Dots in the Hinterland and Other Places:

Neoliberalism, the State, and the Small-Town in Three Contemporary Indian Novels

"Hundreds of kilometres of a familiar yet unknown landscape, seen countless times through train windows, but never experienced - his life till then had been profoundly urban."[1]

> \- Agastya Sen in *English, August* (1988)

'Will you ride the elephant to other places?' 'No, we'll walk,' Raghuvar Prasad replied. The college was eight kilometres away—that is why an elephant or a jitney was needed. For Raghuvar Prasad and Sonsi, 'other places' weren't places that were too far to walk.[2]

> \- *A Window Lived in the Wall* (1997)

"Mr. D'Mello would stand with his arms proudly on Girish's shoulders. "The teacher who nourished the budding genius." They would conquer Bangalore next, the teacher-and-pupil team that won the all-Karnataka state poetry contest. After that, what else—New Delhi! The President himself would award the two of them a medal. They would take an afternoon off, take a bus to Agra, and visit the Taj Mahal together. Anything was possible with a boy like Girish."[3]

> \- The high school Hindi teacher, D'Mello, in *Between the Assassinations* (2008)

"'The only mix-up, Mr. Bhatt,' said the assistant headmaster, 'was made on fifteen August 1947, when we thought this country could be run by a people's democracy instead of a military dictatorship.'"[4]

> \- also D'Mello

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[1] Upamanyu Chatterjee, *English, August* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1988), 10.

[2] Vinod Kumar Shukla, *A Window Lived in a Wall*, trans. Satti Khanna (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005), 118. The novel was first published in Hindi as *Dīvāra mēn ēka Khiḍakī Rahatī thī* (1997). For the purposes of this citation, I am using the English translation, however the discussion itself covers aspects that are better brought to life through the Hindi text's poetically-driven prose.

[3] Aravind Adiga, *Between the Assassinations* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 101.

[4] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 85.

Upamanyu Chatterjee, Vinod Kumar Shukla, and Aravind Adiga, the writers of these respective passages, provide distinctive ways of seeing the small-town, ways that are structured by the socio-historical transformations that India underwent in the final decade of the twentieth century. These stories use the small-town as a place with whom a subject's relationship comes to reflect a way of seeing the role of the nation-state in economic and social development. This takes place in both material ways - the writers directly point out ways in which the state and the small-town interact - as well as through submerged designs, such as the construction of landscapes in these texts, the depiction of labour within these spaces, and the small-town's relationship to urban and rural society.

This thesis analyzes how Chatterjee, Shukla, and Adiga use the small-town to illustrate the city-country divide and the processes of urbanization, as well as how their works aesthetically plot the changes wrought by neoliberalism. The constellation of quotations above shows that, for the three writers, the construction of the general way of life in the small town, and the persons who engage with this scene, as well as the commonalities and links between people in this space, of the people to this space, and of this space to the world outside (of state, city, and countryside) are all variables united by a way of seeing.[5] This thesis charts the journey of this way of seeing the small town as it moves across two decades of tumultuous economic changes.

The thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter analyzes how the space of the small town is *conceived* differently in the three novels. My usage of the term "conceived" takes

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[5] My use of the term "way of seeing" follows from its usage within Raymond Williams' work, most notably fleshed out in *The Country and the City* (London: Vintage, 2016). For a succinct analysis that uses this term and fleshes out its implications, see Williams, "The Knowable Community in George Eliot's Novels," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 2 no. 3 (Spring, 1969): 255-268.

after Henri Lefebvre influential theorization of the three competing valences inherent in spaces: the lived aspect, the conceived aspect, and the perceived aspect. Conceived space is "the space of scientists, planner, urbanists, technocratic subdividers, and social engineers…the dominant space in any society (or mode of production)."[6] The chapter traces what motives and objectives undergird the manner in which space manipulates, connotes for, and evokes in the minds of the characters in the three novels. I examine how and why state power marks the conception of space in the three novels, and how socio-historically situated ways of seeing this space allow certain aspects of it to emerge in heightened fashion, while others disappear. I also discuss how the liminal position occupied by the three small towns, between city and country, speaks to the writers' specific visions of the roles played by urbanity and rurality in the national imagination. The second chapter focusses on the manner in which individual subjectivity is constructed in the three texts, and how it is counterposed to what Raymond Williams calls "a general ways of life."[7] This chapter focuses on the eclipsing of "purpose," as a totalizing ideology that fosters a sense of communal belonging, by the individualism of the characters, which speaks to a reconfigured relationship between the citizen-subject and society. As we move from the last days of state-led development to the heyday of neoliberalism, citizen-subjects increasingly come to resemble citizen-consumers, and their vision of the public life around them is increasingly animated by the privatized and market-driven concerns of the consumer. For this citizen-consumer, the experience of space and time comes to be dominated by subjective, rather than objective, manifestations of the general way of life around them. With the deepening of neoliberal

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[6] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. David Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991): 36-39.

[7] Raymond Williams, "Realism and the Contemporary Novel," *Universities and Left Review* 4 (1958): 22-25.

processes of extraction, the general way of life, in the form of community or society, interrupts the lives of the characters of the three novels in increasingly limited ways, and its images and forms are either presented  in a fantastical manner or through transactional relationships.

These three works, separated in each instance by a gap of a decade, cover some of the most important years in contemporary Indian history, charting the transition of its economy from a closed, government-directed one to a neoliberal and globalized model. For a variety of reasons, scholars have noted that the period "from June 1991, when the Congress Party officially initiated a policy of economic liberalization, to the spring of 2007" constituted "the most transformative period" in India's postcolonial history, "with the exception of the enormous changes … following independence and partition."[8] The economic events of 1991, often grouped together under the rubric of "liberalization," involved:

> A wide-ranging reformulation of the relationship between economy and state…
> This process included derestriction of domestic production, decontrol of foreign
> trade, reduction of tariffs, and reform of company law to enable majority share-
> holding by foreign corporation in their Indian subsidiaries and new ventures…the
> entry of private enterprise in many core sectors like education, healthcare
> provision, telecommunications, transport, urban public health and sanitation, and
> energy supply, and a sharp reduction in the number of people recruited into the
> all-India civil services.[9]

This twenty-year period saw a renewed emphasis on urbanization as concomitant with modernization and the "newness" associated with private enterprise and liberalization. "New

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[8] Kanishka Chowdhury, *The New India: Citizenship, Subjectivity, and Economic Liberalization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4.

[9] Akhil Gupta and K. Sivaramakrishnan, "Introduction: the state in India after liberalization," in *The State in India after Liberalization: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

India [was] about constructing a specific urban form of subjectivity"[10] and the small-town became charged with the burden of improving its being to attain the category of "urban."

I have chosen to constellate these three novels because they provide three very different perspectives on this period of time. As an a member of the elite administrative services, born in metropolitan India, and bred in English-medium schools, Agastya Sen provides a very alienated perspective on the small-town. The distance between his way of seeing and the small-town is mediated by his class-based urban experiences, and his presence in Madna cannot be separated, quite literally given his occupation, from the manifestation and role of the state in the economic development of India's "hinterland." *English, August* narrates a series of encounters that Agastya has in Madna, as he slowly realizes how the bureaucrat's job holds no appeal for him. The novel's firmly existentialist-modernist mode also provides a particular note of inwardness that connects the constitution of the seeing subject and the seen small-town. *A Window Lived in a Wall* was written as a Hindi novel, and its way of seeing the small-town, therefore, falls into a different tradition. The novel tells a highly located and intimate account of private life in the small town. Even so, it registers the manner in which the small town was transformed by socio-historical changes. At its centre is the newlywed couple - Raghuvar and Sonsi - and its their relationship with one another that opens up a different spatial understanding of the small town and of space in general.

Unlike Agastya, these two characters have grown up in the countryside, and their economic privileges are far more limited than the former's. Raghuvar works as a mathematics teacher in a nearby college while Sonsi works at home. Their dire financial straits and the

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[10] Chowdhury, *The New India*, 46.

irrealist, fantastical aspects of the novel, rather than a modernist aesthetic, provide a fresh take on the small town. I chose, finally, *Between the Assassinations*, because it attempts to tell the story of the small town in a novel fashion - through a series of short stories that are strung together by the form of a guidebook, rather than an omniscient or individually-located narration. Adiga's novel reaches for an idea of quantitative totality by attempting to typify and describe the figures that one would find in the small town. It is also a historical novel, although one in which the gap between present and imagined past is meagre, and it reconstructs how the small town would have figured and participated in national discourse in the years leading up to liberalization. Thus, it straddles two historical moments, and it is a testament to the contemporary surge in studies of the semi-urban that it uses the small town as a space to navigate the task of historicizing the movement from state-led to market-determined development.

The passages at the beginning of this introduction reflect the divergent concerns of these texts and the manner in which state, subjectivity, and small town are yoked together differently in them. In Agastya's case, the small town is held at a remove: it is "familiar, yet unknown," and "seen, but never experienced." It simply cannot be inhabited by someone with a perspective and way of life as urbane and cosmopolitan as Agastya's. Adding this to the fact that Agastya is supposed to embody the role of the state in underdeveloped towns, the passage fluidly conveys how much neglect this task had faced, and how city-centric the reach of government-led programmes, not to mention the imagining of the nation, had become by the late-1980's. The quotation from Shukla shows the small town as a space of inhabitation; "other places" are no longer the site of belonging, and the only purpose with which Raghuvar journeys outside of the town is for work. It provides a way of seeing the small town as a highly knowable community, in

whose vicinity, and sometimes within it, places of personal interest lie. The sections from Adiga,

meanwhile, highlight the manner in which the small town plays the role of a microcosm of the

nation - chaotic and turbulent. The national realm, embodied by D'Mello's visions of being

celebrated in New Delhi, is seen as a site that is accessible to the small town's residents.

Although not quite the "other places" of Shukla's novel, the national realm has been brought into

a closeness with the small town, and personal merit and achievement, the constituent elements of

the neoliberal citizen-consumer, are shown as bridges between the state and the subject.

Conversely, the small town is also shown to be deeply affected by national events, emphasizing

the government's involvement, or lack thereof, in determining the way of life within its space.

This emphasis is attested to by the rise in scholarly works, particularly in the 2010's[11],

that are concerned with the space, economics, and politics of the small-town. This collection of

works is extremely heterogenous, employing lenses that range from developmentalism and

dependency[12] and cultural geography[13] to psychology and  phenomenology, to name just

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[11] Debarshi Guin has written about the release of census data in 2011 that indicated a massive rise in the number of "census towns" - an umbrella category that is more useful in mapping "urbanization" than as a coherent category on its own. Government policy and research has actively shaped the emergence of the small town as a specific cultural and socio-economic space. See, Guin "From Large Villages to Small Towns: A Study of Rural Transformation in New Census Towns, India," *International Journal of Rural Management* 14 no.2 (2018): 87-109.

[12] See Benjamin Zachariah, "Developmentalism and its Exclusions: Peripheries and Unbelonging in Independent India" in *Peripheralization: The Making of Spatial Dependencies and Social Injustice*, ed. Andrea Fischer-Tahir and Matthias Naumann (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2013), 55-76.; Bhuvaneswari Raman, Mythri Prasad-Aleyamma, Rémi de Bercegol, Eric Denis, Marie-Hélène Zerah. *Selected Readings on Small Town Dynamics in India* (Puducherry: HAL Open Archives, 2015); Srilata Sircar, "'You can call it a *Mufassil* Town, but nothing less': Worlding the new census towns of India" *Geoforum* 91 (2018): 216-226.

[13] See T. T. Sreekumar, "Neither Rural nor Urban: Spatial Formation and Development Process," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25 no. 35/36 (Sep. 1-8, 1990): 1981-1990; Roger Jeffery et al "Parhai ka Mahaul?: An Education environment in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh" in *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India*, ed. Geert de Neve, Henrike Donner (New York: Routledge, 2006): 116-140; Robbin Jan van Duijne, "Why India's Urbanization is Hidden: Observations from 'rural' Bihar," *World Development* 123 (2019): 1-13.

a few.[14] Furthermore, as contemporary scholarship has noted, a position of peripherality fleshes

out the appearance of socio-economic contradictions which may be otherwise harder to find in

economic metropoles.[15] The small-town, in this regard, is doubly peripheralized, for not only is it

peripheral to the metropolitan city in material terms, it is also a discursive periphery for

allegorical spatializations of socio-political concerns, national or otherwise, that usually

interrogate ways of life in rural or urban locales. There are a congealed set of tropes and ideas

through which the allegorical navigation of the urbanity and rurality proceeds, one that has been

well-charted in pre-liberalization postcolonial India. Thus, aesthetic debates, such as the

constitution of the regionalism movement in Hindi (*anchalikta*) were also animated by

discussions of whether the village could stand in for the contradictions and problems of the

modern nation-state. Similarly, consideration of the New Story movement (*nayi kahani*) and its

modernist style could hardly proceed without disputes over whether or not the alienated, urbane

subject of such works could epitomize the postcolonial Indian.[16]

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[14] See William J. Glover "The Troubled Passage from 'Village Communities' to Planned New Town Developments in Mid-Twentieth-Century South Asia" in *Ecologies of Urbanism in India: Metropolitan Civility and Sustainability*, ed. Anne M. Rademacher and K. Sivaramakrishnan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013): 93-117; Srilata Sircar "'Census Town' in India and what it means to be 'urban': Competing Epistemologies and Potential New Approaches," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 38 (2017): 229-244; Atreyee Majumder, *Time, Space, and Capital in India: Longing and Belonging in an Urban-Industrial Hinterland* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[15] For a general account, see Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015) and Pheng Cheah, *What is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[16] For an account of *anchalikta* and its constructions of the village's Indianness see Sadan Jha "Visualizing a Region: Phaniswarnath Renu and the Archive of the 'regional-rural' in the 1950s" *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49 no.1 (2012): 1-35. For a detailed account of the aesthetic debates surrounding the regionalism and the new story movements, see Kathryn Gay, "Phanishwarnath Renu: The Integration of the Rural and Urban Consciousness in the Modern Hindi Novel" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1978). See also Preetha Mani, "What Was So New about the New Story? Modernist Realism in the Hindi *Nayi Kahani*," *Comparative Literature* 71, no. 3 (2019): 226-251; and Thomas de Bruijn, "Indianness as a Category in Literary Criticism on *Nayī Kahānī*" in *Imagining Indianness: Cultural Identity and Literature*, eds. Diana Dimitrova and Thomas de Bruijn (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 55-75.

The debates over what aesthetic mode constitutes a realistic Indianness, and which spatial form better attests to it, are further complicated by the anglophone-vernacular divide in Indian letters. The varied manners in which city and countryside are depicted across this divide have been analyzed by generations of scholars, from Namvar Singh to Meenakshi Mukherjee to Francesca Orsini.[17] The utopian potentialities of these spaces, structured by different languages, to depict a national reality and its contradictions, has been charted by scholars like Sandeep Banerjee[18] and Anupama Mohan.[19] What all of these works have, to varying degrees, however, presumed, is the stable categorization of a space as "urban" or "rural." Aesthetic modes are chosen and dispensed with as fads, languages and ways of seeing have been decried as orientalist or pastiche, but scholarly work has often elided the investigation of how a space is seen as urban or rural. The study of the small town that this thesis undertakes will examine how this space is *made to appear* urban or rural, in specific ways, through the introduction of ways of belonging to the city and countryside. The small town functions as a site that throws into relief the structures of feeling within which urbanity and rurality are co-constituted and made to appear sensible, distinct, and also interrelated in particular ways, as these two ideas carry within themselves specific hopes, ideas, and associations related to both individual and socio-historical elements.

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[17] For a discussion of the manner in which the English language inflects and shapes the construction of a national allegory, see Meenakshi Mukherjee, "The Anxiety of Indianness," in *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000): 166-186; Namvar Singh provides an excellent account of the same concerns with Indianness in postcolonial writing in "Decolonizing the Indian Mind," *Indian Literature* 35, no.5 (Sep./Oct. 1992): 145-156; for a discussion that constellates how rurality is constructed across three South Asian languages, see Francesca Orsini, "Reading Together: Hindi, Urdu, and English Village Novels," in *Indian Literature and the World: Multilingualism, Translation, and the Public Sphere,* ed. Rosella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 61-86.

[18] Sandeep Banerjee, *Space, Utopia, and Indian Decolonization: Literary Pre-Figurations of the Postcolony* (New York: Routledge, 2019)

[19] Anupama Mohan, *Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

## Chapter 1: Denationalizing the Small Town

Three different senses of the suffix "small" can be felt in the three small-towns of *English, August* (Madna), *A Window Lived in a Wall* (unnamed)*, and *Between the Assassinations* (Kittur). Upamanyu Chatterjee's small town is small because of the structure of feeling that the conjugation of the urban visitor in a space of underdevelopment generates: boredom. Vinod Kumar Shukla's novel, with its focus on producing a minimalist small town reduced to its constitutive economic relations, is small in the more literal sense of claustrophobia, size, and function. Here, the, overarching response to a felt "smallness" of the town is enchantment. Aravind Adiga's Kittur, on the other hand, is small in a way that combines these two definitions - its smallness comes through in how it *restricts* growth. In the light of India's neoliberal growth rates, the small town's underdevelopment during the "bad days" of pre-liberalization is seen with a sense of disillusionment. Behind these three shifting, but interrelated definitions, we can already perceive a movement of history. A space, known popularly for its function as an in-between, home to the majority of South Asians, once earmarked for development, is, over the course of these three works, abstracted to its structural, functional essence, even as the aspirations of those who comprise this "majority" are crushed under the march of neoliberalism.

