the surface. Additionally, it is also possible to read this novel as a critique of neoliberal Bangladesh, whose economic prosperity masks the deep cultural divisions and grotesquely violent social institutions that have failed to establish a functioning democratic nation state; for, to suggest that natural death has become a reified utopian dream is to force into the narrative of national development and progress the unpleasant reality of the state’s failure to protect life and creativity (the lost lives that are mourned in Necropolis are often lives engaged in creative activities). Although Hossain’s novel appears as a critique of violence, what underwrites that critique is a deep sense of loss emanating from the understanding that the state’s interest now lies in protecting capital and commodity consumption.

Anxiety about Bangladesh’s neoliberal transformation has been echoed in a number of fictions written during the 1980s and the 1990s, although the effects of neoliberal economic transformation began to appear more clearly only at the beginning of the twenty-first century. My objective in this chapter is to look into a remarkable short story by Akhtaruzzaman Elias, the
foremost writer of Bangladesh’s post-liberation war generation, to examine how one of the fundamental aspects of neoliberal culture is staged and critiqued in it. What swims into view in Elias’ short story “Kanna” is the stubborn persistence of money as a mediator not only of social relations but also of affect and emotions. If we accept Fredric Jameson’s premise that “genuine allegory does not seek the ‘meaning’ of a work, but rather functions to reveal its structure of multiple meanings” (*Allegory and Ideology* 10), what follows from this premise is the understanding that the symbolic inscription of neoliberalism in culture and daily life leaves behind the trail of its presence at the very moment of its concealment and normalization. In “Kanna,” the apprehension of the meaning-generating structure takes place in the form of an exposé: by unmasking the fetishism of money, it exposes how money relations sublate other social relations, even emotions and affect, objects that are often considered be outside the purview of money’s mediation. This story, written almost two decades before *Necropolis*, chronicles the material and emotional struggles of a *moulvi* who has recently lost his son. Although traumatized and emotionally numbed because his son has been his only hope for escaping grueling poverty, Afaz Ali—Elias’ story’s protagonist—has no time for shedding tears or expressing his caged emotions. Much like *The White Tiger*’s protagonist Balram, Ali is summoned to take part in his daily activities and ignore his personal loss. He too must constantly count his profits and losses in monetary terms, and make earning money the objective his life. Such tendencies give weight to the consideration that he is a *homo œconomicus*, an “economic man” and a “subject of interest” (Foucault 274) whose actions are triggered by the logic of profit and gain. Yet, unlike Adiga’s protagonist Balram, Ali is not an entrepreneur; he is one of traditional society’s caregivers—a custodian of the dead—and a pre-capitalistic relic whose labor produces nothing but ritualistic consolation for the relatives of the deceased. More importantly, he is a reluctant participant in the
system which conditions the society he is a part of. He needs money not to enrich himself but to escape his lonely life in the capital city. Why, then, subject the story of such a being to scrutiny? For two reasons. The first argument that I advance is that “Kanna” allows us to weigh the extent to which neoliberal culture has penetrated Bangladeshi society by thematically addressing the broader phenomenon of the monetization of consciousness. A close reading of the story points towards not merely a change in the economic culture but also to the presence of a neoliberal structure of feeling. Ali, as we will see in the course of our discussion, is not a neoliberal subject because he is convinced that economic reason must at all times be prioritized; rather, as the story implies, he is a neoliberal subject because he lives in a society which demands from him a practical response at a moment when his life is shattered by tragedy. His inability to express his grief directly, without a medium, can be read as a symbolic encoding of the neoliberal mediation of the affective and the social. In my second argument, which I put forward by extrapolating from Marxist discussions on money, I contend that the money that torments Ali is not simply a commodity that represents value; it is also an object that mirrors class and social relationships. In subsequent sections, I will elaborate on these two aspects and explain how they help us track the changes in Bangladesh’s economic culture.

“Kanna” and the Monetization of Consciousness

Elias’ short story “Kanna” was completed in 1994 and was included in his collection of short stories Jaal Shopno, Swopter Jaal [“Nets of Entangled Dreams and Dreams of Entangled Nets”] which was published in 1996, a few months before the author’s death. Not considered the centerpiece of Elias’ literary corpus, “Kanna” has attracted perplexing responses from scholars and critics. Early commentators on Elias, especially Shoeb Shahriar and Shahid Iqbal, each of whom published book-length studies on the writer’s work in the first decade of this century, do
not even accord nominal allowance to “Kanna” in their critical reflections. They probably saw it as a hasty compilation of unpublished stories rather than a collection marking a stylistic departure from Elias’ early works. Zafar Ahmed Rashed, who is among the first to comment on Jal Shopno Shopner Jal, gives credibility to this observation by claiming that the stories of Elias’ posthumous book fail to register the same kind of aesthetic and thematic precision as his other volumes because “the stories of this book did not get the same kind of attention from the author as did his other stories” (108). Nevertheless, Rashed himself pays adequate attention to Elias’ least-discussed work, separately commenting on each story and critically reflecting on their thematic development. In his reading, “Kanna” emerges as a compelling story of a struggling father whose loss reveals the deep tension between emotional/spiritual demands and material strife. To him, the entire volume appears like a narrative of “shattered dreams” because its stories depict the morbid underside of the Bangladeshi nation’s reality (123).

In the past decade or so, critical engagement with Elias’ last work has become more frequent and customary, resulting in a number of in-depth discussions and analyses. In the second chapter of Subhoranjan Dasgupta’s commendable Elegy and Dream: Akhtaruzzaman Elias’ Creative Commitment, the titular story of Elias’ last work has been summarily discussed to justify the critic’s presupposition that “Muktijuddho”—Bangladesh’s liberation war—and post-independence struggle for a just society shape the form and content of Elias’ short fictions. Although Dasgupta’s book does not attempt a comprehensive re-reading of the writer’s last work, that he nevertheless engages with Jal Shopno Shopner Jal, which bears witness to the shift in critics’ perception about this book. However, it is not until the publication of Alauddin Mondal’s voluminous study Akhtaruzzaman Elias: Nirmane Binirmane (2009) [Akhtaruzzaman Elias: Constructions and Deconstructions], that we find a serious effort to engage with Elias’
posthumous work. In its last chapter, Mondal argues that *Jal Shopno Shopner Jal* is distinctively different from Elias’ other works in terms of plot, narration and structure (451). Since this posthumous work is comprised of stories written during the 1980s and 1990s, Mondal argues that Elias’ late short fiction witnesses the writer’s changing aesthetic ideology and worldview, which, informed by the changing social reality, drips into the pages of this compilation (Mondal 451). Of note, his close reading of “Kanna” posits that this story allegorizes, through its exploration of the “material strife and helplessness” of Afaz Ali, the struggle of the entirety of Bangladesh (Mondal 459). Mondal’s extrapolations about the story mark a decisive break from Rashied’s insinuation that “Kanna” lacks creative ingenuity and is a mere echo of Mahasweta Devi’s *Rudaali* (122). Like Rashied, Mondal, too, draws attention to the story’s religious protagonist’s odd material appetite, but unlike the former he situates the struggle of the story’s protagonist in the thick of Bangladesh’s cultural transformation in the last two decades of the twentieth century, claiming Elias’ story artfully gestures towards the rise and proliferation of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh (463). Not only does Elias’ story capture the conjuncture between foreign aid and religious extremism; it also shows how the foundation of secular education has been corroded from the twin assaults of local corruption, on the one hand, and global capital-aided religious education on the other (464-65). Yet, despite Mondal’s admirable attention to the context and changing social circumstances, there seems to exist in his detailed examination of the historical canvas an unintentional omission—an omission that is tellingly present in almost all critical evaluations of Elias—namely, the neoliberalization of the economic and political spheres of Bangladesh.

None of the commentators on Elias has shown any interest in situating his work in the moment of its production. Anu Muhammad, in his penetrating analysis of Elias’ last novel in an essay titled “*Khoabnama: Khoabe-Chetonay Manush O’ Shomoy*” [*Khoabnama: People and Time*],
in Dream-Consciousness], has perceptively pointed out how Elias’ last novel Khoabnama brings the present to bear upon the past and the future (29). Despite his insistence on seeing history as an active and dialectical process, however, his own essay desists from detailing how the political and social reality of the late 1980s and early 1990s era informs Khoabnama, allowing it to gaze upon the past with the sensibility of the time in which the work was written and published. That most of the commentators on Elias have failed to take full measure of how the writer’s lifetime—his lived experience—maps onto his work has resulted in a relatively hollow estimation of his fictions.

“Kanna” begins with the scene of Afaz Ali conducting a monajat\textsuperscript{22} for a recently deceased person. While reciting a prayer for tomb visitation, he notices, “out of the corner of his eye,”\textsuperscript{23} a man in “green sweater and green-yellow checkered lungi,” hanging about in the graveyard (376). When Ali recognizes Monu Mian, he becomes bitter, thinking he has come all the way down from his native village to hound him for money. Afaz owes Mian’s father five thousand taka—a sum he has used bribing an officer who has promised his son a job. Noticing that Mian has intruded his workplace, he gets ruffled, unable to focus on the prayer he is engaged in. He also makes a grave mistake which dampens his mood even further. Instead of uttering the name of the deceased “Hayat Hosen Khan” in the monajat, he mistakenly blurts out his own son Habibullah’s name. Afaz is “embarrassed” for the obvious mistake but what bothers him even more is the thought that the error may be a premonition in disguise, a hint of some sort about the grave danger that looms over his son’s head (378).

When Afaz Ali finally manages to talk to Monu Mian after Asar\textsuperscript{24} prayer, the latter informs him that he must leave right away because his elder son Habibullah is down with severe diarrhea. Ali shrugs off Mian’s insistence, for diarrhea, in the late Twentieth Century, is not the same terrifying epidemic it once used to be. He indignantly quips: “Have you come all the way down
[from Krishnakathi] to give me the news of his diarrhea? Has the government built the hospital in Bakerganj for you guys to watch bioscope there?” (383). Ali’s frustration is as much the fruit of his inability to process the absurd possibility of losing his son to diarrhea, a non-threatening illness, as it is of his reluctance to leave his workplace right before the pick of the season. It is a derivative anger, emanating from a source which has very little to do with the person it is directed at. Underwriting this anger is the rural destitution which has drawn Ali out of his familiar community, imprisoning him in the city where he lives alone, without family. The trauma of displacement becomes evident when we zoom in on Ali’s description of his own isolation. He compares his condition to “being buried alive in a graveyard” and hopes his son would help him escape this deathlike displacement. This tiny section touches upon the locus classicus of urban to rural movement. As we will also see in The White Tiger as well, rural unemployment, lack of infrastructure and corruption all play pivotal roles in uprooting people from their communities. Elias’ story recounts the familiar tale of rural destitution driving people out of their peripheral rural communities to urban locations. It is here that Afaz Ali’s story attains its allegorical character, representing as it does the global story of capital’s expropriation of cheap labor as told through the antithesis of town and country.

What is unique about Ali’s labor, however, is that its product is immaterial, affective. He has not traveled to the city to sell his labor power in a factory that produces commodities; his work involves caring for the dead, and thus providing the emotional support to the wealthy whose family members are buried in the graveyard he works in.

After reaching Bakerganj, Ali’s home district, he hears that his son’s burial has already taken place. The news of his son’s death strikes him hard, leaving him wordless. As he gets on a rickshaw to grab a boat that will take him home, he sits there “looking blankly at the way forward” (385-86). Although a moulvi versed in prayers for the dead, he fails to utter a single word until at
the end of his boat trip when he suddenly starts muttering “astagfirullah” [“I ask Allah for forgiveness”] thinking of the punishment sinners receive inside their graves. When he reaches home, he is comforted by his father-in-law who tells him that diarrhea has suddenly become an epidemic in “the south,” claiming several lives. “The young new doctor” at the local hospital, who is treating several hundreds of people alone, is doing his best without saline and medicine (386).

Written more than a decade before The White Tiger, this section bears eerie likeness with the scene of the death of Balram’s father in a government hospital lacking doctors and basic medicines. The centralization of infrastructural support in core urban areas and lack of health services in peripheral locations are thus the object of critique in both works. The allegorical possibilities of these works emerge out of this critical venture, where the uneven relation between the core and the periphery, privileged locations and less fortunate ones come under scrutiny.

The chasm between the wealthy urban locations and destitute peripheral ones is more compellingly explored in the next episode of the story. When Ali goes to visit his son’s grave in the local graveyard, he is so appalled by its condition that he “slightly stumbles” as he begins to recite from the holy Quran. “What a mess,” he thinks to himself. “Don’t Allah’s holy words become dirty if one recites them in such an [unclean] place!” He likens the graveyard to a slaughterhouse, a dumping ground of dead animals. The repelling smells of “women’s defecation,” “unearthed body-parts” and “the medicinal odors of trees and plants” assault his senses with such vicious ferocity that his legs begin to wobble. Although he finishes reciting a section from the Quran, he comes back without finishing the monajat, without praying to Allah for his son’s deliverance. While the odious smell plays a role, what also seems to have steered his decision to flee from the sordid burial ground is a bodily apprehension of his material destitution. Before abandoning his monajat, Ali feels on the skin of his neck the hot “breathing of Abdul Kuddus
Howlader,” from whom he has borrowed money (387). The feeling of losing his only hope for freedom from his entrapment in the affluent people’s graveyard leaves the story’s protagonist so traumatized that he is unable to raise his hands up for prayer. The scene of Ali’s perplexity and grief, further compounded by his realization that he may never escape the web of credit, is described in the following manner:

As soon as he clasps his hands together to pray for his dead son’s deliverance, he feels the hot breathing of Abdul Kuddus Howlader on his neck. The thin skin of his thick neck gets singed. The path to pay back the borrowed sum in monthly instalments through his son’s salary is now shut forever. How sad! His own son lent him no help. The salty sea breeze that comes from the river over the canal allows a thin cloud to develop in Ali’s eyes. But Abdul Kuddus Howlader’s breath-infused local breeze soaks it up. Since the moisture of his throat is also lost, he fails to petition for anything [to Allah] despite bringing his hands up. On his way back from the graveyard, even his blood begins to dry up. Still, in his cadaverous frame he gathers enough strength to begin a conversation with Monu Mian. But he fails to remember what he wanted to say.  

This brilliant passage where sensory apprehension, affect and economic life all seem to intersect without clear separation is a fine example of Elias’ complex rendition of social realism. Without even drawing a parallel between the neatly arranged and flower-adorned graveyard of Dhaka where Ali works (377) and the “dumping ground of dead bodies” where his son is laid to rest (386), the narrator of this story conjures up the topological disjuncture between the rural and the urban by masterfully manipulating sensory metaphors. The stacking up of visual, olfactory, somatosensory, and gustatory images in succession not only points towards the strong connection between feeling and emotion but also emphatically proclaims that there exists a double bind.
between the affective and the economic. The ventriloquism of the economic conditioning of affect can be effectively exhumed in the figurative singeing of Ali’s neck, metaphorically capturing the disrupting persistence of economic reality in daily life. In what seems like a straightforward moment of grief and olfactory disgust, the thing that constantly disrupts and defers Ali’s ritualistic performance of grief—the monajat or the prayer for forgiveness to Allah—is the consideration that he has borrowed money from Mian’s father and that he must now return this sum on his own, without any help from his son.

The relation between money and affect, which appears to be a recurring feature of this story, can, as well, be traced back to an earlier moment in the text. When Monu Mian first informs Ali about his son’s health, when it first dawns on him that his son’s life may be at risk, he is so distraught that he suddenly sits down on the “stone railing” of a grave. A thorn from a rose bush—a plant that his assistant has planted under his supervision—pricks his “thick” neck. The sensation on his skin reminds him of a time when the infant Habibullah sat there, giving him similar sensations in the same spot. It also seems to Ali as if the sharp corners of the borrowed 5000 taka are pricking him in that spot. Physical pain, affect and financial loss merge into one another, forcing us to reconsider the social and economic conditionings of affect. This is how Elias’ narrator discusses Ali’s overlapping emotions and feelings:

What has he [Monu Mian] seen? Is this why, few moments ago, during the monajat of the man buried in [grave] number 12345, Allah has made him ask for his son’s deliverance in advance? Afaz Ali suddenly sits down on the wide and smooth stone railing of number 7769 and a thorn from a rose bush, which Sharif Mridha planted under his supervision, pricks his neck. His neck is thick, but his skin isn’t, so the prick leads to pain. Simultaneously, this area of his body, where many years ago infant Habibullah sat and
swung his legs, tickles. Just above that part of his neck scratch the notes making up 5000 takas—the amount he borrowed for bribing [the officer] for Habibullah’s job. The prick of the rose thorn remains, but the swinging of Habibullah’s small feet fades under the weight of money.²⁹ (383)

Although evocative of Ali’s premonitory feeling about his son’s death, this passage stops from naming his feeling before and after the prick. Ali’s is a feeling that cannot be named.³⁰ It emerges out of his body, when subtle physical pain begins to transmute into memories of his son’s childhood; the same bodily sensation alerts us about his financial loss, eventually harking back, once again, to the touch of his son’s vanishing small feet. Touch plays an important role here. The prick of the rose thorn, the memory of the sensation of carrying infant Habibullah on his back, and the sharp touch of pointed corners of paper money—all seem to direct towards the multiplicity contained within a single bodily sensation. However, what is particularly impressive about this passage is its depiction of the primacy of economic reason over affective affinities in Afaz Ali’s life—an idea that is subtly gestured towards by the vanishing feet of Habibullah which gets crushed under the weight of economic considerations.

The fading of the affective—bodily sensation resulting from memory and emotion—under the “weight” of material concern that recurs in the story is evocative of the cultural and economic transformation of Bangladesh. In *Khoabnama* (1997), Elias’ epic novel, the epochal transformation of rural Bengal is expressed through the symbolic loss of *Khoabnama*—the book of dreams. From the custody of dreamers and mystics who have been the traditional keepers of the secret art, the book ends up in the possession of the emerging national bourgeoisie—a group predominantly comprised of entrepreneurs and landowners—in the aftermath of the partition of the subcontinent. The loss of the book of dream marks, on the one hand, the loss of rural and
agrarian Bengal’s control over its own destiny and, on the other, the consolidation of power in the hands of the nation’s elites. What is also present in the schematization of this collective loss is a deep sense of tragedy derived from the betrayal of the nationalist bourgeoisie, who, having failed to bring in radical political and economic transformations, resort to violence and intrigue to cling on to their newfound power. The shadow of the present looms large over the novel’s re-imagination of the past:\(^3\): the treason of the bourgeoisie, which is one of the key themes in the novel, is as much a reimagination of the popular history of the Tevaga and the anticolonial independence movements as it is a projection of the contemporary predicament on a distant past. The disappointment of the post-Ershad neoliberal era, which marks another failure of nationalist politics in Bangladesh, casts a long shadow on this novel’s imagination of history and temporality. The dialectical transaction between the present and the past—most notably present in Khoabnama’s depiction of past myths constantly informing and inspiring present moments of insurrection—enacts a circular vision of time where history is shown to repeat itself in another form. What also seems to repeat itself in Elias’ fictions is the loss of revolutionary insurrection to petty bourgeois nationalist politics. In Chilekothar Sepoy too, we notice the wily petty bourgeois nationalists derailing a revolutionary uprising by appropriating its rigor for their own benefit. In “Kanna,” no thematic engagement with Bangladesh’s long history of bourgeois treason can be traced; what remains as a residue of this long history is a ghastly shadow of rural destitution, which, much like the pervasive corruption that has now been fully internalized into the fabric of institutional culture, symptomatically represents the metamorphosis of the nation’s economic life.

An equally important indication of how the imperative to earn money bears down on Ali’s already afflicted mind appears before us when the bereaved father unceremoniously returns from his son’s grave without performing the monajat, the culminating part of the prayer where the
devotee raises his palms to God in supplication. After returning home, Ali learns that his wife too has contacted diarrhea. Instead of staying back and attending his grieving and ailing wife, upon the insistence of his father-in-law he quickly returns to his workplace—the graveyard—to recover the losses for his missed days of work. This moment productively points towards the utter antipathy with which Muslim-Bengali families treat women. The complete silence—except at the moment when Ali’s grief-stricken wife lets out a loud heart-wrenching shriek—that the story imposes on her, signifies her expulsion from her own family’s decision-making process. Neither Ali nor his father-in-law seem to care much about what she feels about his return to the city. What is simultaneously brought to attention in this segment is how Ali prioritizes financial considerations over his wife’s health and over his own grief and loss.

It is possible to read Ali’s hasty departure from his native village as a symptom of his capitulation to material pursuit. Given Ali’s obsessive pursuit of money, we may even feel tempted to cast him in the mold of an economic being—*homo economicus*—albeit such quick inferences may land us on troubled terrain when we weigh in his other thoughts and actions, especially his desperation to leave the city. It is clear that the stubborn persistence of money in Ali’s unconscious has less to do with his personal craving for wealth than it has with a culture that fetishizes money, indeed worships it. On the one hand, money’s mediating capacity in capitalist society comes to light, and, on the other, the objective world in which the de rigueur fetishization of money attains ubiquity begins to come into view. If Ali is constantly pricked or singed by money, it is not enough to point towards the various appearances of money in his consciousness to show how money’s forms—paper and metal—reveal themselves in his memory and actions. That Ali is literally tortured and tormented by money—that he bleeds and burns by the figurative touch of money—also speaks powerfully about the violence of money in a society that fetishizes it and worships it.
Here, in this symbolic apprehension, the shape of the monetized culture in which a rural Madrasa educated moulvi is first pierced and then burned attains a different connotative visage, according money vitality, and making it appear as the master who can brand and torture its subjects at will.

It needs to be pointed out that Elias’ story does not present Ali as an overtly avaricious person, which rules out the possibility of reading this moment as the poor moulvi’s eager subjection to the lordship of money. Indeed, his anxiety about being trapped in the graveyard suggests the opposite, making apparent that he does not see money as an end in itself. He accepts commodity-infested urban life only begrudgingly, hoping his son will free him from his condition. It is his discontent, and not his acquiescence to go back to the city a day after his son’s death, that awakens us to the possibility of reading “Kanna” as a critique of monetization. If we pay careful attention to the story’s closure, we notice that what initially appears as a subjective condition (his monetized consciousness) is indeed a commentary on the objective condition in which both emotions and affect get buried under the weight of a commoditized world in which money constantly silences positive feelings and bodily reactions. Only when the totality is taken into account—the complete social whole against whose backdrop exchanges take place and things attain abstract value—does the complexly intertwined thread of the story’s critique begins to reveal itself. “Kanna,” then, appears as a critique of money’s power and mediation, an apprehension of Ali’s helplessness in the brutal monetized culture where he not only loses his son but also the agency to mourn for his child. To explore this idea further, I will now turn to Marx’s theories on money, for here money’s mediation of social power—its fetishistic existence in our capitalist society—come in full view.

**Money and Reification: “Kanna” as a Critique of the Objective Condition**

In many of his most familiar works, Marx discusses money not only as a commodity facilitating exchange but also as a repository of wealth and power, an engine behind the global
commodity production process. In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, preparatory notes that were discovered many years after Marx’s death, the German revolutionary refers to money as “an object of eminent possession”—a universal mediator between “man’s need and the object” (136). In bourgeois society, money’s power is unlimited because in it, unlike in societies where commodities were exchanged directly, commodity exchange faces no external barrier tied to utility. The “omnipotence” of money, Marx notes, comes not just from money’s mediating capacity but also from its power to give concrete appearance to “abstract” value. That the possessor of money can access anything that has exchange value testifies to money’s privileged status among commodities. Yet, despite its status as the universal mediator, money itself is a confounding commodity whose essence contradicts its social appearance. Emphasizing money’s capacity to “overturn” and “confound” the “individual” as well as “society,” Marx points out that money’s omnipotence leads towards an “upside-down” world where it mediates all other relationships (139-40). Since money is not a mediator of any specific kind of object or quality but for everything that has the potential to be exchanged, money’s purchasing power appears as the power of the individual who possesses it, who, with the help of money, can buy what s/he does not possess (140). Although Marx’s early awareness of money’s unfettered power over human beings and other commodities allows us to construe how bourgeois society fetishizes money, the process through which money attains its “omnipotence” is only nebulously present in the pages of *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*; it is in his later works that Marx revisits the problem of the money form to account for its power in bourgeois society by expanding the concept of exchange value.

In both *Grundrisse* and *Capital Volume I*, we see Marx developing an analytical schema of money—a historical anatomy of sorts—through a detailed discussion of money’s historical
emergence and its contradiction. In both volumes, he carefully details how money attains its power and value, its fetishistic form. In *Grundrisse*, Marx’s notes from 1858-59 which were compiled and published posthumously, money is given apposite philosophical attention. He begins the second part of his notes on money by suggesting that since exchange value forms the substance of money and exchange value is wealth, money too is the “embodied form of wealth” (221). Yet—and this is where Marx differs from other prominent theorists of money, most notably from Ricardo (Brunhoff xiii)—he also reminds us that money is a mere representation, “the general representative of wealth” (*Grundrisse* 221). On the one hand, money is the concrete manifestation of exchange value and wealth whose historical development can be traced at various moments in history and, on the other, it is a representation—an abstraction—whose material presence is underwritten by an immaterial social imagination specific to commodity producing economic systems (*Grundrisse* 225-226; Harvey 26-27). Having identified money’s historical contradiction in this manner, Marx then draws attention to money’s fetishistic character—its sociality—which leads towards the reification of its owner whose access to the world of commodities is mediated by money. Money does not spell out a specific relation to its owner; rather, private labor attains social character through commodity production and exchange. As a general medium for exchange, money accords its possessor access to all the commodities s/he has not produced. In other words, the agency of the possessor of money is the agency of money itself; while money attains vitality and agency in a commodity producing society, allowing its possessor limitless access to commodities, the owner of money loses his own agency and is subjected to money’s power. This is how Marx puts it in *Grundrisse*:

*Money, however, as the individual of general wealth, as something emerging from circulation and representing the general quality, as a merely social result, does not at all*
presuppose an individual relation to its owner; possession of it is not the development of any particular essential aspect of its individuality; but rather possession of what lacks individuality, since this social relation exists at the same time as a sensuous, external object which can be mechanically seized, and lost in the same manner. Its relation to the individual thus appears as a purely accidental one; while this relation to a thing having no connection to his individuality gives him, at the same time, by virtue of the thing’s character, a general power over society, over the whole world of gratifications, labours, etc. …The possession of money places me in exactly the same relationship towards wealth (social) as the philosophers’ stone would towards the sciences. (222)

This early meditation on the reifying power of money becomes the more elaborate and penetrating analysis of commodity fetish in Marx’s finest work *Capital Vol. I: A Critique of Political Economy*. In its first chapter, he explains how commodity’s sociality spawns a magical world where commodities socialize and interact and living labor is abstracted so as to facilitate commodity exchange. The dual process whereby, on the one hand, the workers are reified through the abstraction of labor and, on the other, commodities are made social through the process of exchange is what Marx calls fetishism of the commodity (163-65). In the third chapter of the same work, Marx delves deeper into the realm of money’s reifying capacity by stressing the idea that without the mediation of money, commodity production and exchange at a global scale would not have been possible. While other commodities are merely “particular equivalents for money,” money itself is “their universal equivalent” and its relationship to other commodities is the relationship of a universal standard to a local/particular form (184). It is not that money’s preponderance among commodities brackets it out from other commodities; on the contrary, it allows money to emerge as the *de jure* representative of other commodities, a “reflection” of the
“relations between all other commodities” (ibid). Hence Marx’s supposition that the “riddle of the money fetish is therefore the riddle of the commodity fetish” (187).

The German revolutionary’s conjecture about identical sources of fetishism should not lead us to conclude that Marx has failed to draw a line of distinction between the money fetish and the commodity fetish. In all his major works, specifically in his writings on political economy, Marx shows an extra-ordinary awareness about money’s capacity for inciting greed and violence. All commodities, of which money is one, Marx argues in the first chapter of *Capital*, retain traces of a violent erasure of concrete labor. Once entering the market as commodities, exchange values wipe out the traces of the specific kind of labor that has produced them and, instead of being controlled by human beings, start controlling them (167-68). Marx elaborately discusses the process through which commoditized societies turn workers into mere appendages of the tools they work with in a remarkably insightful chapter of the same book titled “Machinery and Large-Scale Industry.” Nevertheless, unlike *Grundrisse*, where he singles out money for its capacity to drive people towards greed and injustice (222-24), and where he contends that money form itself is the cause of such depravation, in *Capital Volume I*, Marx pays more attention to the inherent anomaly of the capitalist mode of production itself, thus leaning towards the position that the monetary economy under capitalism deflects capitalism’s own crises and contradictions, while, also, simultaneously generating a temporary equilibrium only to produce new volatilities and crises (243-44).