To paraphrase Marx, the guiding perspective attached to the small town in *English, August* is that the city that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its future.[20] The novel, thus, *positions* the small town as the periphery, by beginning the text in the urban metropolis. The young IAS officer, Agastya Sen, is ready to leave for Madna "which is eighteen hours away from Delhi" by train (9). Agastya and his circle of friends are the

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[20] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Capital* Volume 1 (New York: Penguin, 1990): 91.

cosmopolitan youths who would, in a few years, reap the fruits of the oncoming neoliberal

transition. They speak fluent English, have private-sector jobs (banks, publishing sector), and are

highly educated. Delhi and Calcutta form the frame of reference for their perception of the small

town.

Every aspect of Agastya's idea of the small town is marked by how it lacks this

metropolitan sheen, and every encounter an occasion to reflect on this. For Agastya, the

metropolis serves as the ideal towards which the small town is to tend. In this regard, it is

illuminating to begin, like Agastya does, from his conception of Delhi. Arriving at Delhi from

Madna, Agastya reflects on how:

> Six in the morning, and Delhi's *satellite industrial* towns, whose ugliness even the
> morning light couldn't soften. But in them Agastya could sense the pulse,
> sounding louder every minute, of a big city…it always thrilled him this
> megalopolitan feeling…[of] millions *purposefully* on the move.[21]

Consider this in juxtaposition with how a similar situation, Agastya's first arrival in Madna by

train from Delhi, is described:

> Hundreds of kilometres of a familiar yet unknown landscape, seen countless
> times through train windows, but never experienced - his life till then had been
> profoundly urban. Shabby stations of small towns where the train didn't stop, the
> towns  that looked nice from a train window, incurious patient eyes and weather
> beaten bicycles at a level crossing, muddy children and buffalo at a waterhole. To
> him, these places had been, at best, names out of newspapers, where floods and
> caste wars occurred, and entire Harijan families were murdered, where some
> prime minister took his helicopter just after a calamity, or just before the
> elections. Now he looked at this remote world and felt a little unsure, he was

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[21] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 163.

going to spend months in a dot in this hinterland.[22]

right up to the moment he leaves for Delhi for a vacation:

> He was hurtling through the hinterland, and now he knew what its dots were like…Bits of town were visible. That old and still-pompous building, with the glad, could be the Collectorate, he thought, and the grey decaying house with a red-tiled roof the District Judge's, and that ruin perhaps the Ratlam Club. These buildings would be in the quieter part of town, perhaps called the Civil Lines; a furlong away from them would lounge in torpid weather a life of which *they and their inhabitants* would be unaware - the world of paanwalas and shopkeepers and cobblers and rickshaw-walas; who in turn would be aware of a yet wider world only when they stopped at level crossings to see the trains pass.[23]

Coming to, staying in, and leaving the town, Agastya has the same manner of conceiving it. The dual move here is that he places it within a national schema, which is also a statist one. The small town is, within the *national* imaginary, a dot (small and insignificant) and located in the hinterlands of the *state* (distant from those centres where state power is most easily identifiable). This space is vacated from the nation that one *imagines* into being, behind which, per Eric Hobsbawm, the state always lurks,[24] but quite directly, it is physically and economically underdeveloped due to state policy. Expressions like "familiar yet unknown" and "seen but never experienced" betray the nature of the subject - someone who has the oracular power *to see* the small town - as well as that of the object - it is not worth knowing or experiencing for the urban subject, or can only be known by recourse to the state (neglected) and the nation (embodies its worst).

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[22] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 10.

[23] Chatterjee, *English, August* 162, italics added.

[24] Eric Hobsbawm: "Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round." In *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 10.

The idea that the "hinterland" remains "familiar and unknown" also comes to define the presence of the state and the nation in the small town. This is most evident in the suggestions regarding his conduct provided by Agastya's immediate superior, the district collector of Madna, Ravi Srivastava. Srivastava's philosophy is one that flattens the small towns, abstracting from their distinctiveness, and rendering them as just a series of tropes, such as having an inclination towards gossip, which need to be managed and supervised. When Agastya first arrives at Madna, Srivastava tells him of "the cattle camp in the corridors of the Collectorate" during the monsoons.[25] At the same time, Srivastava reassures Agastya by telling him that this is not unusual, and that he had seen the same thing in his previous work in other small towns, like Azamganj. The IAS, for Srivastava, should *remain* "familiar and unknown" to the small town residents, just like looking out of the train window the space of the "hinterland" seems to Agastya. Thus, Srivastava cautions him to "be careful of the company you keep in Madna. A small place, people talk a lot, they don't have much else to do…It's [the IAS] is not a job, bhai, where what you do after office is entirely your own private business, you're also responsible to the Government in the after-hours."[26] At the same time, Srivastava tells Agastya to avoid acting "uppity and high-handed" because "[t]his is India…and not the Raj, we are servants of the people."[27]

And yet, despite this highly developed ethos of cloak-and-daggers developmentalism, the bureaucracy is shown to be completely ineffectual even in the small town. The only time when the IAS officers are shown to exercise their power in a manner fruitful to the public is when

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[25] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 26.
[26] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 92.
[27] Chatterjee, *English, August*,  30.

Srivastava and Kumar, the Superintendent of Police, scare a truck driver into moving his vehicle to decongest a traffic jam. Noticing his alacrity in performing this self-serving task, Agastya likens Srivastava to "a king in ancient India…walking incognito among his subjects, revealing his identity to do good and punish evil."[28] This comparison seems to paint Srivastava as a just king who "do[es] good" for the benefit of others, which is entirely not the case since the bureaucrats only get involved so that *they* can get out of the traffic jam. The moment these events take place, Agastya once again imagines how this would have played out in "Delhi or Calcutta" and concludes that such a "reaction from a truck driver is unimaginable, unless some constables beat him up."[29] The small town is opened up for observation and the exercise of power for the most banal of matters, but this is only ensured by the reaction of the truck driver. Ultimately, therefore, the bureaucrats are not shown to be supervisors of development, but manipulators of the "pettiness" of the small town, its openness to being swayed by the whims of state power, even when the latter simply remains unconcerned about any other interests than its own.

Similarly, Agastya's only contribution in terms of work is when he is posted to a yet smaller town called Jompanna. It is not even in Jompanna, however, that he manages to get significant work done, but in a nearby village facing severe drought called Chipanthi. When he orders his juniors to bring water tankers for the residents of Chipanthi, he realizes how "sitting in the Block Office at Jompanna, Chipanthi and its problems would've seemed remote."[30] The state, then, is able to successfully project its power in the countryside for the actual betterment of the lives of the people living there. The reality of this depiction is, as it often happens, not so

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[28] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 127.
[29] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 126.
[30] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 286.

positive, but the fact remains that the small town is simply seen as a distraction and a source of

projection of state power as it actually helps quell extreme situations in the countryside. Even the

attention that Agastya brings to the village is drawn, initially, from his libidinal fascination for

the woman, Para, who approaches the BDO for his help. Finally, a tanker or even ten cannot

solve a drought crisis, and while it is a fine start, the novel gives no indication that the actions

taken by Agastya are put into permanent practice. The whole episode shows two things: first, the

state uses the small town as its base of operations for the village, as a place for the power of the

city to manifest itself while neglecting the small town's needs itself, instead directing the labour

power and organizing the space according to their whims. Second, it also shows how state power

is drawn to the countryside, where its actions remain perfunctory and geared to the spectacular

(Agastya notes that he felt "heroic" and "tough"[31] after ordering the water tankers) rather than

the stabilizing.

This aspect of neglect, that the small town is neither cared for by the state, comes across

in the ways in which Madna is shown to conceive of itself within the national realm.

"Tamsevian," an adjective that Agastya coins after a former engineer who had lived in Madna

called Tamse, is how he describes cultural works that link the nation to the small town.[32] In line

with the peripheral location of their origin, these works reveal the underdevelopment of the small

town from the national schema. Thus, a statue of Gandhi is described as: "a short fat

bespectacled man with a rod coming out of his arse," the latter having been put there "to prop up

the statue."[33] That the image of Gandhi needs to be propped up by such a graphically located rod

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[31] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 287.
[32] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 48.
[33] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 28.

intones not only the corruption of a national ideal by the bribery and cronyism in small towns,

but also its distance from urban locations. Economic backwardness necessitated this, that a better

statue could not be built; but the statue also exposes that the state needs to "prop up" nationalist

ideals in the small town in cultural and political terms, and not through economic integration.

Later, reflecting on whether this statue could be located in a place like Delhi or Calcutta (once

again measuring the small town against the metropolis), Agastya remarks that "no one had been

angered enough" by the presence of such a statue, which to him should be "an insult to their

taste" and "a travesty in stone."[34] The nature of underdevelopment and the unevenness of

capitalistic growth is cast onto the ways of being of the residents of the small town, and once

again, it is the rhetoric of "purpose" by which Agastya sees Delhi charged, that is shown as

lacking here. Per Agastya, pettiness governs the state of affairs in the small town, and, in the

words of another bureaucrat, the residents simply lack, not investment and economic incentive,

but rather, "any respect for themselves."

The small town, thus, for Agastya is variegated into layers of discrete social relations,

which fold upon themselves - *they* don't get to look outwards, but they themselves are opened up

for observation. Agastya's source for imagining the small town is the classic form: the

newspaper, with which the history of nation-building is strongly associated.[35] The burden of

proclaiming "smallness" is also placed upon caste-prejudice, which is assumed to have

abandoned the city and taken refuge in these neglected corners of the nation. It is a bold assertion

to make, considering the Mandal Commission had placed the very question of caste-privilege

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[34] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 139.

[35] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016).

front and centre in the late-1980's,[36] and characteristically emerges from the upper-caste lips of a

state Governor's son. While these are his impressions before having ever visited a small town,

the observations that he makes *after* this encounter are similarly structured. In the "bits of town"

that "are visible," the text chooses to organize Agastya's observations with the centralizing image

of government buildings: "the Collectorate," "the District Judge," the once-colonial "Ratlam

Club" and the colonial houses in the "quieter part of town…the Civil Lines." From his Madna

experience, Agastya postulates that these government bodies are "unaware" of the life that takes

place "a furlong away from them." The bourgeois-bureaucratic class is shown to live in a

cloister, separated from the working-class population of the small town: "the paanwalas and

shopkeepers."

While the working-class is aware of the houses and lives of its local bourgeoisie, their

image of the "yet wider world" is limited to stopping at "level crossings to see trains pass":

Agastya assumes that working population of the small town knows as much of the outside world

as the outside world *knows* of the small town. The only difference would be that the outside

world, coded here as the urban has the ability to see the small town, which the latter reciprocally

cannot. What is more important, however, is that Agastya considers the working-population as

trapped, between a circulating bourgeois class and an apathetic urban-oriented state that can *see*,

but never resolve, and in fact only further exploit, its problems.

This perspective, of the privileged insider to the small town who can also travel to the

urban centres is very well captured by Agastya's observations on the first day after his arrival:

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[36] Zoya Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion: Castes, Minorities, and Affirmative Action* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012): 13-14.

His room was one of two in a kind of cottage. The other room was silent, locked. Other similar cottages, and 200 feet away the large Circuit House. A few lights on in the compound, two jeeps outside the circuit house. He was 1,400 kilometres away from Delhi, and more than a thousand from Calcutta, the two cities of his past.[37]

This is a lived distillation of the conceived mapping that Agastya provided us in his train travels. The bureaucrat's world consists of the few houses that he lives in and around, the places of his work (not mentioned here, but comprising of precisely the same ones mentioned by him on his train journey), and then, the centre from which he receives his orders: Delhi and Calcutta. Doing justice to his colonial office, the train becomes the site through which a structure of feeling for the small town and its relationship to the metropolis is enunciated:

He wondered, would the train be Madras to Delhi, or Hyderabad to Calcutta? If to Calcutta, he suddenly decided, then … I'll be happy, and if to Delhi, I shall be, well just generally fucked…It was a goods train, slow and heavy … The wheels were monstrous and wonderful, each one a killer. People were flopping down under them all the time.[38]

Suicide, death, and an equal chance of being "happy" or "generally fucked" - these are the sentiments with which the destinies of the city and the small town are yoked together in the mediating subject of the train. The relationship between small town and city is shown to be essentially murderous, for these lines evoke images of those who are indeed "flopping down under" the "monstrous and wonderful" killing wheels of the train. The train, as it moves through the small town, towards the metropolitan end points, grinds into earth the bodies of those who, living the underdevelopment of the small town and the village, choose to end their lives under a

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[37] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 12.
[38] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 114.

train. If, going from hinterland to metropolis (to turn Marx on his head into a Johannes Fabian) the train also moves from past to "the image of its future," then it emerges into the city "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" from the small-town, as the latter is crushed by underdevelopment. Contained in this is also a structure of feeling for the oncoming onslaught of neoliberalism.

Agastya's way of seeing, till now, has shown how the state's relationship, in material terms, has underdeveloped the small town, and how much it needs economic vitality. Within the horizon of history that the late-1980's context provides, *English, August* can only go so far as to show that the state has completely failed in its ability to create the capitalistic way of life in the small towns which Agastya notices as constituent of the metropolis. The state's abandonment of the small town (not to mention its flashy, self-serving work in the countryside) is well elaborated in the disjunction between old and new: the generational conflict between Agastya and his father, Madhusudan Sen, the Governor of West Bengal, and a former bureaucrat himself. The older Sen understands how "Madna must have placed [Agastya's] Delhi and Calcutta in perspective… but…[his] reactions were different from [Agastya's]."[39] The "same happened" to Madhusudan in the Konkan small town to which he had been posted, he assures his son, but he tells his son to "not choose the soft option" of quitting the job. This remark contains the older Nehruvian state's perspective to the small town, the developmentalist optimism - "the Konkan was a pleasant surprise"[40] - as well as understanding how the more metropolitan, younger Sen is unable to function in the small town. It highlights that, in historical terms, the postcolonial state's lack of involvement in developing the small towns beyond their colonial *mofussil* purpose has widened

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[39] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 168.
[40] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 168.

the gap between metropolitan city and small town to such a degree that the second postcolonial generation no longer even understands Delhi and Madna to be parts of the same country. Within the context of such unevenness, the small town has to be shown as a site ripe for the free market reforms that neoliberalism would bring. Agastya's subjective perceptions, existential angst, and lure for the private sector, discussed in the second chapter, all highlight this idea of preparing a way of seeing for which the public-sector is completely ineffectual.

The developmentalist frame justifies and structures the ways in which Madna is seen in its relationships with countryside, city, nation, and state. The waning of this schema in the late-1980's, heralded by Rajiv Gandhi's neoliberal reforms and culminating in the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, are the immediate historical horizon for the ways in which the small town is conceived in Vinod Kumar Shukla's *A Window Lived in a Wall* (henceforth *WLW*). The unnamed small town is shown to be functionally "linked" to the places near it, which is a development on Upamanyu Chatterjee's Madna, where the *distance* between villages and small towns was emphasized incessantly through Agastya's bored reactions to the trips. There, the emphasis on distance was to show how wide state power had to spread to make contact with its object. Here, as noted above, the *shortness* rather than the *interminability* of distances is emphasized to produce the smallness qua smallness of the town: the 8 kilometres of distance between the small town and Jora village that the protagonists traverse daily for their livelihood.

The protagonists of this novel are the newlyweds, Raghuvar Prasad, a resident of the town, and his wife, Sonsi. While this novel too locates the small town as a space of mobility, this feature itself comes under examination in *WLW*. The Indian railways have been replaced in their role by the National Highways (NH6, formerly the second longest highway in India, which runs

from Mumbai to Calcutta). The location of the small town is pegged to the nation in an abstract

manner, since it is by NH6, but the role of this highway is not to *bring* people to or from the

small town; it is depicted as a matter of pure chance that the town lies on this national highway,

even as it reaps the benefits of the mobility it allows, and laments the crowdedness of this

highway: "[a] stream of trucks, buses and three-wheeled jitneys flowed day and night along

National Highway No. 6."[41]

Beyond this single reference to India and the state, the novel mentions almost no other

public services; a municipal garden is presented as an inferior version of the "window-

world" (discussed in detail in the second chapter) and the local government hospital is depicted

as being overcrowded and slow. Raghuvar Prasad is "a lecturer at a private college" - with this

sentence, and with the slow evacuation from the small town of the colonial buildings and the

bureaucratic functionaries, this 1996 novel provides an image of the small town as the dialectical

opposite of Madna. The novel is couched in a structure of feeling that is thus marked by the

aftermath of state failure, and anticipates the full-fledged effects of the neoliberal transformation

that would appear in twenty-first century India.

*English, August* understands the nature of urban-centric development as positive and

quantitative. "It would be a long, long time, an eternity, before Madna would become Delhi,"[42]

thinks Agastya; rhetorically, this implies that Madna and Delhi were incommensurate, but,

literally, it suggests that the only essential difference between Madna and Delhi is one of time. If

we shift the emphasis in this sentence from "an eternity" to the deterministic quality of the future

perfect (the use of "would" obscuring the question of "could"), the teleological, improving

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[41] Shukla, *Window*, 5.
[42] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 247.

nature of the urban on the semi-urban becomes clear. The question of non-urban local identity is posed sarcastically, as Srivastava notes about Madna - it was "made to feel proud of its tribal traditions, which another way of trying to make you forget your economic backwardness."[43] This same equation now plays out between the small town and the village in *WLW*. No longer is the metropole Delhi; it is the small town, having moved away from its peripheral location. It organizes how space is conceived around it within the universe of the novel. Just like Agastya's presence mediated the small town and the village, Raghuvar's being mediates the relationship between country and small town:

> The college was eight kilometres away from a town of seventy thousand…If the town had extended to the village, Jora would have been the name of a suburb. But at eight kilometres away, Jora had its own separate identity. It was in Jora that Raghuvar Prasad's college was situated.[44]

However, due to the distinct spatial organizations of rurality and urbanity i.e. so long as the planetary totalization of urbanity that Lefebvre points to remains incomplete,[45] the idea of developing here is not quite as linear as of a teleological movement between small town and city.

The relationship between the village and small town is different because it has a qualitative component to it. Change, once led by the state, was simply "the insane race to meet

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[43] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 27.

[44] Shukla, *Window*, 5.

[45] In *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre argues that urban forms of spatial production "anticipate the process of generalized urbanization." See *The Urban Revolution,* trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014 [1970]).

targets"[46] - it was numerical and quantitative. Now, on the other hand, local identity[47] has become important, because *its erasure has become so much the more certain*, as the homogenization of difference into identity and universalization of identity via difference takes precedence over economic development i.e. the act of constituting a new identity through a struggle against the forces that uphold difference[48]. Change in this regard is qualitative, for a village to become a suburb is for the spatial practices of rurality to be entirely replaced. Thus, the spectre of gentrification and suburbanization looms over Jora village, and the town *will* over time "extend to the village." Raghuvar himself realizes that "[i]t would be a good idea … to rent a house right next to the college and save on travel."[49] If a person of limited, woking-class means can ponder thus, it points to a structure of feeling, of exploiting the unevenness created by state-led development towards, and to the fact that those *who can* move closer to the village i.e. creating suburban space, are in the process of doing so. If Agastya believes an "eternity" will pass before Madna becomes Delhi, in *WLW* that eternity is shown to be neoliberal transformation, for the fear now isn't about how long it will take, but rather, how transformative this change would be, and how it would be seen by those around whom it takes place.

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[46] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 27.

[47] In this regard, Shukla's novel can also be seen as participating in the long tradition of *anchalik* works. The local flavour present in the novel is well-argued for by Jitendra Kumar, "विनोद कुमार शुक्ल के उपन्यासों में छत्तीसगढ़ के लोक-सौंदर्य का अनुशीलन [The Depiction of Local Beauty in the Novels of Vinod Kumar Shukla]" (PhD Diss., Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, 2016); see also Radhika Sharma, "विनोद कुमार शुक्ल के कथा साहित्य का कथ्य एवं शिल्प [The Form and Content of Vinod Kumar Shukla's Prose Fiction]" (PhD Diss., Dr. Harisingh Gour University, 2007).

[48] For more on the relationship between neoliberalism, and its organization of the concepts of "identity" and "difference," see Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issues" in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998): 54-77.

[49] Shukla, *Window*, 29.

And this transformation is indeed how the town is conceived. Once shown to be structured as a series of layers that selectively interact with one another and are looked upon by an outside world while only seeing nationally-mandated symbols (people on the railways) of the outside, Raghuvar's small town "of seventy thousand" is described as:

> Farming land surrounded the town on all sides. The oldest neighbourhood was to be found in the town centre. The houses at the edge of town had been built much later. A few buildings on the outskirts were of the same period as the old neighbourhood. This was not the kind of town where brick buildings stood next to mud huts.[50]

Unlike Agastya's vision of Ratlam from the train window, where the class division of the small town was the prime manner in which he saw it divided, here, the class-based development of the small town is spatialized differently.

For while Agastya's definition echoes the white town/ black town distinction that colonialism created,[51] the small town in *WLW* is no longer spatialized with such clear-cut distinctions, but rather, has been homogenized to a certain degree. For such is the import of this not being "the kind of town where brick buildings stood next to mud huts." Either this town is the result of its own processes of gentrification, or its wealthier residents have left this town for newer climes; in either case the description itself *marks* transformation on the structure of this settlement, unlike the stodgy permanence of Ratlam, with its colonial-era buildings. Transformation and change are further spatialized in this context when we consider that the small town here is conceived in terms of *two* older settlements, for while "the oldest neighbourhood

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[50] Shukla, *Window,* 5.

[51] Vividly elaborated upon by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The colonial world is a compartmentalized world…the colonized world is a world divided into two…The 'native' sector is not complementary to the European sector. The two confront each other, but not the service of a higher unity." See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004): 3.

was to be found in the town centre" there also are "a few buildings on the outskirts [from] the same period as the old neighbourhood." What this implies is that the "centre" is a provisional one, and that, over time, the town had spread "so that the houses at [its] edge" have ended up linking these two (once) distinct spaces where the older buildings stand. Finally, the existence of farming land once again signifies more space for the town to spread.

The processes of privatization and gentrification have also entered how land-use patterns are conceived in the small town.[52] Disjunctions between old and new, much like Agastya and Madhusudan, also animate the relationship between Raghuvar and his father in *WLW*. Most prominent among these is the father's objection to Raghuvar's renting of an outhouse which costs "an extra eight rupees" per month, as well as a lock. This privatization is shown as necessary, for as Raghuvar tells his father, "There's often a long line at the public toilets. One isn't always free when you need to go."[53] This implies not only that the government has failed in providing adequate infrastructure to for this semi-urban space, but also the fact that Raghuvar considers his time valuable (discussed below). His father, on the other hand, tells him to simply not bother with these sites: "You have a whole meadow. You have the fields."[54] Between the these two ways of understanding has sprung up a different ethics of privacy and time-use. While the basic reason here is shown to be public-sector failure, there is also a subjective aspect to it - Raghuvar's father is made uncomfortable by both the aspirations to class mobility encoded in renting spaces, as well as his son's *ability* to do so:

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[52] For a wide-ranging discussion of rental practices in post-liberalization India, see Sai Balakrishnan, "Recombinant Urbanization: Agararian-urban Landed Property and Uneven Development in India," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 43, no. 4 (July 2019): 617-632.

[53] Shukla, *Window,* 28.

[54] Shukla, *Window,* 28.

"An outhouse on rent! Tomorrow you will rent a bathroom, the day after a full kitchen. Learn to make do. If you spend all your salary on rent, what will you have left to send us?"[55]

It is the commodification of space, the melting of all that was once solid under the new neoliberal regime, and the genesis of a new kind of concern with "privacy," that Raghuvar's father finds hard to understand.

The commodification of space regulates the movement within *WLW* and defines the way in which small town and countryside are related to the nation-state and to one another. As pointed above, public sector failure necessitates the rise of privatized spaces in *WLW*. Older forms of privatized ownership of land are also present in the novel, such as landlordism. "The Dau owned land in Jora village which he had donated"[56] for the construction of the private college where Raghuvar teaches. However, the Dau (term for "elder brother," denoting someone wealthy and socially privileged) has not marked his property clearly, for "[i]t was hard to tell whether the pond [an improvised urinal] came first or the Dau's fence that marked his property."[57] At the same time, this pond had been dug by "[p]ublic relief projects" that had "left it more shapeless."[58] The college had erected "steep mud walls" around it so that "one had to look for it."[59] This pond provides a dialectical image of three separate property relations inscribed onto the naturalized space of the pond, which have left it increasingly shapeless and unrecognizable. The allegorical nature of this image, in its relationship to the nation and the

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[55] Shukla, *Window,* 29.

[56] Shukla, *Window*, 18.

[57] Shukla, *Window,* 20.

[58] Shukla, *Window,* 20.

[59] Shukla, *Window,* 20.

state, is brought to the fore by what was once considered the national flower in the array of

symbols devised by the postcolonial state - the lotus:

> The land graded naturally—first grass, then lotus leaves, then water. The older
> the grass and clumps of lotus, the older the pond. This pond did not have a
> single lotus, while nearby ditches became lotus pools within three or four years.[60]

The infertility of this land, the wait for the lotuses to finally grow, frames a feeling for the land

that has seen the extractivism of landlords, the failed developmentalism of the state, and now, the

make-shift privatized usage of space through the installation of "a shelter of twigs [that] served

as an improvised urinal."[61] That the lotus, as a symbol, has also been privatized by xenophobic

discourse in contemporary India (it is the polling symbol of the ruling Hindu majoritarian party,

the Bharatiya Janata Party) only heightens the poignancy of this image: old and new.

And the question of old and new interrupts the image of the small town, in its relationship

with country and countryside, for the small town cannot move fast enough over NH6, has to wait

anxiously at bus stands, and cram itself into tiny, crowded jitneys, or find community in its

relationship with older forms of movement, and confront its own fears of lack, for it simply

cannot afford bicycles, let alone the suggestion given to Raghuvar by his principle to purchase a

moped. NH6, and movement over it, are the other site where the commodification of space, as

well as movement through it, is presented. Just as the train, for Agastya was animated by its own

discursive associations with respect to movement in space, the jitney, the elephant and the sadhu,

and ultimately, the bicycle, become so many ways of seeing and relating to the small town. The

train has been enshrined in postcolonial India as a site for the unexpected encounter that unifies

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[60] Shukla, *Window,* 20.
[61] Shukla, *Window,* 20.

and contains "difference" (linguistic, gendered, or classed) within a postcolonial schema, and this

identification continues, with some ironic twists in *English, August*.[62] The jitney, on the other

hand, offers a similar cross-section of society, and Raghuvar encounters many different people

going to and from the villages nearby, but *WLW* emphasizes not their difference, but their

similarly cramped situation within the bounded space of the vehicle: "So Raghuvar Prasad

squeezed in where there was no space for him."[63]

However, it is not that difference cannot be celebrated, or interacted with in any manner,

in this historical schema, due to spatial constraints that ultimately also delimit subjective

interactions and the constitution of social units outside of the individual. The jitney has reduced

the people into numerical quantities, to be transported to and from their workplaces, without

much reference to their subjective identities. Raghuvar's encounter with the elephant and the

sadhu, on the other hand, is the actualization of this subjectivity, for the moment he rides on the

elephant he begins to notice the variegated nature of the crowds around him: "a caravan of

Devars… women carrying bamboo matting on their heads," "a boat being transported…on a

large wooden barrow," the Head of his department at college, and "[a] truck carrying … fresh

river sand."[64] But this sensuous appreciation of difference cannot take place unabated and

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[62] This difference was also used to nefarious ends in the colonial era, with racial and class-based divisions manifesting themselves in the space of the train, some of which still persist to this day. During the partition, it was the train's ability to bring together difference that was turned inwards; trains became sites of extreme communal violence as they moved between the newly delineated states of India and Pakistan. See Marian Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity: India's Railway and the Culture of Mobility* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). See also, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

[63] Shukla, *Window*, 10.

[64] Shukla, *Window*, 43.

restrictions are placed upon this way of seeing very soon, for Raghuvar cannot help but associate

the elephant, in myriad ways, with an outmoded way of living:

> Riding on an elephant…was like using an out-of-date coin…Once upon a time,
> maharajas and princes rode on elephants. If royalty travelled by elephant now,
> they would be laughed at. A former maharaja might enter a crowded market to
> buy vegetables on an elephant—with no room for the elephant to turn.[65]

*WLW* propounds this view - the sadhu and the elephant have made a ruined mansion in

Khairagarh, the former home of a long-dead landlord-aristocrat, their residence. This mansion

has "gone to seed" and the house is abandoned, with tiles broken, doors and windows missing,

and the hedge around it overgrown to the point of resembling "a jungle."[66] The elephant belongs

to an older way of relating to the small town, of the rajas and zamindars who commanded extra-

economic power through the spectacle of control over these massive animals.

On the other side is the jitney, the natural mode of transport belonging to the highway,

which embodies, per Raghuvar, the worst aspects of a train ride - the lack of space and

discomfort. The positive subjective aspects of such travelling - community and appreciation of

difference qua difference - are made legible only by using a mode of travelling depicted as

outmoded and unstable (the sadhu often disappears without warning, abandoning the elephant

outside Raghuvar and Sonsi's house).[67] The struggle is for the privatization and personalization

of this daily travel, and contained within this longing is the vision of the automobile, which

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[65] Shukla, *Window*, 9.

[66] Shukla, *Window*, 209-210.

[67] In a way, such a depiction plumbs the depths of colonial associations, so that the usage of an elephant, instead of more modern means of transportation, also reflects how the British Raj sought to domesticate the image of a steam engine for South Asians. For an in-depth discussion of this association and the discursive presentation by the Colonial government of the railways to South Asians, see Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity*, 14.

Raghuvar's boss, the head of the department, tells him to buy - a moped, which he describes as

"an elephant driven by petrol."[68] The atomized mode of transport is depicted as being the ideal of

movement in a commodified space-time matrix, and throughout the text, the bicycle is celebrated

as providing precisely this kind of neoliberal freedom:

> A bicycle flies. An elephant moves ponderously. Instead of waiting at a jitney stop, one waits while the elephant walks…He was spurred on by the excitement of travelling on a bicycle. On his way back, he'd meet up again with the things he was leaving behind now. The road was deserted, but he rang his bicycle bell. He continued ringing it, to urge aside whatever lay before him on the road. It could be that the trees lining the road were once on it. They pulled back to the edges at Raghuvar Prasad's insistent ringing.[69]

Such is the power of this personalized, solitary figure as it moves across the landscape, so

absorbed in the sense of control over his own mobility. Certainly bicycles are not a new

invention, and Raghuvar has owned one in the past (his father uses one). It is the way of seeing

this bicycle that is novel - as an alternative from the cumbersome shackles of jitney (national-

modern) and elephant (communal-feudal).

Through the image and the body of the bicycle, the small town has been liberated, as

well as mechanized. It is seen floating in space, unconnected to countryside or city; in one word,

it is enchanted. At the end of the novel, Raghuvar simply releases the elephant into the wild after

the sadhu passes away. The act is one of liberation, slipping through its semantic other,

"liberalization." The final image with which the novel closes is of a new sadhu riding a bicycle.

He does not recognize Raghuvar. And while Raghuvar is gladdened by this anonymity, he has

also lost what is depicted as one of the few instances of genuine community he had found over

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[68] Shukla, *Window*, 13.
[69] Shukla, *Window*, 135-136.

the course of the novel. In this moment, the small town, relieved from the tensions of gossip and recognition, so pertinent to Agastya's stay in Madna, finally becomes urbanized in its way of seeing. Unlike the mechanized forms of transportation - the jitney and the train - both the bicycle and the elephant make use of physical labour, whether that of a human or of an animal. The movement between these three modes of mobility showcases the historical development of forms of community and labour. The elephant provides community and friendship, but it is also associated with lag and feudalism. The jitney is an improvement, for it is faster and requires no animal labour; it also, like the train, ideally offers a space of community. But this is often undermined by the lack of space for passengers, and their inability to communicate with one another because they are too distracted by discomfort. Finally, the bicycle can carry an autonomous figure through the landscape, guarantees ample space and leisure, and the ability to fully control other aspects like the speed of the movement, the route and directions, and the points at which one stops. But is also relies on a kind of self-exploitation, and the machine fuses the driver and the passenger into a perfect whole in order to access the mobility it can provide.