An important corollary of Marx’s theory of money is the idea that the historical trajectory of money predates the historical emergence of capitalism. On the face, this idea appears to imply that money operates differently under capitalism, that its monetary system has a different form and function under the capitalist mode of production. Yet, when one pays close attention to his
discussion of the historical emergence of money, one comes to understand that what the German thinker is pointing towards is not only historical emergence but also potentiality; in Marx’s reckoning capitalist economy is a money economy not only because “the precondition for bourgeois society” is the production of “exchange value, i.e. money” (*Grundrisse* 225) but also because money’s full potential can only be materialized within a commodity producing [a] global system like capitalism (*Grundrisse* 227). This conjuncture properly explains why he describes money as “a social relation of production” (Qtd. in Brunhoff 20). Just as capital is a social relation held together by the contradiction between living labor and dead labor, money too is a social relation underwritten by inequality and oppression. In his insightful work *The Value of Money*, Prabhat Patnaik categorically refers to the systemic inequality residing at the heart of capitalist monetary economy by claiming that “[t]he stability of the value of money is based on the persistence” of the “unequal and oppressive” relations that underlie “a modern monetary economy” (xvi). Equally conscious of money’s ability to incite greed and violence, David Harvey writes the following in *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*:

[T]he fact that money permits social power to be appropriated and exclusively utilized by private persons places money at the center of a wide range of noxious human behaviours—lust and greed for money power inevitably become central features in the body politic of capitalism …what is certain is that the rise of the money form and the capacity for its private appropriation has created a space for the proliferation of human behaviours that are anything but virtuous and noble. (33)

The money that pierces Afaz Ali’s neckline and singes his thin skin is also the same commodity that binds him in a relationship of debt to Abdul Quddus Howladar—Monu Mian’s father and a distant relative who lives in the neighboring village. It is not only the want of money that forces
Ali to suppress his grief for his son; it is also his debt—that the fruit of his future labor is given over to others and that others can make a claim on his future earnings—that silences him when he tries to talk to Monu Mian about his uncertain future after losing his son. Yet, when we look into the world that lies outside Ali’s emotional and financial struggles, it looks extra-ordinarily prosperous. Right at the beginning of the story, we are introduced to the “ash-colored smoke and slightly sweet fragrance of Indian incense sticks” (376) that heighten the effects of Ali’s emotional monajat. We are also told that the graves in the graveyard Ali works in are “entirely gilded in marble,” “mosaicked,” or “built using red ceramic bricks.” Many of these graves have “borders of red Chinese grasses,” while others have decorations of local and imported flowers (377). While performing his namaz, Ali hears “the sweet sound of opening and closing of car doors” (382). The car which has arrived has brought in people who would select the burial space for a “young man” whose father is “a very big officer in a foreign corporation” and whose relatives are flying in from “the US, Germany and Japan” to join the burial prayer (ibid.). The narrator also informs us about Ali’s clients whose medical treatments take place in “Bangkok” and “America” (384). When Ali is about to leave for Dhaka after visiting his son’s grave, his father-in-law gives him “1000 taka,” asking him to return it quickly because that money is not his own. “Money,” he tells Ali, is “flowing in from England and America, for the infidels have come to understand that there they cannot do without Islam” (388). This last sentence is remarkable for its strategic use of irony which simultaneously takes aim at the rigidity of institutionalized religion as well as the NGO-led aid politics in Bangladesh which reached its apogee in the 1990s. It is against this backdrop of heightened economic activities and the influx of foreign commodities that the story invites us to account for Ali’s loss. Its titular reference to grief—that the story’s title “Kanna” refers to Ali’s struggle to give ritualistic form to his loss by mourning in public for his dead son—puts under the
microscope the objectifying process that turns emotion into a subjugated experience which cannot be made public without the mediation of culture and money.

The observation that make in the last sentence about subjugation of Ali’s affect demands further justification. In the last part of Elias’ story, we find Afaz Ali desperately soliciting the responsibility of conducting the *monajat* for the dead son of the “big officer” whose ostentatious presence offered Ali’s hope for financial recovery. However, when he begins his prayer, his language attains emotive doubleness, simultaneously whipping up the grief of the young man’s father and channeling his own angst and grumble. As the convention demands, he begins by asserting the greatness of the Supreme Being whose actions cannot be disputed: “Allah, you have brought back your dear servant to you and we have no objection, no one has any objection, I have no objection”³³ (390). While the repetition of the word “objection” affirms the superiority of Allah over his³⁴ subjects, who must accept his actions without any questions, what is also at play here is Ali’s rhetorical prowess which, through repetition, has attained musicality and is geared towards stirring up emotions. Yet, the use of the word “objection” also raises the possibility of reading the prayer as a grieving father’s disinclination to accept his loss as fate, as a divine intervention. The moment of seeking comfort for another, thus, becomes the instance of injecting subjective remonstration, inscribing within the ritualistic and objective expression of grief the burden of the insufferable subjective loss. Thus, as the prayer progresses, Ali’s language becomes more acrimonious, incriminating:

Do you love him so much that you didn’t think of his parents even once? Allah the Merciful, did the river of your mercy go dry after showering its mercy on Shatab Kabir? … [G]rant him heaven Allah. But, holy creator, didn’t you get time to notice his father? Will he spend the rest of his life in the graveyard? (390-91)
As Ali pours out his grief, not only does he lose his composure, weeping profusely and bringing in public his long-held gripe against the supreme creator, he also loses his balance, almost falling face down, saving himself by holding on to a bamboo stake. The overlap between Ali’s emotional outburst and his corporeal response call for a deeper analysis of the relationship between affect and loss. Denied a proper material condition for expressing his grief—Ali’s son, it needs to be mentioned once again, is buried in a graveyard that resembles a slaughterhouse and is too dirty for a sacred rite—Ali has to defer what is required of him by convention and training. Held back and temporarily abandoned, his ritualistic prayer can only be expressed through something else, some other figure. It is this mediation of another figure and medium, that allows us to read Ali’s affect as a subjugated affect—a reified affect—which expresses corporeal emotion through a body that is not the subject’s own.

I am suggesting, therefore, that we read the closure of the story as a further exploration of the power of money in the capitalist society. It is only when we apprehend capitalist society as monetized society that we can apprehend the symbolic significance of Elias’ ventriloquized affect. After all, only in a monetized society will affect remain subjugated, unable to express itself without the mediation of money. Affect’s ventriloquism also speaks powerfully about class power, suggesting those who possess money have the ability to mediate and suppress the affect of those who do not. This allows us to relate the agency of the money form—the note and the coin, not to mention credit-money—to the agency of the class that possesses it and is its custodian. While discussing Marx’s elaboration of the process of simple reproduction, which has been captured, in its most succinct form, through the deceptively simple equation of M-C-M’, Rosa Luxemburg writes:
Since the whole social process of circulation is set in motion by the capitalists, who are in possession of both the means of production and the money necessary for the mediation of circulation, everything must end up in their hands once again after each circuit of social capital, and more precisely it must revert to each group of capitalists and each individual capitalist in proportion to the investment made by them. Money is held by workers only temporarily while it mediates the exchange of variable capital between its money-form and its natural form; in the hands of the capitalists it is the appearance-form of a part of their capital, and as such it must always return to them. (59)

It is important to note here that money that is advanced by the capitalist class through the purchase of labor power is not the real locomotive of the valorization process; nor is the capitalist class the rightful owner of all social wealth because it is not their labor that goes into producing commodities. Indeed, neither Marx nor Luxemburg leaves us with any confusion about the fact that labor is the real engine behind commodity production and the true source of all social wealth including money. The money that remains in circulation is advanced for productive or individual consumption and is neither withdrawn from circulation nor put aside by the workers whose labor goes into the production of commodities. Instead, surplus value comes back to the capitalist class in money form, only to be advanced once again as capital. The structure of capitalist relations of production, therefore, remains fundamentally opposed to the enrichment of the working class; capitalism’s raison d’être, instead, is the transfer of almost all social wealth into the possession of the capitalist class. Hence, Luxemburg’s observation that capital returns to the capitalist class in the money form after commodity’s value is realized.

Conclusion
Ali’s channeling of his grief through another figure and medium, therefore, needs to be comprehended not simply as a moment of agency and subversion but also as an apprehension of his reified affect, which, having found no direct outlet has now chosen to express its emotion through another body—the body of a corporate executive. If the pricking and singing of Ali’s neck by money represents his reification in the form of debt, his derivative grief embodies his lost subjecthood within the social structure. This loss of subjecthood, in turn, affirms his objectification within the social schema where he exists only to perform someone else’s prayer, where he is a mere tool for meeting social need for parceling out private grief and mourning. In a sense, his labor is always given over to someone else—someone who is positioned higher in the social ranks and is able to pay the right price for his service—but the nature of his labor is immaterial as no material object is produced by it. To be more precise here, the object of his production is emotion/affect and the use value of his labor-power does not take the form of producing something tangible but instead in his ability to move people emotionally through his emotionally charged prayers. Just as the worker puts his labor-power into commodities, thus producing something of value, so Ali produces an emotionally charged *monajat*, where his affective labor attains reified form, assuming increasingly commodified form even as the social function of delivering *monajat* persists, almost by definition, as non-commodified labor. As such, the product of his labor bears all the symptoms of his alienation, as do other commodities where the labor of the worker exists in reified forms. It is in the reification process that one needs to locate the source of Ali’s inability to mourn for his son publicly. The vicarious weeping that releases Ali’s pent up frustrations, therefore, is not a moment of freedom, but rather a further confirmation of his imprisonment in a social system that has chained him twice: firstly by binding him in a relation of debt and secondly by subjugating his feeling and emotion to the dictates of the capital-relation. It is, then, of little
surprise that Ali’s complaint is directed towards a transcendental subject—his creator. Having found no worldly solution to his worldly problems—the loss of his son due to the inadequate medical facilities existing in the rural area and the loss of his wealth to a socially brokered network of corruption—Ali chooses to blame the creator for his misfortune, thus transferring a worldly problem to the custody of a transcendental being. That the bereaved father, despite being tormented by material concerns, decides not to question the existing social relations that are responsible for his suffering but seeks justice from his creator, reveals to what degree the mediating power of capital/money has normalized itself in neoliberal Bangladeshi culture.

As I have indicated above, one of the reasons why critics have not shown any interest in connecting any of Elias’ works to neoliberal culture is because the effects of neoliberalization of economy did not become fully visible in Bangladesh until early twenty-first century when ideas of entrepreneurship and consumerism began to take hold of the dominant culture. How can one read a writer’s work as an allegory of something that is yet to manifest itself, yet to come? It is difficult to cast Afaz Ali in the mold of an entrepreneurial subject—a *homo œconomicus*—whose sole purpose in life is to financialize the self by becoming “human capital” (Brown 33). If anything, his subjectivity points towards a vague awareness of the necessity of earning money at all cost. But, as we have already seen in our discussion of the story, Ali’s priority in life is not to advance the self as capital but to escape the grueling poverty that has cast him in a distant city, employing him at the service of the wealthy and powerful whose grief he must give proper vent to. There is nothing voluntary about his labor; nor is there any desire in him to internalize the entrepreneurial culture that has begun to take hold on people of his profession. In this regard, he is very different from his father-in-law and fellow *moulvi* Haider Boksh—both of whom know how to use religious education for personal enrichment. Theories of subjectivity, therefore, offer inadequate tools to
account for Ali’s struggle and entrapment. There is nothing in his subjectivity that allows us to understand the cultural shift that was gradually sinking in, transforming the whole of the social sphere. In order to apprehend this change, one needs to look outside Ali’s consciousness—the outside world whose culture is changing, where a precipitous consumerist culture has begun to germinate. Elias’ “Kanna” apprehends this cultural shift not through the transformation of Ali’s subjectivity but through the mores of a changing world which can only be captured elliptically as a structure of feeling.

In his entry on “Structures of Feeling” in *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams writes that against “explicit” social forms that are immediately recognizable (130), we also have “emergent” social experience “still in process,” not yet recognized as social (132). He calls this collective emergent experience “structures of feeling” because such experience exists more as nebulously expressed thought than as an ideology or “world-view” (132). For Williams, the idea of structures of feeling has “a special relevance” to art and literature because in them “this present and affective kind” of social experience, “which cannot without loss be reduced to belief systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships,” can be represented in its social and historical complexity. (133). In an earlier essay written in 1954, he discusses how the dominant experience of an era gets expressed in literature as a tacit convention which changes with time and condition (“Film and the Dramatic Convention” 33). Williams does not believe that such structures of feeling can be adequately theorized because, unlike documented history, the lived experience of a historical moment cannot be seized upon once that moment is lost. Hence the conjecture that literature and art can successfully represent the structure of feeling of an era: “The structure of feeling … lies deeply embedded in our lives; it cannot be merely extracted or summarized; it is perhaps only in art … that it can be realized, and communicated, as a whole of experience” (40).
Although vague and, occasionally, inconsistent, Williams’ notion of structures of feeling is perhaps the best conceptual tool for grasping why and how so many Bangladeshi writers writing during the 1980s and 1990s were able to thematize an economic and cultural shift that was still in its formative phase. After all, literature does not need to wait until changes become discernible to express the contradictions of a social order in flux. Writers can tap into the ever-changing source of social experience to creatively rework and reimagine transformations that are unknown to theoretical labelling, indeed, that cannot be named. It is extraordinary that so many Bangladeshi writers had a premature sense of what was to come—of what kind of culture was going to settle in. What is ironic is that when a neoliberal culture gradually consumed the nation’s cultural institutions, monetizing the consciousness of the writers and artists, the alarm bell that Elias, Sofa, Dutta, Zahir and others rang began to fade. No savage parody succeeded Sofa’s *Gavi Bittanto* and no epic novel followed Elias’ *Khoabnama*. It is in this context of aesthetic and cultural vacuum, then, that one is summoned to account for the enormous significance of Elias’ late works, especially his aesthetic *tour de force* “Kanna,” where the protagonist’s material and emotional strife symptomally represents Bangladesh’s neoliberal turn on the one hand, and the subjugation of affect under money on the other.

In many ways, these fictional works that were written in the last decades of the twentieth-century, works that explored the contours of social anxiety about neoliberal economic reforms and transactional norms, found an echo in the fictions of the next decade because it was, by then, impossible to ignore the effects of neoliberalization on society and life. The chasm between the remote rural and the affluent urban that “Kanna” secretly gestures towards, overtly features in the pages of Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, where the protagonist narrates how the landlord-infested rural life has become a steady source of cheap labor for urban India, which treats the rural
with an acerbic apathy and sees it as a fetter to its otherwise smooth rise to economic prosperity. The parallel world of affluence and want which is the feature of Dutta’s short story, is echoed not only by The White Tiger but also by H. M. Naqvi’s Home Boy. The general sense of joylessness and despair that one encounters in the works that I have discussed here, seem to reverberate in other contemporary South Asian novels as well. Its satiric/parodic form notwithstanding, the tenor of The White Tiger’s narrator’s voice remains mournful, sad, echoing the tragic end of Ahmed Sofa’s satire where the protagonist tries to erase the memory of loss of his cow, his only true companion, by optimistically looking forward to his lecture tour in the US. Both protagonists try to erect a bastion of false hope amidst insufferable loss, as if their material success will somehow wipe out their trauma. It is in their optimism about the ameliorating potential of money that these two men exhibit their internalization of neoliberal ideology, the same ideology that Ali fails to internalize. His complaint against his creator, thus, should not be taken literally, as if having lost his belief in the transcendental being he has subjugated to the dictates of the money. Rather, it should be seen as his total rejection of the monetized world that has failed and incarcerated him, binding him to the same distant graveyard he wants to escape. But, he has also come to realize that no supreme being will save him either. Ali’s radicalism lies in his rejection of both: he simply declines to accept that the solution of this world’s problems lies in the norms and dictates of another world.

“Kanna” was among the last published works of Akhtaruzzaman Elias. Only two more works were completed after this story—a short story titled “Jaal Shopno Shopner Jaal” completed in 1994 and his epic novel Khoabnama, considered by many including Mahasweta Devi as one of the greatest novels written in Bengali. Published in 1996, a year before his death, this novels marks the summit of Elias’ substantive creative corpus. These three works, which were all written the
1990s, are notable for their pessimistic tone and stylistic ingenuity. Although the early 1990s in Bangladeshi history was marked by the optimism of being able to break from the yoke of military dictatorship which had been the feature of Bangladeshi life for fifteen years, no sign of that positive historical turn can be traced in Elias’ late works. Instead, we encounter in them a somber glum about the return of the same putrid bourgeois politics that has plagued Bangladeshi nation all through its history. “Jaal Shopno Shopner Jaal” engages with the collective heartbreak of witnessing the rise of the defeated islamist collaborators who aided Pakistani army’s genocide by resorting to metaphors. Koabnama, on the other hand, digs deep inside history to locate another moment of disappointment—Tevaga Movement—which brought hope for rural farmers and sharecroppers but got lost in the humdrum of nationalist independence movement of 1947, which swallowed up the peasant rebellion, crushing its dream of equality and justice. The treason of the nationalist bourgeois remains the overlapping theme of Elias’ late works. It is only in “Kanna” one finds no such overt political engagements. Instead, what the reader encounters is a façade of loss and mourning. But, as has been discussed earlier, broader political economic concerns powerfully map on to the surface of this story, allowing us to grasp how Afaz’s private grief is underwritten by the movements of both national and global history.
Chapter Two

Of Cities and Uneven Geographical Relations: The White Tiger as a Spatial Parable

By “visualizing time as geography,” space becomes the metaphorical bearer of time’s meaning. It is likewise with the most abstract depiction of time, the clock; time is rendered measurable and given meaning via the spatial arrangement of the clock’s hands.

Neil Smith, Uneven Development 214

Introduction

There is an intriguing passage in the penultimate chapter of Aravind Adiga’s Booker winning novel The White Tiger—a passage that conjures up not only the image of a divided city but also of a divided country (and as I will make clear in the course of this chapter, a divided world market). Balram, the narrator of the novel, takes leave from his employer one Sunday morning to explore Delhi’s G. B. Road where the city’s famous “red-light district” (215) is located. Exasperated by the suggestive remark of a paan-seller who asks him to have a paan to overcome his nervousness, Balram charges into him and is subsequently chased out of the premise by pimps and street-vendors. He starts aimlessly wandering around the streets of Old Delhi where he notices a slew of objects and people who, to him, seem like things belonging to an old and lost world. He notices heaps of old books and practitioners of old trades and professions. With his characteristic sarcasm, Balram remarks that Delhi is the capital of not one but two different countries. New Delhi, with its affluent suburbs and shiny shopping malls, belongs to the India of light, whereas Old Delhi with its stone buildings and lugubrious inhabitants belongs to the India of darkness. Here is how Balram expresses his thoughts:

Delhi is the capital of not one but two countries—two Indias. The light and the Darkness both flow into Delhi. Gurgaon, where Mr. Ashok lived, is the bright modern end of the
city, and this place, Old Delhi, is the other end. Full of things the modern world forgot all about—rickshaws, old stone buildings, the Muslims. (215)

This passage alludes to an earlier remark by Balram in the very first chapter of the novel that India is “two countries in one”: the “India of Light” and the “India of Darkness” (12). In his observation about Delhi, Balram re-invokes the dichotomy between light and darkness not simply to liken the city with the divided country but also to imply that the chasm between the two parts of the city (as well as two parts of the country) is both spatial and temporal. Gurgaon, where Balram’s employer Ashok lives, is new (“modern”) and positive (“bright”), whereas Old Delhi from which he is chased out is corruptible and anachronistic where people belonging to a lost world live in an isolated bubble oblivious of the transformations going on around them.

In her insightful reading of Adiga’s The White Tiger, Betty Joseph suggests that the relation between the “India of Light” and the “India of Darkness” is indeed a metonymic representation of the vastly unequal relationship between the neoliberal cosmopolitan India and its agrarian and semi-feudal rural. In “Neoliberalism and Allegory,” she writes that Adiga’s novel is a satire that allegorizes the vicissitudes of India’s neoliberal makeover. The narrative of two Indias that Adiga’s protagonist puts forward, is indeed a parody of the rhetoric of divided India advanced by multinational corporations and nationalist parties such as BJP (74). Referring to a full-page advertisement run on the front page of The Times of India—a leading national daily where the idea of a forward-looking and advanced India held back by an undeveloped and meek one is advanced—Joseph suggests that such narratives function by simultaneously undermining welfare state policies and by valorizing neoliberal economic growth (72). The anthem of suburban progress and rural/inner-city backwardness is, thus, one of the rhetorical strategies of neoliberalism, which it employs not simply to glorify its own achievements but also to undermine opposing views and
ideologies. In Adiga’s novel, the fractured map of two Indias is invoked to slyly hint at a future neoliberal remapping—a narrative strategy that I later discuss as the *locus classicus* of neoliberal utopia (of an eternal capitalist future). The salvaging power of neoliberalism remains one of the key frames of Betty Joseph’s discussion about Adiga’s novel’s fraught relation to neoliberalism. She reads the *Times of India* advertisement as a classic example of neoliberal allegory, implying that the discourse of holding back the full potential of entrepreneurial future itself is premised on the fetishistic process of turning actually existing systemic and material inequality into cognitive dissonance—the psychological inability and reluctance to fly towards a neoliberal future. She writes:

> The anthem is an example of what I call neoliberal allegory, where a dynamic new India with high rates of economic growth seemingly repairs the split geography of uneven development, class divisions, and political interests by unleashing the forces of entrepreneurship and competition. In this scenario, despite the suggestion of a historical break, neoliberal allegory still figures the nation as a struggling individual emerging finally from long-term postcolonial economic woes and ready to take its place on the international stage. (69)

> “India Poised,” the advertisement that Joseph discusses in her essay, thus presents neoliberalism as a positive transformative force engaged in the task of repairing the split geography left behind as a legacy by the postcolonial welfare state whose anachronistic presence, much like the Old Delhi of Balram’s imagination, only hurts the nation’s potential for development. Joseph reads Adiga’s *The White Tiger* as a “critique of neoliberalism,” as a parody of India’s neoliberal entrepreneurial success story (72). “By placing the language of neoliberalism in the hands of a character who originates in a world of rural poverty but thinks himself to be a part of the new
economic elite,” she posits, “Adiga brilliantly satirizes neoliberalism through ventriloquism” (82). She considers Balram as “an illegitimate spokesman” for neoliberalism whose parroting of its core values further undermines its ethical and moral claims. “When the White Tiger is the mouthpiece,” she argues, “we hear neoliberal entrepreneurial shibboleths as criminality” (72). The allegorical value of the novel for Joseph, therefore, resides in its subversive gesture, in its ability to expose the subjective and systemic violence that underwrites neoliberalism’s present history.

Joseph’s broader discussion about The White Tiger’s critical representation of neoliberalism comprises conjectures about both time and space. One of the key cognates of her discussions about space is the idea that Adiga’s novel offers a cognitive remapping of mainstream media’s representation of urban-rural relationship by exploding the myths about rural India. Balram’s story—his journey from the rural to the urban—challenges neoliberal urban India’s perception that the rural is ossified, unwilling to venture into a thriving capitalist future. What it offers instead is a more complex take on the rural-urban relationship in which rural appears to be as tangled in the web of global capitalist world order as the urban. The White Tiger thus challenges neoliberal urban imaginary where the rural exists as a “nightmare” lurking in the shadow of pre-capitalist modes of existence. The novel’s subversive narrator sheds light on “the tracks of capital and class that remain invisible in the celebration of the global city phenomenon today” (79).

Swaralipi Nandi, in her exhaustive reading of Adiga’s first novel, offers a slightly different interpretation of the urban-rural relation than the one Joseph advances here. She contends that the relation between the India of Light and the India of Darkness is one of time lag between old and feudal India and the new and neoliberal one. Her essay, “Narrative Ambiguity and The Neoliberal Bildungsroman in Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger” reads Adiga’s novel as a narrative presentation of neoliberal subject formation, claiming Balram’s transformation thematizes his
normalization within India’s new “capitalist social order” (276). Positioning herself in opposition to Joseph and several other scholars who claim that the novel is a tongue-in-cheek critique of India’s economic disparity, Nandi argues that these readings fail to notice how the protagonist’s voice wavers as the searing irony of the beginning transforms into a “serious testimony” (279) at the moment of its closure. One needs to read Balram’s development against this backdrop—this shift in his narrative voice from “self-deprecation” to “victim testimony”—and comprehend it as a transition from past to future, from feudalism to neoliberalism. She writes: “Balram’s narrative voice wavers between victim testimony and self-deprecation, which coincide, respectively, with his oppressed, pre-capitalist subjectivity and his emerging neoliberal subjectivity” (279). Indeed, her assumption that the novel’s critique is directed more towards India’s pre-capitalist/feudal structures than it is towards the country’s neoliberal reorganization draws upon both spatial and temporal distinctions to funnel uneven geographical relations through the trope of the bildung—a rhetorical strategy developed by conflating space and time so as to advance the idea that Adiga’s novel remains complicit with the dominant structure because it “celebrates the immense possibilities of India’s neoliberal turn” (280).

My discussion on Adiga’s The White Tiger in this chapter contests Nandi’s argument that the relation between the India of “darkness” and the India of “light” is a temporal one—a relation that is better understood as historical shift from feudalism to neoliberalism. This tendentious conflation of time and space, I argue, mirrors the fallacies of other readings that restrict the novel within the perimeters of national history and fails to notice how its imagination of the nation is underwritten by the nation’s relation to the rest of the world. The White Tiger is as much a novel about the neoliberal India as it is about the neoliberal global order of which India is an important part. Marx writes in Grundisse that the creation of a global market—a fundamental
capitalist tendency propelled by the desire to overcome every limit—is predicated upon the task of bringing within its fold all preceding economic systems (408). Capitalism’s global conquest is thus achieved through both spatial expansion and temporal subsumption: not only must capitalism conquer spaces by constantly turning its outsides into its insides, but also should it march towards the future by positing all existing economic systems as primitive and backwards (408). Jameson has shed light on this temporal erasure in his insightful reading of Marx in *Representing Capital*, where he has contended that erasure of capitalism’s violent past remains central to its present survival (105); capitalism’s newness is predicated upon the dual task of erasing its history of violence (past) and blocking the emergence of a post-capitalist future. The neoliberal trope of pre-capitalist culture and economic systems holding back neoliberal (properly capitalist) economic forces, explains Joseph, is one of the “anthems” of what she calls “neoliberal allegory” (69)—a theme that is also played out in Adiga’s *The White Tiger* whose protagonist corroborates the view that the India of darkness occludes the nation’s leap into its neoliberal future.

Instead of critiquing the novel for its complicities and failures—a recurrent theme of Indian scholars’ response to the novel—I seek to understand how the novel allows for a gaze into the spatio-temporal fetishes that conceal uneven geographical relations and suppress utopian temporal imaginations. Although Nandi, critiquing Joseph’s strategy of reading *The White Tiger* as an allegory, suggests that it should be read as a *bildungsroman* instead, my reading of the novel does not do away with the idea of allegory precisely because any narrative of an individual’s development (*bildung*) in society is also, effectively, a narrative of that individual’s relationship to social processes and the broader determining structures. “The individual subject,” to quote Jameson, “is always positioned within the social totality,” (*The Political Unconscious* 283) which
makes it possible to read the individual’s story as the story of the whole society. Jameson’s much maligned38 “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” brilliantly demonstrates how the individual’s story can be also read as a collective one, shot through with political and ideological codes and utopian impulses. Drawing upon Jameson’s discussions about allegories in *The Political Unconscious* and in “Third-World Literature” I argue that the narrative structure of the *bildungsroman* does not disrupt or disqualify its allegorical possibility, but, rather, imbues it with the likelihood of being read as the narrative of a group or even the entire human race by placing on it the burden of symbolic encoding. It is because of this reason that Balram’s narrative of development (subject formation) also becomes a window into the collective suffering and utopian visions that exist in our neoliberal era. While the collective suffering can be apprehended through the novel’s presentation of class, gender, caste and spatial exploitations, the utopian visions can be discovered in the work’s thematization of individual and collective imaginations of time. In what follows, my arguments will detail the two observations I have made so far: that what Nandi reads as a critique of India’s “feudalist past” is indeed a narrative presentation of its uneven geographical relation and its neoliberal present sustained by the uneven exchange between not only the India of darkness and the India of light but also between India (imagined as the periphery) and the metropolitan west (the center); and, that the relation between the feudal and the neoliberal is not a temporal one, mediated by “then” and “now,” but a spatiotemporal one mediated by the temporal idea of an “eternal present” and “blocked future.” Its *bildung* structure notwithstanding, *The White Tiger* allegorically represents the fetishes of the neoliberal world order, while simultaneously pointing towards the emerging utopian visions that neoliberal capitalism seeks to suppress.

*The White Tiger as a Spatial Parable*
The hostility with which Balram gazes at India’s poor has led many critics to question the novel’s narrative strategy. Shingavi has questioned the efficacy of “passing and slumming” as a narrative technique because such a strategy muddles up the separation between class and caste politics in India (5). He also suggests that by putting the “critique of caste into the mouth of a sweet-maker’s caste” the novel plays a con game on its readers who misidentify Balram as a victim of the caste and class system (14). Amitava Kumar has expressed his reservations against Adiga’s novel’s representation of Bihar’s rural poor (“Diary” n. pag.), gesturing that such a representation is not only unrealistic but also unsympathetic. Amardeep Singh, in his blog “Why I Didn’t Like “The White Tiger,”” expresses his displeasure about the novel’s narrative technique, claiming the novel’s “first-person confession” makes no sense to him. He also mentions that although Adiga’s work is extolled as a brilliant dark comedy, it ceases to be so as “the novel progresses” because the author “grows more and more committed to the character, and Balram becomes less of a darkly comic character and more of a realistic anti-hero” (n. pag.). Like Shingavi and Singh, Nandi too has sought to critique The White Tiger by casting it exclusively in the mold of a bildungsroman—a narrative of its protagonist’s neoliberal subject formation.

Yet, as Adkins, Joseph, Gui and many others have convincingly argued, Balram is both a mouthpiece of India’s neoliberal entrepreneurial class and a comic “antihero” of Adiga’s parody of neoliberalism. Gui has warned his readers of the perils of mistaking “Balram’s narrative for a celebration of entrepreneurial subjectivity,” for this is to miss how his isolation from the rest of the world (“with only his chandelier for company”) simultaneously ridicules his success by exposing the vacuousness of his world (180). In Adkins’s description, Balram emerges as a mimic whose rhetorical antipathy towards India’s poor who accept abjection as fate are
counterbalanced by his mimicry and parody of its elite whose isolated, dependent life he undermines by simply inhabiting it (181). Ulka Anjaria, likewise, has praised Adiga’s construction of “a virulent critique of contemporary social issues” in *The White Tiger*, claiming the novel assails on “inequality, casteism, greed, consumerism, middle-class hypocrisy and government corruption” in an aesthetically innovative way by turning social reality into interpretable “hieroglyphic” symbols (115).

Sarah Brouillette has accurately described *The White Tiger* as a “rags-to-riches” tale (86), a therapeutic biography (84). For her, Balram’s rise as an entrepreneur exemplifies how the self is advanced as an entrepreneurial machine, engaged in the process of self-enrichment. There is little doubt that Adiga’s novel follows its narrator’s gradual transformation from a rural half-educated teashop assistant to a relatively successful transportation entrepreneur in possession of a fleet of upscale vehicles. It tells the story of Balram Halwai, a lower caste boy, who grows up in abject poverty in a rural village of North India and becomes an entrepreneur after murdering his employer and running away with his cash. The novel begins with the moment of the narrator’s address to the Chinese leader, Wen Jiabao, who is about to visit India. Balram is convinced that neither the Government officials nor the city’s entrepreneurs are likely to tell the Chinese Premier about India’s reality and would conceal from the visitor the unpleasant truth about the nation’s economic rise and about the not-so-glorious tale of its ambitious entrepreneurs. Balram’s self-assumed role is thus of a “native informant,” although to what end remains uncertain. His sweeping generalizations and random caricatures provide only distorted frames; the reality that is visible underneath these lenses remain both incoherent and opaque. What is unmistakable, however, is the deeply bitter and cynical tenor of the narrator’s voice,
which ruthlessly critiques not only the Indian state and its culture but also its inequality and caste-based oppression.

The novel’s story develops around a clichéd theme: rural to urban movement. Balram describes his own story as an “autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian” (8), a story that begins at Laxmangarh, a rural village located in north-eastern part of India, and ends in Bangalore, India’s fast-growing IT capital. The son of a rickshaw-puller and his fragile wife slowly dying in the village—both, we come to learn, contract tuberculosis and die prematurely—Balram remains unnamed until his first day at school. Noticing that he is simply called “Munna” or “Boy,” his schoolteacher names him Balram after “the sidekick of the god Krishna” (11). The narrator does not put the blame of not being named on his family; rather, he sees not naming as a pervasive cultural practice specific to the location he comes from. Hence his anguished rhetorical question: “what kind of place is it where people forget to name their children?” (11). The importance given to the location—the emphasis on “place,” rather than on family—is an indication of the narrator’s trauma of having been born in a place that is hostile to decent living. The world that Balram depicts—the world of grinding poverty, hunger, disease and illiteracy—is a mirroring not only of his subjective experience but also of a collective one, shared by people of that location. His village is run by four landlords who control almost all the resources it possesses. Named after four animals by the people of Laxmangarh because of their habits of exploitation, the “Stork,” the “Buffalo,” the “Wild Boar,” and the “Raven” own not only the arable and non-arable lands around the village but also the river that flows outside it (20-21). They live in “high-walled mansions” outside the village and control both economic and social life of its populace. The intensity of their oppression is such that a large number of inhabitants are forced to seek out livelihood elsewhere. The narrator compellingly describes how “the Animals … fed on the village, and everything that grew in it,
until there was nothing left for anyone else to feed on” (21). It is in this life-emptying circumstances that the migration to the city takes place. Unable to make life in Laxmangarh, the villagers scatter around the urban enclaves of India in search of food and livable life, choosing the most difficult and labor-intensive works only under compulsion. This is how Balram narrates the mass exodus of the villagers:

[T]he rest of the village left Laxmangarh for food. Each year, all the men in the village waited in a big group outside the tea shop. When the bus came, they got on—packing the inside, hanging from the railings, climbing onto the roofs—and went to Gaya; there they went to the station and rushed into the trains—packing the inside, hanging from the railings, climbing onto the roofs—and went to Delhi, Calcutta, and Dhanbad to find work. (21-22)

Balram’s lengthy description of landlords’ relentless oppression and the consequent mass exodus of rural people to the cities offers up another way of grasping Balram’s antipathy towards his birthplace—not so much as an aversion to the geographical space, towards Laxmangarh and Darkness for instance, but rather as a resentment against the socio-economic conditions that render such places unlivable. The evocation of the metaphor of “Darkness,” therefore, is not just an evocation of the essential difference between affluent coastal cities (India of Light) and less affluent rural hinterland (India of Darkness) but also a commentary on uneven distribution of wealth and privilege, and an acknowledgement of the social practices that stifle human potential and throttle creativity.

One of the reasons why Balram writes to the Chinese Premier is because he feels obligated to leave behind a trail of evidence about the processes that suppressed his own potential. In his childhood, Balram shows promise as a student and is acknowledged by the school inspector who
calls him a “white tiger” (30) because he is the only one among the school’s students who is able to answer his questions correctly. Still, Balram is compelled to drop out of school because his family has taken loans from the Stork (one of the four local landlords) for his cousin’s sister’s wedding and now must pay him back by offering the school-going boy’s labor. Balram’s rickshawpuller father’s dream to see at least one of his sons “live like a man” (26) thus comes to a premature end, as does his own dream to escape grueling poverty through education. He joins the same tea shop his brother Kishan works in and begins by breaking large chunks of coal into smaller pieces. Noticing that Balram is more interested in the conversations of the customers than in the work he has been employed to do, the owner of the tea shop sends him back. After a failed attempt to find work in the neighboring coal mining city of Dhanbad, he, with financial help from his family, goes to an old taxi driver to learn driving. Although he completes his training with relative ease, finding work proves more difficult. After weeks of fruitless door-to-door solicitations, Balram finally finds employment at Stork’s house as his son’s driver. Ironically, it is here at the landlord’s house that Balram’s ascent begins. His self-serving opportunism starts to take shape as a consolidated desire to escape “the Rooster Coop” (147)—the traditional family relation that restricts the social mobility of an individual and keeps him tethered to his family. Balram’s first step towards escaping what he sees as a restrictive bond comes in the form of spatial detachment, moving away from the place of his origin. Ironically, his first step towards separating himself from his large family is achieved through blackmail and treachery. Only by chasing away the old driver of the Stork family by threatening to expose his hidden Muslim identity does Balram manage to accompany Stork’s son Ashok and daughter-in-law Pinky to Gurgaon, an affluent suburb in New Delhi.
In Delhi, Balram’s transformation comes sweepingly, fast. He distances himself from his family and stops sending them money. He begins to siphon his employer’s petrol and bill “him for work that was not necessary” (195-96). The more Balram steals from his master, the stronger grows his desire to get rid of him. He finally slashes Ashok’s throat and runs away with his money (perhaps the most direct form of what Harvey would call accumulation by dispossession.). Balram conceals his identity and settles down in Bangalore—the city “full of outsiders” (254)—where he uses the money acquired through violence to start a luxury transportation service that shuttles the city’s IT workers to and from their workplaces. The expansion of this “start-up” (258) allows Balram to consolidate his position as an entrepreneur and claim at the end of the novel that he has “switched sides” and is “now one of those who cannot be caught in India” (275).

Commentators on the novel have accurately pointed to Balram’s ambivalence, his contradictory impulse. One of the reasons why The White Tiger’s critics disagree so much about the meaning of the narrator’s articulations is because Balram repeatedly contradicts and undermines his own views and positions, leaving no clear indication as to what he means by them. The fluctuations in Balram’s voice ruptures his own narrative in such a manner that it becomes difficult to determine whether his depiction of uneven spatial relation is a sincere reflection of his critique of uneveness or is a derision directed towards India’s rural backwardness. What is also striking is how the sarcastic/parodic tone of his narrative negates what it simultaneously endorses, undermining the very object it seeks to valorize. In Balram’s description, his own village Laxmangarh becomes synonymous with abjection—a dystopian place made arid by oppressive landlords and heartless women, a place which the Buddha would scurry away from and not look back (15).
His representation of Delhi is equally unflattering: a city “where civilization can appear and disappear within five minutes” (241), where abject poverty and affluence resides in the same vicinity. Balram tries to rationalize his personal corruption as a contagion passed on to him by the corrupt city—a corruption that first contaminates his employer and from there infects him: “All these changes happened in me because they happened first in Mr. Ashok. He returned from America an innocent man, but life in Delhi corrupted him” (167). It may seem as if Balram is advancing a clichéd dichotomy between a corruptible Delhi and an incorruptible “America,” willfully ignoring the internal unevenness of “America” itself. However, when we look deeply into the substance of what constitutes Balram’s America, we become conscious of an equally problematic, essentialist thought process that reduces “America” to a place of limitless consumption and sexual escapade—a place where one can “drink beer, dance, [and] pick up girls” (173). The irony of Balram’s representation of America is that it undermines the place as it seeks to elevate it, ushering in the possibility of reading Balram’s representation of “America” as the novel’s masked critique of its consumerist culture and political domination. Yet, behind Balram’s representation of “America” lurks an equally subtle understanding of its dominant position—its centrality—within global capitalism. The malls of Gurgaon where one can “drink beer” or “pick up girls” are not outside India; they exist as a “small bit of America” in the city of Delhi (173). The sublation of “small bit of America” into the body of Delhi suggests, first of all, how capitalist expansion has asserted itself in India and, secondly, how neoliberal urbanization process has taken the form of Americanization of the world.

The uneven geography imagined and represented here is funneled through the trope of the nation, although it is possible to notice in this relationship the veiled shadow of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls the “world-system” (The Capitalist World Economy 5) in which the
United States now occupies the core position. The reorganization of Delhi which Balram gleefully cheers here is as much a vague schematization of capitalism’s expansion as it is of US domination of the global circuits of production. Balram’s imagination of “America” (the US), therefore, is mediated by two things: US economic and military dominance in the world and India’s own position in the global division of labor. The relation between American capital and Indian labor comes to light each time the novel shifts its attention to the outsourcing companies of Bangalore whose late-night working shift is in sync with the working hours in the US. When Balram arrives in Bangalore, the first thing he notices is the city’s obsession with information technology. So deep is the city’s relationship with the hi-tech companies abroad that every other aspect of its urban environment and experience seems to flow from it. Balram’s description is remarkably perceptive: “Everything in the city, it seemed, came down to one thing. Outsourcing. Which meant doing things in India for Americans over the phone. Everything flowed from it—real estate, wealth, power, sex” (255). This short passage is remarkable because in it the generative capacity of global capitalism has been expressed powerfully. International capital here is not only obliquely organizing the landscape of the city through “real estate” but also reorganizing the city’s culture and social life by redistributing “wealth and power” in the hands of India’s newly emerging IT elites. What needs more attention, however, is the process through which the city’s wealth is generated. Bangalore, in reality, is the provider of labor power in the global IT industry and its relation to “America” mirrors the relationship of labor to capital in the capitalist system, i.e., the relationship of capital’s domination and control of labor.

In its typically fetishistic form, this relationship appears as labor’s dependence on capital, as Indian IT workers’ dependence on multinational hi-tech corporations—a phenomenon which Adiga captures in the expression “everything flowed from it”. Yet, in its characteristic
ambivalent way, the novel also shreds to pieces the same fetishistic veil which goes into papering over capital’s dependence on labor—dead labor’s dependence on living labor. While addressing the Chinese Premier at the beginning of the novel, Balram mentions that despite lack of “drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene …” India edges out everyone else in the overabundance of “entrepreneurs” (2). These entrepreneurs have set up “outsourcing companies” that “virtually run America now” (3). It is clear that the object of Balram’s sarcasm here is India’s uneven development: the lack of infrastructure in the rural is overcompensated by the prolific production of “entrepreneurs” whose only ingenuity seems to reside in its capacity to provide labor power for America’s information technology sector. The narrative strategy here is to undermine India’s entrepreneurs by overestimating their capacity to influence things in America. On the one hand, this comment can be taken as an example of Balram’s characteristic undercutting of the official drumming up of India’s economic progress; on the other, it can be also read as a nifty critique of India’s designated role in the global division of labor where it is merely a provider of technological labor power, a ghostly shadow of the core companies operating in the United States. However, if we press further and take Balram’s words literally we open up the possibility of another interpretation in which the claim about Indian “outsourcing companies” virtually running America appears to gesture towards the hidden vital force that keeps the world market functional. It is here—in the expression “virtually run”—that creative energy of labor gets spelled out and the dependency of capital on labor gets revealed.

Capitalism’s uneven global expansion has been explored in Adiga’s novel in another way as well: not through the movement of capital but through the movement of raw materials. Joseph claims that The White Tiger is a representation of “continuing colonization of the rural” (85) by India’s urban cores. She discusses how the novel emerges as a corrective to neoliberal discourse
about rural India’s dependence on urban and technologically advanced India, depicting not only
the state’s withdrawal from rural areas but also the process of continual “resource appropriation”
(78) that siphons off money from India’s rural areas to its urban locations, draining the rural’s
resources and capital. The subjugation as well as continued exploitation of the rural, in Joseph’s
reckoning, is one of the key themes of the novel. What Adiga’s novel productively puts on
display is the process of emptying out of both labor and resources from rural India so as to put
them at the service of international capital. The novel depicts how Stork’s family benefits from
exploiting Laxmangarh’s waterways. A portion of the money that Stork extracts by squeezing the
villagers is put into coal mining in Dhanbad—coal that ends up in China and is used in
production. The rural that is imagined in the novel is not a space that exists in isolation: the
brilliance of the novel lies in its continuous evocation of interconnectedness which allows
readers to schematize the role the rural plays in a world connected by capital and trade. Capital
that flows from the multinational corporations from the United States and other parts of the globe
to India does not directly contribute to the quality of life in its less privileged spaces like
Laxmangarh. Rather it moves into an already receptive city like Bangalore, alters and
reorganizes it after capital’s own image, and then returns, multiplied, to the corporate
headquarters located in the United States.

*The White Tiger* thus imagines an interconnected world with fluid movements of capital
on the one hand and “international division of labor” on the other. It also navigates, with ease
and insight, the uneven map of India, depicting the extreme wealth gap between rural and urban
India. The novel’s dialectical vision glides easily between local and global scales, imagining, on
the one hand, a world brought into contact by capital and, exploring, on the other, deep economic
and social divisions that plague India. The novel also makes visible the extreme inequality that
shapes the existence of India’s mega cities, especially Delhi whose suburbs stand in stark contrast with its roadside slums. Particularly important is the novel’s depiction of the rural as a steady supplier of cheap labor. Balram’s village is not only a site of “primitive accumulation” where the four landlords have established their reign of terror, it is also a steady supplier of cheap labor to adjacent mining towns and big cities where migrants from Laxmangarh swarm in great numbers to escape the grueling poverty of the village. The novel’s description of this spatial accumulation process, in which capital that is affixed to a particular geographical place in the form of land and water are advanced to produce, on the one hand, more wealth and, on the other, poverty and migration, is both powerful and compelling. The novel vividly captures the desperation of the rural migrants who seek to travel to the cities for self-preservation. Yet, as the novel also shows, the fruit of such a painful journey is rarely ever commensurate to the trouble taken for such escapes. Balram’s father, in the process of pursuing his desire to escape the landlords of the village, ends up becoming a rickshaw puller in a city, eventually dying from hard-labor and poverty. On his way to Delhi, Balram notices trains of people leaving the rural areas of “darkness” and comments: “You’d think the whole world was migrating” (94). But when he reaches Delhi, he notices how the desperate migrants have been forced to embrace the same inhuman life they seek to escape. Of course, a significant portion of the migrant labor is not immediately absorbed into the city’s formal economy; “[t]housands of people” who live under the “huge bridges and overpasses” (99) become the city’s “surplus population,” variously brought in and thrown out of the orbit of production according to the capitalist city’s ability to absorb such labor.

One visible site of the formal absorption of the migrant labor is the city’s cosmopolitan makeover and expansion, effected, predominantly, by global trade and establishment of
“American Express,” “Microsoft” and so on (101) and, also, by the neoliberal reorganization of 
the city’s landscape. The expansion of Delhi, as depicted in the novel, is motivated by two 
principles that are bound to each other—the separation of the wealthy and the affluent from the 
city’s underclass through gentrification and creation of gated communities, and the production 
temporary dwellings and slums, so that the labor absorbed in construction remains cheap and 
constantly available. While visiting a slum populated mostly by rural migrants from “darkness,” 
Balram caustically reflects on the ethical incongruity that lies at the core of the expansion 
process. Of course, Balram seeks to understand it simply as a local manifestation of injustice 
towards the laborer. He recalls a visit to a newly built slum populated by construction workers:
“These people were building homes for the rich, but they lived in tents covered with blue 
tarpaulin sheets, and portioned into lanes by lines of sewage” (222). Although Balram is in no 
position to relate it to neoliberal/capitalist organization of society in general, but his outcry draws 
attention to the sheer immorality of punishing those on whose back the shiny offices and malls 
are built.

Another description that captures the socially/culturally mediated exploitation of labor is 
Balram’s sarcastic quip that the “trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian 
economy” (149). Tied to one of the master metaphors of the novel which compares India’s 
underclass to the chickens trapped inside the rooster coop, this idea of dependence of the entire 
economy on the cultural/ideological production of the servant points towards the economic and 
cultural contexts in which dependency is produced and maintained. Of course, to the privileged 
class this relationship appears in an inverted form, as the servant’s dependence on the master. 
Balram describes how, when landless farmers wanted to work in Wild Boar’s agricultural lands, 
they had to first “touch the dust under his slippers” (21) so as to conceal the exploitative
transaction and make it appear as a favor done to the exploited. As the novel progresses, the upside-down logic of the servant’s dependency on the master begins to peter out. As someone who himself served as a servant, Balram’s insight into the reality of this relationship is imbued with all the intricacies that working for someone else may involve. When he uses the word “servant,” he does not simply mean low wage professionals employed by someone wealthy; instead, his use of the word is a conscious evocation of a broad social practice that is specific to India and “Darkness”: “[In] India—or, at least, in Darkness—the rich don’t have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants” (58). An Indian servant, in Balram’s reckoning, is distinctively different from those who have similar titles elsewhere because the Indian servant can be summoned into service anytime and for any occasion: a servant’s labor is not governed by the logic of division/separation existing in more formal sectors, nor is it restricted by the hours and minutes labor is often measured by. In other words, the servant is presented in *The White Tiger* as a residual feudal element whose existence in the liberal capitalist economy is seen as an anomaly. Balram’s critique of India’s wealthy for depending on the servant emerges as much out of his past through his experience as a driver, as it does out of his entrepreneurial present. In the same chapter where he reflects on the relationship between the servants and Indian economy, Balram proclaims that he would never “envy” the rich of America or England because they do not have servants (150). Of course, this sarcastic comment erects a false equivalence by inverting the scales of normativity. The only context in which this inversion of superiority makes sense is the context of dependency, in the context of the unlimited supply of servants’ labor which allows the wealthy of India to avoid work. Balram’s narrative renders clarity to this culturally conditioned exploitation through the compelling image of servants waking up early and traveling across the city in overcrowded buses to make the life of the wealthy more comfortable:
Every day millions wake up at dawn—stand in dirty, crowded buses—get off at their masters’ posh houses—and then clean the floors, wash the dishes, weed the garden, feed their children, press their feet—all for pittance. I will never envy the rich of America or England, Mr. Jiabao: they have no servants there. They cannot even begin to understand what a good life is. (149-50)

On display here is not only the circuit of surplus labor but also what can be conceptualized as surplus leisure attained through the process of transferring almost all forms of activities on the shoulder of the “servants” whose value lie in being able to provide additional work. It is not that those who employ servants for work are incognizant of the relation between additional work and leisure. Ashok makes the relationship between extra work and additional leisure clear when he tells his wife Pinky that he would not go back to New York because he is “better” in India as there are “people to take care of [them].” He then asks her: “Where in New York will you find someone to bring you tea and sweet biscuits while you’re still lying in bed …?” (77). His privilege of being cared for never appears to him as a process deeply rooted in the unequal distribution not only of labor, but also of leisure.

**History as temporal fetish**

Balram’s sharp critique of Indian culture and traditional family through the figure of the servant has been read by Nandi as proof of his “aggressive neoliberal individualism.” That, after becoming an “entrepreneur,” Balram attempts to distance himself from his past employers—landlords from rural India—by not following their tracks is interpreted by Nandi as a symptom of his “anti-feudal attitude” and his rejection of “India’s traditional feudal structures” (295). Unlike Joseph who applauds *The White Tiger* for drawing attention to the continued concealment of “the impoverished rural” by India’s political elite (74), Nandi argues that Adiga’s novel stages
a rejection of the “pre-capitalist” rural by “absolving” capitalism and by not calling into question India’s “structural inequality and social injustice” (296-97). Fundamental to her argument, then, is the notion that the relationship between “Darkness” and “Light” is a temporal one: darkness embodies “pre-capitalist” India, whereas the “India of light” is a representation of India’s “post-capitalist system” (288). Her discussion about Balram’s rejection of feudalist India draws upon Lily Want’s observation that Balram breaks away from “feudal norms” to embrace “capitalist relations” (74). Want’s and Nandi’s conclusions put them at odds with the presuppositions of the major proponents of uneven development, who reject the hypothesis of simultaneous coexistence of feudalism and capitalism in the era of an integrated world market.

Andre Gunder Frank, in particular, critiques the tendency to characterize certain spaces and sectors as “modern and relatively developed” and other sectors as “feudal and pre-capitalist” (4). In Frank’s reckoning, the relation between developed and underdeveloped spaces within the capitalist totality is a mediated one: as a deeply unequal system of production, capitalism itself generates both development and underdevelopment, creating conditions for domination and dependency. Local and global vectors of uneven geographical relations, he argues, do not point towards the relationship between properly developed capitalist locations and feudal and backward spaces; what these vectors help us schematize is a global structure comprised of both developed and underdeveloped nations and sectors, engaged in trade and commodity exchange (224). Although Argentine political philosopher Ernesto Laclau upbraids Frank for conflating a number of political economic categories including the distinction between modes of production and economic systems, he nevertheless agrees with Frank on one major point: it is development itself that generates underdevelopment (Laclau 31). Both Frank and Laclau critique the concept of dual society, refuting the premise that a society’s “modern,” capitalist sectors might remain
isolated from what appear to be distinct “traditional,” or feudal sectors. He emphasizes the necessity to “confront the system as a whole” to “show the indissoluble unity that exists between the maintenance of feudal backwardness at one extreme and the apparent progress of a bourgeois dynamism at the other” (31). Their disagreements notwithstanding, both Frank and Laclau insist on grasping local relations through their connections to the world market, as mediated phenomena conditioned by capitalism’s global domination.

Although useful for understanding the relation between advanced capitalist countries and the underdeveloped nation states of the global south, Frank’s theory of development of underdevelopment struggles to explain how and why spaces that experience capitalist development face decline and deindustrialization, while certain other spaces that were previously underdeveloped become industrialized and gain preponderance. His attempt to explicate uneven development as a stable relation between the metropole and its satellites appears ossified because of the dynamic changes within the capitalist world order that have developed parts of the previously underdeveloped nations while destroying the fabric of life and economic activities elsewhere. Marxist geographers such as Harvey and Neil Smith have addressed this paradoxical see-saw movement of uneven development by incorporating the category of “the spatial fix” in their discussions. Immanuel Wallerstein, Frank’s fellow world-systems theorist, has sought to escape the latter’s theoretical entrapment in a mechanically determinate structure by suggesting on the one hand that core capitalist nations also face decline, and on the other hand by introducing the concept of semi-periphery—nations that see relative capitalist developments but are also susceptible to decline.

Wallerstein’s understanding of uneven geographical relations has been described by Harvey as a “constructivist” approach towards uneven development (Spaces of Global
Capitalism)—one that leans on Marxist theories of imperialism to propound that capitalist exploitation of peripheral nations generates an uneven world marked by inequality and dependency. Against liberal as well as left theories that seek to use national-development as the normative scale for measuring uneven development, Wallerstein offers a different set of concepts—the concepts of the “world systems” and “totalities” (“Rise and Future Demise of the Capitalist System” 4)—to describe how the capitalist mode of production produces both privileged and marginalized spaces, each generated by the same system. He argues that what generates such unevenness is capitalism’s need for surplus on an expanded scale. On the one hand, capitalism must expand its borders to eternalize its domination, and, on the other, it must also deprive a large tract of the world’s population of “immediate consumption” because worldwide consumption at the same rate will deprive the capitalist class of the surplus that the system needs for its expansion (“The Rural Economy in Modern World Society” 120-21). Such contradictory necessities, Wallerstein writes, feed into the processes of simultaneous production of wealth and poverty. This also leads towards the creation of a world which remains divided along differential lines. Wallerstein’s major reservation against the “dual economy” hypothesis is that it fails to notice how the exclusion of certain areas from capitalist development is not a “sign of the failure of the system, but is precisely its cornerstone” (123). He writes:

The slowly developing, slowly eroding, marginal, largely subsistence sector of the world-economy, within which live the largest part of the world’s rural populations who are presumably our concern here, do not pose a problem to the capitalist world-economy. These areas are and have been from the beginning one of its major solutions. (“Rural Economy” 123)
Wallerstein’s observation that the rural is not excluded from economic development but is precisely the reason why certain areas gain more prosperity than others, powerfully challenges Nandi’s hypothesis that the relation between the urban and the rural is one marked by historical lag between the feudal and the neoliberal. Indeed, it exposes the fundamental weakness of the Foucauldian subjectivist descriptions of neoliberalism which relies on the vectors of subjectification to explain the parameters of neoliberalism. By contrast, Wallerstein underscores that the relation between the urban and the rural under capitalism is mediated by capitalism’s spatial movement, and its need to continuously expand its market. His idea that the impoverishment of the periphery is not an unintended outcome of capitalist development but, precisely, the reason why capitalism survives its crisis echoes Marx’s discussions about the “surplus population” whose reproduction on an expanded scale ensures capitalism’s survival (Capital Vol. I, 784). As I explore this concept in detail in the next chapter, let me return to the question of dual society that both Frank and Wallerstein addressed in their deliberations on uneven geographical development.

The idea that The White Tiger is a critique of feudalism and socialism—the precise point of Nandi’s argument—owes its origin to a conjecture about India’s relationship to modernity. Such a thought process presupposes that India is a confusing coagulation of modernist and pre-modernist economic practices and cultural habits, and its internalization of modernity is incomplete and partial. In Provincializing Europe, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has criticized the tendency to characterize India in this way, as if its different historical moments exist in permanent contradiction, “telescoped into” a single temporal conjuncture. Although Chakrabarty has used this same argument to attack the theorists of uneven development—specifically, historian E. P. Thompson whose seminal essay “Time, Work-discipline and Industrial
Capitalism” he tries to debunk in the second chapter of his book—there exists a continuity between his observation and what the major theorists of uneven development argue about capitalist history in general. We have already discussed how Gunder Frank and Laclau object to the dualist tendency to characterize a part of a nation as capitalist/developed and another as feudal/backwards. From the perspective of world-systems theory, the thesis of coexisting productive systems appears flawed. The creation of a world market is premised on the foundation of subsumption of pre-capitalist relations of production under the capitalist one. As capitalism looks to expand globally, it brings within its orbit all pre-existing relations of production which it encounters as barriers to be overcome. In Grundrisse, Marx observes that capital posits every limit—external as well as internal—as “a barrier” and tries to go “beyond” it (410). In other words, capitalism expands by subsuming all that appears non-capitalist to it and by internalizing what exists outside. Marx asserts, “the tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself” (408), elaborating how capitalism fundamentally alters “old ways of life” so as to construct the condition for “the development of the forces of production” (410). This idea of capital’s will to totalize can be traced back to The Communist Manifesto, where, in a powerful passage, Marx describes how capitalism “creates a world after its own image” by battering down walls of resistances (11).

Marx, of course, does not imagine subsumption to be a linear and transparent process; Instead, he conceptualizes it as a complex historical unfolding which meets contestation everywhere as capitalism expands and takes over institutions. He explains how, by taking over feudal relations of production, capitalism subsumes labor under capital initially formally, without ideological and technological transformation, and then, materially, by developing institutions and technologies that saturate all aspects of social life. In his Economic Manuscripts of 1861-1863,
notes which later contributed to the creation of *Capital Volume I* and were later compiled in *Collected Works: Volume 30*, Marx writes that at the beginning of capital’s formation it “takes under its control” existing labor processes without fundamentally altering them. Marx calls this taking control “formal subsumption of the labor process” (*MECW 30*, 93). In the course of its further development, however, capital “not only formally subsumes [sic] the labor process but transforms it” which gives the mode of production “a new shape” and creates a “mode of production peculiar to it” (92). For Marx, the latter process forms the basis of the real subsumption of labor under capital. As such, real subsumption presupposes not merely subordination of labor under capital, but also labor processes’ institutional and ideological reconstitution according to the necessity of the mode of production. In what is sometimes referred to as the “missing sixth chapter” of *Capital Volume I*, the German revolutionary explains that the real subsumption of labor under capital “begins only when capital sums of a certain magnitude have directly taken over control of production” (1027). Although the general features of the formal subsumption remain throughout the history of the mode of production, “irrespective of its technological development” (1034), real subsumption begins to emerge only when institutional and technological changes have solidified enough to fundamentally alter the labor process that existed in another form before (1035). Formal subsumption, thus, exemplifies the more general condition of labor’s subordination to capital, whereas real subsumption implies both technological and institutional conditioning which accords capital the power to extract surplus value in all possible forms and modalities, specifically by extending beyond “absolute surplus-value.” It is because of this that Marx attaches real subsumption to the extraction of relative surplus-value, suggesting capitalist extraction of surplus-value enters a more complex and pervasive phase with the emergence of real subsumption. For Marx, the change that is
required for ushering in the real subsumption is nothing short of a revolution in the mode of production; the advent of real subsumption means capitalist production has established itself as the “sui generis” mode of production and its ascendancy has been established beyond any doubt (1035).