The image of this exploitation of the self forms the essence that links all the stories in Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*. Unlike *English, August* and *WLW, Between the Assassinations* (henceforth, *BTA*) has a specific socio-historical context to which it attends: the period of time between 1984, when Indira Gandhi was assassinated and 1991, when her son Rajiv was. The book itself, however, was published in 2007, at a phase that can now properly be seen as the heyday of neoliberal growth in India. It is from this vantage point that Adiga's work conceives of a small town called Kittur and combines its ways of life with a self-conscious attempt at taking stock of the past two decades of neoliberal reforms. Adiga's work is, first of all,

a play with forms with a tendency towards naturalism of the descriptive kind. Georg Lukács'

examination of Emile Zola's writings and way of seeing are extremely apt. For if "description

contemporizes everything,"[70] then Adiga's characters, settings, and ways of being in the small

town are more reflective of the late-noughts than the late-1980's, from a time of uncertainty

about the economic and political future of the country through a socio-historical conjecture

where the end of history was triumphantly celebrated,[71] India became increasingly imbricated in

the NATO-led power structures of globalization with an exclusive nuclear deal under its belt,

and, despite the global recession, India's GDP grew at the highest rates it had ever seen.[72] In this

contemporization drive, of course, much is lost, as the city comes to play a symbolic role in

constructing relations between urban, rural, and national ways of seeing and being. The

development of the small town is detached from both the village and the city, and it becomes a

spatialization of contact between these two realms, as well as a space where concerns about

national development are voiced, but neither of these two realms are depicted with the

transcendental specificity that would speak to the *locale* within which these concerns play out.

    *BTA* produces a series of stories that make the reader feel like an observer, not a

participant, and "the events themselves become only a tableau for the reader, or, at best, a series

of tableaux."[73] This is reinforced by the structure of the book itself, which is composed in the

form of a tour guide. Thus, the book is divided into seven "days" instead of chapters, and on each

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[70] Georg Lukacs, "Narrate or Describe," in *Writer & Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunklap, 1970), 130.

[71] See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

[72] Dipak Dasgupta and Abhijit Sen Gupta, "Rapid Recovery and Stronger Growth after the Crisis," in *The Great Recession and Developing Countries: Economic Impact and Growth Prospects,* ed. Mutstapha K. Nabli (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2011), 211.

[73] Lukacs, "Narrate or Describe," 116.

of these "days" specific stories take place in Kittur. Each of these stories is titled after, and opens

with a short description of, the place in Kittur around which they take place. So, for instance,

there are stories titled "Market and Maidan," "Lighthouse Hill, or "The Cathedral of Our Lady of

Valencia." Further, each "day" is contextualized through a series of guide-like sections: "How

the Town is Laid Out," "The History of Kittur," "The Languages of Kittur," and "Kittur: Basic

Facts." This intricate organization, however, has little to no effect on the storytelling itself and

"the setting is incidental, merely 'setting'."[74] Thus, the "interweaving and counterposing" of

private life with public events, as is the case for Lukacs with Flaubert and Zola, is definitively

accomplished in the context of *BTA,* with the book as a whole articulating several attitudes

towards the "chaos in Delhi" and juxtaposing the political turmoil of late-1980s India with the

struggles and quandaries of daily life in Kittur.

Kittur remains a setting for Adiga, despite his effort at providing multiple differently

classed, gendered, and casteized points of view on small town life. The book as a whole ironizes

this emphasis on description over narration, and pokes fun at its different writerly ambitions

through metafictional commentary (through the two writer-characters: Gururaj and Murali) on

the different ways in which writers conceive of the small town. Thus, there is no correlation

between an image of totality and the small town manifestation of this totality which is Kittur. In

other words, Adiga's Kittur "consists of the assemblage of all the important details as seen from

various points of view" but "the result is a series of static pictures" and "still lives connected

only through the relations of objects arrayed one beside the other."[75] The search for totality ends

up being quantitative (acquiring the most "comprehensive exposition of the social milieu") rather

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[74] Lukacs, "Narrate or Describe," 115.
[75] Lukacs, "Narrate or Describe," 144.

than qualitative, which would reveal interconnections within the network of economic and political relations that sustain the assemblage depicted. What should be dynamic becomes reified, taken as a given. In Walter Benjamin's words, this is the symbolic realm in which "[t]he false appearance of totality" undermines the allegorical method; for the latter, it is the search for totality that determines its manifestation.[76]

Thus, the small town is opened to external examination, no longer the "distant" life closed off from a powerful subject (Agastya) or the extremely inhabited space which needs no definition because it admits no observation (Raghuvar). However, in the process of this conversion it undergoes a mutilation and is no longer legible as a space in itself: it has parts and aspects to its existence, but these parts are no longer *located* within a small town specificity. Thus, the fate of the overworked rickshaw-puller Chenayya can be transplanted to any urban centre in South Asia. The anguish felt by the Dalit student, Shankara, in "St. Alfonso's" is similarly transportable, as is the claustrophobia of the domestic help Jayamma, or the embarrassed middle-class sexuality of the Raos, or the bourgeois guilt of Abbasi. Their concerns simply do not arise from the space of the small town itself - they are general concerns that acquire local colour from their *placement* in a small town schema. But the schema itself remain obscure. In this regard, Agastya's shorthand for a similar exercise of conceiving the small town, as divided between the old colonial neighbourhood and the working-class enclaves that open onto the railway lines gives more detail about the *way* of life in the region than is the entirety of Adiga's tourist-guide setup.

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[76] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), 176.

An example of this sense of lack is provided by examining the introductions to local sites given at the beginning of each chapter. Let us take the example of "Day One - The Bunder." which notes that "The Bunder has the highest crime rate in Kittur, and … in 1987, riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims…the Hindus have since been moving out to Bajpe and Salt Market Village."[77] The significance of this reversal of trends, from city to countryside, is never discussed or contextualized in other examples. Neither do we find any examination of *what* makes the Bunder so particularly lucrative for criminals to congregate around. Beyond the designation on this chapter's protagonist as a Muslim businessman and the presence of some Muslim criminals for few lines of dialogue, religion itself guides no aspect of depiction here. Thus, the description provided does not even provide a frame of reference for the story itself, which is about the moral tribulations that Abbasi is faced with as he realizes the manner in which his sweatshop is destroying the lives of his employees.

At other points, the description of locality and the depiction of life in the locality are simply reiterations of the exact same perspectives, showing that, ultimately the logic fixing these two together is a subjective, authorial one i.e. Adiga's, and simply not arising from an organic relationship between figure and ground. Such is the case when we turn to the aforementioned chapter on "Bajpe." Described as "the 'cleansing lungs' of the town," Bajpe is full of natural beauty - guests sit on "terraces or balconies" and enjoy "cool breezes that blew from the forest" as they watch "herons, eagles, and kingfishers."[78] At the same time, "it was assumed that if a man built his house on Bishop Street, he had some reason to want to be so far from

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[77] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 23.
[78] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 291.

civilization."[79] Aside from the fact that there is a sudden change in the valence of this introduction, from tour guide to real-estate brochure, the story in this section is just an elaboration on the themes already presented in this description. In short, it is a narrativization of what the introduction notes as: "the observers had the distinct impression that they were being observed in return."[80] The residents of Bajpe, the married couple Giridhar and Kamini, have no children. This becomes a point of examination for the guests that they regularly invite to their house - thus the observers become observed. When Giridhar feels stressed, he goes to a nearby lake which is hidden behind some trees. It is, in other words, hidden just like Bajpe is secluded. There is even the explicit mention of "A cool breeze … blowing in from the forest."[81]

The relationship between narrative and guidebook elements may be diametrically opposed in these two instances: completely extraneous as opposed to direct mirroring between. However, the way of seeing which they indicate is actually unified through their tendency to description - they level the difference in accounts that would arise from an outsider's way of seeing the small town and an insider's perspective. The small town as seen from the outside, as conceived, begins to predominate over elements of how it is perceived and lived as well. The lived experiences of the small town are always shown as lack in *English, August*, and in *WLW*, the lived experience dominates and seeks to reorient the perceived and conceived spaces. This dominance of conceived space as totality, bounding the frame of what can be perceived and lived, is what leads to the note of naturalism throughout the text by destroying the *experiential* and *narratable* reality of the space of the small town itself.

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[79] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 291.
[80] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 291.
[81] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 292.

Thus, the various ways of seeing that *English, August* and *WLW* provide in terms of national location, public services, and the small town's connections to the countryside and the city are extremely homogenized since there no longer exists an insider-outsider distinction in terms of residing in the small town. The small town now uniformly becomes a space where disillusionment with postcoloniality can be voiced. Thus the disappointed valence of the thoughts of upper-class businessmen:

> "I thought things would get better with this young fellow Rajiv taking over the country," Abbasi said. "But he's let us all down. As bad as any other politician."[82]

This note of dissatisfaction is also echoed by a lower middle-class school teacher:

> "The only mix-up, Mr. Bhatt," said the assistant headmaster, "was made on fifteen August 1947, when we thought this country could be run by a people's democracy instead of a military dictatorship."[83]

The same stance on national affairs is also taken by a middle-class banker:

> "One of these mornings the Soviets would come streaming over Kashmir with their red flags. Then the country would regret having missed its chance to ally itself with America back in 1948."[84]

This sense of chaos and disillusionment is further developed by an overexploited rickshaw-puller:

> He passed by a statue of Gandhi, and he began thinking again. Gandhi dressed like a poor man—he dressed like Chenayya did. But what did Gandhi do for the poor? Did Gandhi even exist? he wondered. These things—India, the River

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[82] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 32.

[83] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 85.

[84] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 296.

Ganges, the world beyond India —were they even real?[85]

In the same vein, a disillusioned ex-communist notes that certain postcolonial ideological

emphases had blinkered India's vision of development:

> A whole generation of young men, deluded by Gandhianism, wasting their lives
> running around organizing free eye clinics for the poor and distributing books for
> rural libraries, instead of seducing those young widows and unmarried girls. That
> old man in his loincloth had turned them mad. Like Gandhi you had to withhold
> all your lusts.[86]

While these thoughts exist and circulate in the small town, these moments of reflection on the

state of the nation are also tableaux, historical traces that seek to understand the late-1980's

moment as one of chaos and flux, but without any definite perspective on the state of affairs. An

assumed and homogenized criticism of the corruption of the Rajiv Gandhi government is

adopted as a uniform way of seeing, rather than the construction of a historically located way of

seeing the nation that would allow for moments of heteroglossic enunciation regarding the state.

The small-town, seen until now as a site from which unique aspects of state incompetence could

be registered, and where the imagination of the nation was strained in peculiar (Tamsevian)

ways, is now levelled through description. Which is to say that the specificity of unevenness is

dismantled by a grievance shared by almost all characters against the national state of affairs.

The socio-historical conjunction is also made into a tableau against which the small town is

projected, but it registers none of the polyvocality of this structure of feeling. As Lukacs notes

"disillusionment" is also the subjective element that can string together unrelated narratives into

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[85] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 193.
[86] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 332-333.

a picture of reality.[87] This disillusioned subject is the natural successor to the highs experienced

by Shukla's enchanted subject, as the latter is folded within the same processes that it once

organized. It stands in contrast to Agastya's sense of boredom and ennui in the small town. While

both these responses are motivated by a sense of stagnation, Agastya damns the small town

because he sees it from an urban perspective and finds it lacking. On the other hand, Adiga's

subjects are disillusioned by Kittur not (only) out of a sense of a lack, but because it embodies

only too well a general national condition that has homogenized city, country and small town -

corruption and stagnation. For Kittur, there remains nothing to *orient* its dynamism, as opposed

to Madna, in which case those who are supposed to perform this task of orientation have

relinquished their responsibility.

The abstract and monovalent description of the small town's relationship to the nation

also infects the *BTA*'s way of seeing the town's relationship to the countryside. Rather than

examining the sources of underemployment and unemployment in the countryside, the villages

around Kittur simply become sources of cheap labour for the small town. However, none of the

characters who make the journey from village to Kittur (namely, Ziauddin, Keshava, Chenayya,

Jayamma, and George) are shown as having particular success in the more urban surroundings of

Kittur. What is shown, or seen, is rather their inability to assimilate with their surroundings,

whether it is in the form of Chenayya's disdain for his fellow rickshaw-pullers, Jayamma's

strained relationship with her co-workers, Shaila and Rosie, or Ziauddin's inability to hold a

stable service job. It is a reified way of seeing the town and country relationship, in which the

same pattern repeats itself again and again to masquerade as truth. They seem to have no ability

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[87] Lukacs, "Narrate or Describe," 144.

to interact with the small town itself, and their fate is dictated by a series of encounters with Kittur's urbane residents, or by ways of being that they bring with them from country to town.

The city, however, is treated in the same way and those among Kittur's residents who have more urbane origins, but have moved to the small town, are shown to be stymied by it. The small town here is small by virtue of how it limits movements *beyond* this smallness; changelessness and the eternity between Madna and Delhi, once shown to be specifically the thoughts of the urban observer of the small town are now depicted as essential elements of the small town itself. Thus, the characters who long for mobility and movement to the city are shown as just as unable to fit in to the small town schema as their countryside counterparts. "Father Mendonza, who had … come down from Bangalore," is shown to be a failure in upholding decorum at a boys' school, and has to harness the power and brute force of a small town resident, D'Mello.[88] On the other hand, D'Mello, who secretly wishes to inhabit the urban zone of Delhi is frustrated in his aspirations. Characters like Giridhar Rao and Murali, who come to Kittur from Bangalore and Madras respectively, are depicted as unwise to have chosen to settle in the small town. In stark contrast to characters like Govind Sathe from *English, August* whose decision to stay in the Madna, which he regards as his home, and not Bombay is accepted with interest and admiration even in Agastya's urbane framework, there is no such joyful existence in the small town, and the metropolis is *unquestionably* better in the ideological universe of *BTA*.

Finally, the small-town, so long a point of contact between the country and the city, is starkly pushed off this choice role. In all the instances in which Kittur conducts and facilitates such contact, the outcome is shown to be outrageously negative. The overarching message that

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[88] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 87.

the encounter between country and city, facilitated by the small town, conveys, is the abandonment of the city's labouring class by the capital from the city. Thus, Jayamma's life is pegged to that of the city folks, who hire her and suck up her labour power for their social reproduction causes, while she herself remains an unmarried virgin because her family could not provide for her dowry:

> Her father had saved enough gold only for six daughters to be married off; the last three had to remain barren virgins for life. Yes, for life. For forty years she had been put on one bus or the other and sent from one town to the next to cook and clean in someone else's house. To feed and fatten someone else's children. She wasn't even told where she would be going next.[89]

The countryside is unable to interact with the city in any other way than to be mercilessly lead by it. Their fates are pegged to one another, but the city leads the way without question.

The city has, effectively, abandoned its role of moving the village *with* it in a national schema, which is another way of saying that the national development is overwhelmingly urban-oriented in Adiga's world. Gone are the educators who came from urban locales to help the development of the village and the small town, such as Dr. Prashant Kumar from *Maila Aanchal* who goes to Maryganj to help the fight against Malaria,[90] or Ravi, the cosmopolitan teacher who returns to Khasak, in O.V. Vijayan's *Khasakkinte Itihasam.[91]* The closest we get to this circumstance is when an English-speaking journalist from Madras pays Chenayya and his fellow workers a visit. However, after he asks a few questions about the nutritional intake of the rickshaw-pullers, Chenayya gets frustrated:

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[89] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 219-220.

[90] Phanishwarnath Renu, मैला आँचल (New Delhi: Rajkamal Paperbacks, 2007)

[91] O.V. Vijayan, *The Legends of Khasak,* trans. O.V. Vijayan (New Delhi: Penguin, 1994).

"Don't patronize us, you son of a bitch!" he shouted. "Those who are born poor in this country are fated to die poor. There is no hope for us, and no need of pity. Certainly not from you, who have never lifted a hand to help us; I spit on you. I spit on your newspaper. Nothing ever changes. Nothing will ever change. Look at me." … You think I need your notepad and your English to tell me this? You keep us like this, you people from the cities, you rich fucks. It is in your interest to treat us like cattle! You fuck! You English-speaking fuck!"[92]

Chenayya realizes the truth of this separation between urban development and rural uplift: NREGA in the streets, SEZs in the sheets. The fate of the countryside is locked in place, and the small town simply becomes a large place for the collection of the reserve armies of labour produced by neoliberal unevenness. Perhaps the journalist too realizes this, for he "turn[s] his face away, as if he were ashamed."[93] The turned face only avoids its own failure to aid the development of the countryside.

The other side of this forced yoking of destinies, and abandonment lies, of course, the open manipulation that the city enacts to force the countryside to its purposes. Ziauddin's fate is such: caught between the two pictures of the city. Thus, he manages to find employment in the xenophobic markets of Kittur only because of the rise of the influx of Muslim immigrants, which had led to a rise in the number of Muslim-owned restaurants and hotels. The influx of immigrants from "Yemen or Kerela or Arabia or Bengal" have helped him gain employment, as has the influx of soldiers in Kittur, on their way to establish a new military base in Cochin.[94] An entanglement with the nation-state, and the latter's consideration of this regional small town's importance, have placed it in a schema that facilitates economic exchange between city and

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[92] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 183.
[93] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 184.
[94] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 9.

small town, helping, ultimately, Ziauddin's family in the countryside to receive money. But if national capital can improve the countryside through the small-town, it can also use the small-town as a site where, in disguise, it approaches the countryside to manipulate it to its ends. The face of community helps the city disguise itself in the small town, as kin, but tilt the countryside to a cause that would, ultimately, lead to its own destruction.