Based, therefore, on our discussions of Marx and uneven geographical relations, is it possible to answer the question whether India’s rural economy—the economic system in which Balram grows—is feudalist in character? If we take formal subsumption of labor under capital as the starting point of capitalist subsumption, then we must conclude that feudalism in India is history, for we do not encounter labor-capital relations in a feudal form in contemporary India; what we notice, instead, is how, even where the agricultural sector appears feudal, its pre-capitalist form is better understood as a manifestation of the capitalist state’s own uneven development. Indeed in the 1980s, long before Nandi and Want discussed the presence of feudal systems in contemporary India, Indian scholars were debating whether India’s agriculture sector was semi-feudal (both feudal and capitalist) or entirely capitalist. In his response to N. Sen Gupta’s characterization of India’s agricultural economy as semi-feudal, Dipanker Gupta argues that a discussion of such nature should begin from an analysis of the mode of production. Gupta states that modes of productions are identified on the basis of relations of production and, so long as relations of production is concerned, India’s agriculture is subsumed within the capitalist relations of production because Indian state itself is capitalist (A98-A99). Gupta also powerfully argues, based on Marx’s passages on formal and real subsumption, that by the time labor is formally subsumed under capital, “the destruction of feudal institutions” has already taken place, which makes the argument about the real subsumption redundant (A99). He also debunks the
notion that capitalism is “ultimately constrained by the presence of pre-capitalist remnants,” explaining how the pre-capitalist remnants are brought under the logic of capital.

Both discussions—theories of uneven geographical relations and the concept of subsumption—alert us to the theoretical predicament of considering feudalism as a separate economic system, working outside the capitalist relations of production. They also help us understand why apparently backward agricultural sectors of both developed and underdeveloped nations are as much part of the global capitalist system as are technologically advanced cities parading headquarters of multinational corporations. As I have already discussed in the second section of this chapter, one of the most ingenious thematic arrangements of the novel rests on how the uneven relation between labor and capital, in its local and global manifestations, is made visible through the narrative of a person who has never traveled abroad—whose local experience is sufficient enough to accord him an understanding of the dynamic of global capitalism—and whose relationship to capitalism is not antagonistic. Balram’s rejection of feudal relations illustrates why it is important to consider not only the novel’s thematic presentation of uneven geographical development but also the dialectical tension that exists between Balram’s self-legitimation and his narrative presentation. So long as we treat this novel as a murdering entrepreneur’s narrative of his becoming, the gap between his earlier self and the new one appears much wider than it actually is. Balram does indeed posit the “India of darkness” as a pre-capitalist space, although his narrative presentation leaves us with sufficient evidence to cut beneath his fetishization “India of light” and discover how the relation between the two Indias mirrors the uneven national scale, dividing the rural, agrarian India from the technologically advanced urban. If too much weight is placed on the difference between the rural and the urban, between the India of light and the India of darkness, one may fail to notice how both are parts of
a larger global system mediated by the uneven exchange between labor and capital. Just as the rural villages of darkness exists as a steady supplier of cheap labor for urban India, so the affluent urban locations of India serve as the steady supplier of cheap labor for tech-firms located elsewhere, in the core capitalist countries of Europe and North America. In Balram’s narrative, what is often present is the unequal relation between labor and capital which projects onto all other social relations, and which we see played out over and over again not only in the village where four landlords reign undeterred and the tea stalls of Dhanbad where Balram and his brother Kishan work, but also on the roads of Delhi and Bangalore where the urban poor huddle, and in the shopping malls of Delhi where drivers like Balram cannot enter.

**Conclusion**

If Balram’s narrative appears to be a rejection of the feudal relations that persist in some parts of rural India, it is because as an entrepreneur—an apostle of capitalism—he inherits the dominant temporal fetish of the productive system of which he is a part. Capitalism, Marx proclaims in *Capital Volume I*, posits its own violent past as pre-history. As capital marches towards the future it seeks to erase all the traces of its violent past, so as to present itself as neat and clear, devoid of savagery. That capitalism’s past is revelatory of its propensity for violence, leads its propagators to conceal its history either by papering over it or by inventing a fictitious narrative of its origin. It is this concealment which forms the basis of capital’s temporal fetish. Marx points out in *Capital* that the discourse of political economy is culpable of attempting to conceal capitalism’s violent history by mythologizing its past. Although “conquests, enslavement, robbery, [and] murder” have been the means through which accumulation of capital has been carried out, political economy has obfuscated such gruesome history by telling the tales of an “idyllic” past devoid of expropriation and violence. Such tales, according to Marx,
are falsification of capitalism’s true history because surplus extraction itself depends on the use of violence on most occasions. Yet, in the narratives of political economy, such moments never appear. This is how Marx takes the entire discipline to task:

In actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short force, play the greatest part. In the tender annals of political economy, the idyllic reigns from time immemorial. Right and ‘labor’ were from the beginning the sole means of enrichment, ‘this year’ of course always excepted. As a matter of fact, the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic. (873-4)

Marx’s sarcastic reference to political economy’s “tender annals” that carefully leave out capitalism’s history of violence is a clear indication as to how classical political economists tried to cleanse the violent history of capitalist accumulation by propagating, on the one hand, that capitalism’s past is “idyllic” and, on the other, its present violence is an exception—“always excepted,” in Marx’s own phrase. Capitalism’s reliance on violence features prominently in Rosa Luxemburg’s works too, especially in her magisterial “Accumulation of Capital,” where she draws upon Marx’s notion of “primitive accumulation” to explain how capitalism constantly resorts to violence for surplus accumulation (Complete Works II 262, 329). Just as Marx ridicules political economy for secreting capitalism’s ravages, so Luxemburg takes political economists to task for propagating capitalism as “the only possible and eternal social order” (Complete Works I 258), thus foreclosing the possibility of change.

Both revolutionary theorists thus draw attention to the fetishistic norms that conceal capitalism’s systemic violence. The narrator of The White Tiger, it seems, fetishistically pigeonholes violence into spatial categories by suggesting that the “India of light” is intrinsically
less violent than the “India of darkness,” ignoring the possibility that the differential allocation of violence may by a reflection of capitalism’s systemic unevenness.

Abdullah Al-Dagamseh has drawn attention to the connection between Balram’s violence and the systemic violence of capitalism. Balram, he notes, thrives only after participating in “the violent system by committing acts of violence” (5) and justifies his action by suggesting that his violence is neither exceptional nor pathological; rather, it is an attribute of those who have become successful: “Kill enough people and they will put bronze statues of you near Parliament House in Delhi” (Adiga 273). Thus, as Al-Dagamseh accurately points out, Balram’s violence is a reflection of the violence of the system itself, a mirroring of “the global economic system dominating Bangalore, New Delhi, and other parts of the world” (5). Yet, surprisingly, Balram is convinced that the singular moment of killing his employer and, consequently, endangering his own family has been an exceptionally violent moment, belonging to his past; his present, in which he has emerged as a spokesperson for his class (a self-described “entrepreneur”), never appears to him as a moment of integration into the system which makes violence a precondition for success. Although Balram singles out the culture of “Darkness” as the source of misery, his narrative leaves a trail of evidence of the presence of a broader reality which mediates “subjective violence.”

The rapacious women of his family who squeeze out every hard-earned penny from Balram’s father (22), the youth of Darkness who lie watching photos of film actresses all day because they have no job (46), the urban workers of Delhi who build “homes for the rich” but they themselves live “tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets” right next to sewage (222), and the “manual laborers” of Bangalore who have been “left behind” (259)—all are parts of the same cut-throat reality that disenfranchises the poor and unevenly distributes political and social power so the landlords of Darkness and corrupt politicians can grow richer by using
violence to their benefit. If Balram is scornful of the culture and not the economic system, it is because as a beneficiary of the corrupt and unjust system he is unable to impute the very process that has placed him in a position of domination. He is, after all, one of those “who cannot be caught in India” (275). A member of “India’s secessionist global elite,” he feels that neoliberalism has brought into being a “post-race, post-class, post-revolutionary society” (Adkins 183) where class solidarity has become obsolete, and where “[e]very man must make his own Benaras” (Adiga 261).

Since Balram takes no note of systemic inequality, his utopian dream only reaches as far as educational reform. His solution to systemic oppression is the establishment of an educational institution which is in sync with the market, euphemistically termed as “reality” by the novel’s narrator. In a candid confession to Jiabao, his audience of one, Balram divulges that he plans to sell his start-up business and move to real estate, which, he deems, is the future of Bangalore’s business. “After three or four years in real estate,” he writes:

I think I might sell everything, take the money, and start a school—an English language school—for poor children in Bangalore. A school where you won’t be allowed to corrupt anyone’s head with prayers and stories about God or Gandhi—nothing but the facts of life for these kids. A school full of White Tigers, unleashed on Bangalore! (275)

What this passage ridicules is not merely the utter disconnect between Indian reality and its education system but also neoliberal utilitarianism, which wishes to purge anything resembling idealism that is devoid of use value for India’s burgeoning business industry. It also exposes the limit of neoliberal utopianism whose solution to world’s woes seems to reside in further expansion of capitalism by bringing every institution into the service of capital. Hence the necessity of institutionally manufactured “White Tigers” who will reign in Bangalore.
Balram’s knee-jerk rejection of any form of solidarity testifies to what extent he has internalized a neoliberal vision of the world. A representative of “the new managerial-entrepreneurial class” (Adkins 183), Balram treats state welfare system with scorn and sarcasm. On a number of occasions, Balram mentions India’s Naxalites in passing, never allowing the ghastly presence of resistant Naxalites come to the fore. He also depicts India’s poor in a negative light, essentially framing them as passive and “bereft of class solidarity” (183). Such a conviction about the culture of passivity has led him to believe that ordinary Indians are like roosters trapped inside a rooster coop, unable to marshal enough courage to rise up against their oppressors (Adiga 147, 166). Balram’s rejection of collective resistance is evocative of the symbolism of the title as well. As a white tiger—a rare animal of unmatched cunning and agility—he finds no essential value in forging collective bonds. After all, how can there be a bond between a tiger and the encaged roosters? Indeed, his entire narrative continuously undermines all kinds of affinities, making collective affiliations look ridiculous. It is through his rejection of solidarity that Balram’s cynical realism expresses itself most articulately, without pretension. He rejects solidarity because, like the political economists of Luxemburg’s description, he too has internalized the mantra of an eternal capitalist future, and sees no alternative beyond it.
Chapter Three

*Home Boy, The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the Critique of Finance Capital

**Introduction**

Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and H. M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy* (2009) are both novels that narrate the stories of immigrants’ return to their countries of origin. In that sense, they are allegories of return, standing in contrast to earlier postcolonial novels about arrival in the metropolis. V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mystic Masseur* and *Mimic Men*, Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, Amit Chaudhuri’s *Afternoon Raag*—all these novels stage allegories of arrival, telling the tales of the immigrant’s struggles to create a space in the metropolitan West. Both of Naipaul’s comic novels thematize the struggles of their narrators in their own countries—struggles followed up by relative success and, finally, exile to England. Nazneen, the protagonist of Ali’s debut novel, arrives in London through her marriage to a man much older than her and, after hardship, finally finds her independence from men who seek to define the contours of her walls and worlds. Lahiri’s two novels, likewise, thematize first generation immigrants’ gradual assimilation into the socio-cultural tissues of American lifeworld, depicting how settling down in the West which appears to offer a relatively settled life is also underwritten by anxiety and loneliness, although such a life, at the end, is also rewarding. The two Pakistani writers’ works, in contrast, tell the stories of difficulties and disappointments, depicting how the fallout after the terror attacks of September 11 leads South Asian Muslim migrants to abandon the city that they had embraced as their new home, thus revealing the perils of nestling down in the cozy couch of a cosmopolitan city whose logic of inclusiveness is underwritten by its proximity to the nation’s imperialist/capitalist ambitions.
Changez, the protagonist of Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, goes to the United States in search of better life. A bright and hardworking graduate from Princeton, he lands a job in a small but very efficient evaluation firm named Underwood Samson where he keeps prospering until the attack on the Twin Towers changes New York City and the lives of Muslim immigrants. As the city’s culture changes and the antipathy towards Muslims snowballs into resentment, Changez’s discontent against America grows exponentially, destabilizing his personal life and affecting his relationship with those who are close to him. He loses his job, and the woman he has deep feelings for commits suicide. It is amidst this personal and financial loss that Changez decides to return to Lahore, the city of his birth.

An almost identical thematization of return occurs in H. M. Naqvi’s novel as well. His debut novel *Home Boy* narrates the trauma of three young immigrants—Shehzad, Ali Chowdhury and Jamshed—whose misadventure to find a missing friend makes them run afoul of the law enforcement authorities, resulting in their arrest and detention on false charges of terrorism. Young men drawn to New York’s high-life and drugs, they see their lifestyles as decisive markers of their difference from the ordinary Muslim youth. It is only when they are arrested that they realize that their right to navigate the country undeterred has been taken away from them. With Chowdhury in prison and Jamshed abandoning his dream of pursuing his career in music, Shehzad, unable to withstand the trauma of living in a country which resents people like him, chooses to forgo of his dream of seeking permanent residency in New York City. Like Hamid’s Changez, he too returns to the city of his birth, Karachi, putting an end to his immigrant dream.
It is, then, no surprise that both these novels have been read as narratives of precariousness and resistant Muslim identity. Joseph Darda, for instance, has described *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as “the story of one man’s awakening to the frames of recognizability” (111). Drawing upon Judith Butler’s discussions on precariousness and frames of recognizability in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), he argues that apprehension of his own precariousness allows Changez to broaden his “arc of vision” and extend the same empathetic frame to the “precarious lives of Filipino jeepney driver, a Chilean bookseller, Pakistani university students, and an American in Lahore” (121). Brite Heidemann, on the other hand, reads Naqvi’s *Home Boy* as a “counter-Orientalist” text, resisting the neo-Orientalist strategies of essentializing “all brown-skinned people” (291). Heidemann perceives Naqvi’s novel as a discursive resistance, challenging hegemonic Orientalist worldviews and disrupting the essentialization of South Asian immigrants by injecting into the narrative of South Asian identity a counter-narrative of difference. While these readings underscore the necessity to understand these two Pakistani novels in relation to identity politics, as a response against the racial culture of the United States, they show little interest in situating these novels within the relations of neoliberal capital, thus emptying political experience of its socio-economic content. If it is true that both these novels seem eager to participate in the contemporary discussions about race and identity, what is also unmistakably present in them is a nuanced understanding of the corrosive effects of finance capital in New York City’s daily life. It is no coincidence that both novels dwell on the difficulty of living through the economic crisis that follows the 9/11 terror attacks. Shehzad and Changez both lose their jobs when the financial meltdown begins. It is also symptomatic that both these novels’ protagonists choose to work as analysts in financial institutions. It is their proximity to the financial institutions that give weight to their critiques of
the financial system, allowing one to see how the practices in the financial institutions are reflective of the values and ideologies these institutions are founded upon.

The reading that is advanced in this chapter, therefore, connects these novels’ representation of NYC with the two young protagonists’ critiques of the financial system. The city is accorded pivotal space in these novels’ explorations. New York City, here, is the setting where the two young men from Pakistan arrive as students and pursue their immigrant dreams. In the course of actions, this city becomes both an object of fascination and a space of resentment. The entire monologue—the whole of the narrative, in fact—of The Reluctant Fundamentalist takes place in a marketplace in Lahore, though the story that Changez tells mostly relates reminiscences about his New York City life. Likewise, it is difficult to ignore Home Boy’s cosmopolitan urban sensibility; Home Boy’s spatial imagination and its language are inflected by the rhythm and pulse of New York City’s immigrant life. The cosmopolitan global metropolis remains central to the thematic organization of these two novels, not only because the city is the locus of their experience and activity but also because the city’s abandonment results in trauma, driving them to mourn for it in their narrative reminiscences. Although a deep sense of loss permeates both these novels, they simultaneously understand that NYC is organized around certain exclusionary principles informed by race, class, and ethnic identities. Not entirely explicitly, Home Boy allows a glimpse into the lives of New York City’s underclass, while The Reluctant Fundamentalist exposes the heartlessness that underlies institutional drive for profit and efficiency—an exposure that leads the novel’s protagonist to connect America’s vested economic interests to its imperialist domination of other nations.
What further complicates the representation of New York City in these novels is the way the characters initially mythologize this contemporary cosmopolitan city, only to later realize its failures. Changez’s depiction of the city as a space of intense economic activity and multiethnic cuisine and Shehzad’s description of the space of abundant personal freedom and homeliness is later weighed against their perception of the metropolis’ metamorphosis into a hostile netherworld, marked by violence and ethnic/religious bias. There seems to exist a chasm between their initial impression of the city, which comes to them through the city’s representation in films and popular culture, and their own experience of it at a moment of heightened tension. Shezad, for instance, describes New York City as a hospitable space, eager to embrace its immigrant population. Invoking the difference between London and New York, he asserts, “you could … spend ten years in Britain and not feel British, but after spending ten months in New York, you were a New Yorker, an original settler” (Naqvi 19). It is this same cosmopolitan New York that appears in Changez’s monologue in the busy market of Lahore, where he reminisces: “I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker” (The Reluctant Fundamentalist 33). Yet, as Shehzad and Changez’s return to their home country suggests, such strong conviction about cosmopolitan New York’s hospitality crumbles in these young narrators’ opinions later on, making apparent that these early estimations were only facile observations informed by their class privilege. Abandonment of NYC, therefore, is a marker of these narrators’ apprehension of the city’s other history—the one that remains well-hidden under its hospitable façade. The fetishism that papers over this city’s realities is revealed to Shezad and Changez after they lose their social privilege. It is only after being declassed that they begin to discover the weight of the city’s oppressive paraphernalia, becoming vaguely aware of other communities who had to face similar experiences.
In this chapter, I seek to read the phenomenon of return not only as the narrators’ apprehension of their precariousness but also as their deliberate attempts to affirm discontent about conditions within whose perimeters precarity is normalized. In what follows, I discuss how The Reluctant Fundamentalist and Home Boy symptomatically represent the vicissitudes of post 9/11 urban experience, bringing into view the political processes through which precarity is distributed, and the neoliberal economic structure which silently orchestrates the process. Distribution of precarity and disciplining of migrant labor, I argue, are woven into the same network of the capitalist accumulation process, mirroring the unequal relation between capital and labor. It is for this reason that I propose to stretch beyond precariousness’ biopolitical veneer to notice how the “differential allocation of precarity” (Butler 3) is tangled with capitalism’s production of surplus populations. If New York City initially appears, to the two young narrators, as a space of freedom and habitability, it is because their class position does not allow for a clear insight into the forms of exclusions that New York City’s migrant underclass goes through in their everyday life. The seismic changes that middle-class Muslim protagonists encounter after 9/11, are merely intensifications of what had already existed in mainstream American culture: institutional racism. The racist subsumption of New York City’s middle-class Muslim population—they were often lauded as “model minority” because of their “work ethic” and cultural understanding of America (Thangaraj 52)—into the category of dangerous individuals, threatening the well-being of the republic, marks the moment of transferring a part of the nation’s middle-class into its working-class population. The abandonment of New York City thus symbolically represents the abandonment of Muslim middle-class’ utopian vision of permanently inhabiting the cosmopolitan metropolitan cities—the abandonment of first world cosmopolitan utopia. It is in this context that the two narrators’ returns strike as deliberate acts of
defiance: by abandoning the city, first of all, they dispute popular media’s representation of NYC as a place of essential freedom and, secondly, they critique the neoliberal ordering of daily life which constantly tosses the migrant workers in and out of the workforce, keeping them in constant fear and alarm. The project of exploring the conjuncture between race, class, and islamophobia, which has been extolled by the critics, simultaneously emerge as the project of unmasking the operative mechanisms of contemporary finance. There is no doubt that both novels show genuine interest in navigating the uncharted territory of Muslim trauma after September 11 terror attacks, but what is also offered in them is better understood as an expression of what John Bellamy Foster labels as the “imperialism of monopoly finance capital” (n.pag.).

I first explain here how Home Boy’s urban world offers a window into the interlaced world of race and class, exposing not only the paradigms of systemic racism but also the processes through which workers from around the world are brought into the cosmopolitan urban centers, creating a “reserve army of capital” to be taken advantage of when necessary. I then turn towards Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist to show how the narrator’s representation of New York City and the US gradually metamorphoses into a cognitive mapping of US imperialism, providing a cartography of the nation’s global domination and unmasking its equally violent financial exploitation. Moreover, I navigate contemporary theoretical discussions about finance and empire, only to posit later that they both converge in the body of neoliberal capitalism, which has benefited from its relationship with US Imperialism. In my concluding section, I contend that both these novels’ endings offer us important clues about how they can be read not only as critiques of imperialism and finance capital but also as fictional inquiries into
the question of which subject positions might have the capacity to mount resistance against neoliberal capitalism and finance.

**Home Boy and Racial Antipathy**

H. M. Naqvi’s first novel has been read as an urban fiction whose success lies in its complex rendering of the post-9/11 social reality that addresses the essentialization and oppression of Pakistani Muslims living in the US. This is what Heidemann emphasizes in her engaged reading of *Home Boy*, where she suggests that Naqvi’s work can be read as a counter-orientalist discourse because it problematizes those essentialist descriptions of cultural and religious identities that slot people in fixed categories. In her essay “‘We are the glue keeping civilization together’: Post-Orientalism and counter-Orientalism in H. M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy*” Heidemann points out that Naqvi’s characters represent a kind of “opaque, slippery … cosmopolitan swag” that challenges the post-Orientalist ideological depositions that seeks to turn “every ethnic signifier” into an “object of unwanted attraction and suspicion” (291). Her essay’s focus, then, remains on the rhetorical strategies of its narrator, whose rendering of his experience is not only identarian but also relational (297). Similar efforts to cast Shehzad’s narrative into the category of a performative gesture can be located in P. Shanthi’s essay “Performing Identities: A Study of H. M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy*” where she reads the novel as a representation of the production of colonial discourse after 9/11 attacks (59). Sanjay Sipahimalani’s short but insightful review of Naqvi’s novel in *the Indian Express* draws attention to the novel’s thematic and linguistic innovativeness, while simultaneously pointing out how the novel’s representation of the transformation of New York City remains central to its thematic structure. In contrast to all these favorable readings of the novel, Hirsh Sawhney’s somewhat critical review of the novel
questions the depth of its representational politics. For Sawhney, while the novel’s “bold technique” is effective, adding richness to its stylistic architecture, its representation of New York City remains weak, often “shallow and exotic” (n.pag.).

Sawhney, it seems, reads too much into the novel’s beginning and the middle where NYC is presented by Naqvi’s protagonist as a space of unbound freedom. A significant part of Shehzad’s description plays on the theme of the city’s greatness, riffing on the stereotypical image that NYC is a multiethnic paradise. Indeed, the life that the three young friends live—visiting pubs, listening to hip-hop music, reading postcolonial literature, leafing through pornographic magazines, and having one night stands—seems to affirm their subscription to the City’s middle-class cultural stereotypes, which, instead of excluding them from the mainstream urban life, ropes them in and makes them a part of the pervasive culture that enshrines NYC as a space imbued with the essences of freedom and happiness. If one pays adequate attention to the novel’s first sentence where the novel’s protagonist, in his urban hip-hop inflected vocabulary, quips, “[w]e have become Japs, Jews, Niggers … [w]e weren’t before” (1), one understands that this is a moment when the narrator bears witness to his own marginalization through his association with other groups he neither represents nor wants to belong to. This sentence also allows us to become vaguely aware of a long history of exclusion, which, in the context of post-September 11 mass hysteria, has taken a new turn. Temporally, this sentence stitches two different moments of the narrator’s life into one coherent story—the moment of inclusion, the period before 9/11 when he is a “homeboy,” and the moment of exclusion, the juncture when he is recast into a new group. Before I stretch this transition even further and explain how this moment is connected to Shehzad’s experience of being declassed and experiencing, temporarily,
what it means to be a part of the city’s surplus population, to be thrown in and out of the workforce, let me explain what I posit here as Shehzad and his friends’ inclusionary moment.

Naqvi’s novel’s beginning introduces its three protagonists—AC (Ali), Jimbo (Jamshed) and Chuck (Shehzad)—as “self-invented and self-made” urban youth, eclectic in culture and taste. They are familiar with the city’s secret corridors and have knowledge of its more dangerous corners. The narrator describes his and his friends’ insidedness in the following manner:

[we] slummed in secret cantons of Central Park, avoided the meatpacking district, often dined in Jackson Heights; weren’t rich but weren’t poor (possessing, for instance, extravagant footwear but no real estate); weren’t frum but avoided pork … and drank everywhere, some more than others … (1-2)

Ali, the eldest among the three, is a school teacher who has been in and out of the PhD program and depends on his more stable and successful sister for additional support. He is described by the narrator as a “charming rogue, an intellectual dandy, a man of theatrical presence” who is both confrontational and compassionate. Jamshed, on the other hand, is quiet and thoughtful, with a steady girlfriend who lives in “a swank corner apartment” on Broadway (17). Shehzad, in contrast to his friends, is neither an immigrant nor a citizen, but a student who thinks he had “claimed the city and the city had claimed” him (3), but as we get to see in the latter part of the novel that his claim on the city is met with a hostile rejection. Part of the reason why Home Boy reads like a bildungsroman is because the city’s attitude towards these three Pakistani men abruptly reverses, leading its protagonist to learn from one of the most traumatic experiences in
his life that he is an outsider. “I was growing up but thought I was grown-up” (3) is how the narrator sums up this maturation process.

Shehzad’s awareness of his outsideness begins to form a few days after the September 11 attacks when he first comes out of his house after lying low for a while. He and his friends meet at Jake’s, a local bar, to discuss the disappearance of one of their friends, Mohammed Shah or “Shaman” whom he describes as “an American success story, a Pakistani Gatsby” who drives a “scarlet Mercedes 500 SEL” and lives in an affluent neighborhood in Westbrook, Connecticut (21). As AC gets visibly upset about not being able to trace Shaman and starts venting his frustration at the 9/11 attackers saying, “they’ve fucked up my city,” two burley “brawlers” approach them, asking: “What’s gonna fuck up?” (23). As the two men keep harassing Shehzad and his friends, calling them “A-rabs,” “Moslems,” and finally physically assaulting Shehzad, a brawl breaks out between them. Jake, the owner of the pub, comes running down, screaming at them “‘GETATAHERE! ALLAYOUS! … NO ROOM FOR YOUS!’” (24). It is at that point that they begin to understand that “[t]hings were changing” (25). The idea that there is no room for the three young men in the neighborhood pub can be seen as a metonymic exploration of the change in New York City’s dominant culture where Muslim men began to register as dangerous individuals, unworthy of being let in. The undertone of white privilege that mediates the normative determination of who belongs and who does not is embodied in the figure of the burley brawlers whose violent interruption of Ali’s narrative can be construed as a narrative apprehension of the power of whiteness in New York City’s, and of course America’s, cultural imaginary. This episode stands in stark contrast to the one discussed earlier where Shehzad makes his claim about being an insider. This episode, along with the one that follows later in the
novel where the three friends get arrested, echoes the novel’s ironic title which essentially dismisses the possibility of belonging to New York City as a Muslim migrant.