That this economic manipulation is given a xenophobic cast in Adiga's novel, through the introduction of the older Pathan, initially called "the stranger" and then referred to as "the foreigner," who employs Ziauddin to spy on the military's movements in the region, speaks to the socio-political context in which meanings of manipulation could be produced.[95] It also taps into the widespread discourse, since mobilized by the Bharatiya Janata Party, to fold the small town into a bastion of xenophobia, in its march to electoral triumph (of the will or otherwise). The greater point is that the city and country relation is *fractured* in the small town, rather than being facilitated by it. The city remains a realm of fascination and an ideal for development, as in D'Mello's dreams of reaching Delhi with his genius student Girish. But these dreams take place in the realm of a deep slumber in which the small town is shown to persist.

As the city, and its concomitant privileged relationship with the national ideal, become cemented as the *only* way of seeing both state and nation, the small-town is consigned to the role of a symbol. In the same moment in which Adiga shows the insider/outsider ways of seeing the small town as the same, the dynamic intercourse that animated the city - small town - countryside triad collapses. The older allegorical force that was driven by the presence of, for instance, Tamsevian art in *English, August* or stark depictions of peripheral relationality, as in

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[95] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 17.

Raghuvar's ontological relationship to NH6, is entirely absent in Kittur's relationship with the nation. The small town is simply a tableau of national, urban, and rural concerns, all of which seem increasingly hard to disentangle. Truth is considered a given here, and Kittur allegorizes nothing, preferring the staid stillness of naturalism, spewing symbols that refuse to "unfold in new and surprising ways" and instead, "remain persistently the same."[96]

Combined with the changes wrought about in the ways in which the general way of life of the small town is depicted is also the transformation of the individual subject who interacts with the small town. The inward-facing subject who faces the small town, bored of his professional duties and dissatisfied with his private life, struggling to maintain the veneer of respectability, is personified by Agastya Sen, and speaks to a specific conjunction in the relationships between market-led economics, state-based politics, and the cosmopolitan culture of urbanity. The further deepening of this inwardness, seen in *WLW*, is accompanied by the enchanted nature conferred upon daily life in the small town, as it jostles for space in a new economic world. Fantasy papers over objective contradictions, as the weightlessness of finance capital is mirrored by the invisible appearance of the window-world; its renewed emphasis on extraction of surplus value, on the other hand, can also be noticed in how sites of community are marked by hidden forms of labour. Finally, *BTA* shows the latest form of this subjective development, as the characters in Adiga's universe struggle to find some way of belonging to the small town. The quandaries which were once the province of the urban observer of the small town are now generalized to the point that they have become the way of seeing of the small town's residents too. But while the ways of belonging to the small town are seen as urbanized in

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[96] Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 183.

*BTA*, the infrastructure of this space itself is not shown to have changed drastically, and this

constitutes the contradiction around which questions of subjectivity revolve in Adiga's text.

## Chapter 2: Small Town Subjects or Neoliberal Citizens

The nation-state, the city, and the countryside, are distinct and connected aspects of the relationships that the small town establishes, and through which the small town is established. This chapter seeks to understand how specific ways of relating and belonging to[97] the small town can be mapped onto the socio-historical conjunctions that have manifested since the late-1980's moment in India. Through its modernist-existentialist aesthetic, *English, August* provides an allegory of the small town's isolation and underdevelopment, straddling the divided realms of state-led development and the market reforms, already underway, that would end up in liberalization. The structure of feeling of a coming-of-age novel with its impasses, opportunities, decisions, and choices, comes to intersect with and unfold through the ways in which the small town is seen by the national metropole. *A Window Lived in a Wall* provides a cultural depiction that is animated by a way of belonging that accords with India's entry into the era of globalization and finance capital. The isolated, particularized, and atomized subject, coupled with a heightened sensitivity to concerns of privacy belongs to an era in which the market forces championed the idea of the self-sufficient subject fulfilling themselves through active economic participation. While *WLW* shows how belonging can be successful in limited ways, *Between the Assassinations* depicts its failure. Despite its symbolic and naturalistic relationship to concerns of urbanization and national development, *BTA* presents a historicized account of the developments of the late-1980's. Written at what can now be recognized as the high noon of neoliberalism in India, Adiga's objective is to understand the conditions that allowed for its emergence.

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[97] Martin Mülheim, *Fictions of Home: Narratives of Alienation and Belonging, 1850-2000* (Tübingen, Germany: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2018). Mülheim provides a succinct discussion of the development of ideas of belonging to the city and the countryside in European literature, as he works with the important theoretical contributions of Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*, to this idea.

Belonging, here, is depicted as a struggle, one that often clashes with the manner in which

neoliberal culture emphasizes the atomism of individuality.

In *English, August*, the development of the subject and its conundrums around belonging

are seen in their first stage - dissatisfaction with state-led development in the small town and the

articulation of a longing for *change,* for a departure from the longstanding developmentalist

framework through which the small town has been seen. The existential aspects of the novel

aptly predispose it towards vocalizing the concern with belonging. Within the existentialist mode

in which this dissatisfaction is enunciated, the first step becomes to discredit the reality of the

state's presence in the small town:

> In that mild autumn sunlight, Madna seemed light years away, yet he knew that it
> would return, perhaps after dark, or whenever he was alone. It seemed unreal,
> yet accessible, a sleepwalking eighteen hours away.[98]

This is only a short step away from the dissolution of both metropole and periphery as equally

unreal locations, co-constituted through a nefarious relationship wrought by the industrial,

colonial technology of the railways:

> Madna and Delhi seemed two extreme points of an unreal existence: the only
> palpable thing was the rhythm of the beast beneath him, a wonder, that could link
> such disparate worlds together.[99]

Ultimately even the immediacy of the small town cannot relieve the burden of unreality, and

Agastya encounters these emotions even while he is on the job:

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[98] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 166.
[99] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 198.

> He was again assailed by that sense of the unreal. *Now* what was he doing,
> here in the obscurity of a place called Jompanna.[100]

At the same time, this feeling is also accepted, and given in to, in the village of Chipanthi:

> He looked around. The tribals stared at him blankly. A pleasant afternoon sun,
> and a light breeze. The familiar unreal feeling asserted itself, here, in a barren
> patch in a decaying forest, amid mud huts and strange tribals, with children being
> wounded in a well - what was he doing here?[101]

This marks the emergence of a new way of seeing, within which this government job and its requirements no longer make sense, and a sense of belonging cannot be forged for the urban subject in the small town. The former fails entirely to relate to the latter. With the emergence of novel ways of earning a middle-class livelihood, the search for social capital no longer needs to be directed through the state; in turn, the state can no longer belong to the small town, and the small town's sense of belonging to the nation comes under duress. Unreality, then, is as subjective as it is objective, for this no longer *needs* to be the either the reality of the class to which Agastya belongs, or the reality of economic development in the small town. As Agastya notes, his work feels "as though he was living someone else's life."[102] Unreality simply indicates the presence of other ways of structuring a given set of socio-political relationships, the fraying of the dominant to reveal emergent qualities, as well as residual ones, which together comprise it:

> Sitting with the three men, he was again assailed by a sense of the unreal. I don't
> look like a bureaucrat, what am I doing here. I should have been a photographer,
> or a maker of ad films, *something* like that, shallow and urban.[103]

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[100] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 227.
[101] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 287.
[102] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 11.
[103] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 19.

Proclamations of the unreality of the bureaucrat's presence in the small town are ultimately ways of underscoring the falsity of a narrative of state-led development in the small town. This understanding is fragile and emergent, for alternatives to it cannot be spoken of. It is simply "someone else's" job to continue this task, for Agastya, and his fellow cosmopolitan Indians, would rather be pursuing "something…shallow and urban."

What this repeated invocation of "unreality," combined with Agastya's ironic mode of engagement with fellow bureaucrats, his mockery of norms, and his near-constant inebriation combine to form is a facade; underneath this lie the "conceal[ed] relationships" that Lukacs understands as the totality of objective economic relationships, and Agastya's presence in the small town is a part of this totality.[104] The appearance of belonging denoted by Agastya's forced sociality conceals the various ways in which the urbanized arm of the government's face in the small town runs away from its actual duties: of aiding and assisting in the development of Madna. That this encounter generates a way of seeing in which the economic reality of the small town must be either avoided, or, upon encounter, shirked off through a series of deflecting gestures, speaks to the distance between the bureaucratic power and the object of its transformation.

Herein lies Upamanyu Chatterjee's innovative deployment of the modernist mode - for he places at its centre the subject, and not the object, of power. If "the common thread of modernist ideology" is to "ascrib[e] historical agency to aesthetic works,"[105] *English, August* essentially

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[104] Georg Lukacs, "Realism in the Balance" in *Aesthetics and Politics*, translation editor Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1997), 39. For a detailed discussion of this term and its deployment in aesthetic debates by Marxist literary theorists, see the other essays in the collection.

[105] Neil Larsen, *Modernism and Hegemony: A Materialist Critique of Aesthetic Agencies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), xxv.

takes this ideology to its logical conclusion, by using modernist techniques to illustrate a *real*

crisis in agency felt by a government official in the face of oncoming market reforms, *and*

*simultaneously* inverting the *objectivity* of this crisis by deploying a *modernist way of seeing*, full

of referentiality, irony, and self-conscious mockery. In sum, it would be true to note in the

novel's context that *representation* no longer works, but this is no longer purely a subjective

crisis, for there is an objective connotation to the state no longer having "access to the object"

and its internal operations - and that is the strongly perceived failure of state-led

developmentalism. This is the structure of feeling within which the liberalization of the economy

could be sensibly inscribed.

The terms of this operation then are, to adapt Raymond Williams, of an "unknowable

community." Williams points out "[t]o be face-to-face in this world is already to belong to a

class,"[106] implying that the bounds of who is "know*able*" within a community framework

depends on the class to which the seeker of this knowledge belongs. As we have pointed out, the

knower here is Agastya Sen. The modernist crisis of knowledge, turned back on its feet, now

appears, realistically, as a failure to belong to the small town. Thus, the knowable community

here functions according to Williams' reading of Jane Austen i.e. on terms of exclusion of the

working-class inhabitants of the small-town:

> Glimpses of Madna *en route*: cigarette-and-paan dhabas, disreputable food
> stalls, both lit by fierce kerosene lamps , cattle and clanging rickshaws on the
> road, and the rich sound of trucks in slush from an overflowing drain.[107]

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[106] Raymond Williams, "The Knowable Community in George Eliot's Novels," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 2 no. 3 (Spring, 1969): 256.

[107] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 11.

Much like Austen's narrators do not, or simply could not, grant social recognition to the "actual community" living in and around their properties, a "tightly drawn mesh" structures who comprises the "small town" for Agastya.

The novel complicates this erasure, however, and this is where the idea of an unknowable community comes to the fore. For Agastya understands his struggle to belong to Madna's society - both its bourgeois-bureaucratic sections and its working class. He knows very well that there is such a "mesh" constricting his way of seeing and belonging to the town. For instance, consider the montaged, chopped, action-oriented vision of work in Madna that Agastya sees : "veined hands on bicycle handle-bars, … a man emptying a bucket into a drain, the tensed calves of a rickshaw-wala, sweat-wet shirts around a stall selling fruit juice."[108] Right after this piecemeal depiction, the narrative takes note of this way of seeing itself:

> But in the months that followed he saw very little of the real Madna, the lives of its traders in wood and forest produce, the coal miners, the workers at the paper mills, the shopkeepers, the owners of cinema halls and restaurants. The district life that he lived and saw was the official life, common to all districts, deadly dull. This world comprised [bureaucrats]…many wielders of petty power.[109]

Contextualized thus, Agastya provides us a way of seeing that can separate the bureaucratic *way of seeing* from questions of belonging to the small town. It is this gap, between what *could be known* as community and that *cannot be known* because of the structure of class and power relations, that registers itself as a felt lack that needs to be constantly smoothed over through the modernist devices of irony and self-conscious mockery, such as the ones that allusively liken Agastya's "petty power" to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius:

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[108] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 28.
[109] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 28.

> Crowds on the road, the rickshaw-wala using both his bell and his hoarse voice
> against them, the smell of dosas and frying fish from a dhaba, and urine and mud
> from a police station, a transistor from a sugarcane stall deafening its
> surroundings with a Hindi film disco song, softer pseudo-ghazals from a music
> shop, the darkness of passing alleys. "It wouldn't be too boring, to get stoned and
> hang around here and watch all this."[110]

The call to inebriation becomes an escape from this lack of knowledge about the small town's

affairs, a normalization of the failure to belong through recourse to irony.

For the struggle here is not so much as to *discover* the objective networks of economics

in society - Agastya's presence is dictated by an economic and political need - but to purpose

them to the right ends. This, furthermore, can only take place through a sense of belonging to

Madna. The concealment of these networks not only fails, but is *shown* to fail, and this flaunting

of failure, of an absence whose presence is all to obvious because of its intersection with hero's

*bildung*, ends up contextualizing the development of the modernist way of seeing, as simply one

among many. This contextualization is registered through the depiction of Agastya's modernist

understanding of his subjecthood. The modernist subject, whether understood through Theodor

Adorno's readings of Samuel Beckett[111] and Franz Kafka[112] or Walter Benjamin's understanding

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[110] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 91-92.

[111] For a brief discussion of the Adorno's critique of Becket's plays, see Chris Conti, "Critique and Form: Adorno on 'Godot' and 'Endgame'," *Samuel Becket Today/ Aujourd'hui*, 14 (2004): 277-292. See also Theodor Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" in *Notes to Literature* Volume II, trans. Shiery Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 241-276. An example is Adorno's understanding of Becket's modernist construction of the subject as based on a type of principle of "subtraction": Instead of omitting what is temporal in existence - which can be existence only in time - he subtracts from existence what time, the historical tendency, is in reality preparing to get rid of. He extends the line taken by the liquidation of the subject to the point where it contracts into a "here and now," a "whatchamacallit," whose abstractness, the loss of all qualities, literally reduces ontological abstractness ad absurdum, the absurdity into which mere existence is transformed when it is absorbed into naked self-identity (246).

[112] Theodor Adorno, "Notes on Kafka" in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 243-270.

of the impact of the First World War on subject-formation,[113] can, in a word be understood as

contorted by its relationship to an objective state of affairs. Per Adorno, Kafka refused reality,

replacing it with an "enigmatic image composed of its scattered fragments."[114] Chatterjee,

meanwhile robs the fragments of their enigma, and replaces them with a self-conscious subject's

bewildered attempts at balancing his autonomy and belonging. He explicitly states his

protagonist's wish to keep his belongings and relationships separated, which is presented through

Agastya's choice to organize his social life in Madna into distinct "worlds":

> He realized obscurely that he was to lead at least three lives in Madna, the
> official, with its social concomitance, the unofficial, which included boozing with
> Shankar and Sathe, and later, with Bhatia, and the secret, in the universe of his
> room…Each world was to provide educative, and the world beyond Madna was
> continually to interrupt and disturb him…When he was leading one Madna-life,
> the other two seemed completely unsubstantial.[115]

This passage already shows the breakdown of a unified identity, and the dismantlement of

unified subjective experience in the contact between metropolis and small town. This reference

to the existence of multiple worlds is made several times to highlight the difference between the

urban life of metropole and that of the periphery.

    The breakdown of subjectivity and the breakdown of objective links that would tie the

fate of the city, the small town, and the countryside, are mirrored in the way of seeing both split

into "worlds." Initially, Agastya enjoys this interplay between different worlds, which he

deliberately keeps separate from one another so as to revel the more in the different guises he can

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[113] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," trans. Harry Zohn, *Chicago Review* 16, no.1 (Winter-Spring 1963): 81.

[114] Adorno, "Notes on Kafka, 263"

[115] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 58.

take[116]. There is even a sense of thrill to his "hiding" his identity, for instance when he is with

Govind Sathe in public places, or enjoying a meal at Dakshin, where "he didn't want to be

recognized."[117] Over time, however, an inevitable tiredness sets in in the management of

identities (which are ultimately, conceptually *identical*), much as the state's inability to manage

unevenness comes to fail. Here, we see that the struggle to belong can only be *managed* for a

time being through irony and mockery, but that the image of authentic belonging still exists, even

for Agastya, for whom the site of homeliness is always urban. Agastya increasingly complains

about how "[i]t was too much, to endure the load of more than one world in the head,"[118] failing

at his attempts to "try to organize his past"and mocked by "images of world lost, and semblances

of a pattern."[119]  By the end of *English, August*, Agastya has realized that he can manage "only

one world at a time," and the longing for a unified world, to which one can properly belong,

creeps in:

> Now all he wanted, or thought he wanted, was one place, any one place, with no
> consciousness in his mind of the existence of any other. He could even make do
> with Madna, if his mind would not burgeon with the images of Delhi, or of
> Calcutta…and beyond that Singapore…and Illinois. It was convulsing, the agony
> of the worlds in his head.[120]

This is a highly privatized, atomistic, understanding of subjectivity. The "worlds in his head" are

just as painful as the many worlds his "head" has to move amongst. Agastya's inability to belong

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[116] A prosaic literalization, considering his bureaucratic employment, of T.S. Eliot's initial titling of *The Wasteland*: "He do the Police in Different Voices." See T.S. Eliot *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of The Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, edited by Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).
[117] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 93-94.
[118] Chatterjee, *English, August*,185.
[119] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 228.
[120] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 198.

to a world different from the one he is used to, even when dictated by professional necessity, signals the widening chasm between small town and state.