The back and forth movement of the novel takes us to another set of antinomies in the next few chapters after the bar incident, initially revealing Shehzad’s relative success as a bank employee, only to take us to the next phase when he finds himself jobless, becoming a New York City “cabbie,” living day to day. An English department graduate from one of the city’s best universities, he easily lands a job in an investment bank during the boom, when the economy is thriving. He begins to plan for the future so he can become formally integrated into the lifeworld of the city. He imagines an affluent future ahead of him, with his bank sponsoring his green card in the near future and then, a few years down the line, him sponsoring his mother (28). It is during these more prosperous days that Shehzad feels happy to be a “part of the secret, intricate, if procrustean machinery that made Capitalism tick.” Although he is not entirely convinced by its modes of working, he comforts himself by questioning, “who ain’t a slave?” (29). Despite working “fourteen, fifteen-hour days, including most weekends,” he gets terminated when the “bull-run” ends, bringing the boom to a stall (29). However, once he loses his job and his boss tries to comfort him saying he is taking “one for the team,” the vague awareness that makes him see the procrustean machinery that made capitalism tick also accords him the insight into its class character, making him realize it has to “do with the bottom line” (30). He tries to keep afloat by investing in “stocks with high price-to-equity ratio” but as the market plunges further he finds his investment “reduced to a few cents on the dollar,” leaving him with little to survive on. He focuses on reducing his expenses, tries his luck by investing in lottery tickets, but nothing works in his favor. He finally accepts his fate, saying: “There wasn’t much more I could do. The market had soured. I found myself in profound funk” (31).
It is this extreme poverty and helplessness that shoves him towards becoming a cab
driver. He fortuitously meets a fellow Pakistani cabbie who agrees to allow him to drive the only
cab he owns. For his license, he needed to complete an eighty-hour requisite course. For two
weeks, Shehzad wakes up “at the crack of the dawn” and takes two different trains to go to the
NYS Federation of Taxi Drivers Academy so he can attend his eight-thirty classes which goes on
until five-thirty (36). It is here that he notices the other eighteen people who are there for the
course, most coming from Asia and Africa:

There were nineteen of us, none of whom was Pakistani … A bony Indian from Patna, a
wide-eyed Bangladeshi, a square-faced Egyptian, and a small, intense Xingjiangi fellow
sat up front, taking abundant notes, while the self-designated backbenchers—an
Albanian, a Haitian, and a Sikh—mostly glowered…The rest hailed from the Dark
Continent: there was a Kenyan nightwatchman, a Beninese busboy, and a convivial
Congolese tribesman named Kojo with whom I became lunch buddies. Over sandwiches
and soda, he regaled me with riveting tales of his barefoot and bloody escape from the
copper-rich province of Kivu during a routine spasm of violence. (37)

This passage allows for a peek into the city’s working-class immigrant life. By tying into its
description of migrant workers from different nations and places the narrative of Kojo’s escape
from the copper-rich province of the Republic of Congo, this passage offers us a fragmented
view of the violence and corruption that make the peripheral nations unsafe—a key reason why
people leave those places to work in cities like New York. The processes of concentration of
labor on the one hand and capital on the other for capitalism’s metabolic necessity has been
discussed not only by Marx but also by Engels. The latter in his precocious urban ethnography in
The Condition of the Working Class in England comments that England’s biggest cities were the consequences of capitalism’s necessity to have at its disposal both excess labor power and excess capital. Written when Engels was only twenty-four, The Condition thus identifies the features that became paradigmatic for cities created by capital: the concentration of capital on the one hand and of workers on the other (66). In Capital Volume I, Marx further explores the processes of expropriation, explaining how forceful eviction and immiseration are necessary for the production of workers. Joblessness, however, creates a labor population of a different kind, what Marx calls the “reserve army of capital.” These partially employed or wholly unemployed workers—the group that is described as “floating surplus population” in Capital I—keeps growing as capital looks for a cheaper and younger labor force (794). Although most of the workers described by Shehzad in this passage fall within the category of the “floating surplus population,” Kojo, it seems, is a victim of a more violent process—a process, if approached theoretically, will resemble what Marx calls “primitive accumulation.” The tale of mineral rich Africa, whose violence comes as much from its comprador military and corrupt civilian leadership as it does from multinational corporations who require staged anarchy to quietly siphon off surplus, is too familiar to detail here. Just as South Asia, with its military dictators and oppressive social relations—to which Adiga’s The White Tiger bears witness—has been a steady source of migrant workers, so Africa with its ethnic wars and inherited exploitative system has been a copious supplier of cheap labor (long after the chattel slave trade came to a close). Violence thus ensures not only the steady supply of labor power to core capitalist nations but also the production of the lumpen population whose presence keeps the workers of the metropolis on the edge, afraid. It is important to notice how the passage on migrant workers leaves us with a vague silhouette of some of the most gruesome practices of the global capitalist
system whose uneven world and imperialist practices collect people from all around and bring them to cosmopolitan cities to exploit their cheap labor.\textsuperscript{48}

The effect of the imperial coercion through which capital and labor are concentrated in core urban locations is suffered in insular local communities as well, where the relation between empire and periphery on a global scale is played out in its miniature form, leading towards joblessness and despair on the part of the worker and enrichment on the part of the capitalist class. Contrary to what is conjectured by some of the novel’s critics, the objective of Shehzad’s narrative, then, is not to posit a differential understanding of the center and the periphery but to expose the similitude of the two spaces by zooming in on internal maps of core capitalist nations.

The day after the barfight, the narrator accompanies Jamshed to Jersey City where the latter’s family lives. On his way to their house where Jamshed’s father “Old Man Khan” and sister Amna live, Shehzad takes a good look at the city. Once prosperous and busy, the city has lost its population, becoming a run-down place inhabited mainly by immigrants. A city where “Caucasians are a minority,” outnumbered by African-Americans, Hispanics and Arabs and Muslims, Jersey’s history is replete with antecedents of racial violence. The parallel between the “routine violence” of the extractive wars that Kojo runs away from, and the “the murderous Dotbusters” who “stalked and killed Asians with clubs and boots and pipes” well into the eighties (45) is a reminder of the likeness between the US and the Republic of Congo, not an evocation of their essential difference. The veneer of racial tension, it seems, is underwritten by collective destitution of the entire working-class population of Jersey City. Loss of jobs and economic activities work as subtexts in this narrative of racial antipathy, pitting one community against another, creating a rift within the body politic. This is how the city’s desolate small businesses and communities have been described by the narrator:
You could feel it walking down some streets: people didn’t avert their eyes or nod when you walked past but often stared, either tacitly claiming you as their own or dismissing you as the Other. Jersey City has been defined by a decided troubled bustle… The skyscrapers downtown were erected in the seventies and looked it: you didn’t see any stucco or stonework, only steel and darkened windows. At night, the buildings seemed to brood. And despite the gentrification of Jersey City through the Great Bull Run, there were boarded-up storefronts in the side streets, closed movie theaters, bodegas with iron grills. (45)

The description of boarded up storefronts and closed movie theaters bears an eerie resemblance to David Harvey’s account of Baltimore city with its abandoned houses and impoverished working-class neighborhoods (*Spaces of Hope* 133-135). This short description also allows us to understand how the contours of Shehzad’s narrative is not only shaped by September 11 but also by the Great Bull Run, whose end in the mid-1990s marked the beginning of a prolonged era of crisis. Jersey city’s destitution is a reminder of the failures of the neoliberal experimentation of Regan-Thatcher era, which, instead of enriching the working-class, impoverished them even further. Since this idea of the race-class conjuncture and its relationship with financial crisis will be further developed in the latter part of this chapter, let us now turn to the novel’s closure which takes us back to the issue of racial oppression.

*Home Boy*’s uncommon narrative closure, where the narrator’s departure from the city and his first arrival are relayed in succession, makes it difficult to arrive at any definitive conclusion about its thematic development. Those two moments are preceded by the events leading to their arrest and detention on suspicion of wrongdoing. After Shehzad and Jamshed
return from their monthly visit to Old Man Khan, the three men take Abdul Karim’s cab to go to Westbrook, where the Shaman lives. When they reach his house, they find it uninhabited, with no sign of their friend. As they loiter around Shaman’s house, his suspicious neighbors call the cops on them, a report that escalates in the immediate post 9/11 hysteria from a local police incident to a federal terrorist investigation. When FBI comes and the intoxicated friends, unable to understand what is going on, attack the intruders not knowing who they were, they get arrested. After days of torture and inquiry, both Shehzad and Jamshed are released without any charges. AC, however, faces the prospect of fifteen years of life for possession of cocaine, the penalty for which is “the same for second degree murder” (193), a critique of the Rockefeller drug laws that have contributed to the racial disparities of mass US incarceration. Traumatized and broke, Shehzad decides to go back to Karachi despite a job offer and the prospect of settling down with Amna.

There is no after story in Naqvi’s *Home Boy*—no follow up of what happens after Shehzad (Shehzad) leaves the city. A crestfallen, dejected Shehzad departs from New York City leaving AC in the detention center. Before his departure he meets Amna who asks him to stay. The last few days of Shehzad’s New York City life are very economically described, with little clue as to what his thoughts are. Since Shehzad’s is a deeply personal story, it ends in a personal note too, with a reminiscence of his first arrival to the city. However, the penultimate chapter of the novel gives the reader a clue about the trauma the FBI investigations and AC’s incarceration leaves in Shehzad’s unconscious, showing how the fear and puzzlement makes him collapse in terror near Central Park after seeing what he believed to be a police officer hailing him, and even prompts him to attempt suicide. Indeed, Shehzad’s traumatic breakdown demands that, following Freud, we consider his abandonment of NYC and the US as a melancholic subject’s desperate
attempt to preserve his ego by withdrawing from the lost object (Eng and Kazanjian 3) and by sadistically trying to destroy himself for failing to retain the object of love (Freud 252). Both NYC and his friend AC appear to be the objects/persons on whom the narrator dotes. But the penultimate chapter offers another prism, allowing us to construe the narrator’s trauma as a symptom of his rejection of anonymity, racial and cultural erasure. Before leaving his apartment for good, Shehzad discovers in a newspaper an obituary for his missing friend Shaman (Mohammed Shah) who died while attending a conference in the World Trade Center. The obituary describes Shaman as an unusual Muslim, one who was more like “us”: “Everybody thinks all Muslims are fundamentalists … Mohammed wasn’t like that. He was like us … He worked hard, played hard” (270). Shehzad accurately notices that there is no mention of the likes of him and his friends in the Manichean post-9/11 narrative; the young, carefree, cosmopolitan, immigrant community of which he is a part has suddenly become unrepresentable:

It was the oddest obituary. Perhaps all obituaries are fundamentally odd. There was no mention of the ship jumping, gas pumping, porn watching, cigarette running—*de mortuis nil nisi bonum*—and there was no mention of us. The story was simple, black and white: the man was a Muslim, not a terrorist. (270)

What Shehzad wants is the recognition of his identity, the acknowledgement of his and his kind’s existence. Although this demand may appear incommensurate to the damage he experiences and the loss he suffers, behind the narrator’s anguished desire for recognition exists his harrowing memory of being cast as a member of a community he and his friends carefully chose not to belong to. The normative understanding of Muslim identity in the United States, notes Aparajita De, “functions to demonize” them in dominant narratives in such ways that “their experiences
and articulations become disposable, dismembered, and dysfunctional” (xii). It seems as if Shehzad is battling against the processes of such demonization, which, after obliterating his and his friends’ narrative, has chosen to replace it with their juvenile ideas about good and evil, “us” and “them,” the same juvenile Manicheism that President Bush articulated in his State of the Union address in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan (a speech Shezad and his friends hear on the night before their arrest).

*Home Boy*’s closing chapters make it imperative that we take note of the post-9/11 US cultural polity which demonized the entire Muslim, Arab and South Asian population living inside the borders of America. But the novel does not do so by drowning out the economic fallouts of institutionalized racism, nor does it propagate a belief that race relations in the US are merely subjective paranoia, flowing from the white man and moving towards the South Asian Muslim object. Indeed, one of the subtle thematic moves of the novel is to place multiple moments of empathy and compassion in its narrative, showing how, despite systemic production of racism in culture, human beings treat each other with kindness. These subjective and particular forms, however, are set against the backdrop of the broader frames of socio-economic generality. As we have discussed earlier, the novel’s depiction of race relations is channeled through the city’s—also the nation’s—economic reality, their deep history. In *Racism and Cultural Studies* (2002), E. San Juan Jr. contends that ethnic identities in the US cannot be understood “apart from the historical trajectories, the workings of the state, and the contingencies of political economy” (99). In order to understand the race relation in the US, he maintains, it is essential that we look into the nation’s long imperial history, and its relationship with other nations. Naqvi’s novel allows us to grasp how the perimeters of race relations is conditioned by class relations and the vice versa, but it also tells us how destitution itself generates its own
divisions, demanding loyalties, pitting one community against another. Although his novel addresses some of the most pressing issues emerging out of the events of 9/11, what remains distant and not fully comprehended or articulated in its narrative are the contours of the US imperial relations which, by engaging with distant worlds of nations and impinging upon other people’s lives, draws people in only to exploit them even further. The cab drivers who arrive in the city in barefoot, the frightened migrants who leave America to find a safe abode somewhere else, the terrified citizens of South Asia who wait the to see the consequences of the destruction of the twin towers—all point towards an imperial presence and its uneven human consequences. *Home Boy* deftly narrates the story of a fractured city and national space, while only gesturing towards the distant imperial relations. The novel that addresses the issue of United States’ global/imperial presence even more boldly and explicitly is Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, one of the finest fictions set on the theme of 9/11 attacks.

**The Reluctant Fundamentalist and US Imperialism**

Published in 2007 and shortlisted for Man Booker Prize, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is Pakistani born British writer Mohsin Hamid’s second novel—the novel that established beyond doubt his pre-eminence among the writers of his generation. His first novel *Moth Smoke* was published in 2000, using Lahore as its setting and thematizing Pakistan’s internal strife, especially addiction and economic despair. Like this first novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is set in the same city of Lahore, Pakistan’s second largest city. The entire novel is written in the form of a monologue where Changez, a university lecturer who graduated from Princeton, engages an American in a conversation in a marketplace. Although narrator’s interlocutor is not given a voice in the narrative, it is possible to conjecture what the content of the conversation can
be by following the threads of the narrator’s discourse. In her elegant discussion of Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Rajini Srikanth contends that Changez’s monologue is a counter-discourse aimed at ending the monopoly of the US on the topic of terrorism. She reads the silence of the American agent as a deliberate narrative strategy, geared towards reducing the vociferous locution of the privileged imperial subject into mere listening. In the opening scene of the novel, we see the loquacious narrator trying to strike up a conversation with an American who, he thinks, is “on a mission,” suggesting he is an American agent. Claiming he is a “native” of the city and can speak English fluently, Changez offers to assist the visitor, in case he needs it. He reassures the alarmed agent by saying that he has lived in America for four and a half years and has worked in New York City. A graduate from Princeton, he has also spent a substantial amount of those four and a half years in New Jersey, where the university is located. As the narrative progresses, the readers get to know how his Princeton days were marked by financial and academic strife, and how he had to juggle between odd jobs to keep afloat, while also maintaining a high grade-point-average to retain his scholarship. When, after graduation, he is hired by Underwood Samson, a savvy evaluation firm that researches the financial prospects of companies for potential investors, he feels elated, thinking his hard days are over. The money that Changez receives as sign-on bonus allows him to holiday in Greece—his first one to Europe. This is where he first meets Erica, a fellow Princetonian, whom he befriends and later falls in love with. While he enjoys the company of wealthy Princetonians, he is put off by the brashness of their attitude, especially by their irreverent attitudes towards people much older than them. The impudence with which Americans treat others, which the narrator identifies as an expression of their imperial power, is contributed to their relative ignorance about the rest of the globe. The narrator’s distaste for American impudence testifies to his own ambivalence as well:
on the one hand, he sees it as a culture devoid of sensitivity and empathy and, on the other, he is drawn towards it, so much so that his narrative is redolent with positive experiences, especially his memories of being in the city of New York, which he compares with being at home.

Although the differences between Shehzad’s and Changez’s New York are pronounced, there is also likeness in the manner in which they embrace and celebrate the city. For Shehzad the city is the place of his mental and intellectual growth, the very fabric of his cultural sensibility, whereas for Changez, it is a sanctuary, a place imbued with warmth and familiarity. For the latter, the city is a place where he will not stick out among the crowd; there are many more like him in that city. It is symptomatic that New York City enters the narrator’s discussion as a point of comparison. Lahore, we are told, is the second largest city of Pakistan, and is “home to nearly as many people as New York” (7). It is in the third chapter of the novel that the narrator makes specific references to NYC, claiming moving to this city was like going home (32). He also explains why the city feels homey to him. It is a city where he hears his first language Urdu being spoken by cab drivers. There is also a Pakistani restaurant just two blocks from his apartment. All these details make him feel comfortable, so comfortable that he claims: “I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker” (33). The evocation of the idea of belonging to the city allows us to see the parallel between the two narrators’ fondness for the place. Yet, unlike Shehzad and his friends who are traumatized by the attacks on the WTC building, Changez is pleased to see the towers go down. Although he later tries to complicate his initial reaction by claiming that it was accompanied by a “profound sense of perplexity” (73), that his initial reaction was not of horror but of satisfaction allows the complexity of his relation to the city emerge on the surface. It is difficult to conjecture whether Changez belongs to NYC in the same way that Shehzad does. But the former’s ambivalence
towards the city makes apparent how in his consciousness the city exists as a place mediated by the nation and its imperial ambition. It is perhaps because of this that when the twin towers go down, he likens it to American empire being brought to its knees; the traumatic event is, in his reckoning, an attack on the empire and not the city. After confessing to his interlocutor how he was initially “remarkably pleased” to see the twin towers go down, he tries to clarify his response using the following reasoning: “But at that moment, my thoughts were not with the victims of the attack … no, I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (73).

The symbolism of seeing America on her knees, thus, informs his initial response to the tragedy of loss of life in Twin Tower attacks. Belonging to the city does not deter him from deriving pleasure at its destruction because in his mental space America and New York exist as separate entities. It is here that Changez is different from Shehzad. Whereas Shehzad is able to expand his arc of empathy and extend it to others who face tragedy, Changez faces perplexity and a dilemma, and is consequently unable to empathize with those whose lives are lost. What further complicates his representation of his relation to the city is the symbolism of being a lover of America. Erica, it has been suggested, is a metonymic representation of America. In the symbolic sense loving Erica is loving America. Yet, what complicates the whole concept of loving Erica/America is the trauma of losing her. While the narrator of The Reluctant Fundamentalist mourns the loss of Erica, the best he can do at the city’s loss is to conceal his real feelings in front of his colleagues (74).

One explanation for Changez’s responses to the city’s tragedy can be this: unlike Shehzad who feels that he has a stake in the city’s cosmopolitan culture, Changez feels no such
obligation towards the city. His outsideness, for instance, has been pointed out to him by his boss Jim who credits his watchfulness to him being “out of place” (43). What is also probable is that his gradual understanding of America’s imperialist history and an acquaintance with its victims (in Manila and in Chile) condition his unconscious response to its tragedy. Albert Braz, in his insightful essay titled “9/11, 9/11: Chile and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*” gestures towards this second possibility by suggesting that Changez’s antipathy towards America is due to the nation’s long history of disrupting lives elsewhere, thus creating a common experiential frame where America features as an imperialist power bent on destroying democracies and buttressing authoritarian regimes who suppress people (241-243). The three trips that he takes to evaluate companies for his value firm, all unpack for him the way the imperial state treats not only people from other nations but also its own working-class population. Srikanth’s characterization of Changez’s discontent as “deliberate dissatisfaction” valorizes the idea that his is a conscious disengagement with America. Yet, the trajectory from voluntary servitude to intentional distancing is not a linear development. Erica, whose love Changez seeks and who symbolically represents America, both disrupts and hastens Changez’s antipathy towards the American empire. Srikanth traces the beginning of Changez’s transformation way back in his first business trip to Manila. Sitting in a limousine with his colleagues in Manila’s thick traffic, Changez feels the heat of the “undisguised hostility” of a jeepney driver’s gaze, wondering what might have induced such resentment. Although Changez is unable to understand the rationale behind the driver’s “obvious, intimate” dislike (67), he gradually mounts up enough understanding of capitalist accumulation process and American imperialism to critically look into his own contribution to both. Changez reveals that he has “always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world” (156), but his
awareness about his own complicity does not fully emerge until he is confronted by the Chilean book publisher Juan-Bautista. Already troubled by America’s indiscriminate bombing of Afghanistan and arm twisting of Pakistan, Changez starts neglecting work when he is sent to Chile to evaluate a book publishing company. Juan-Bautista, the chief of the company whose understanding of books runs much deeper than those evaluating his business, is both irate and troubled because of the intrusion of the valuation firm. Convinced that Changez is different from the rest in his firm, the old book publisher takes him out for lunch. “Does it trouble you,” he asks Changez, “to make your living by disrupting the lives of others?” (151). Un convinced by his young companion’s answer that Underwood Samson is only an evaluation firm, Juan-Bautista asks if Changez has heard of the janissaries. In response to Changez’s baffled “no,” the veteran publisher says:

They were Christian boys … captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time was the greatest in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to.

(151)

Changez later recounts how Juan-Bautista’s historical chronicle “plunges” him into “a deep bout of introspection,” inducing in him the awareness that he was “a servant of the American empire” (152). The essential irony of situation lies not so much in Changez’s realization that he is working against the interest of his own nation but, rather, that his cosmopolitan life in Princeton and New York City accords him no insight into his own reality. It is the outside—the spaces that have already experienced the brunt of the brutality of US imperialism—that make him aware that he is indeed the empire’s mercenary.
However, how is it possible that a person who is no soldier is lumped so carelessly in the category of the janissaries? At the moment when Juan-Bautista chastises him for being on the wrong side, he is merely an employee in a valuation firm. What, then, is the real import of this statement? In order to understand the stakes of this implied culpability as a financial analyst, we need to look into the way finance has been depicted in this novel, and how the novel figures the coordination and cooperation between corporeal violence and the financial empire. In a fascinating paragraph where Changez tells his American interlocutor that his country’s “constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable,” he also asserts that “finance is [sic] the primary means by which the American empire exercised its power” (156). Changez’s conjecture about the nexus between imperialism and finance demands that we carefully scrutinize how violence has been used to open up new markets for capitalist usurpation and how, by forcefully imposing neoliberal economic policies on other nation and by enforcing austerity measures, the US empire has amassed huge wealth in its cities. It also solicits us to notice how the American “interference” in other parts of the world has allowed its ruling elites to have a reserve army of worker at its disposal.

In what follows, by drawing upon Marxist theories of imperialism, I will shed more light on the relation between the financial empire that Changez gestures towards in the segment discussed above. I will also examine, more comprehensively, the tangled relationship between finance and empire, and look into the processes of accumulation that yoke them together, making both work together to advance the interest of the capitalist class.

The Empire of Finance
It is no secret that Marxists in general have emphasized the necessity to treat imperialism primarily as an expression of the contradictions of capital at the scale of the world market, as opposed to the liberal models that posit it as a cultural and civilizational issue. Although the ideas of expansion and domination are built into the fabric of Marx’s discussions on capitalism, he did not develop a separate theory of imperialism. The expansive corpus of Marxist theories of imperialism are developed on the foundations provided by V. I. Lenin, Rudolph Hilferding and Nicolai Bukharin, who are generally referred to as the founders of “classical Marxist theories of imperialism” (Brewer 79). These revolutionary figures saw imperialism as a stage in the history of capitalism—a stage that is marked on the one hand by intense competitions among the most powerful capitalist nations and on the other by increased financialization and cooperation among capitalist institutions. The works of the world systems theorists such as Gunder Frank, Samir Amin and Wallerstein develop a different model for schematizing imperialism, where they see imperialism embedded in the capitalist accumulation strategy itself which accords unequal advantage to a few core capitalist nations that draw capital and resources from peripheral nations and agglomerate them in their own national spaces. What is distinctive about the World Systems theorists’ conceptualization of imperial relations is that they see underdevelopment as an inevitable outcome of a peripheral nation’s inclusion within the capitalist totality (Brewer 161).

In more recent times, especially after the publication Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s millennial manifesto Empire (2000), which argues that the old forms of imperial competition and outright domination have been replaced by the formation of a new biopolitical “Empire” which operates on the basis of cooperation among the powerful institutions (xii), and at the wake of United States’ invasion of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, a rich body of Marxian prognosis of imperial formations began to emerge. These works, instead of relying entirely on the Leninist
definition of imperialism as intra-capitalist competition, offer more varied descriptions of imperialism, delineating how the occupation of these aforementioned sovereign countries by the US mark the arrival of a new historical juncture. In the introduction to his book *Naked Imperialism* (2006), John Bellamy Foster contends that there is nothing uncharacteristic about the US occupation of Iraq because territorial aggression is woven into its fabric. Since its inception, the US has always been an “expansionist power”; what has changed, however, is that its expansionist logic, “the nakedness” of its imperial aggression, which often remains hidden behind its covert financial domination, has come to light (11). Foster’s contention, it seems, is premised on the observations made by David Harvey, who, at the wake of United States’ Iraq invasion, described the US imperialism as “a new imperialism” within the capitalist system (*The New Imperialism* 1). His conjecture derives its materials from the history of United States’ gradual move away from production since the 1970s, and its increased dependence on finance in the decades afterwards (62). The aggressive move to occupy Iraq was a way for overcoming the economic contraction the US has been facing since the end of the 1990s. One of the most important observations advanced by both Harvey and Foster has been the conjunction between imperial aggression and finance. Although both refer to the increased influence of financial and multinational corporations in state affairs, neither of them, at least at this point, make their claims about the corporate takeover of the state explicit. It is only in their later works that both Harvey and Foster begin to claim that US imperialism in the new century has been driven primarily by the necessity to overcome the crisis of financialization.50

The connection between imperialism, financialization and the production of surplus population has been impressively explored by Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik, who, in an essay published in *The Monthly Review*, argue that the necessity to stabilize the value of
money—capitalism will face terminal crisis if the value of money diminishes—drives the core capitalist nations to forcefully impose underdevelopment on peripheral nations. Much of the wealth today, they write, is held either as money or in “money denominated assets,” i.e., financial assets. It is, therefore, imperative that capitalism does not allow the value of money to sink in relation to commodities because that will lead towards crisis. In order to keep the value of money stable and to ward off depreciation, the capitalist class of the core nations constantly resorts to two means: first, the production of a large reserve population at home and in the periphery, and, secondly, the draining of surplus from the peripheral nations either through corporate investment or through imports of petty commodities “from the capitalist metropolis” (“Imperialism in the Era of Globalization”). Neither the production of the reserve army of capital, nor the imports of petty commodities from the metropolis can happen without coercion. The vexing problem of “diminishing returns” of capital, which is one of the primary causes of stagnation, can only be averted if the diminished sum is socially dumped on the shoulders of the peripheral reserve army of workers, and on the metropole’s own surplus population. The metropole’s “income deflation,” is thus shifted onto the backs of both its own internal working-class population and the workers of the peripheral nations. It is the class power of the global elite, who not only run the state apparatuses and financial institutions but also almost all digital, print and social platforms that disseminate information, that allows them to avoid any financial cost of their economic decisions. Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik take up the conjuncture between capitalism, finance and imperialism explicitly:

In the current period, when the weight of finance has increased, the urgency to preserve the value of money has become even greater. Hence the need to impose income deflation in general, and upon the working people of the periphery in particular, has become even
more pressing. Imperialism, far from disappearing, has become even more significant. That a segment of the periphery’s bourgeoisie has become integrated with metropolitan capital, that some countries in the periphery have experienced high “growth,” and that the working people in the metropolis are now experiencing income deflation to a far greater extent than before, are all differences to be registered regarding the contemporary capitalist world in contrast with its past. (“Imperialism in the Era of Globalization”)

What is noteworthy in their discussion is how capitalism’s internal urge to stabilize the value of money, the medium of all values and commodities, leads it to shift the economic cost of diminishing returns on an ever-expanding surplus population. But such an action requires the threat of violence and coercion. Hence the increased significance of imperialism in today’s world.

The imperialist wars of the last two decades certainly give validity to this observation. But what is equally demonstrative of this argument’s cogency is the exponential growth in the world’s reserve working-class population. As Forster has noted, the “global active labor” army was almost half the size of the “global reserve army” population in 2011, which means most of the world’s population at that time did not have stable jobs (“The New Imperialism of Globalized Monopoly-Finance Capital” n. pag.). Today, the number of people without stable jobs has only increased in leaps and bounds, allowing big industrial and tech corporations to rip profit out of the precariousness of employment. In a New York Times report published just a year ago, it was shown that out of Google’s 2,23,000 workers, more than half were temporary (“Google’s Shadow Workforce” n. pag.), while it was reported in multiple news outlets that almost the entire Uber workforce is made up of contingent workers, employed as contractors. In their 2016 annual report, International Labor Organization (ILO), a United Nation’s agency,
states how “over the past few decades, in both industrialized and developing countries, there has been a marked shift away from standard employment to non-standard employment” (2). From these reports in the mainstream media outlets and organizations, it becomes clear that there has been a steady increase in size of the reserve population, giving substance to the claims made by contemporary Marxist thinkers like Harvey and Foster that the imperial interventions in the last two decades have produced, alongside misery and new markets, a large number of reserve workers who are ready to take up any job for their survival. But how is this phenomenon connected to the processes of capitalist accumulation? In order to understand the systemic relation, it will be useful to return to grand-old Marx, who, in *Capital Vol. I* spells out why it is important for the survival of capitalism to produce “surplus population” (782)—part-time workers who are also referred to as the “industrial reserve army” (784).

The capitalist accumulation process, Marx notes, constantly produces a relatively “redundant working population” whose labor power is intermittently employed during the production process. As the productivity of labor increases and technology improves, the capitalist system’s drive for relative surplus value propels it to let go of workers at an increased rate (783). But when social production expands, these workers or others are re-employed, only to be “repelled” again when competition tightens, or crisis shows up (785). Since the capitalist system goes through constant transformations—“periods of average activity, production at high pressure, crisis, and stagnation” (785), to quote Marx—and labor’s demands for better wages and fewer working hours mount, capitalism’s survival depends on the production of surplus population to maintain pressure on fully employed workers, who are forever threatened by the part-time workers who may take their place. It is because of this that Marx refers to the production of the surplus population as “a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of
production” (784). It is worth quoting a lengthy passage from *Capital I* here, because in it Marx details how the surplus working population is taken advantage of by the capitalist system of production. He writes:

[T]his surplus population also becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalist accumulation, indeed it becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. Independently of the limits of the actual increase of population, it creates a mass of human material always ready for the exploitation by capital in the interests of capital’s own changing valorization requirements. With accumulation, and the development of the productivity of labor that accompanies it, capital’s power of sudden expansion also grows; it grows not merely because the elasticity of the capital already functioning increases, not merely because credit, under every special stimulus, at once places an unusual part of this wealth at the disposal of production in the form of additional capital; it grows also because the technical conditions of the production process—machinery, means of transport, etc.,—themselves now make possible a very rapid transformation of masses of surplus product into additional means of production. The mass of social wealth, overflowing with the advance of accumulation and capable of being transformed into additional capital, thrusts itself frantically into old branches of production, whose market suddenly expands, or into newly formed branches such as railways, etc., which now become necessary as a result of the further development of the old branches. In all such cases, there must be the possibility of suddenly throwing great masses of men into the decisive areas without doing any damage to the scale of production in other spheres. The surplus population
supplies these masses. The path characteristically described by modern industry, which takes the form of a decennial cycle (interrupted by smaller oscillations) of periods of average activity, production at high pressure, crisis, and stagnation, depends on the constant formation, the greater or less absorption, and the re-formation of the industrial reserve army or surplus population. In their turn, the varying phases of the industrial cycle recruit the surplus population, and become one of the most energetic agencies for its reproduction. (784-5)

Marx’s discussion here leaves no doubt as to why it is so important for capitalist system to produce a reserve army of workers. They are, after all, the forces that allow capitalism to manage its crisis and come back stronger every time it has to face one. Yet, the production of precarious worker is the production of misery, and wretchedness, as Marx shows in the same volume, especially in the chapter on primitive accumulation. Such misery cannot be produced through non-violent means, without expropriation and violence.51

This other effect of the production of surplus population has been brilliantly explored in Daniel Zamora’s essay “When Exclusion Replaces Exploitation.” In it he draws upon André Groz’s classic Farewell to the Working Class,52 to argue that capital’s tendency to expel workers even as it expands leads to a pseudo-antagonism between “active workers” and the “surplus population,” where instead of both turning against the real source of their suffering—the capitalist system—workers turn against one another, breeding antipathy and racist xenophobia. The problem of intra-class antagonism, which has been highlighted here, is a defining feature of the neoliberal era where the processes of demonization of the Other continues side by side with the processes of expropriation of the peripheral other. In the passage where the narrator of Home Boy describes the immiseration of Jersey City, he also mentions the ravaged working-class
neighborhood where the migrants and the white working-class live side by side in a state of acute tension—a place where people do not avert their gaze and where the visitors are immediately framed either as friends or as foes—as the gentrification of the city continues under their watch (45). The fetishistic norm that veils the reality of collective exploitation by global capitalism simultaneously pits one working-class community against another, spawning more rage and anger.

The threat of the desperate migrant waiting to swoop down on the native worker’s job is perhaps too powerful an image to allow one to empathize with the workers of another country suffering from the fallouts of the imperialist wars and the homebred corruption/violence. It is often difficult to empathize with a community which is constantly cast as an enemy. The drumming up of micrological divisions within a society—divisions that are premised on a monolithic understanding of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, caste, and sexuality—obfuscates what Gayatri Spivak describes as the “double bind” (97), a complex interlacing, between different aspects of identities and the social distribution of vulnerability in the form of class oppression. It because of this that the two novels that I discuss here demand close attention, for their aesthetic exploration of the fractures within the working-class allow us to see how the rhetoric of racial and religious difference drowns out these communities’ collective exploitation as a class.

When we pay close attention to these two novels, we see how the urban lifeworld in which Shehzad grows up begins to splinter under the weight of 9/11 attacks, antagonizing the same people with whom he shared the pubs and the heady nightlife. The cushioned life that clouds Changez’s visions also erects a wall of isolation around him, not allowing him to notice
his likeness with the migrant “charioteer,” who, “lacking the requisite permissions” is “forced to accept work at lower pay” (157), or, more importantly, with other victims of US imperialism who suffer at the hands of their oppressor. When Shehzad walks through that deeply divided neighborhood he only has a vague understanding of the nexus between gentrification and immiseration. Likewise, Changez feels that his eighty-thousand-a-year job and Princeton education separates him from the “Pakistani cabdrivers” who are being “beaten to within an inch of their lives” by fellow Americans. For him, the disappearance of “Muslim men” and FBI raids in “mosques, shops, and even people’s houses,” are “exaggerated” and “untrue” information, disseminated by gossipmongers (94-95). His class position distorts the reality that ordinary Muslims suffer, thus alienating him from the very community he is a part of. This initial schism notwithstanding, both narrators have their epiphany as well—the sudden realization that leads them to desert the city/the country which brands them and others them. Despite receiving a new job offer and the promise of a more settled life in the US, Shehzad chooses to go back to Karachi. Changez receives numerous opportunities before his boss’ patience wears out. He too, without much doubt, voluntarily embraces desertion rather than staying back in the US. People’s ignorance about their own complicit endorsement of US imperialism appears to him too troubling to ignore. The reasons why Changez and Shehzad desert their beloved City of New York and the US remain clad in ambiguity. Nevertheless, the symbolic import of it is too significant to ignore, because, as I have discussed earlier, it is in their desertion that the key to their resistance resides.

Conclusion
Changez describes his departure from New York succinctly, revealing that his final days were passed in a state of incoherence and confusion. The thought of leaving the city redolent with memories of Erica drives him into a state of frenzy and depression. He narrates how he went out and tried to provoke people by flaunting his beard and Islamic attire, only to return to his room to watch the media and well-respected journalists lapse into the kind of rhetoric that reflects hubris and righteousness (167-68). On his way back to Pakistan, he looks out through the window of his plane to locate the place from which Erica went missing after jumping off a cliff into the Hudson river. As he returns to Pakistan, he obsesses over Erica, fantasizing about her and imagining what might transpire if she was with him in Lahore. The trails of trauma that Changez leaves behind in the last few chapters of the novel are too numerous to address here, but it suffices to mention that his time in American leaves a permanent void in his life and his struggles to overcome it partially defines his deep emotional investment in Imperial America.

The penultimate chapter of Home Boy, on the other hand, where the narrator’s departure from the city is described, alternates between first person and second person narratives, describing first Shehzad’s lunch with Amna and then the moment of his discovery of Shaman’s obituary in a newspaper. Before he leaves the city, she drops by unexpectedly with a dish of sweets—“gulab jamuns” (210)—which prompts him to take her out for dinner. As they have dinner and chit-chat about her family, Amna asks him: “why’re you leaving?” Although he tells her he does not know exactly why, deep inside his head he relays why he is leaving, thinking:

If I had a couple of drinks in me I might have told her about the fear, the paranoia, the profound loneliness that had become routine features of life in the city, about my
undistinguished career as a banker and a cabbie. If I had a couple of drinks in me, I just might have spilled my guts. (211)

It is, then, not only his fear of being alone in the city he collectively experienced with his friends that drives him out; it is also the paranoia that has become the characteristic feature of the city that repels him. The thought is vague enough to suggest that, even to the narrator himself the reasons for abandoning the city are not transparent. Although the city’s antipathy is hinted at, his reasons for leaving the city remains deeply personal, suggesting a nebulous indeterminacy that mediates his action. Before leaving his apartment, he notices Shaman’s obituary in the newspaper with which he is about to wrap Amna’s gulab jamuns. After reading the “odd obituary” he offers a prayer for his dead friend—a Muslim custom—and then, “when it was time to go,” he departs (216).

As I have mentioned earlier, there is no after story after the departure. The final chapter narrates Shehzad’s first arrival, how he says “‘[h]aya doin’” at the immigration, and how from his cab he notices “blurred images framed by graffiti and rubbish” (215). Despite his initial disappointment from observing a homeless man with “the contents of his life spilling from a shopping cart,” he feels upbeat and optimistic when he arrives. This return to the moment of beginning can be aesthetically and formally schematized as a circular closure: the story ends where begins. Symbolically however, this formal circularity can be read as Shehzad’s entrapment in his NYC memory, which enacts its own totality by denying any other beginning in its space. As a traumatized subject, he must return to the object of trauma again and again to realize the meaning of his existence. The circular temporal logic enacted by the last chapter of the novel leaves us at the doorstep of two different figurations: following the footsteps of Lauren
Bernant we can interpret Chuck’s return to the source of his trauma—New York City—as a moment of “cruel optimism” (94); and, toeing the line of Marxist hermeneutics, we can also see it as a moment of imposing on the stylistic form of the novel the neoliberal logic an eternal capitalist future—the end of history, as Francis Fukuyama phrased it as. The first figuration’s limit is that it fails to convincingly explain Shehzad’s desertion of the city. Why, having invested in the object of love, does he withdraw from it only to return to it time and again? The second interpretation allows us to understand why there is no after-story. Unlike Changez whose apprehension of the US as an imperial power allows him to look for solidarity, Shehzad’s atomized self sees no usefulness in extending his community beyond his friends. The departure itself is his ultimate resistance. Devoid of any means of extending his community beyond his friends, all he can think of is leaving the site of trauma behind and return to his national space where he must re-live the memory of friendship and petty-bourgeois migrant life. Simply put, NYC’s cosmopolitan life remains his utopian moment to which he must return time and again. It is this element of his subjectivity that, despite his many similarities with Changez, also separates him from the latter. Shehzad caves in and re-immerses himself in a phantasmic return to the site of trauma, while Changez expands his arc of vision and engages in an anti-imperial politics. What informs the former’s resistance, therefore, is a kind of “cynical reason” (Jameson, Valences of the Dialectic 413) which parleys the reality for Shehzad in such a way that he is unable to dig himself out of his deep pessimism about any other possible future.

In his elegant discussion of Capital Vol. I in Representing Capital (2011), Jameson hypothesizes that Marx’s magisterial critique of capitalism posits two definitive features of capitalism’s response to its own history. The first deals with erasure: capitalism tries to erase its present violent history by positing it as its past. The second feature deals with the occlusion of a
non-capitalist future: by constantly postulating itself as futuristic, capitalism tries to block the arrival of a post-capitalist historical moment (104). By hiding the traces of its violence, and also by suppressing the imagination of a future utopia, capitalism offers itself as the only possible alternative to itself. Cynical reason marks the acceptance of capitalism’s narrative about itself. Despite knowing “everything that is wrong with late capitalism, all the structural toxicities of the system,” cynical reason declines indignation in “a kind of impotent lucidity” (Valences 413), rejecting the possibility of a different kind of future. The kind of postcolonial rage that makes Shehzad identify the “procrustean machine,” but stops him from rebelling against it can be slotted as the kind of cynical reason that Jameson addresses in The Valences. In his pragmatism, one notices the internalization of one of the grand fetishisms of the neoliberal era—the idea of the eternal capitalist future. In this sense, Shehzad’s desertion of NYC reflects his utopian desire to abandon a neoliberally conditioned racially divided city, whereas the absence of an after story marks the playing out of a cynical reason.

Like Shehzad, whose narrative leaves the reader in an indeterminate space, Changez too offers the reader similar enigmas. It is very difficult to assume what his narrative’s purpose is. There are moments when it seems as if his narrative is merely a subterfuge for holding the agent back until the evening so he can be stalked and ambushed. There are other moments when his narrative appears like a genuine tête-à-tête, aimed at unpacking a trauma. The indeterminacy of the closure, typical of postmodern fictions, resists definitive conclusions, thus obscuring not only the content of what is explored but also the politics of its representation as such. Nevertheless, the story of Changez’s return to Lahore marks a rather successful filiation. After mourning for Erica, and amidst the fear and anticipation of Pakistan’s impending war with India, Changez joins the local university and becomes a very popular lecturer of finance—the subject he studied
in the US. Now convinced that US imperialism is deeply detrimental to Pakistan’s independence, he professes “disengagement” from the US for “greater independence in Pakistan’s domestic and international affairs” (179). Although his students mostly include “bright, idealistic scholars” whom he addresses as “comrades,” implying his left-leaning politics, the alternative that he suggests involves demonstrations against the bully of the United States. The book’s final paragraph, however, renders Changez’s entire narrative unreliable and it is possible to read his narrative as a fictitious story constructed to allure the American agent into the dragnet. Since the last passage also blurs the distinction between Changez as a left-leaning university professor and him being an assassin possibly involved with right-wing religious groups, no determinate answer as to what constitutes Changez’s resistance is possible. What is indeed possible is an account of whether or not Changez’s return looks into an alternative outside capitalism. Having identified finance capital as the fundamental impetus behind American imperialism, the narrator of Hamid’s novel has no other alternative but to recede back to the nationalist quasi-religious struggle. It is not that Changez does not know what he is fighting against; it is, rather, having understood it all, he must channel his resistance through the nation/religion space because the existing reality conceals the other alternatives. The returns that close both novels embody hopes for an alternative mode of existence but the novels, having failed to find traces of that possibility in existing reality, remain trapped in what exists and what is dominant: the capital relation as expressed under neoliberalism.

It is difficult to definitively know what the narrators’ return to their national space means. *Home Boy* does not even embark on the task of narrating what happens once Shehzad returns. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist’s* narrativization of the return, on the other and, leaves us in limbo because no conclusion can be reached on the basis of the closure that is attempted in the work.
Irrespective of the confusion created by open closures, however, what can be surmised about them is that they stage powerful critiques of the world their narrators leave behind. It is here, in the desire of these works to critique not only cosmopolitan (neoliberally reorganized) New York City but also US imperialism, that one needs to locate their utopia. Written in the aftermath of United States’ war on terror, these novels could only collect the broken shards of the popular discontent against those imperialist wars. As I discuss in the next chapter, collective rage against neoliberalism was not voiced at that moment because the effects of neoliberal policies had not begun to come into full view. The war itself further obfuscated any clarity about the neoliberal policies that became ubiquitous after the financial crisis of 2008. The absence of a utopian collective practice is a mere reflection of the zeitgeist of the condition in which the novels are set. It is impossible to ignore the vague presence of it in Changez’s attempt to instill anti-imperial values in his students, but perhaps the actions of the two narrators—that they decline the comfort of the cosmopolitan liberal utopia and return home—illustrate a different kind of utopian desire, one that seeks to begin from the beginning.
Chapter Four

Conclusion: In the Ruins of Neoliberalism

Introduction: The Loss of Utopian Dreams

In the last three chapters, we have seen how contemporary South Asian novels aesthetically represent various local manifestations of neoliberalism, while simultaneously navigating its global structure—the feature that remains unmistakably present in all social contexts. No matter how we see neoliberalism, whether as a new logic of organizing society or as a new modality of subject production, what remains constant in its very fiber is the concentration of wealth and political power in the hands of the bourgeoisie—the power with which this ruling class disciplines and suppresses labor and produces subjugated beings who see their existences tied to the existence of capitalism. The underlying system that silences Afaz and subjugates his grief is the money relation, which, in essence is but another manifestation of the relation between capital and labor. Similarly, the unequal geographical relations that Balram sees as rural/feudal India’s fetters on progressive/urban India is a fetish that obfuscates capitalism’s systemic production of uneven space. Instead of mitigating the distance between the margin and center, capitalist globalization has made ubiquitous the unequal relation between center and margin, inner city and suburb, urban and rural, and core and periphery. The inequality that bends the back of the rural poor is the same inequality that immiserates the lives of the urban underclass. The relation between the owners of capital and the owners of labor power is conditioned by the same fundamental inequality that underlies the production of uneven geographical space, especially the production of rural-urban relations. It is because of this that Changez and Shehzad’s desertions of New York City appear as symbolic acts, signifying their resistance against the neoliberal city. NYC registers in their
consciousness as a shattered dream. That their memories of the city are so redolent with a sense of loss emanating from their personal encounters with antipathy—antipathy that is underwritten by race and class relations—symptomatically represents the trauma of having to encounter xenophobic racial profiling. In a city whose demographic history is marked by the vectors of exclusion, it is only expected that Pakistani Muslim youth will, in the aftermath of September 11 attacks, find themselves racially and ethnically profiled, harassed and, even, imprisoned without any viable cause. What remains well-hidden from these Muslim youth is the unequal distribution of precariousness, the class logic of which only becomes visible to them when they themselves are subjected to cultural exclusion and economic disenfranchisement.

None of these works, it needs to be emphasized, explicitly critiques neoliberalism. Their thematization of certain elements of neoliberalism makes it possible to read them as neoliberal allegories, the presentations of which make it possible to recuperate narrative traces of neoliberalism’s adverse effect on people’s lives. Yet, if there is one thing that all these narratives point towards, it is the process of masking the systemic production of inequality. In the case of Afaz, the reality of the monetization of society remains concealed to him. In the case of Balram, what is blocked from his consciousness is the gruesome reality of the neoliberal city built on the labor of the homeless urban migrants, who, like his father, have been driven out of their rural homes by poverty and oppressive landlords. Similarly, Changez and Shezad do not see their complicity in the financial system that comprises the heart of global imperialist structure. It is only at the moment of crisis that we begin to see neoliberalism’s forms of appearance for what they truly are.

There is another important homology among the novels I discuss in my work: the absence of utopia. It is deeply symptomatic that none of the Anglophone South Asian fictions discussed
here represents any entrenched collective utopian project. Even if some of them allude to such visions—*The White Tiger*, for instance, vaguely refers to the Naxalites—it is done in an ironic tone, only to ridicule to the futility of such dreams and projects. Just as neoliberalism itself forestalls potential utopian visions by propagating the idea that there is no alternative, so too do allegories of neoliberalism thematize absence of collective resistance by re-rehearsing idiosyncratic acts of defiance. Shehzad does not show any inclination to voice his discontent against the capitalist-imperialist structure he vaguely recognizes as the source of his suffering, whereas what Changez aims to achieve remains veiled under the indeterminacy of the novel’s open closure. Faced with no other alternative, Afaz’s only choice is to quietly return to the service of the wealthy and the powerful. Balram, true to his entrepreneurial spirit, can only think of a secular and utilitarian education as a viable alternative to state sponsored corruption, rather than a systemic change.

Zafar, the mercurial protagonist of Zia Haider Rahman’s brilliant first novel *In the Light of What We Know*, which also figures a critique of neoliberalism, turns into an eternal exile, moving from one place to another, trying to find a place where he can fit in. Disappointed by the elite liberal universe which abandons him after deceiving him, Zafar embraces displacement as his permanent condition, leaving behind the world of speculation and finance. His deliberate departure from speculative banking needs to be read as a critical presentation of the neoliberal financialized world. But, like other allegories of neoliberalism, *In the Light*, too, gets trapped in the singularity of existence, producing no solidarity, presenting no schema for the collective dream of transcending the ubiquitous capitalist norm. Despite being educated in some of the most prestigious institutions of the world, despite his familiarity with heavyweight philosophers and thinkers, and despite his working-class pedigree, Zafar is unable to see through the fetish of
capitalism’s eternal present, which produces him as a lonely, singular entity with no potential for collective overcoming.

The atomized individual is also the object of exploration in Amitav Ghosh’s tour de force the Ibis Trilogy. The three novels that comprise the trilogy—Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke and Flood of Fire—despite their differences in stylistics and themes, culminate in the metamorphosis of Zachary Reid, who from being a carpenter in the docks of Baltimore rises to become an opium trader—a true-blue capitalist—in the final segment of Flood of Fire. The constant evocation of the correspondence between past and present, the homology between the liberal and the neoliberal moment, is what casts this trilogy into the mold of an allegory. Ghosh’s trilogy brilliantly zooms in on the past to expand our understanding of the present—imperialist war, self-congratulatory attitudes of venture capitalists, the corruption of political leadership, exile and displacement, ecological crisis ushered in by industrial production and cut-throat competitiveness to overcome poverty. In the Ibis trilogy, we find a historical depth absent from the other neoliberal allegories, providing greater analytical purchase on the structural dynamics of capital and empire. However, despite the novel’s panoramic reconstruction of nineteenth-century’s globalized world it shares the same notable omission that marks each of the texts examined thus far: an inability to figure collective utopian practices.56

Why are these allegories of neoliberalism, which are surely invested in the project of critiquing finance and inequality, so uninterested in representing collective utopian projects? Perhaps, there are both historical and economic answers of this question. Historically, neoliberalism’s triumphant march was accompanied by the implosion of socialist states in Africa, Asia and Europe. The triumphant march of neoliberalism across the planet was made possible by the collapse of the socialist block in Europe between 1989 and 1991, the dismantling of Keynesian
welfare states in Africa and Asia in the 1980s and 1990s and the large scale economic reforms in communist China and social-democratic India in the 1970s and 1980s. As communist regimes in Poland, East Germany, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia fell one by one between 1989 and 1991, the narrative of communism’s failure gained ground, turning into a conviction about socialism/communism’s inherent inability to organize society around its utopian ideology. The narrative of capitalism’s victory over communism and socialism allowed neoliberalism to gain ground not only in politics and economic strategies but also in educational institutions where the idea of market economy nestled so strongly that it became difficult to question capitalism in any meaningful way. Devoid of a place in state and political institutions, the idea of economic parity and social justice for all human beings began to disappear from the main frame of politics, only to be found in marginalized formations and in the niche and lonely quarters of academia.

If the political defeat of communism/socialism was one element that allowed neoliberalism to expand globally, the other aspect that made it difficult to dream dangerously about revolution was cultural retreat. Aided by the postmodernist fetishization of difference which made it difficult to assert one’s solidarity with a grand project, neoliberal culture universalized the notion of the atomized subject entirely engaged in the process of achieving personal goals. The dwindling production of utopian narratives is an inevitable outcome of the internalization of a neoliberal postmodernist culture that rejects the notion of the collective pursuit of political and cultural goals. The strange correlation between the advent of neoliberal capitalism and the departure of utopian dreams has been cautiously noted by Jameson. In his perceptive essay “An American Utopia,” he observes that the production of utopias has decreased remarkably in the last few decades (1). Although it has become customary to present dystopian descriptions full of fantabulous moments
of the destruction of the earth, imagining the end of capitalism and the beginning of a new era marked by equality remain outside the frame of imagination of contemporary writers.\textsuperscript{57} The overproduction of dystopias on the one hand and the obliteration of utopian visions and politics from recent cultural memory on the other has contributed to the creation of a defeatist culture where “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2) appears to be the only condition of possibility.\textsuperscript{58}

The absence of utopian politics in the allegories of neoliberalism, then, is an expression of a world where the supremacy of the neoliberal market appears uncontestable. Written before neoliberalism’s widespread destruction of the planet began to appear clearly when even the core capitalist countries started showing symptoms of widespread disenchantment about the mantra of freedom and equality doled out by the market, these novels predominantly represent the moments of neoliberalism’s temporary social and political victory, depicting the struggles of people in a society administered by neoliberal cultural parameters. The significance of these novels’ presentation lies in the manner in which they point towards the failures of neoliberalism and its concomitant culture.

One can always read their inability to communicate the collective utopia as a symptom of their formal and thematic complicity: being the products of the culture of neoliberalism, how could these works remain immune to its ideological inscriptions? Yet, as I try to suggest through my readings of some contemporary South Asian fictions, such easy conclusions should be avoided. If these works fail to articulate, clearly, a utopian vision, it is because an articulation of such a vision during the high neoliberal era would appear affected, artificial. The reason why Shezad, Ali, Balram and Zafar do not form any collective space is because, as atomized neoliberal subjects, they have internalized neoliberalism’s habitual suspicion of collective utopian dreams and, consequently, are unable to find any redemptive value in collective actions. Written when
neoliberalism’s crisis began to show up but before a widespread understanding of its climacteric effects, these works seem more invested in depicting the limits of neoliberalism than locating collective utopian practices. Hence my observation that we need to locate the significance of their representation in their critical presentation of neoliberalism.

This observation is fortified by the reappearance, albeit in limited scope, of utopian collective practices in more recent South Asian fictions. As neoliberalism’s blazing trail of destruction appears more clearly before our eyes and as crises become intensified, the neoliberal states’ response to these crises become more desperate and draconian. It is no coincidence that the terrible environmental crisis and extreme inequality have been accompanied by the rise of fascism and a far-right extremism that not only denies climate crisis but also blames the growing inequality on immigrants and poor working-class population. It seems, as if, instead of dismantling the veils of fetishism, late neoliberal crisis has further expanded fetishism’s hold.

Perhaps our collective anxiety about the topsy-turvy world of the late-neoliberal era has been best captured by two recently published novels that depict not only the adverse impact of capitalism on climate but also the poisonous effects of fascism on society. The first of these two, Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), explores the raw wounds of the Indian nation through the experiences of two remarkable characters—Anjum, a hermaphrodite born and brought up in Old Delhi, and Tilottama, a rebellious woman whose unmarried teenage mother first abandons and then adopts her. It is through their experiences that the traumatic history of contemporary India becomes available to the reader. The second novel, *The Gun Island* (2019) by Ghosh engages with global issues, most notably global ecological crisis, planetary displacement and capitalist greed. By reworking an old Bengali myth—the tale of Manasa and Chand Shadagar—this novel sets in motion an adventure that works like a meta-narrative capacious
enough to touch upon vast swaths of history and experience, asking vexing questions about the relation between nature and commerce, humans and non-humans, myth and reality, to subtly suggest that the unfettered power of commerce that we observe today is the root of our agony.

These works are somewhat different from the ones I have discussed earlier in another sense as well: standing amidst the ruins of neoliberalism, these two novels also point towards a possible collective future. They have their differences, of course. Roy’s work is firmly rooted in India’s internal injuries whereas Ghosh’s cli-fi takes the whole world as its setting, navigating the past to creatively zoom in on the present moment. Yet, they do look into the conditions of possibilities in their own ways: *The Ministry* does so by imagining the possibility of creating a counter-space inhabited by the traumatized, the damaged, the oppressed, and the abandoned, while the *Gun Island* does the same by stitching into its narrative the possibility of collective awakening, by narrativizing the possibility of a post-humanist future. In this concluding chapter, I will read these allegories of late-neoliberalism not only in terms of their presentations of capitalism’s crises but also in relation to their utopian visions, so as to argue that these two novels hint towards a new structure of feeling, a feeling that has grown out of the ruins of neoliberalism and is looking towards a post-neoliberal future.

**Utopian Visions in *The Gun Island* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

“[T]he world of today presents all the symptoms of demonic possession,” is how Professoressa Giacinta Schiavon or Cinta—a character from Ghosh’s latest novel *The Gun Island*—verbalizes her anxiety about humanity’s inability properly assess the danger that looms large over our heads. In a sense, Cinta’s description of human beings’ incognizance about the impending danger points towards the operative fetishisms that distort our apprehension of reality,
hazing us into believing that the crisis threatening our existence is unexceptional, mundane. It is no coincidence, then, that the novel’s plot is organized around its protagonist Dinanath Dutta’s awakening from the demonic possession that stymied his ability to understand how human-induced environmental crisis is threatening life on this planet. As Dutta, a dealer in rare books and antiquities, visits Kolkata to recover from heartbreak, he is prodded by one of his old acquaintances to find out more about the ‘Bonduki Sadagar’ (the Gun Merchant) who, according to that acquaintance, is a mythological figure like ‘Chand Sadagar’ who is said to have escaped overseas to flee from the punishment from Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes (5). Pursuit of the legend of the ‘Gun Merchant’ sets Dutta on a long and harrowing journey that takes him to different parts of the planet—the Sundarbans, New York, Los Angeles and finally to Venice—where he observes not only a trail of ecological destruction but also of human trafficking, war and migration.

Thematically, the novel deals with three of the most familiar tropes of late capitalism—environmental crisis, migration and commerce—yet ones that are rarely brought together on the same narrative canvas. The myth that exists at the center of the novel’s thematic structure itself is a tropological exploration of the antagonistic relation between nature and capital, capturing not only the stubbornness of the merchant class but also their hubris and insolence for which they become the targets of nature. This foundational myth which comes from the ancient Indian epic The Mahavarata has been locally appropriated in many different forms of Bengali and Asamese folklore, all narrating the stubbornness of Chand Sadagar—a merchant—who declines to show proper respect to the goddess of the snake. This myth has appeared and reappeared in many different forms in the Bengal delta in different historical junctures, especially during difficult times (Haq 42). What is even more important about the complicated relationship between
Manasa Devi and Chand Sadagar is that the former is seen as the subaltern class’s deity, protecting the poor from the adversity of nature. In other words, the relation between Manasa and the Merchant is one that is already underwritten by the logic of class, where the merchant’s insult of the subaltern goddess sets her on the path of revenge. In the novel, this antagonism is reworked into a much broader one embracing the whole planet, figuring the metabolic rift between nature and capital.60

That the myth of Banduki Sadagar is a site of struggle between nature and commerce is clearly gestured to right at the beginning of Gun Island when Kanai, the novel’s narrator Dinanath’s distant relative, introduces him to the myth saying:

[E]very merchant who’s ever sailed out of Bengal has had to pass through the Sundarbans—there’s no other way to reach the sea. The Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that’s exactly where the war between profit and Nature is fought. (8)

The idea of a “war” between nature and profit conjures up the image of the world in which capital is positioned against nature. The evocation of this theme very clearly situates Ghosh’s novel as a neoliberal allegory. In the latter part of the novel, when the pursuit of the legend of the Gun Merchant finally takes Deen to Venice where the historical figure on whom the myth is based also took shelter in the Sixteenth Century, the same idea of the war between nature and profit is relayed once again, this time more compellingly. Sitting on a bench near the Piazza San Marco, the narrator gets lost in a dream that gives him a clue to the mystery of the merchant. He understands that Manasa Devi was not ‘a goddess’ in the conventional sense of the term; rather, she was an arbiter between humans and non-humans whose job was to maintain a balance between the two. The merchant’s refusal to submit to her dominion was a clear indication of his
unwillingness to submit to the rules by which the balance of life was maintained. If, propelled by
greed and hubris, the Gun Merchant and his like disavowed the goddess, the age-old boundary
between the human and the non-human would collapse, and the balance of life would tilt. Hence
the significance of the pursuit and persecution of the Gun Merchant in the distant foreign land. In
the narrator’s words: “if he, and others like him, were to disavow her authority, all those unseen
boundaries would vanish, and humans—driven as was the Merchant, by the quest for profit—
would recognize no restraint” (153).