What Agastya settles for is an acceptance of, per Lukacs, the "autonomy of the part" for the "totality of the whole"[121] - "one place…with no consciousness in his mind of … any other"[122]:

> Far away in a field was a farmer behind two oxen, ploughing, three slow spots in a landscape of brown and green. Agastya looked at him and thought, too many worlds, concentric, and he a restless centre.[123]

The landscape manages to lend a dint of organization to the many worlds: they have been centralized and organized with Agastya as their "restless centre." This sense of subjective cohesion comes along with the transformation of the farmer and his work into a pastoralized and painting-like image of "three slow spots in a landscape of brown and green." In this symbolic transmutation, Agastya is once more located in, comfortably, in his modernized and urbane way of seeing, the only world to which he knows he belongs. Only now, the partial "worlds" have gained their own autonomy, organized by the subjective centre around which they exist. The actual processes of the non-urban space are being transfigured into "still life," into a partial description that must stand in for the totality of the processes that a farmer and their oxen embody. And it is the exhaustion of the search for the totality, and the acceptance of the part for the whole, that leads to the final exhausted configuration of "concentric" worlds, a structure that admits neither overlap, nor interconnectedness, except being defined by a centripetal force. Agastya no longer has to think of work when he stares at the "hinterland" landscape, nor its

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[121] Lukacs, "Realism in the Balance," 32.
[122] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 198.
[123] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 311.

history of colonialism, its present state of economic underdevelopment or caste violence, or play a role in its future. He can simply watch a non-urban economic process and perceive it as a landscape painting.

It is within this way of seeing, focussing on the autonomy of parts without their imbrication into a totality, and conducting the search to belong within an increasingly free-floating world, organized, not according to a central dictum, but amorphous market forces, that Vinod Kumar Shukla"s *A Window Lived in the Wall* emerges. In *English, August,* the abandonment of realism was explicitly hinted at, located in the struggles of an urban subject to belong to the small town. Modernist technique, in that novel, was meant to associate the failure of realism to the inability of state-led development to constitute a vision of totality, in subjective and objective terms (belonging and economic development), that could fold into itself the unevenness between city, small town, and countryside. After the jokes and laughter go silent, Agastya is shown to long for a closed-off, autonomous world, in which he doesn't have to struggle to belong, in which his way of seeing accords with the general way of life. This abstract separation of the state and the market into autonomous fields is made concrete, in the economic realm, through the liberalization of the Indian economy. The attendant entry of finance capital was entangled with, as in other parts of the world, the rise of postmodernism proper in the Indian context.[124]

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[124] Veronica Ghirardi, "Sudhīś Pacaurī and Pāṇḍey Śaśibhūṣaṇ 'Śītāṃśu': Postmodern Approaches to Recent Hindi Literature," *Annali di Ca' Foscari: Serie orientale* 54 (June 2018): 267. ; For a history of pre-1990's postmodern influences on Indian literature, see Jaidev, *The Culture of Pastiche: Existential Aestheticism in the Contemporary Hindi Novel* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1993).

While the presence of a postmodern aesthetic, sometimes also understood as a vernacular version of magic realism, in Vinod Kumar Shukla"s novels has been pointed out and discussed,[125] I show that this aesthetic has also supported and enabled a historically conditioned way of belonging to the small town. Here, what can be seen is no longer determined by failures of state-led development in an atrophying Cold War scenario. Well into the liberalization period by 1996, a new kind of autonomy that could once only be thought of in terms of the anti-colonial struggle, has become available. For Fredric Jameson, the era of finance capital and neoliberalization "brings into being a play of monetary entities that need neither production (as capital does) nor consumption (as money does), which … can live on their own internal metabolisms and circulate without any reference to an older type of content."[126] The financialization of economics brings autonomy to several parts of what was once considered a totality. This tendency towards autonomy, pointed out by Lukacs as a phenomenon generated by the regular functioning of capitalist relations, makes the horizon of reality, or totality, recede further into the distance, suggesting "a new cultural realm or dimension that is independent of the former real world."[127] Belonging is manifested in more particularized ways, as individual relationships come to acquire the charge of community and collaborative associations, even as they are further removed from those than ever.

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[125] See Avisha Shree, "जादुई यथार्थवाद और हिन्दी का कथा-साहित्य: मनोहर जोशी, निर्मल वर्मा, उदयप्रकाश और विनोद कुमार शुक्ल के विशेष सन्दर्भ में" [Magial Realism and Hindi Prose Fiction: With Special Reference to Manohar Joshi, Nirmal Varma, Uday Prakash and Vinod Kumar Shukla](PhD Diss., Calcutta University, 2013).

[126] Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 265.

[127] Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 265.

For Jameson, culture under finance capital undergoes a new level of deterritorialization. Older cultural forms are emptied of their meanings (essence), even as they retain their former shell (appearance): they appear as fragments. The postmodern fragment however, unlike its modernist counterpart, no longer "dialectically affirms its constitutive relationship with an absence."[128] Culture, therefore, no longer provides the solace of an Agastya who *knows* what he *cannot know*, whether it be in terms of belonging to the small town or his own coming-of-age paroxysms. Instead, the fragment under postmodernism "become[s] capable of emitting a complete narrative message in its own right … autonomous, not in the formal sense … attributed to modernist processes, but rather in its newly acquired capacity to soak up content and to project it in a kind of instant reflect."[129] As capital "separates from the concrete context of its productive geography…and prepares to take flight," production and consumption take a back seat, and circulation, from its proto-capitalist couch of mercantile relations, leaps back into focus, transfigured. The "new ontological and free-floating state" that deterritorialization[130] implies arises from "new and unrepresentable symptoms in late-capitalist life."[131]

That Shukla's novel straddles these concerns is evident in the ways in which it constructs space, and the nature of belonging to those spaces. If Agastya provides the reader with a way of seeing society through a heightened sense of state-failure, Raghuvar and Sonsi's eyes, living in the aftermath of what that older feeling wrought, are open to a distinct sense of possibility. A felt

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[128] Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 263.

[129] Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 264.

[130] For all further uses of the term "deterritorialization" I base my understanding on Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's work, particularly their construction of this term in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). For an applied understanding of these terms, see David Martin-Jones *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

[131] Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 260.

need for individual and subjective autonomy is therefore spread throughout every discursive socio-historical and cultural level of the novel. Raghuvar and Sonsi's small town is unnamed, and its economic relations are obscure and difficult to map. The town has farming area around it, shops on its outskirts, sand mining quarries in its vicinity, and seems to be "growing" economically. Beyond that, it is extremely difficult to determine what would constitute the economic life of this space. This town has a specific kind of peripherality that exhibits it as more autonomous than, for instance, Madna. As pointed out in the previous chapter, the town is conceived as autonomous from state management and interference as well. The "concrete context" recedes further away into the horizon, and neither labour processes of production nor concomitant consumption are mentioned in the novel.

Beyond its physical manifestation, a way of seeing that arises from this autonomy, and which confers its special quality of spectrality upon all the objects within the sweep of its eyes, is also dominant in the text. Space and time are seen as amorphous, homogenous, and strangely mobile in the novel:

> The jitney driver asked his passengers to make space, but there was no space to be made. *Simply adding space from an open field into the jitney was not a possibility*. So Raghuvar Prasad squeezed in where there was no space for him.[132]

There is a heightening of the focus on *how* space can be manipulated, and how it is, in its "pure state," charged by absence. While, on the face of it, the statement stresses the impossibility of adding "space from an open field into the jitney," the way in which space is seen here emphasizes the fact that it could be put to better use in terms of increasing the number of passengers the jitney could hold, were it inside the vehicle.

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[132] Shukla, *Window*, 10.

The deterritorialization of space is accompanied by the fragmentation of speech in the novel. Conversations are shown to be more or less impossible, and while this is largely an *effect* of the plotlessness of the novel, this fractured linguistic capacity also hints at the absence of a signified world that it could be referring to. The words have the *form* of a conversation, and indeed do focus on topics that are pertinent to the ongoing events, but they provide a refracted way of seeing these events, a way of seeing that abstracts aspects of objective facts, rather than be undergirded by a firm ground of physical happenings:

> She asked him in the darkness if he had taken a rickshaw from the bus terminal. "I walked," Raghuvar Prasad said. Sonsi heard, "I came on horseback." … "How long does it take on horseback?" Sonsi asked. "I would have been here sooner, but I met a friend on the way," Raghuvar Prasad said. Sonsi heard, "I met another rider on the way." "We wandered together." Sonsi heard, "We rode around." "When we got tired, we stopped for tea at a village teastall." Sonsi heard, "When we got tired, we stopped for saffron milk in an old inn." "It was good hot tea." Sonsi heard, "It was thick hot milk."[133]

This sense of possibility restructures the relationship to language. Words and conversations are shown to be deterritorialized - broken into their most basic meanings - and reterritorialized on the plane of desire, whether it be to imagine a heroic spouse riding a horse, or to revel in the richness of saffron milk over "tea at a village teastall."

The combination of fragmented speech and deterritorialized space comes to the fore in showing the breakdown of community bonds and the city-like encounters that the space of the small town facilitates. The new figure of the "stranger" now appears in the small town, and the "unknowable community" that was found in *English, August* is further developed in *WLW*. There, unknowability walked hand in hand with the struggle to belong. In *WLW*, on the other

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[133] Shukla, *Window*, 36-37.

hand, unknowability is used to gesture towards a new kind of belonging, more urban in its scope. When, for instance, in a secluded spot near their house, Raghuvar tells Sonsi that a child they had been searching for was not in the tree, his words ("not here") take on a life of their own, traversing a deterritorialized and empty space in search of an addressee who was never addressed:

> A man sitting out on his stoop heard the "Not here" and asked, "Who is not there?" Raghuvar Prasad … heard the question "Who is not there?," but did not reply. He understood that somebody who heard the message supposed it was intended for him. Hence his question. But the man asking the question had not been satisfied. He was eager to know that which he did not know…"Who is not there?" he repeated loudly. He couldn't help himself. He didn't know who was not there. He didn't know whom he had addressed. He didn't know if he had been heard. All he knew was that he had tossed a question at the person who had said "Not here"…He could have been young or old or middle-aged. He could have been healthy as well.[134]

Unknowability is understood as a part of the social organization of the small town, as the codes of belonging are reconfigured. The private concerns of a pair of lovers is broadcast into the open world of the small town, accessible to complete strangers. Neither the speaker nor the listener, furthermore, care for the other - only the message itself remains of concern. The image of space that they create is emptied out and infinitely open, vacated to such a degree that the human voice can be conducted to great distances and create linkages between two complete strangers:

> He wanted to say across the stillness of the night—"Not here." That man might still be sitting out on his stoop—the man who had heard Raghuvar Prasad say "Not here." At that time, he had called out, "Who's not there?" … From a distance, the man sitting on the stoop must have sensed that another person had opened his door and come outside. Unable to restrain himself, he called out

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[134] Shukla, *Window*, 213-214.

loudly, "Who is not there?" Raghuvar Prasad must have heard him. "Sonsi is not here'" must have escaped Raghuvar Prasad's lips. The man on the stoop heard. He must have heaved a sigh and nodded his head. He must have gone inside. The other night he had been unable to sleep. He had wanted to know who it was that was not there. Now he knew. He didn't know Sonsi, but he knew enough to be able to sleep.[135]

Belonging now consists in the ability of two subjects to interact. The separation of the worlds that Agastya wishes for, is shown to be complete, and a movement backwards, towards knitting them together into new kinds of belonging, has emerged. Clearly, there is an ironic implication of the words themselves - "not here" implies not only the presence or absence of a specific object which is not present in the "here," but rather the dissolution of "here"-ness itself, of the destruction of the bonds and divisions between "here" and "there." This is the fully developed meaning of "unknowable community," for *English, August* provided the reader with two images of community, and the unknowable was that to which one could not belong. This restriction itself, the gating of the community to include only those with access to state power, was a mediation of historical forces, and it was felt in the form of an immanent critique of bureaucratic norms. *Now*, small town community *in general* becomes fundamentally *unknowable*, an absence that is no longer structured by a presence located elsewhere. If Agastya can be taken to task for not attempting to lift the aforementioned restriction, here, no attempts are made to know the unknowable - it becomes the generalized state of affairs. The flow of information takes place regardless of the links between addresser and addressee.

The new nature of belonging is further fleshed out through the fantastical construct of the window-world. While this space is never named so in the novel, it is basically a space that is

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[135] Shukla, *Window*, 218.

(only) accessible through the window in Raghuvar's house. The window-world appears without explanation in the text, and although its presence is made manifest, it is never ascertained as subjective or objective. In many ways, it is a conventional depiction of nature - full of wildlife and vegetation, and with children enjoying themselves its idyllic beauty. It is a utopian space, insofar as it offers Raghuvar and Sonsi a place to escape from the constraints of their small house, their low disposable income, and their lack of privacy; in the window-world they can be intimate without worries of being watched or interrupted.

However, despite these utopian *attributes*, the space itself is highly privatized, a piece of nature that is inalienably bound to the inhabitants of the household - Raghuvar, Sonsi, and their family. The only other person who is granted entry to this space, apart from these, is Raghuvar's boss, the Department Head at the private college. He assumes that this space is a public one, for he returns with his family on a different day to enjoy this window-world. At this point, however, he is unable to locate the window-world and has to tell his children to go, instead, to the "public gardens,"[136] once again implying that, on the face of it, the window-world appears to be a public park and not a private garden. This understanding of the window-world's functioning is also emboldened by the department head's speculation that Raghuvar's neighbourhood seemed unusually quiet because "everyone had jumped through their windows to go out and celebrate."[137] His assumptions are shown to be completely off course, because the protagonists of *WLW* never encounter any of their neighbours in this space, marking it as an idealized private realm even as it is a perfectly naturalized one.

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[136] Shukla, *Window*, 58.
[137] Shukla, *Window*, 57.

The nature of this utopian space is further complicated by the fact that at its centre stands "Old Mother," an elderly woman who, it is shown, is responsible for the maintenance of the window-world. She keeps an eye on the children, cooks for them (and apparently for others as well), and is constantly engaged in keeping the window-world in ship-shape. Her presence, however, is not pastoralized, in the sense that she would take joy in her work *à la* the peasant labourers of *Saxham* or *Penshurst*.[138] It is in the actions and speech of this old worker, the only one of her kind within the novel, upon which is thrust the burden of depicting, in a fragmented manner, the neoliberalism at the heart of this deterritorialized utopia. The first words spoken to her are Raghuvar's command to make some tea for him and the department head, a role that she undertakes throughout the text, as well as making them *batasha* and other meals. She also offers emotional support to Raghuvar when he misses Sonsi, and generally performs the labour of social reproduction around these these two, such as covering them with blankets if they fall asleep in the open of the window-world.

Besides these obviously economic tasks, for which she is never remunerated or consoled in any way, Old Mother provides a dialectical image of the operations of finance capital because she creates something of immense value - a pair of golden bracelets - from the immaterial space of the window-world. Thus:

> When she was free of sweeping and cleaning, Old Mother would take a wooden pan to the stream. She would fill the pan with sand and sift it in the flowing water … separat[ing] gold particles from sand…It took a lot of sand-sifting to find any gold particles at all. Sometimes a particle was as large as a grain of wheat.[139]

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138 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, 39-43.
139 Shukla, *Window*, 118.

To the older images of physical, social reproductive labour (sweeping, cleaning, preparing meals) is added the work of extracting and collecting gold particles from a realm whose physicality can never be ascertained. The latter work mirrors the manner in which wealth creation operates under finance capital - a seemingly abstract realm becomes the source of monetary transactions. It is an image of what has been called "poverty capital" - the financialization of the labour of the poor as capital reinvents its networks of circulation.[140] That Old Mother's labour is placed in conjunction with this other task of wealth creation hints at the manner in which both processes - of social reproduction and of finance capital - are presented as non-monetary but are, in fact, an expropriation of actual labour-time, built, on the one hand, through patriarchal networks, and on the other, through union-busting that can drive up profit margins by lowering wages, upon which the speculative aspect of finance capital ultimately rests.

But Old Mother is *not* shown to be living in harmony with the space of the window-world itself. For instance, she is the only character in the entire novel who is ever associated with anger:

> A bird dropping fell splat on the rock. Old Mother looked angrily at the birds flying overhead. The birds she looked at knew they had erred. She washed away the bird dropping with water from a rocky hollow. No bird soiled the black rock thereafter.[141]

This is not a utopian vision of space, but one that has to actively worked upon to be maintained. While the window-world is supposed to present an idealized image of belonging in, and to, the small town, the person who facilitates this belonging - Old Mother herself - is simply not

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[140] Ananya Roy, *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 30-32.

[141] Shukla, *Window*, 127.

included in the community of people who get to enjoy the window-world. Like Wordsworth's

"Old Cumberland Beggar," she is the force who actualizes communal belonging around her,

without ever getting to fully belong to it, except in form of providing her labour-power to it.[142]

Unlike the Cumberland Beggar, however, Old Mother is the dispenser, rather than recipient, of

"past deeds and offices of charity."

       An indication of this is the fact that work is still "tiring" for Old Mother. Here, the

slippages caused by the aforementioned deterritorialization of language open up a way of seeing

the actual distress that the labourer under finance capital undergoes:

> On his way back, Raghuvar Prasad said, "Old Mother, I haven't had any tea yet."
> But she heard Raghuvar Prasad say, "Ask Sonsi to give you a hand for an hour
> or two every day."[143]

Old Mother struggles to foster a community of work around her, not only for physical support,

but also for a recognition of her labour, which is no longer understood as work at all:

> Old Mother was sweeping the ground outside her hut with a bristle broom. When
> one hand grew tired, she switched the broom to the other. Raghuvar Prasad said
> nothing as he ran. But she heard him say, "You work very hard, Old Mother."[144]

The disappearance of work, and the lack of recognition granted to it, the extraction of surplus

value from a seemingly-transcendental and abstract space, the trace of utopia that otherwise

lingers in what is a completely privatized image of nature, and the general unknowability of

community relations, as the small town is seen in more urbane ways - these are the stylistic

features of the postmodernist turn effected by the transition to market-led development. In the

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[142] Gary Harrison, "Wordsworth's 'The Old Cumberland Beggar': The Economy of Charity in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Criticism* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1988), 26.

[143] Shukla, *Window*, 90.

[144] Shukla, *Window*, 90.

image of Old Mother one sees labour, finally unmoored from all its communal and combinational (union-based) ties - an existence that fosters a space of belonging for others, but which simply becomes a new way to extract surplus value from the same labour that she performs. The image of totality is only accessible from this obscure point of entry, which is itself the formal image of labour emptied of its contents; the latter, as shown above, is now only present in linguistic slippages and lyrically mobile thoughts that flit among persons, but have no material effect on the sphere of the work itself, which is shown as transcendental. Capital has, indeed, been "separate[d] from the concrete context of its productive geography."[145]

Despite the detour through the window-world that belonging takes in this novel, *WLW* still provides a refracted image of the general way of small town life. It is very much a personal novel, but one in which "a society, a general way of life, is apparently there," even when submerged within the historically constrained aesthetics of the "end of history." The "highly personalized landscape" of the window-world "frame[s] an individual portrait" of Raghuvar and Sonsi's marriage.[146] The novel separates them from the world around them and boils their behaviour down to their conjugal relationship. Social interactions and a sense of belonging to society, what Raymond Williams calls "that element of common substance"[147] is, within Shukla's world, only revealed through elements of fantasy or picaresque, as is the depiction of Raghuvar and Sonsi's attempts at reuniting a neighbouring family that has been torn apart by domestic

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[145] Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 251.

[146] Raymond Williams, "Realism and the Contemporary Novel," *Universities and Left Review* 4 (1958): 22-25. Williams provides a typology of the realistic novel in the twentieth century, dividing it into four types depending on how they calibrate the relationship between the individual subject and the general image of life and society around them: the social description novel, the social formula novel, the personal description novel, and the novel of special pleading or personal formula.

[147] Williams, "Realism and the Contemporary Novel," 23.

squabbles. There is no exploration of the motivations that lead the two of them to help the family come together again, besides *showing* their involvement in "society" itself.

The other way in which Raghuvar and Sonsi are shown to belong to society at large is when they are likened to archetypes. This can take a fantastical route, in which they are elevated to the level of everyman/woman status for the people around them:

> Whenever good artists among the primary-school children or among teachers and college students drew a picture of a man, he looked like Raghuvar Prasad. If they drew a picture of a woman, she looked like Sonsi.[148]

Raghuvar and Sonsi stand in for the general citizenry of the small town because of how generalizable they have become in this account. Their individual attributes stand in for a general way of life. In other accounts, they are generalized through comparisons to mythical figures:

> Sonsi sat on the rock by the pond. Raghuvar Prasad had dug up a ball of clay to bathe with…Wrapped in clay, the two looked like the first human couple.[149]
>
> Two women who were going to the Ramlila performance joined their palms together when Raghuvar Prasad, Sonsi and Chhotu [accompanied by the sadhu and the elephant] came into view, as if they had beheld holy figures from the Ramlila.[150]

The fantastical element, in these instances, is a way to link the trajectories of a generalized human life with the individual aspects of Raghuvar and Sonsi's experiences. The sense of belonging is heightened to such an extent that it is not even seen as such; the individual subject comes to stand in for belonging itself. That they are recognizable as types speaks to how the general way of life is not completely lost in terms of their individualized depictions, that it

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[148] Shukla, *Window*, 117.
[149] Shukla, *Window*, 71.
[150] Shukla, *Window*, 83.

constantly speaks through them by generalizing their specificity in terms that can be recognized through its placement in social relations of belonging. There is still an element of the flattening of the social world into "dull things that are written about in the newspapers," but this is only because the linkage between their experiences and the manner in which they are socially perceived is mediated through fantasy. A general way of life, with its distinctive ways of seeing, informs and inflects the manner in which Raghuvar and Sonsi are recognized by the novel, the society around them, and by themselves.

In *English, August* the loss of this generalizability is paramount. The modernist-existentialist aesthetic, the sundering of productive relations between small town and state and its atrophying into dominance and useless exploitation, and Agastya's urban way of seeing and failure to belong to the life of Madna are all elements that keep a general way of life at a distance. This novel takes only one person very seriously, and that is Agastya Sen. Other characters and their experiences, from the passionate naxalites, to the social workers helping leprosy patients, the small town shopkeepers and working-class, the bureaucrats and their vile actions, are all reduced to caricature and mockery. The general way of life could not elevate the individual to any kind of social existence, because this was exactly what was at stake within the novel - Agastya's longing to extricate himself from his bureaucratic job and find his way back to the metropolis. The unrealistic aspects here, in contrast to *WLW*, are engaged in producing the image of a human being completely sequestered from a general way of life, so much so that his way of seeing the world can only ever be in conflict with how every social group around him sees it. Fantasy can still register the absence of a general way of life and mediate it in different ways, pointed out above, that make it visible in *WLW*. Chatterjee's novel, on the other hand,

takes it as its point of departure to interrogate the common substance between Agastya and society around him.

      *Between the Assassinations* also interrogates the constitution of this common substance between a subject and the society around them. For what essentially undergoes a transformation between *English, August*, through *WLW*, and *BTA*, is not only the manner in which the balance is (not) maintained between "the substance and quality of a way of life" and "substance and qualities of persons,"; it also concerns the way of seeing this very common substance that is supposed to bring these two together. In *English, August,* belonging is a site of disrepute or failure, and Agastya's wishes to be "shallow and urban," to conduct a retreat into the self, to divide his life into multiple separate "worlds" that are kept at a distance from one another. In *WLW*, it is not only fantastic, but also privatized - it belongs to, and derives from, the realm of private and personal affairs. This is well evidenced by the fact that the fantastic, as argued above, is quite literally attached to the private realm of Raghuvar and Sonsi's rented house, and that its functions derive from fulfilling the libidinal demands of the house's inhabitants (and only theirs). The common substance here is not rejected, so much as it is operationalized into fulfilling specific social roles. But it is also a source of joy, hope, and individual realization.

      In *BTA*, the common substance is threatening and punitive. The common substance, which could be rejected in *English, August* in terms of an exercise in bourgeois coming-of-age narrative, cannot even be so turned away from in *BTA*. This is because of the atrophying of the nature of belonging into its pure economic aspects - that of professional ties. Individuals are no longer able to see themselves, irrespective of class, as outside of their economic roles in society. As the productive powers of neoliberalism reached their apex, right before the Recession of

2008, the cracks begin to show in its vision of society, and the depth of the conflict it had unleashed between the fetish of the individual and the commodification of individuality. The economic aspect of the common substance is not enough to forge any kind of actual commonality between characters.

This is best registered by the two stories in which economic class takes a backseat in the construction of the characters themselves. For they continue to be seen by the other characters, consistently, as nothing more than economic subjects. Thus, the entire enigma of "childlessness" in the penultimate story, "Bajpe" is analyzed purely in terms of the economic lives of the two characters, Giridhar and Kamini. On the one hand, it is assumed that Kamini is biologically unable to conceive, and refuses to have surgery to be able to do so because of "her privileged background…the darling child of a famous eye surgeon in Shimoga."[151] While her "sisters had married well - a lawyer, an architect, and a surgeon, and they all lived in Bombay," Giridhar Rao was "the poorest of the brothers-in-law." On the other hand, it is attributed to Giridhar's "lack of initiative" which, the couple's friends assume, is well reflected by the fact that Giridhar refuses the offers for promotions and an economically better station that he receives.[152] What could have a multiplicity of causes, ranging from choice to biology, is distilled into the discourse of economics. The household conversations in the story take only three routes - national politics of the kind described in the previous chapter, Giridhar's banking career, or a variety of jokes and pantomimes that provide a description of middle-class social behaviour.

On the other hand, these characters have all been brought together because of their upper-caste and middle-class origins.

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[151] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 299.
[152] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 300.

> The *intimates* knew that the Raos had selected them for their distinction—for their delicacy. They realized that they bore a responsibility upon entering that cozy little garret. Certain topics were taboo.[153]

The ability to keep the commonality of the common substance restricted to the economic realm is the basis of the intimacy depicted here. It is the only way in which individuality is registered - Giridhar Rao is a banker with *taste* - but it also boils down the social being of a person to the most basic economic aspects, as the "childlessness" discussion shows. The "person" here refers to those aspects that adorn and decorate the professional subject. For all the characters in *BTA* are simply based on a social formula - that the general substance and quality of life is economic, and those who try to find an avenue of action outside of it, i.e. in the realm of the personal, are doomed to failure. Thus, economic bonds are the only link between workers, but that in itself fails to bring them together in any socially meaningful way:

> Chenayya never talked to his fellow cart pullers. He could barely stand the sight of them—the way they bent and grovelled to Mr. Ganesh Pai; yes, he might do the same, but he was furious, he was angry inside. These other fellows seemed incapable of even thinking badly of their employer; and he could not respect a man in whom there was no rebellion.[154]

The only site where Chenayya is able to meaningfully make a claim to having common substance is with an elephant and mahout. At first, Chenayya is angered by the sight of a leisurely elephant blocking his path as he carried heavy appliances. Once he finds out that the elephant had been robbed of its earnings, he begins to identify with the elephant.[155] Yet even this

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[153] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 294.

[154] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 181.

[155] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 178.

shred of the sense of belonging is quickly nipped in the bud, as we are told that the mahout felt "a sense of apprehension rising within him" as he watches Chenayya talking to the elephant.[156]

Thus, even when a meaningful social link beyond economics is hinted at, it collapses, often in spectacular fashion. Thus, Ziauddin's search for a common substance leads him to another Pathan, who is seemingly wealthy, only to realize that the older man was attempting to manipulate Ziauddin for his espionage activities. Similarly, D'Mello tries hard to extricate himself from his violent pedagogical methods through the kindness and genuine fondness he exhibits towards Girish. The story, however, ends with his cardiac arrest (and death) at the sight of Girish peeking at pornographic posters.[157] What has happened in "Lighthouse Hill (The Foot of the Hill)" is that while D'Mello finds a way of relating to Girish through their shared love of poetry and politics, he still sees Girish as purely a student, still constrained by economic commonalities. When those constraints fall away, the collapse, as noted above, is spectacular and rapid.

In *BTA* professional aspects, thus, form the basis of one's individuality, but at the same time, constrain what would be a fully realized subjectivity that could belong to a general way of life around it. The converse is also true, and when a relationship is presented whose basis is not professionally derived, elements of the aberrant are used to structure it. Thus, Gururaj's friendship with the Nepali nightwatchman renders him "an outsider, a man who frightens others"[158] as he becomes an insomniac, grows obsessed with the corruption behind the newspaper he works for, and ultimately, is shown to be mentally unwell. Similarly, difference

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[156] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 197.
[157] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 105.
[158] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 162.

and caste-discrimination prevent Shankara from ever feeling like he belongs among his equally wealthy friends. Shankara also points out how the professional student-teacher relationship acquires a different valence because of his caste identity.

> He knelt with his eyes to the ground, and thought, over and over again, *He is doing this to me because I am a Hoyka. If I were a Christian or a Bunt he would never have humiliated me like this.* That night, as he lay in bed, the thought had come to him, *Since he has hurt me, I will hurt him back.*[159]

Disenchanted with school and friends, feeling consistently mocked and ridiculed by the general public because of his half-Brahmin, half-"Hoyka" identity, Shankara takes solace in fighting against caste-discrimination.

But just as the story is inching towards extra-professional links, to showing the systematicity of how caste undergirds a totality of oppression and extraction, dividing labourers as well as labour, the narrative devolves into an existentialist mode. Shankara's initial rationale behind exploding the bomb had been explicitly anti-caste:

> I have burst a bomb to end the five-thousand-year-old caste system that still operates in our country. I have burst a bomb to show that no man should be judged, as I have been, merely by the accident of his birth.[160]

He had also found support for his anti-caste sentiments in a professor, Daryl D'Souza:

> "One solution is what the Naxalites have done, just to blow up the upper castes entirely," said the professor …"They blow up the entire system; that way you can start from scratch."[161]

However, by the end of the story, Shankara has realized that he was simply lonely, that:

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[159] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 60.
[160] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 55.
[161] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 69.

> It would be nice to have a wife or a girlfriend, he thought. Not to be so alone all the time. Even a single real friend. Even that would have kept him from planting the bomb and getting into all this trouble.[162]

Daryl D'Souza is shown to put on a different, arch-conservative face for the media, a far cry from the radical talk he makes with Shankara. D'Souza now suggests that the bombing was an example of the "directionless" nature of Indian youth, noting that they had "lost the moral standards of our nation…traditions are being forgotten."[163] In the climactic moment, Shankara is shown to be reevaluating his feelings of animosity towards Lasrado, as if the caste-based aspect of the punishment he had faced was something he had imagined.

Shankara's story is one in which the explicit goal is to search for a site of belonging through which the personal and the social could come together. What is missing however, is a site beyond the individual for his anti-caste sentiments to manifest. His struggle is shown in the same terms as Chenayya's struggle against his class-based oppression, one in which no general way of seeing, no common substance, can be found to link the personal expression against this injustice and a systemic correlate that could challenge caste. The only symbol of the latter, the Hoyka MP, is depicted as corrupt and self-serving.

What *BTA* charts, in all of these depictions, is to bring together two different trajectories of the realist novel, as identified by Williams.[164] The first is the "social formula" novel in which all characters and situations are derived from an overarching pattern. However, the overarching pattern structuring all these characters is the alienating and individuating power of neoliberalism. This emphasis on individuation, which is no longer a subjective matter, but rather an objective

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[162] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 71.
[163] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 70.
[164] Williams, "Realism and the Contemporary Novel," 23.

one, brings the work close to a second kind of realist novel, that of "special pleading" or hyper-

subjectivity. As Lukacs noted, "attenuation of reality and dissolution of personality are thus

interdependent, the stronger the one, the stronger the other."[165] The socio-economic cloistering of

Adiga's characters, which forms the basis of their individuation, thus, simultaneously renders

them as modernist eccentrics (à la Lukacs' readings of protagonists in Joyce and Dos Passos[166])

and aberrations, departures from the norm. But the norm itself is nowhere to be found because of

the collusion between the "special pleading" nature of the work that turns all secondary

characters into caricatures, and the "social formula" aspect, that understands "caricaturing" as a

neoliberal structure of feeling.

Adiga's works bring these two ways of seeing reality together seamlessly, with

caricaturing becoming indicative of the common substance. Simultaneously, modernist

aberration becomes the only way to make the individual legible, as neoliberalism places

individualism on a pedestal as the highest possible form, and only conceivable grounds, of

achievement within this system. Conning, then, comes to define the way of seeing for these

novels, as Snehal Shingavi has pointed out in his reading of *The White Tiger*.[167] Much like *The*

*White Tiger*, *BTA* has its fair share of conmen - George D'Souza, Ratna the "sexologist," and

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[165] Georg Lukacs, "The Ideology of Modernism," in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1962), 26.

[166] Lukacs, in the same piece: "The image of man in the work of leading modernist writers is … by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings." He goes on to note that "man, thus, imagined, may establish contact with other individuals, but only in a superficial, accidental manner; only, ontologically speaking, by retrospective reflection. For 'the others,' too, are basically solitary, beyond significant human relationship" (20). He also notes that "the problem central to all modernist literature [is] of the significance of psychopathology" (28) and that this "ontology of Geworfenheit makes a true typology impossible; it is replaced by an abstract polarity of the eccentric and the socially-average" (31).