The emphasis placed on profit in both these passages leaves little confusion as to what is
implied by the idea of war between nature and capital. On the one hand, it points towards what
Marx described as the irreparable “metabolic rift” between society and nature and, on the other,
towards the antagonistic relationship between nature and capital. What is anticipated by those
passages is the devastating effect of profiteering in a society ruled by merchants and their allies.
It is not that the author himself is greatly convinced by Marxist discussions about the relation
between nature and capital. Indeed, Ghosh’s own position (in this novel at least) can be best
described as a kind of anti-imperialist post-humanism. What these passages symbolically capture
are the hostile and confrontational relationships between human beings and nature in a society
driven by the logic of profit. It is here that The Gun Island articulates its critique of
neoliberalism.

If, gesturing towards the metabolic rift is one of the novel’s strategies for depicting the
ruins of neoliberalism, the other strategy of doing so is cataloguing some of the most destructive
and inexplicable catastrophes unleashed by nature. Taking an inventory of nature’s destructiveness
is one of the most interesting narrative features of Ghosh’s work. While the depiction of natural
calamities such as cyclones, tornadoes, draughts, forest fires and so on allows the novel to illustrate
the ravages of nature, such a narrative strategy also provides an outlet for channeling collective empathy by imagining shared victimhood. *Gun Island*’s narrative closure, which depicts pro-immigrant and anti-immigrant vessels facing off south of Venice in the Adriatic seas either to welcome or to chase away refugees, illustrates not only the antipathy which migration can evoke but also the empathy and shared victimhood that can powerfully nullify the threats of xenophobia. However, the novel’s articulation of a utopian vision is not limited to this liberal optimism about the human capacity for goodness. What underwrites this utopian moment of welcoming a refugee boat full of migrants from all the troubled regions of the world is a broader post-humanist desire for a world of harmonious coexistence between humans and non-humans. The moment in which the refugee boat makes its entrance, with a storm of circling birds above and waves of bioluminescence underneath, with a robed woman commanding all the living entities—“bhutas”—to enact a miracle, is described in the novel as a long expected “miracolo” which will wake people up and make them see what is “happening in the world.” “[T]his could be the moment,” says Palash, a Bangladeshi immigrant, “when everything changes” (284).

The stubborn hope for a miraculous change, thus, enacts its own counter-logic against the neoliberal message of hopelessness and despair. The obscene image of the Darwinian world that neoliberalism so effectively conjures up to compartmentalize and alienate people, meets its utopian counterpart in Palash and Deen, who, standing amidst the ruins of capitalism, courageously hope for a hospitable world where humans and non-humans can harmoniously coexist. It is this utopian vision of a world of coexistence, the world as an ark giving refuge to all beings and things, that allows *The Gun Merchant* to be interpreted as a novel guided by a utopian impulse. If ‘utopia’ is indeed a non-place as well as a “good place” (Ameel 786), the refugee vessel surrounded by birds and animals and steered by a Moses-like Ethiopian woman does create the optical illusion of a
utopian space. But this is a moment that cannot on its own generate utopian transformation. What it offers, instead, is a catalyst-like mediation: a moment which exists to mediate the transformations of other moments. Utopia, here, arrives in the form of time, not space. Its potentiality depends on how other successive moments seize upon it. The novel thus leaves us at the threshold of miracle, with the feeling that something good may happen. It is here that the novel escapes the limits of its dystopian backdrop and flings itself into the realm of optimism. Unlike *The Ministry*, whose utopian impulse comes from the trauma of being rendered spaceless, prompting its protagonists to organize and produce a material space, *The Gun Island* seems to rely on the symbolic import of a moment to communicate utopian possibility that emerges in the radical disruption of capitalist temporality. Devoid of particularity—we do not know where the new awakening will take place and when or whether that new moment will summon into existence its own miraculous event—the utopian impulse of Ghosh’s closure leaves us hanging in its globalist moment whose potential for collective catharsis remains limited.

Such a description cannot be applied to Roy’s second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Writing about the difference between the Indian writer’s two novels, Joan Acocella mentions that *God of Small Things* is about private and personal grief, while *The Ministry*, by contrast, is about national grief, about India’s polity and public sorrows (n. pag.). Acocella’s portrayal of Roy’s recent novel as a mourning for India’s national loss seems accurate when we look at it from the vantage point of national literature. It is, after all, a novel about trauma—the trauma that has risen out of the Indian nation’s communal riots, genocide, domestic war, patriarchal oppression and casteism. Roy’s fragmented narrative, which is an assemblage of stories, obituaries, poetry, news items, legal documents and music criticism, formally corresponds to these multiple national losses, gathering together every shard of pain that has come to haunt the
nation’s collective memory. Such an estimation also gestures towards the possibility of reading this novel as a tragedy, as a narrative exploration of trauma and loss. The moments in which characters recount losses are too many to ignore—whether of individualized acts of discrimination, or of communal pogroms in Gujarat, the sustained violence of Kashmir’s military occupation, upper caste violence against Dalits, or the structural discrimination of the BJP—producing the novel’s somber and traumatized tone. What problematizes such a characterization, however, is the novel’s closure, which, by exuding a serene feeling of hope and happiness, stubbornly resists the characterization of the novel as a tragic one. It is due to this utopian closure that Ana Christina Mendes and Lisa Lau have read this novel as the “celebration of the creative agency of the precariat” (70).

The precariat—the vulnerable group of people without permanent employment, broadly synonymous with Marx’s “surplus population”—occupy a prominent position in the novel. Both the protagonists of The Ministry are indeed economically and socially marginalized, although their economic marginalization has come, in part, from the conscious choices they have made (raising, again, the neoliberal fetish of choice independent of structural determinates). Other major characters, because of their religion, caste, gender, sexuality and class position, are also marginal, although this marginality is not complicit, nor is it docile, because it empowers them to envision a parallel world that is more humane and empathetic than the one that lies outside the reach of their creative reimagination. What binds all these people together is trauma—the trauma and horror of being spared from death.

Anjum, who grows up as a boy in a Muslim family in Old Delhi, remains confused about her transsexual identity until one day she meets another of her own gender in the market. Later she runs away from her parents’ house to join other ‘hijras’ in ‘Khawabgah.’ Although her body
remains a constant source of anxiety and agony, her most traumatic experience comes when she
goes to visit Ahmedabad where she is unwittingly caught up in the 2002 mass murders of Muslims
passively if not actively overseen by Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujurat, now Prime
Minister of India. Anjum’s companion, a seventy-year-old flower seller, is killed by Hindu
extremists. She, ironically, is spared because of the religious belief that killing a ‘hijra’ brings bad
luck to Hindus (62-63). Unable to tackle the trauma of witnessing the communal riot of
Ahmedabad where Muslim men were killed with tridents and knives and women raped and burned,
Anjum takes shelter in a graveyard, trying to piece together her life that has been shattered by the
trauma of being spared.

The novel’s intricate story also introduces us to S. Tilottoma or Tilo in medias res. Born
into a Catholic Christian family to an unmarried teenager, Tilo grows into a free-spirited61 woman
whose university life brings her close to three men of completely different disposition and
profession who all find her attractive and fascinating. Tilo, however, falls in love with Musa, a
Kashmiri Muslim who later turns into a militant after his wife and daughter are killed by the Indian
military in a random shootout. Through Musa Tilo is introduced to the complex reality of Kashmir,
an occupied territory whose struggle for freedom makes its people the target of the Indian state’s
ferocity and brutal violence. During her clandestine romance with Musa, who has by then become
a legendary freedom fighter and a fugitive, she gets arrested, as she witnesses the brutal murder of
a teenage boy who stayed with them and cooked—a boy who Musa doted upon. In police custody,
Tilo is brutally tortured and is later saved because her two other friends—Biplab Dasgupta who
now serves in the army intelligence and Nagraj Hariharan or Naga who is now a famous
journalist—use their influence to pull her out of the situation. She later marries Naga, in part to
cover up her ongoing active participation in the Kashmiri independence struggle, but is so
traumatized by her memories that she is unable to settle down in life. Like Anjum, she too leaves her apartment to settle down in the corner of the graveyard where the former has established a funeral service and a shelter home named the Jannat Guest House.

In order to understand the utopian impulse of the novel we need to understand how Jannat Guest House operates as a counter-site where the hierarchical relations of society are either suspended or turned on their head. Anjum herself tells a visitor that she is “Anjuman”—a gathering place, a many. “I am a mehfil,” she announces, “I’m a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing” (4). This reference to herself as a mehfil is of course a reference to her body: as a hijra she contains multitudes. Yet, it is also possible to read this spatialization of the self as a collectivizing practice. Instead of seeing the self as an atomic individual only invested in advancement of self-interest, which Anjum does up until the moment she experiences the trauma, she is able to posit the self as connected to, and constituted by, the presence of the many. The creation of Jannat therefore is an extension of the collective body in the realm of space, where she produces a space according to the logic of the utopian understanding of the body.62

As the Jannat Guest House becomes a sanctuary not only for human beings—most of whom were traumatized, if not abandoned and forgotten—but also for non-humans and the non-living, its difference from “Duniya,” the outside world, also begins to grow. Zainab, an orphan whom Anjum discovered and raised at Khwabgah with the other transgendered residents of that place, and Saddam, a lower caste Hindu whose father was killed by an upper-caste Hindu mob, turn the graveyard into a sanctuary for injured animals—“A Noah’s Ark” of sorts (399). The residents of Jannat begin growing vegetables, although nobody is particularly keen on eating them. Tilo, after settling down in Jannat, begins giving lessons to poor people’s children where they come to learn “arithmetic, drawing, computer graphics … a bit of basic science, English and
eccentricity” (397). A pool with no water in it is built to compete with the ones that are in place in rich people’s house. With “a People’s Pool, a People’s Zoo and a People’s School” the life in the old graveyard begin to thrive (400). This distinction is maintained in the nomenclature as well. “Jannat,” in Urdu, means heaven, while “Duniya,” means the earth. The desire to turn Jannat Guest House into a heaven for those who are traumatized/marginalized by Duniya is visible in the manner in which Anjum reorganizes the abandoned graveyard. The outside world ravaged by the marauding army of right-wing zealots led by “Gujrat ka Lalla” stands in stark contrast with the world inside the graveyard, where the hierarchies of the outside world cease to operate.

The difference between the dystopian outside and utopian inside is maintained in another way: through the redistributive logic of happiness. One of most fascinating features of *The Ministry* is that it turns one of foundational myths of capitalism, the myth of the pursuit of happiness, on its head. The characters of *The Ministry*, especially those who live in Duniya, seem acutely unhappy and aggressive. Amrik Singh, the Indian army officer who used to call himself the “lund” or the phallus “of the Indian Government” (336) and reveled in torturing and killing Kashmiris, shoots his family members before shooting himself while living in the US as an asylum seeker. It seems his excessively violent life pushes him towards the brink of self-destruction. Biplab Dasgupta, the patriotic intelligence officer who was Tilo and Musa’s friend during their university days, turns to alcohol for comfort, losing his job, his wife and two daughters in the process. His service in Kashmir finally comes back to leave a haunting trail in his life. The madness of money and success, it appears, not only shatters other, less fortunate people’s lives; it also seems to destroy the life of those who immerse themselves in the pursuit of success in the conventional sense of the term.

Anjum, too, whose experience of horror in the outside world leaves her traumatized, unable to sleep, only regains her composure when she founds her new universe in the graveyard. After
spending numerous sleepless nights in Duniya, Tilo finally begins to sleep peacefully at night. The novel describes her transformed life in the following manner: “She worked a long day and, for the first time in her life, slept a full night” (397). By emptying the Duniya—the outside world of war, religious fanaticism, conspiracy, occupation, consumption and comfort—of happiness, Roy’s novel not only exposes the vacuousness of the monetized society but also questions the fundamental purpose behind the creation of such a world. It is not surprising, then, that the concluding passage of *The Ministry* is acutely optimistic and peaceful, evocative of a harmonious Elysium,

    By the time they got back, the lights were all out and everybody was asleep. Everybody, that is, except for Guih Kyom the dung beetle. He was wide awake and on duty, lying on his back with his legs in the air to save the world in case the heavens fell. But even he knew that things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to.

    Because Miss Jabeen, Miss Udaya Jabeen, was come. (438)

The novel’s response to the threats of “saffron” fascism, military occupation, and mindless corporate destruction of India’s ecology is serene optimism, as though Jebeen’s urination and return to her room with her foster mother Anjum is a sign of utopian prospect in itself. But Guih Kyom’s wait for the sky to fall and Jabeen’s return home also operate on a tropological level where the dung beetle points towards a harmonious a post-anthropocentric future and the presence of Udaya Jabeen—whose mother was a Maoist militant who left her in the mix of urban people so she could go back to her forest to reclaim her lost land—gestures to a radical, revolutionary future. As Anjum, Tilo and Revaty’s daughter, Udaya Jabeen functions as a symbol of hope for the world. Through the convergence of three radical women vesting their hope in a single child Roy offers the possibility of a utopian future about to arrive through the next generation.
Both novels leave us at the threshold of hope, and in their optimism the utopian tenor of these novels makes itself heard. But, it also needs to be taken into consideration that these novels dream of a better future by standing amidst the climacteric destruction of ecology and the fabric of social life. The toxic erosion of the Sundarbans, the succession of massive hurricanes and storm surges in the Bengal Delta, the infestations and wildfires in California, and the sea-level rise in the beautiful city of Venice which is destined to be submerged in the near future—all these moments that appear in *Gun Island* are a reminder of the ecological reality we live in. *The Ministry,* similarly, begins by bringing into purview the problem of species extinction by telling the compelling story of the extinction of the “white-backed vultures” (1), who drop dead one by one after eating the flesh of cows that have been injected with diclofenac. Simultaneously, the narrative of expropriation of the indigenous people from the forests which have been their home for thousands of years presents a narrative of neoliberalism’s “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 148–49), geared on the one hand towards the production of cheap nature (Moore 112, 117) and on the other towards the creation of the immiserated reserve army of capital discussed in detail in the last chapter. The inventory of the processes of dispossession and violence that are brought to the surface by both these novels allow us to grasp the magnitude of the crisis we live in today. Still, as I will explore further at the end of this chapter, the hope that is corroborated by the closures of both the novels that I have discussed here, point towards the utopian possibility of collectivization from the ground up. It is here, in the collective waking up from “the demonic possession” and rebuilding the world laid to waste by neoliberalism that our human potential lies.

**Conclusion: In the Ruins of Neoliberalism**
What appeared three decades ago as a vague structure of feeling about an ascending neoliberal world order has now catapulted into an undeniable conviction about neoliberalism’s devastating effects on human societies and the planet. The two novels discussed above creatively explore some of these effects, making available the trauma that arises from ecological destruction, displacement, state and communal violence, and xenophobic nationalism. They also depict how, despite stubborn resistances from the hegemonic structure, ordinary people try to rebuild society from below, making meaningful lives in a place reserved for the dead. As the capitalist drive for surplus sucks the life out of the planet, these novels show oppressed and disenfranchised people trying to turn abandoned spaces into sanctuaries for all beings, creating interspecies bonds in the process. The utopian impulse of these novels, therefore, needs to be schematized as a reaction against the process of turning the planet into a massive necropolis governed by the logic of capital. Interestingly, these fictional representations correspond to a broader sense of apocalyptic future echoed by a number of theoretical propositions in circulation today.

Wendy Brown, in a number of works published in the last five years, has repeatedly sounded the alarm bell to suggest that western democratic institutions may not survive the assaults from neoliberal economic and cultural transformations. In *Undoing the Demos* (2015), a book that attracted both applause and criticism from the left, she draws upon Foucault’s lectures on neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics* to suggest that neoliberalism needs to be understood not simply as a set of economic policies, as is often done, but also as “a peculiar form of reason” that is “quietly undoing the basic elements of democracy” (*Undoing* 17). Although her core argument is centered around the production of *homo economicus* [economic human] or “human capital,” (32) what she persistently maintains throughout is the idea that “liberal democratic
institutions, practices, and habits” may not survive the neoliberal “economization” process (17). This conjunction between the forces of neoliberalization and the destruction of democratic politics is also maintained in a recently published essay where she claims that neoliberalism “flourishes where politics, and especially government, are absent” (‘Neoliberalism’s Frankenstein’ 13). One of the key components of her most recent discussions of neoliberalism is the notion that the “the catastrophic present” was not an intended outcome but accidental “Frankensteinian creation” of neoliberal thought (In the Ruins of Neoliberalism 9-10). The conjunction between market freedom and traditional moral values which figureheads of neoliberalism like Hayek promulgated through their writings, later spawned into the kind of hysteric white working class “ressentiment” that led to the political rise of fascist right-wing leaders who are ruling the world today. To understand the rise of xenophobic right-wing fascism, she maintains, we need to be able to track how the ideas of thinkers like Hayek unintentionally contributed to the corrosion of the pillars of democracy. It is, therefore, important that we apprehend the moral underpinnings of neoliberalism as solidly as we understand its economic and political rationality.

This is how Wendy Brown puts it in The Ruins:

If neoliberalism is conceived only as a political rationality featuring the ubiquity of markets and homo oeconomicus (my claim in Undoing the Demos), we cannot grasp the affective investments in privileges of whiteness and First World existence in the nation and national culture or in traditional morality. We also cannot grasp the ways that the hierarchies and exclusions of “tradition” legitimately challenged democratic equality in the name of both family values and freedom. This means that we cannot grasp the new formations of subjectivity and politics that are, in good part, neoliberal effects. (182)
Brown’s critique marks a definitive departure from her own earlier prognosis of neoliberalism as a totalizing economic logic corroding the foundations of democracy. Additionally, it also shows how she struggles to account for the rise of Donald Trump and the fascist right—a historical event that made it difficult to see neoliberalism simply as an economic logic. By arguing that neoliberalism is not simply a political and economic issue but also as a moral one (Ruins 20-21), she tries to address her earlier oversight about neoliberalism’s moral correlative. Her late realization about neoliberalism’s moral logic, also allows us to see the fundamental weakness of Foucauldian interpretation of neoliberalism which seeks to understand neoliberalism through the lens of governmentality. Neoliberalism does not advance a new governmental logic but operates through the state and other institutions that are already in place, which they use to redistribute social wealth so as to concentrate it into the hands of the capitalist class. Had Brown looked not merely into the rhetorical charlatanism of Trump and other fascist leaders but into the content of their actions, she would have noticed that these totalitarian right-wing leaders and their conservative quasi-religious parties have been the staunchest defenders of capital. Beginning from Trump’s trillion-dollar gift to the corporate oligarchy in the form of tax cut to Modi’s extremely corporation-friendly economic policies, the actions of these totalitarian rulers leave ample proof that the protection of corporate capital is their first priority. Brown fails to notice how what appears like a restoration of lost white male privilege is often a vulnerable posture to defend the last remnants of what is left of the promises of collective prosperity—a piece of land, a low paid job, a tattering small business whose existence is threatened, an old habit that is seen as lost, a community scavenged by desertion, and a lost culture which exists more in memory than in an actual space or body.
Neoliberalism’s turn towards what Williams aptly describes as “the residual,”\textsuperscript{63} therefore, is no coincidence, because a turn towards what is lost, and bygone is an effective way of draping over what is emergent and utopian. What Brown sees as neoliberalism’s accidental unleashing of the weapons of family values and traditions is indeed its well-thought out strategy of suppressing utopian politics by bringing within its orbit those who themselves are the victims of neoliberalism’s economic policies. Its limits notwithstanding, Brown’s observations in In the Ruins allow us to track how the history and trajectory of neoliberalism has taken a sharp turn in the last four years. What, even two decades ago, seemed like an economic policy of a few bankers and world leaders, now appears to be a global culture and ideology whose ubiquity cannot be questioned. Even those whose moral universe and religious beliefs seem antagonistic to the Mammonist dictates of neoliberalism now revel in the possibility of queuing up behind billionaires and corrupt politicians who offer lip service to religious purity. The coalescing of the working class around nationalist and religious politics does indeed point towards a new alignment in the struggle against global capitalism where we see the subjects oppressed by the unequal exchange between labor and capital standing in solidarity with the forces of capital.

Anybody who has taken a close look at the history of neoliberalism around the globe should have no confusion about its pedigree, its conservative and totalitarian make-up. In Chile, the laboratory where neoliberal policies were first tested, the military dictator Auguste Pinochet’s government’s cultural inclinations leaned hard towards the right. Pinochet himself believed that he was engaged in a “holy war” which gave him the license to persecute and murder opposition members with impunity (Rector 189). In Bangladesh, as I discuss above, the assassination of Bnagabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman led towards not only economic conservatism (neoliberalism) but also cultural conservatism marked by the rise of Islamic
fundamentalism. In India, the emergence of neoliberalism was accompanied by the fortification of the ideologies of Hindutva, thus suggesting a connection between the forces of the market and the forces of religion. In Pakistan too, the radicalization of culture was accompanied by the neoliberalization of the economy, both taking place under the aegis of military dictatorship. As early as 1996, noticing the conjunction between the liberalization process and the rise of BJP, Aijaz Ahmad wrote that the “liberalization” that the Indian state is leaning towards is not a social democratic liberalization but is “the pristine, dog-eat-dog, nineteenth-century variety” of liberalism “as it has been resurrected for our own time by the likes of Hayek and Friedman” (213). This liberalization, he noted, was carried out by the same dominant structures that supported the kind of communal politics the BJP was engaged in. Neoliberalization was always conservative in terms of politics and practice; what was new about the neoliberalism of 1990s and 2000s was how, by seizing on the ideology of there is no alternative, it was able to draw in the old political left that saw redemptive values in democratic practices. The contemporary fascist turn of neoliberalism, therefore, is a retreat to neoliberalism’s elemental core. Unable to tackle its recurring crises, which has most explicitly expressed itself in ecological crisis and unprecedented inequality, the forces of a market economy have now turned to disenfranchised workers and destitute rural population to delay the birth of any new project that seeks to build a future outside the guarded premises of capitalism.

The superfluity of fascist tendencies that Brown identifies as a threat to democracy is but one of the twin crises that plague the world today. Capitalism’s expansion on a global scale has been accompanied by ecological crises of an unforeseen scale. In his “Foreword” to Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities, Dipesh Chakrabarty warns us about the fate of humanity in an era of climate crisis:
The idea that we may be living through the beginnings of a series of overlapping and major environmental crises for humans all over the planet gains ground every day. The climate of the planet is changing with global warming, the rising seas are getting more acidic, the rate of species extinction is approaching a danger mark, the incidence of extreme weather events appears to be on the rise, and there are discussions—serious and alarming—of water and food security. (xv)

Chakrabarty’s proviso echoes his earlier concerns about the fate of humanity in the era of the Anthropocene—the age of human extinction. In his much-discussed essay “Climate of History: Four Theses” which was published in 2009 in Critical Inquiry, he foregrounded the idea that the scientific conclusions about climate change challenge not only the writing of history but also “the ideas about the human,” forcing on us the burden of rethinking both humanities and historiography (198). Not only does the Anthropocene collapse the boundary between human history and natural history (201), it also requires us to put the “global histories of capital” in conversation with “the species history of the humans” (212). Our limited understanding of history, according to Chakrabarty, can be addressed only if we are willing to inject, in the veins of traditional historiography, species-capital history (220). In a follow up essay published five years after his “Climate of History” article, Chakrabarty again urges us to consider the interlacing between planetary history, human history and capital, suggesting the climate crisis has brought these separate objects on a collision course (“Climate and Capital” 1, 23).

The idea of the abstract human that allows Chakrabarty to hold the entire human species culpable for today’s climate crisis, as well as equivocality about the role capitalism has historically played in ushering in global warming, has led many left leaning environmental critics to question the position held by the apostles of the idea of the Anthropocene. Jason Moore, for
instance, has argued that the Anthropocene argument “embodies the consequentialist bias of Green Thought” (Capitalism in the Web of Life 171). One of his main objections against the enthusiasts of the Anthropocene emerges out of the observation that the idea of the Anthropocene not only posits the human as an abstract category, it also obliterates the history of capitalist development as the key contributing factor behind our environmental crisis. In his own parlance, “the Anthropocene argument is not only philosophically and theoretically problematic … it also offers an unduly narrow conceptualization of historical time” (175). Like Moore, Slovenian Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek also responded to Chakrabarty’s climate hypothesis in Living in the End Times (2011), claiming “the dynamic of global capitalism” did not get enough importance in the latter’s discussion of the Anthropocene where he blames the whole human species for climate crisis. Explaining how Chakrabarty missed out on the “properly dialectical relationship” between the planet and the human, Žižek writes:

Chakrabarty seems to miss here the full scope of the properly dialectical relationship between the basic geological parameters of life on earth and the socio-economic dynamic of human development. Of course, the natural parameters of our environment are “independent of capitalism or socialism”—they harbor a potential threat to all of us, independently of economic development, political system, etc. However, the fact that their stability has been threatened by the dynamic of global capitalism nonetheless has a stronger implication than the one allowed by Chakrabarty: in a way, we have to admit that the Whole is contained by its Part, that the fate of the Whole (life on earth) hinges on what goes on in what was formerly one its parts (the socio-economic mode of production of one of the species on earth). (333)
This is perhaps the reason why Moore calls the current environmental crisis the Capitalocene, or the era of the capitalist crisis. For Moore, this concept appropriately describes not only the cause of the climate crisis but also the process through which nature and human beings both become the object of capitalism’s production of cheap nature.

Both the crises that have come to define neoliberalism today point towards one conjuncture: the crises of the capitalist system. Whether this crisis is a terminal one or not history will decide, but what is available to us in the form of discussions by some of the most important thinkers of our era is the idea that human society is faced with a global crisis today—a crisis that threatens the existence of the whole species. It was Jameson who once quipped that it is easier to imagine the end of the world today than thinking of the end of capitalism. In a sense, this idea speaks powerfully about the fetishism that exists in the neoliberal era, where thinking of a post-capitalist future appears as terrible as imagining death. Perhaps, our analysis of what is at stake today needs to begin from this premise.

Let me end my discussion of neoliberal allegories by referring once again to Jameson who broadened the scope for allegoresis by writing the following: “everything is allegorical … and all allegory is Utopian” (Allegory and Ideology 215). Jameson’s unequivocal generalization of the allegorical form is, in one sense, a metacommentary on an essay he published many years ago to suggest that all third world literary works can be read as national allegories. After all, it was that essay that earned him the long searing critique from Ahmad who took him to task for persisting with a differential hypothesis that slotted the first and the third world in separate categories. One may see Jameson’s sweeping hypothesis in Allegory as his response to his critics who chastised him for failing to notice that he was allowing a sweeping binarism to dictate his hypothesis. After all, how can a refined and erudite dialectician of his caliber fall such an easy
prey to dualism! As has been pointed out by the likes of Prasad, Lazarus and Joseph, Jameson’s observation about national literatures of the Third-World was not off point at all. Quite the opposite, his hypothesis accurately posited the problem of representation within a three-world-system. Jameson’s new hypothesis also needs to be seen as a historically informed proposition about world literature which, in a globalized, neoliberal world, has shaken off the old boundaries of the three-world-system. In an era when no corner can claim its independence from capitalist relations, literary works, when read allegorically, can only be read as allegories of neoliberal, global capitalism. Hence the fetishistic concealments that we noticed in so many contemporary South Asian fictions.

If we look carefully into Afaz Ali’s struggles with monetization, we will notice that what remains concealed behind his desire to escape his displacement in the city is a utopian dream of a system that does not drag people out of their communities to turn them into surrogate mourners for the wealthy and the affluent. His struggles to escape the dragnet of debt and monetization is underwritten by the silhouette of a distant utopian dream that is free from these tormenting objects’ domination. Plainly put, his desire anticipates a world without money, thus imagining a post capitalist future. Likewise, Balram’s desire to escape the grip of the landlord is underwritten by the desire to live in a world where one’s growth does not get suppressed under the weight of caste and class relations. His escape from the old world and his re-invention of himself as an entrepreneur, ironically, falls easy victim to neoliberal ideologies that promise individual freedom but fail to deliver a system that is just to the majority of the people, especially those who are systemically left out of the orbit of good life. Shehzad dreams of a city that is not discriminatory and that does not stifle personal freedom. This aspect of his desire perhaps lumps him in the category of liberal reformist. However, once we look into his declassment and the
desire for economic justice, we can easily trace the elements of a utopian dream of a world without the dictates of capitalism. The problem, it needs to be stressed, lies with giving a collective form to these different articulations of distress and desire for transcending such distresses. None of the protagonists are able to find a viable channel for collectivization. It is here that _Gun Island_ and _The Ministry_ spark a new line of utopian neoliberal allegory. The protagonists of these two novels do not undermine the value of collectivization; nor do they see any redemptive quality in atomized individuality. That these novels do not look at collective efforts to create an alternate universe with scorn, is perhaps an articulation of a different structure of feeling, informed by the urgent need to create a better world than the one we inhabit today.
Notes

1 A number of essays written by Indian academics working in the United States, have registered their disagreement with the premise of Joseph’s article which appreciates Adiga’s caricature of neoliberal India. Snehal Shingavi, has accused her of misreading Balram’s wavering voice, where, he argues, she notices traces of irony and subversion (5). Swaralipi Nandi, in her long and engaging reading of Adiga, has, likewise, taken Joseph to task for failing to factor in Balram’s late transformation in her discussion of the novel. See Shingavi’s “Capitalism, Caste, and Con-Games in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*” and Nandi’s “Narrative Ambiguity and the Neoliberal *Bildungsroman* in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*” for further exploration of this issue.

2 I have borrowed this idea from Bret Benjamin, who, in his book *Invested Interest: Capital, Culture and the World Bank*, perceptively notices that world bank has given birth to a specific kind of culture in the world. See Benjamin’s book for further understanding of this topic.

3 Philip W. Magness, a neoconservative historian and economist opines that the identification of the 1938 meeting between Friedrich von Hayek and Ludwig von Mises as the originary moment for neoliberal thought is a left conspiracy to discredit neoliberalism. He suggests that a more accurate description of the origin of the term will take us back to the 1920s when the word, already circulating among the Germans, entered the political economic vocabulary in 1922. This is what he writes in his opinion piece:

To find neoliberalism’s actual origins, we must turn the clock back by over a decade to the intellectual scene of 1920s Vienna and, with it, neglected sources in the German language. In doing so, we quickly find that “neoliberalism” first emerged as a political label for economic liberalism as applied by its critics on the far left and far right of the interwar European intellectual scene. (n. pag.)

4 My position in this regard is very close to Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy’s who see neoliberalism is a “new stage of capitalism” (*The Crisis of Neoliberalism* 1). Neoliberalism does mark a definitive moment in the history of capitalism. However, my idea is that instead of considering it as a stage, which is progressivist in its orientation, we are better served if we consider it as a phase or period.

5 Mallika Shakya’s in depth analysis of the rise and fall of Nepal’s garments manufacturing industry unpacks the history of the role Maoist politics played in unifying the Nepalese workers against neoliberalization of the nation states’ industrial sector. Although Shakya is more invested in writing a social and political ethnography of the garment sector, her description of the historical unfolding of the crisis records the role the Maoist resurgence in the last two decades played in organizing workers and emboldening them to act. See Shakya’s *Death of an Industry* (2018) for further information on this relationship.

6 In their essay titled “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” Gallagher and Robinson contend that nineteenth century imperialism was characterized by the desire to establish a market for free trade. They seek to separate the imperialism of the earlier stages form from the kind that came
into being in the nineteenth century. Bernard Semmel, after Gallagher and Robinson, has also contributed to the discussion about the role free trade played in the imperialist wars and policies of the nineteenth century, suggesting those who see free-trade as fundamentally opposed to imperialism are historically incorrect. While I am not entirely convinced by their stagist approach towards history and empire, I find their term useful in reading Ghosh’s trilogy where he draws an analogy between the past and the present. See Gallagher and Robinson’s “The Imperialism of Free Trade” and Semmel’s *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism* for further elaboration of the distinction.

7 It is important to remember here how contemporary Marxist thinkers such as Harvey, Patnaik and Bellamy Foster have persistently argued that neoliberalism’s commitment to the freedom of the market remains shallow. Especially in the last decade and a half it has become evident that those who preach neoliberalism also seem eager to use state intervention the moment capitalist class is in trouble. It is only in case of the workers and less powerful nations that the strong state must withhold its generous institutions from intervening in the market. See Harvey’s “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction,” Patnaik’s “The State under Neo-Liberalism” and “Trends of Center-State Relations in India Under the Neo-Liberal Regime,” and John Bellamy Foster’s “The New Imperialism of Globalized Monopoly-Finance Capital” for further discussion on this topic.

8 Canadian social activist and researcher Naomi Klein, in her wonderful prognosis of neoliberalism in *The Shock Doctrine*, records how neoliberalism uses crisis as means to disenfranchise and discipline the working class who are the victims of these crises and catastrophes. By looking into the example of what happened after Hurricane Caterina, she explains that manipulating environmental and social crises has become a way for the capitalist class to further exploit the rest of the population. See the “Introduction” and the chapter titled “Disaster Apartheid” for further exploration of the relationship between crisis and neoliberalism.

9 How collaborators of Pakistani army rounded up intellectuals, tortured them and killed them have been documented by many historians who covered Bangladesh’s liberation war. When the Pakistani army began its genocide on 25th March, they simultaneously attacked higher education institutions, killing both educators and students, and police barracks where policemen of Bengali ethnicity resided. In his book *Bangladesh: A Political History Since Independence* (2016), Ali Reaz notes how, in the last three days of the war alone, pro-Pakistan paramilitary forces like Al-Badr and Al-Shams killed at least fifty prominent intellectuals (42). Such was the brutality of the genocide that even a Pakistani low ranking officer named Siddiq Salik who witnessed and documented the atrocities of Pakistani military force described the operation as a “bloody holocaust” (*The Bangladesh Reader* 231). For further information on the genocide as well as on the targeted assassination of intellectual see Robert Payne’s *Massacre: The Tragedy at Bangla Desh and the Phenomenon of Mass Slaughter Throughout History* (1973).

10 My translation

11 Although prevailing explanations point towards multiple causes of 1974 famine that killed almost 1.5 million people (Lewis 80), one of the key aspects contributing to Bangladesh’s famine was the United States’ disinclination to deliver the promised foodgrains. A number of scholars
studying the cause of the famine have expressed the opinion that the US decision to delay the delivery of the promised amount of food was a part of the nation’s food politics. Eminent Bangladeshi economist Rehman Sobhan has elaborately discussed the causes that contributed to this devastating human induced catastrophe. See his “Politics of Food and Famine in Bangladesh” for further elaboration of the topic.

12 In the penultimate chapter of his book, Ali Reaz notes Bangladesh’s achievements in economic and social sectors. He writes how, in the last decade alone, Bangladesh has achieved more than 5 per cent GDP growth. For the last forty years, Bangladesh has maintained a steady GDP growth, making a remarkable leap each decade. He also mentions how Bangladesh has surpassed its economic growth in social development indicators, achieving high female education rate and improving overall healthcare records. See Chapter 7 of Reaz’s book for further discussion on this topic.

13 My Translation

14 Seikh Tobarak Ali, who presents Abu Zunayed the cow, is a “contractor” who has absolute monopoly over the university’s construction works. He maintains his control over the contracts by bribing both the government as well as the opposition party members, bureaucrats, student leaders, engineers, staff and faculty members (402-3). He describes himself as a “businessman who began his career as a contractor and is still there” (404). A merchant himself, Ali is deeply skeptical about the profitability and utility of large-scale industry. His plan for the future includes expanding his construction business and investing in land, which, he believes, will yield huge profit. Ali fits perfectly within Fanon’s description of “the national bourgeoisie” who operate like “small-time racketeers” and lack “ambition” and inventiveness (Fanon 101). In his drunken confession, Ali expresses his frustration at “mountebanks” who loan money from banks claiming they would set up industries but use the money in unproductive activities (Gavi Bittanto 403-4). The indolent and dependent bourgeoisie of postcolonial Africa, who is the object of Fanon’s scorn and ridicule in The Wretched of the Earth, is a familiar figure not only in Sofa’s works but also in Akhtaruzzaman Elias’. Aware as they have been about the corrosive effect of the governance of a lazy and dependent national bourgeoisie, both Sofa and Elias depict the national bourgeoisie with Fanonian displeasure.

15 My translation

16 My translation

17 My translation

18 Jibon O’ Rajnoitik Bastobota chronicles, by deploying hyperboles and extra-realist techniques, the self-imposed exile of “young Abdul Majid,” who, after witnessing the return and miraculous rise of a collaborator who assisted [the] Pakistani Army in their genocide, has decided to sell his ancestral home in Old Dhaka and settle down in a relatively obscure part of the city. Along with a sense of loss, what is also thematized in this novel is belligerence and resistance. But the general tone of the novel is tragic; it catalogues, in a dispassionate style not only the grotesqueness of murder and rape but also the kind of apathy and opportunism that
allow injustice to take root in an otherwise closely knitted community. *Abu Ibrahimer Mrittu* [Abu Ibrahim’s Death], on the contrary, deals with the theme of tragedy more directly. Published a year after Shahidul Zahir’s death in 2009, *Abu Ibrahimer Mrittu* is a work where he had subtly injected the story of the corrupting influence of entrepreneurs in public institutions into the body of its main narrative. The circumstances under which Abu Ibrahim dies—at the hands of muggers while trying to return the money he had received as bribe—leaves us to question not only the corruption of individuals but also the withdrawal of the state from public service altogether. Yet, in another sense, the novel is about the rise of a new ruling class—the entrepreneurs—whose corrupting influence in state operations is beginning to corrode the very foundation of the nation’s welfare state system. Khaled Zamil’s disrupting presence in Abu Ibrahim’s life, therefore, is not merely an instance of [the] intrusion of corruption in an idealistic individual’s life; it is, also, the manifestation of the encroaching shadow of [the kind of] neoliberal worldview which would become ubiquitous in subsequent decades.

19 My translation

20 A mawlawi or *moulvi* is an honorific title given to someone who works in a mosque and conducts prayers. In Bangladesh, only a handful of *moulvi* are affluent because of their associations with powerful people and/or institutions. Most mawlawis live in rural areas, often far away from family and home, and struggle to make ends meet because their livelihoods depend on charities given to the mosque or the institution they are attached to. Afaz Ali, the protagonist of Elias’ short story, is from a remote village located in the south-western part of Bangladesh. He earns his living from a graveyard (*gorosthan*) which has, as is typical, a mosque within its premise—a mosque that takes care of the graves, renders service before and after the burial, and conducts regular prayers five times a day. Ali works as a senior *moulvi* in that mosque. As is the custom in Bangladesh (also in other countries of South Asia), he leads emotionally charged *monajat* (after the burial prayer for the deceased [see note 13]) in Arabic, Urdu and the mother tongue.

21 My translation. The original reads as follows: “এ গ্রন্থের গল্পগুলো অন্যন্য গ্রন্থের গল্পগুলোর মতো লেখকের স্বতঃস্ফূর্ত মনোযোগ পায়নি। ফলে তাঁর আগের চারটি গ্রন্থের অধিকাংশ গল্প যে গভীরতা, ব্যাপ্তিতে ও শিল্পকৃত্তির পাঠকের আকাঙ্ক্ষার চূড়া স্পর্শ করে এ গ্রন্থের গল্পগুলো কোনো না কোনো কারণে ততটা করে না” (১০৮)।

22 A *monajat* is an imploration to Allah for forgiveness and blissful after-life in heaven. It is customary for Muslims to raise their hands after prayers and ask for forgiveness for themselves and others in the family and community. In Bangladesh, post-burial monajat is often emotional and elaborate. The *moulvi* who conducts a *monajat* is often praised for elaborate and ornamental use of language that evokes both empathy and pathos.

23 My translation. All the translations from Elias’ story, henceforth, are my translations.

24 Muslims are instructed by the Quran to pray five times a day: at daybreak, at noon, in the afternoon, in the evening and late in the evening. *Asar* is the afternoon prayer.
25. The actual sentence is more revealing than what I have been able to come up in my translation here. It clearly states that Ali’s son is his vehicle for transcending his imprisonment in the graveyard. In original, the sentence goes like this: “বিএ, এমএ, না হোক, আইএ, পাস করেও যদি ছোট-খোট চাকরি একটা জোটে তো জীবিত অবস্থায় কবরবাস থেকে রেহাই পায়।” [“Not suggesting that my son needs to have B.A. or M.A. degrees: even if he manages to get a small job somewhere after passing his I.A., I can earn my freedom from this place where I am living the life of the dead although I am alive” (380).]

26. In *Capital Vol. I*, Marx draws attention to the separation of town from the country as one of the pivotal moments in the historical development of capitalism. The importance attached to the division between town and the country is demonstrated by the use of the phrase “summed up,” implying how this feature remains a fundamental condition not only under capitalism but also in the “economic history” of society in general. Marx writes:

> The foundation of every division of labor which has attained a certain degree of development, and has been brought about by the exchange of commodities, is the separation of town from country. One might well say that the whole economic history of society is summed up in the movement of this antithesis. (472)

27. My translation

28. I have already written about the lifelike character of Elias’ realism in a paper titled “Akhtaruzzaman Elias and Realism” in *South Asian Review*. In that paper I argued that his narration often infuses specific temporal moments with simultaneity that emulate real temporal experiences.

29. My translation

30. Although Michael Hardt, following Spinoza, has described affect as “corporeal reason” (x), which involves both “the body and the mind” as well as “reason and passions” (ix), Fredric Jameson is more interested in positioning affect against language and “named emotions” (*The Antinomies of Realism* 29) suggesting that named emotions and affect are binary opposites (31). “[A]ffects,” Jameson adds, “are bodily feelings, whereas emotions are … conscious states” (32). In this essay, I use the word “affect” in the Jamesonian sense to refer to bodily feelings that elude language and nomenclature.

31. The allegorical value of the loss of the book of dreams? to an entrepreneurial national bourgeoisie cannot be overstated, for to read the history of *Tevaga* as a lost opportunity to cease upon the reappearance of an event—to borrow Pothik Ghosh’s concept from “Akhtaruzzaman Elias: Beyond the Lived Time of Nationhood.”—which gets stolen by an opportunistic bourgeoisie is to set up a parallel between the past and the present in which the past is asked to bear the temporal/historical burden of the present. What *Khoabnama* simultaneously stages are the stories of capitalist system’s sublation of rural life and institutions into its capacious universe. The agrarian culture and economy which held back farmers and rural artisans now must set them free for absorption in the newly independent Pakistan state’s burgeoning private enterprises. If *Khoabnama* is an allegory of the neoliberal present it is not so because it enacts a relation
between the past and the present; rather, what casts this novel in the mold of an allegory is the precise manner in which it gazes at the past, recreating a world that looks much like the one Bangladesh has experienced at various moments of its history.

32 My translation

33 My translation

34 In Muslim cultures, “Allah” stands as a proper name for the supreme creator who has no material form or gender. My use of the masculine form is a subjective imposition which has emerged out of the necessity to translate a non-gendered expression into a gendered one.

35 Indeed, one of the richest discussions about this topic comes in *Capital Volume I* where Marx writes the following:

What flows back to the worker in the shape of wages is a portion of the product he himself continually reproduces. The capitalist, it is true, pays him the value of the commodity in money, but this money is merely the transmuted form of the product of his labor. While he is converting a portion of the means of production into products, a portion of his former product is being turned into money. It is his labor of last week, or last year, that pays for his labor-power this week or this year. The illusion created by the money-form vanishes immediately if, instead of taking a single capitalist and a single worker, we take the whole capitalist class and the whole working class. The capitalist class is constantly giving to the working class drafts, in the form of money, on a portion of the product produced by the latter and appropriated by the former. The workers give back these drafts back just as constantly to the capitalist class, and thereby withdraw from the latter their allotted share of their own product. The transaction is veiled by the commodity form of the product and the money form of the commodity.

Variable capital is therefore only a particular historical form of the appearance of the fund for providing the means of subsistence, or the labor fund, which the worker requires for his own maintenance and reproduction, and which, in all systems of social production, he must himself reproduce. If the labor-fund constantly flows to him in the form of money that pays for his labor, it is because his own product constantly moves away from him in the form of capital. But this form of appearance of the labor-fund makes no difference to the fact that it is the worker’s own objectified labor which is advanced to him by the capitalist. (712-13)

36 It would be interesting to return to Marx once again to understand how the great German thinker saw the production of commodities and the production of the worker as an essentially connected process. In one of his most insightful passages in *Capital Volume I*, Marx writes that the capitalist production process itself “reproduces and perpetuates” the conditions that make the exploitation of the worker possible. Even before “the economic bondage” tosses the worker into the mix of commodities to be sold in the market, the social conditions turn his labor power into “a means by which another man can purchase him.” It is because of this that capitalist production is not simply the production of commodities and the capitalist class; it is also simultaneously the
production of the worker whose labor must be sold over and over to those who own capital (money). Here is how Marx puts it:

Capitalist production therefore reproduces in the course of its own process the separation between labor-power and the conditions of labor. It thereby reproduces and perpetuates the conditions under which the worker is exploited. It incessantly forces him to sell his labor-power in order to live, and enables the capitalist purchase labor-power in order that he may enrich himself. It is no longer a mere accident that capitalist and worker confront each other on the market as buyer and seller. It is the alternating rhythm of the process itself which throws the worker back onto the market again and again as a seller of his labor-power and continually transforms his own product into a means by which another man can purchase him. In reality, the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist. His economic bondage is at once mediated through, and concealed by the periodic renewal of the act by which he sells himself, his change of masters, and the oscillations in the market-price of his labor.

The capitalist process of production, therefore, seen as a total connected process, i.e. a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage laborer” (723-24)

37 A large number of reviews and articles by Indian scholars on The White Tiger have been antagonistic, if not outright dismissive. One of the reasons why this novel has been treated as such is that it has been read as a national allegory, as a critique of Indian culture and economy. For instance, Amitava Kumar’s “Bad News” in the Boston Review and Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s “Diary” in the London Review of Books have both critiqued Adiga’s novel on the grounds of verisimilitude, claiming it has failed to represent the rich fabric of North India’s social life. Snehal Shingavi, likewise, has criticized the novel for misrepresenting the conditions of “middling castes” like the halwais.

38 Aijaz Ahmad’s lengthy critique of Jameson’s essay in Social Text, which was then republished in In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures, presented the latter in the mold of a neo-orientalist, engaged in the production of an essential difference between the first and the third worlds. Ahmad’s response ushered in several other antagonistic readings by postcolonial scholars. See Imre Szeman’s essay “Who’s Afraid of National Allegory: Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization” (803-804) for further discussion on the topic.

39 The peculiarity of Bangalore’s schedule and its dependence on US time has been captured well in a passage where Balram expresses the following: “See, men and women in Bangalore live like the animals in a forest do. Sleep in the day and then work all night, until two, three, four, five o’clock, depending, because their masters are on the other side of the world, in America” (255).

40 The actual passage, which also puts on display European humanist tradition’s deep-seated prejudice against its conjectured civilizational other, is a dynamic articulation of capitalism’s desire for global conquest. Marx carefully notes how cheap commodities batter down resistances
and how, even the most hostile nation also comes under the foot of capital. This is how Marx puts it:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of production, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In a world, it creates a world after its own image. (The Communist Manifesto 11)

41 Printed as an Appendix in the Fowkes translation.

42 In Representing Capital, Fredric Jameson has shed light on Marx’s discussion on capitalism’s temporality. Drawing materials from Marx, Jameson has explained how, on the one hand, capitalism itself is built up on the continually renewed exchange between labor and capital or, in Marx’s parlance, capitalism’s “eternal virginity,” and, on the other, capitalism operates by eliminating its past, by extinguishing remnants and practices of other modes of productions. See Jameson’s chapter titled “Capital in its Time” for further discussion on the topic.

43 I borrow my idea of subjective violence being conditioned by something more objective and systemic from Slavoj Žižek. The Slovenian radical philosopher gives an account of the fetish character of subjective violence in Violence, where he claims that we often get so caught up in the horror of subjective violence that we often become oblivious of less visible but equally, if not more, penetrating “symbolic” and “systemic” violence. He writes:

[S]ubjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence. First, there is a “symbolic” violence embodied in language and its forms … Second, there is what I call “systemic” violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems. (1-2)

44 This chapter stands on the foundation of an essay I published in 2016 in a volume titled South Asian Racialization and Belonging after 9/11. This chapter makes significant departure from my essay titled ““The City’s Changed”: Home Boy, The Reluctant Fundamentalist and the Post-9/11 Urban Experience,” although there are ideas that overlap and reappear here.

45 Hakutani and Butler note how many of the most celebrated American writers of the nineteenth century have “expressed different degrees of ambivalence and animosity” toward the city, while most twentieth-century African American writers have done the opposite (9). Harlem poet Langston Hughes, narrating his memory of his first arrival to New York City, expresses his excitement in the following manner: “There is not thrill in all the world like entering, for the first time, New York Harbor … New York is truly the dream city—city of towers near God, city of hopes and visions” (Qtd. in Hakutani and Butler 10). Hughes enthusiasm echoes may other people’s impressions about the city, showing how it gradually became what London was at the beginning of the twentieth century—the center of global economic activities.
46 The idea of being declassed has been used loosely here. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels discuss various forms of declassment. They describe how a sympathetic section of the bourgeoisie, either out of empathy or because their own existences become antagonistic to the development of capital, join the proletarians in their revolutionary reorganization of society. They also point out how the lower segment of the petty bourgeoisie is constantly swept up by one kind of crisis or another, pushing them to become workers. The lumpen-proletariat is constantly employed and dismissed by capital, thus constantly putting them into the service of capital or declassing them and reducing them into a jobless population waiting to be re-employed. The idea that capital creates a reserve army of lumpen population has been discussed in both the first and the third volume of capital. See *The Manifesto* (44-49), *Capital Volume I* (797) and *Capital Volume III* (358), for further discussion on the topic.

47 Judith Butler, who uses the idea of precariousness to explain how injury, loss and vulnerability are biologically mediated and can be apprehended by the frame of grieveability, also makes a careful distinction between precariousness and precarity. According to Butler, precariousness is the general biological frame of vulnerability common to beings whereas precarity is socially and politically conditioned state of injurability, often mediated by state and political power. In this essay, I try to maintain Butler’s distinction between precariousness and precarity while simultaneously suggesting that under capitalism the distribution of precarity often runs along class lines and precarity—politically distributed condition of vulnerability—is the very norm that conditions the being of the underclass. See Judith Butler’s *Frames of War* and Joseph Darda’s essay “Precarious World: Rethinking Global Fiction in Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist” for further discussion on this distinction.

48 Vivek Chibber has explained this uneven historical development by claiming that in the colonial world, “the reliance of producing absolute surplus value rendered capitalism highly coercive and violent … in the advanced world, it was the production of relative surplus value that caused a switch to less personalized, more formal regimes of profit making” (133).

49 By drawing upon Claudia Perner’s essay “Tracing the Fundamentalist in Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*,” Burz advances a fascinating observation which argues that the real fundamentalism of Hamid’s second novel is market fundamentalism, the fundamentalism of high finance. One of the great ironies in Hamid’s novel, writes Burz, “is that the fundamentalism that permeates the narrative does not refer to religion but to economics, particularly the raw capitalism of Wall Street high finance” (245). The ideology that Changez internalizes—the principle that guides him—teaches him to put profit before people and is devoted to the principle of using analytical precision for maximizing profit for clients. The mantra of Underwood Samson—“Focus on the Fundamentals”—which Changez interprets as a call to put in “a single-minded attention to financial detail” (TRF 98) is indeed a credo—an ideology—that places fine-grained analysis above everything else, so nothing interrupts the process of valuation.

50 Long before Harvey and Foster, Lenin too noticed this important juncture between empire and finance. In his classic work “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism” Lenin writes:
Imperialism is capitalism in that stage of development in which the domination of monopolies and finance capital has established itself; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trust has begun; in which the partition of all the territories of the globe among the great capitalist powers has been completed. (237)

As is clear from Lenin’s discussion, financialization plays an important role in imperialism in capitalism’s monopolistic stage. What is significantly different about Harvey’s deliberations on this topic is, he sees it as a process of producing surplus population as well.

51 Marx’s discussion on the production of immiseration is both rich and compelling. He writes:

Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, the torrent of labor, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital. (798-99)

52 Zamora’s invocation of Groz, it needs to be stressed here, is not an endorsement of the former’s hypothesis but a rejection of it. Unlike Groz who sees an immediate impending struggle between “the growing mass of the permanently unemployed” and “an aristocracy of tenured workers” (3), what Zamora identifies as the fundamental threat to society is the neoliberal production of surplus population on an unforeseen scale to keep wages down.

53 A cornerstone of Edward Said’s theorization of the intellectual in “Secular Criticism,” the idea of filiation refers to seamlessly fitting into the environment one is born into or the conditions one belongs to, i.e. “birth, nationality, profession” etc. (25). Said contrasts filiations with affiliative associations such as social and political convictions and so on. In his later works, however, Said associates filiation with nationalist tendencies and affiliations with voluntary associations of an exile.

54 Matthew Hart and Jim Hansen foreground the idea that Changez’s is a secular nationalism. They write:

If it is neither religious nor ethnopoetic, how then to describe Changez’s nationalism? The short answer is that it is political—political because it is predicated on an agonistic relation between two states, the U.S. and Pakistan, and on the judgement that the American response to 9/11 has only worsened Pakistani underdevelopment and insecurity. (510)

However, the novel leaves us with no certainty about Changez’s political pedigree and the symbolic import of Hamid’s novel’s beard points towards a quasi-religious form of nationalism.

55 A detailed discussion of expansion of inequality around the world can be found in Neil Smith’s afterword to the third edition of Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the
Production of Space where he argues that uneven development on a global scale has been matched by geographical unevenness within “national economies” (262). The entire chapter contains valuable discussions about how neoliberalization of economy has led towards a flat world of inequality abuzz with decrease of real wages for most people and increase in income for the uber wealthy. See Smith’s “Afterword to the Third Edition” for further exploration of this topic.

56 There are moments in Sea of Poppies and Flood of Fire that depict different kinds of collectivization and cooperation. In Sea of Poppies, for instance, the women in the hull of the ship create a community where they become a part of each other’s life by sharing stories and experiences. A world built upon empathy and shared experience, this community constructed by women is evocative of a powerful sisterhood built upon shared misery and insubordination. The rebellious Chinese peasants whose anarchic presence is registered in Flood of Fire, on the other hand, point towards the possibility of collective resistance outside national control and coordination. Despite these significant moments, however, the Trilogy remains deeply invested in the deep history of the imperial war which it thematizes—a war that is marked by the cooperation among the opium traders of different nationalities.

57 Both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have commented on the difficulty of imagining a post-capitalist future today. Lamenting the absence of utopian projects in contemporary culture and politics, Jameson has commented that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to think of the end of capitalism. Žižek, likewise, has discussed how it has become characteristic of today’s culture to deny the apocalyptic possibilities although evidences of such a possibility is strongly present before us. See his Living in the End Times (2010) for further understanding of this topic.

58 The same defeatist tendency has been noticed by Smith as well, who in his foreword, compellingly argues that even the left has been infected by the idea of no alternative (Uneven Development 240-41).

59 In this respect, Fredric Jameson’s observation in “An American Utopia” can be reiterated here to explain how the utopian has re-entered the political imaginary. Noticing the re-emergence of utopia in left politics, Jameson, who lamented the absence of it in the post 1970s era, writes the following:

But in the last years, utopia has again changed its meaning and has become the rallying cry for left and progressive forces and a virtual synonym for socialism or communism, now for the moment tainted words or programs. It needs to be said that this a generational change and that is seems to reflect a wholesale transformation in the social, political and economic attitudes of those who came to maturity during the 1990s, when the collapse of the traditional left movements made it possible to see just how predatory capitalism was when left to its own devices. (42)

60 The idea of metabolic rift remains one of the central areas of intervention for Marxist theorists of environment. Influenced as he was by the works of James Anderson, Justus von Liebig, Henry Carey, Marx began to seriously investigate the capitalist production’s effect on soil fertility and
sustainable economy in the 1860s (Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism* 156-161). The culmination of these investigations was the concept of the metabolic rift which Marx very briefly summarized in *Capital Volume III* as “the irreparable rift in the process of social metabolism” (949). This later reflection on the rift between human beings and nature was also explored in *Capital Volume I* where Marx discussed how the concentration of workers in towns disrupts the metabolic relationship between human beings and nature (637). Written as early as they were, there is, of course, some opacity in the manner in which the German revolutionary looks into the relation between humans and nature, but because of recent works in Marxist environmentalism we see more sustained efforts to develop upon the foundation Marx built. See Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett’s detailed discussion of the topic in the introduction of *Marx and the Earth* for further elaboration of the topic.

61 Her friend Biplab (Garson Hobert) describes her in the following way: “She gave the impression that she had somehow slipped off her leash. As though she was taking herself for a walk while the rest of us were being walked—like pets” (154).

62 To understand the relation between body and collective utopian practices, we can perhaps turn to Mikhail Bakhtin who explains how the “material bodily principle” of “grotesque realism” operates differently from the logic of the individual body produced by the bourgeois culture. In Rabelais’ grotesque realism,

> the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, served from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world … the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. (*Rabelais and His World* 19)

Bakhtin’s reading of the grotesque body, which is derived from his examination of Rabelais’ two novels Gargantua and Pantagruel—both written in the Sixteenth Century in the late Renaissance era—allow us to understand how the body in the collective and popular sense is fundamentally opposed to the bourgeois concept of the body which exists in its singularity, alienated from both other human beings and the planet, the “cosmic” world. The body that Bakhtin is drawing towards is the body of the ordinary or, what he calls, the “popular,” whose singularity itself is multiple and is grounded in the material life itself. Despite historical difference between the contexts from which Bakhtin pulls out the grotesque body—early modernity and the advent of capitalism—and in which Anjum stands—the context of late capitalism—there seems to exist a homology as well, a semblance that emerges out of the utopian desire for collectivization and reclamation of space. Bakhtin’s carnivals where fools feast (5) is a place marked by its own codes of freedom; it is a place where “hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men” are temporarily suspended” (15). Although unconscious of its conditions of possibility, this collective body, simply by being present, is able to overwrite the codes that exists outside.
63 According to Raymond Williams, residuals are those “experiences, meanings and values” that cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture. Although certain religious values are incorporated into the dominant culture, there are other experiences that cannot be productively incorporated within it “because at certain points a dominant culture cannot allow too much of this kind of practice and experience” because it becomes risky for it (“Base and Superstructure” 170-171). For Williams, residuals represent those practices and habits that are often rural in nature and are struggling to become hegemonic. See Williams’ chapter on base and superstructure for further understanding of the term.

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