[167] Snehal Shingavi "Capitalism, Caste, and Con-Games in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger," *Postcolonial Text* 9, no. 3 (2014): 1-16.

Abbasi the businessman are all examples of those who have to con certain others in order to maintain their economic lives. But ultimately, it is not just that capitalism, or politics, or polite society, are shown to be cons in *BTA*. A certain amount of suspicion with regard to how much the other is manipulating their self-image comes to define *all* social relations within the novel - nobody is genuinely presenting themselves to the world anymore. Neoliberalism renders social relations into a hall of mirrors, and the images of the individuals emerge in broken reflections and twisted forms, an arm here and a torso there, never quite coming together into a totality, a way of life *within* which individuals exist and to which they can belong to.

The final story in *BTA,* "Salt Market Village" describes how belonging has been reduced to economic calculations and con-games. In contrast to the studied, bourgeois rejection of belonging in *English, August* and its fantastic manifestation in *WLW*, "Salt Market Village" shows the exploitation of social units, and the subjugation of sociality by individualism in its bid to derive surplus value from it. This tendency is already exhibited in Shukla's book, where the relationship between Old Mother and the newlyweds is simultaneously exploitative and communal, with the contradiction papered over, in a word, harmonized, by a veneer of magic. This magical element is reinscribed into the material world in Adiga's story, so that that which was seen as communal can now be understood to be extractive.

"Salt Market Village" is the story of Murali, a member of the "Communist Party of India - Kittur (Marxist-Maoist)" who has spent his entire life in the service of his party boss, Comrade Thimma, and, at the age of fifty five, comes to regret his decisions.[168] This regret is sparked by a meeting with Sulochana, a young woman whose father has died, and who approaches the CPI-

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[168] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 310.

Kittur for monetary help with her mother. Murali falls in love with Sulochana, and it is his

longing to marry her, a desire that devolves into a fixation and then exploitation, through which

he assesses that his life's work has been a failure. Murali is, in many regards, an inverted image

of Agastya. They are contemporaries, situated in the late-1980's/ early-1990's moment, and both

are educated, left-leaning men, conscious of the poor state of economic development in the

Indian countryside, and desirous of bringing some change to this space. It is the specific

differences between the ways in which these two are constructed that speaks to Chatterjee's

situation in the pre-liberalization period and Adiga's more historicized account of that time

delivered from the heights of neoliberalism.

What Agastya sees in the Naxalites of Chipanthi is purpose, even if he ends up

denigrating it as a form of manipulation of the wills of the tribal community. When speaking of

Baba Ramanna and his work to help those afflicted by leprosy, Agastya

> confessed that he envied Baba Ramanna and the Naxalites of Jomapanna not
> their nobility of purpose, but their certitude in knowing what to do with
> themselves…"I don't think Baba Ramanna and those Naxalites, the better ones,
> anyway, are doing all that out of a sense of guilt. They're doing it because they
> want to."[169]

It isn't the fact that what their purposiveness leads to is "noble"; Agastya longs to have the sense

of purpose itself, which he associates with the ability to belong to a community. Murali's

encounter with Sulochana, however, takes him in the opposite direction. If Agastya imagines

Naxalites as people who are committed to the unearthing and advocating for the common

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[169] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 266.

substance between oppressed persons, Murali flips this narrative so that this sense of

commonality is shown to have been false consciousness:

> A whole generation of young men, deluded by Gandhianism, wasting their lives
> running around organizing free eye clinics for the poor and distributing books for
> rural libraries, instead of seducing those young widows and unmarried girls. That
> old man in his loincloth had turned them mad. Like Gandhi you had to withhold
> all your lusts. Even to know what you wanted in life was a sin; desire was bigotry.
> And look where the country was, after forty years of idealism. A total mess!
> Maybe if they had all become bastards, the young men of his generation, the
> place would be like America by now![170]

This purpose itself is shown to have been the root cause of India's economic failure, because it

was motivated in the wrong direction, and aimed to forge a sense of common belonging among

people, to foster community-based growth (an ideal that never quite materialized in any case)

rather than individuality. The common substance that linked humans into social units, through

institutions such as "rural libraries" and "free eye clinics" is deemed by Murali to have been a

"waste of life," a far cry from how Agastya saw him contemporaries.

The subjective rejection of the general way of life was contextualized through the voices

and observations of others, such as Pultukaku and Madhusudan Sen, to show its strangeness and

individualistic nature in *English, August.* Furthermore, Agastya's choice to stop trying to belong

to the small town, through his bureaucratic job, has to be self-consciously parodied through

allusions that range from Arjuna's reticence before the battlefield of Kurukshetra to Marcus

Aurelius' imperial conundrums. It was so loaded, and had to be so justified, because it signalled a

new way of doing things, and not so much the abandonment of things past. The temporality of

Murali's rejection is different, for he is not young, like Agastya, whose lack of belonging to the

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[170] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 332-333.

Madna fails because of urban temptations. Murali's rejection is, first of all, in no manner self-conscious, but rather falls into the closely related category of self-caricature, a mode that speaks to Adiga's deployment of conning as a way of seeing. Self-consciousness indicates a subject who understands the objective manifestation of their being, its place in a material system and a general way of life; caricaturing involves a subjective flattening, usually through ridicule in Adiga's story, of this objective manifestation. What Agastya rejects is shown to be a general way of life for many others, in a range that includes bureaucrats, Naxalites, and social workers. Murali, on the other hand, seems to think that there is no common substance uniting him with anybody, that all such works to forge social units beyond individuality are doomed to failure.

The self-caricature is fleshed out through the insertion of a side-plot through which we are told that Murali once aspired to be a writer. This long-lost ambition is brought into the plot again to signify the resurgence of individualism within Murali's heart, combined with his longing for Sulochana. These two come together in opposition to his socialist tendencies through different ways of seeing the village. Remembering advice he had received years ago from an editor, he now begins to try to understand individual desire:

> "Your characters"—[the editor] unbent his finger—"want absolutely nothing. They simply walk through accurately described village settings and have deep thoughts." "They do have thoughts of changing the world for the better…" Murali protested. "They desire a better society." "They *want* nothing!" the editor shouted. "I can't print stories of people who want nothing!"[171]

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[171] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 317.

But this struggle to try and understand what *other* people want, which once led him to forge ties of belonging with village communities, now leads him back to the self, and Murali can only fixate on how "to want things in life … is to recognize that time is limited."[172]

The other strand that leads him to realize that his individual drives cannot be accommodated by the sense of socialist purpose to, and through, which he belongs, and which has, till then united him with Thimma and other communists, is his oppressive fixation on Sulochana, whom he wishes to marry. At first, after helping Sulochana receive government aid, Murali assumes that she would be so indebted to him that she would accept his hand in marriage. When this does not happen, and her mother rejects him as being too old for her daughter, he becomes vindictive and begins to stalk here. Per Adiga, this is how Murali comes to terms with the fact of individual desire:

> A subaltern army of semen, blood, and flesh rebelling inside him. A revolution of the body proletariat, long suppressed, but now becoming articulate, saying, *We want!*
> The communists were finished.[173]

He thus begins to construct a new kind of belonging, a community of two, in which he and Sulochana could still engage with the older communist discourse, but without any political participation:

> *Maybe I can't give her children, at my age, but I can make her happy, certainly,* he thought, on the bus back home. We can read *Maupassant together*.[174]

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[172] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 329.
[173] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 331.
[174] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 330.

Here, we can see that Murali is, quite literally, longing to fuse two different allegiances that he

seeks - to belong to the communist party and also to attain marital bliss, a signifier for

individualism and the nuclear family (whose presence is hinted at through the children Murali

can no longer conceive).

Longing for both allegiances, Murali ultimately resigns himself to belonging to neither,

for in the same movement that he comes to see himself in terms of an individual with sexual

drives, he is disgusted by his behaviour:

> Now he was a dirty old man; he had become the stock figure whom he had
> worked into several of his stories—the lecherous old Brahmin, preying on an
> innocent girl of a lower caste.[175]

Importantly, this disgust is registered in a highly intertextual manner, constructed through

references to the stories he had written about village characters, an idea that such figures

populated the "old, bad India,"[176] and other texts such as movie soundtracks. Murali also thinks

of his lecherous longing for Sulochana in terms of a historical regression:

> He thought with regret of a man's traditional prerogative in India—in the old, bad
> India—to marry a younger woman.[177]

This is a diametric opposition to the images of futurity with which Agastya thinks of his choice

to abandon the IAS. The most striking of these is the ending of *English, August*, which leaves us

with the image of Agastya embarking on a train and "look[ing] forward to meeting his father,"[178]

who has stood for the image of Nehruvian bureaucratic ideas and governmental success in the

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[175] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 331.

[176] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 333.

[177] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 333.

[178] Chatterjee, *English, August*, 322.

novel. Agastya finally decides to settle into a confrontation, from which only something new, though unknowably so, can emerge.

Murali is, ultimately, longing for a certainty to his actions, one that he seeks in movie songs, short stories, and historical images. It is the inability to find a norm upon which he can base his actions that leads him to the final scene, in which he economically muscles and blackmails his way into belonging. Agastya's search for such a norm had led him to realize that even idealized figures caught in similar vagaries, such as Marcus Aurelius, had "lied, but lied so well," and "failed, but with such grace."[179] Murali goes in the opposite direction, and, rather than reinscribing the past through present experience, seeks to justify his behaviour in terms of the evils of the past. In the former there is a way of seeing that finds belonging through mutual recognition of past failures, and failure in general, as a way to move into the future. The present and the past are shown to have been harmonized through the prospect of the encounter between father and son, one that is built up throughout the novel, but never actualized. In the latter, the burden of failure is made so punitive and exclusionary that its memory can only *justify* modern behaviour - the past is recognized in the present, but this recognition does not lead to a reorientation of the relationship between past and present that could open up a new future. Nor are possibilities of belonging opened up through this recognition.

Because belonging is, therefore, subordinated to the task of castigating postcolonial Nehruvianism, all that the recognition of his longing leads Murali to is caricature - he imagines others calling him a "dirty old man" and finds that he can relate to "many more film songs": "This is what they meant, the humiliation of being avoided by a girl you have come a long way

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[179] Chatterjee, *English, August,* 322.

to see."[180] There is no element of self-criticism, or criticism of any kind, here, as opposed to Agastya's constant guilt and envy at being unable to have a sense of purpose that could lead to belonging. The singular mention of such feelings on Murali's part is quickly papered over by his attribution of the blame to Sulochana and her mother. So the moment he realize his "disgraceful behaviour" and the fact that he is "exploiting these people," his next thought is that "he was also angry with the old woman and Sulochana for treating him like this."[181]

Adiga's story, therefore, shuttles between two tendencies - of showing an ex-communist discover his libidinal drives and individuality by losing his sense of belonging, and at the same time, to show that this individualism is corrupt and exploitative. For at the end of the story, Murali hands over a fresh cheque, addressed to Sulochana's family, to a local moneylender to whom they owe money. The feeling of belonging that Murali's visits to the village foster helps him to identify with people around him and write more accurate stories, for he is shown to be finishing a self-caricature, in a metafictional moment, of his own actions: "Some thoughts that a lecherous old Brahmin might actually have." However, the same "desire" that is made into the common substance through which Murali gains access to a general way of life (at least as he imagines it) is shown to be oppressive and exclusionary. Near the end, he is shown to have become an arrogant man completely comfortable with deploying his privilege to harm those who cross his path: "Do you think a Madras University man—a Brahmin—can be tossed aside so lightly?"[182]

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[180] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 331.
[181] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 328.
[182] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 334.

The story shows how those who have access to the private lives of others through networks of belonging have castigated this commonality to the flames. The end products of what was once a point of emergence for a new social unit - communist support for the broken economic life of rural India, personified in the figure of the farmer who has killed himself - is an actualization of Murali's writerly ambitions and the accumulation of wealth by the moneylender. The social ties that bound figures like social activists and landless peasants into a common ground are monetized in the bid for individualistic longing. The so-called socialist past is relegated to the trash heap of history as "Marx … become[s] mute, dialectics…become[s] dust [and] so had Gandhi; so had Nehru."[183] However, while this is negation of this past in the present, there is no such negation of the present itself which could show the way ahead:

> If Sulochana could read, it was because of volunteers like him, because of those free library projects…A voice growled inside him: *Fine, she can read—and what does that do for you, you idiot?*[184]

The past has contributed nothing to the image of the present - but in what direction should the present tend? By caricaturing, rather than criticizing, Murali's final actions, Adiga casts him into a reified image of "dirty old Brahmin" who, strongly believes in his caste and class privilege. For it is hard to disentangle the extent to which this criticism of reactionary class and caste attitudes is a criticism of the false image of belonging fostered by postcoloniality, or if it is simply an indication and chastisement of what human behaviour becomes under neoliberalism.

Thus while Murali is clearly the site of some opprobrium, the reader remains unaware as to whether Murali realizes, objectively, how badly he condemns Sulochana and her mother to

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[183] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 334.
[184] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 333.

misery. A self-conscious image of such an exploitation would have involved some introspection on Murali's part in terms of *why* he takes such a drastic step against them. But we are never provided such a reasoning, caricaturing Murali's actions into an image of vileness which, ultimately, remains unexplained. The dialectic between "longing for community" to "belonging to community" that travels from Agastya, through Raghuvar, ultimately appears in its highest, most individualistic form in the shape of Murali. In Murali, the contradiction between the two, which animated the space of the small town, collapses. Murali's sense of a life wasted is drawn from his longing for a community where his individuality would be recognized. At the same time, when belonging is made available to him, in the form of recognition by the villagers he has helped and through Thimma's friendship, he rejects it in favour of an aggressively manifested individuality.

In this historical circumstance, Adiga seems to say, the very nature of belonging in the realist text, which had been located by Williams in a specific nineteenth-century moment, comes under duress. Agastya had *sought* that same indistinction between longing and belonging, for, as pointed out above, he does not care for the "nobility" of purpose, but rather, its manifestation in terms of belonging to communities. Murali, on the other hand, feels that "the Americans had somehow won" because they valued individuality over common belongings and purposes.[185] This way of seeing firmly opposes longing and belonging, but the higher unity is no longer that of the community for which the individual longs, and to which they belong. If "the negative consequences of neoliberalism become occasions to generate even more neoliberalism,"[186] then the opposition between longing and belonging similarly gets involved in a cycle of eternal return.

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[185] Adiga, *Assassinations*, 334.
[186] Shingavi, "Capitalism, Caste, Con-Games," 7.

The moment it acquires the image it has hunted for, the moment longing is transformed into

belonging, it begins a renewed cycle of longing. This sense of interminability, of having a

reached a limit in terms of imaginations of longing and belonging, is the definitive aspect of

"capitalist realism."[187]

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[187] I borrow the phrase and its usage from Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* (Abingdon, Oxon: Zero Books, 2009). Fisher writes: "Watching Children of Men, we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (2).

**Conclusion: The Small Town in Popular Imagination**

In a recent newspaper article that discussed the changes popular Hindi cinema had seen in the

2010s, Uday Bhatia notes that while "[m]iddle-class Delhi was an important setting in the early

years of the decade…later, there was a crucial exodus to tier 2 and 3 towns."[188] Increasingly, the

urban centres of Mumbai and Delhi, are replaced by smaller cities with more locally-based

speech styles and sartorial choices. A similar retrospective from 2017 also notes these trends:

> Some of the most memorable films of 2017 not only took the element of the
> location to greater heights but also got small-town India to shine unlike before. It
> was after a long time that places such as Amritsar, Aarah, Varanasi, Bhopal,
> Mathura, Bareilly, Lucknow, Jhansi and Kota to name a few become the mainstay
> of popular Hindi cinema…Small-town India is the new landscape that is telling a
> whole new story both in terms of people and what makes them unique.[189]

Contemporary popular cinema has rebranded the small town and used it as an ideal site to

spatialize a mixture of elements that are neither properly urban nor quite rural, but which can

stand in for a depiction of the local *qua* local.

One of the films that consistently makes the list of movies participating in the movement

*to the small town* is Anurag Kashyap's crime epic, *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012).[190] The manner in

which Kashyap's film constructs the space of the eponymous small town in a depiction that

spans almost the entirety of India's postcolonial history, comes to flexibly reflect ideas that the

other texts discussed in this thesis straddle. Over the course of seventy years, the image of

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[188] Uday Bhatia, "How the 2010s changed Hindi film," *The Mint*, December 27, 2019, https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/how-the-2010s-changed-hindi-film-11577416608680.html

[189] Gautam Chintamani, "Bollywood's biggest star in 2017? Small-town India, which shone like never before," *Firstpost*, December 27, 2017, https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/bollywoods-biggest-star-in-2017-small-town-india-which-shone-like-never-before-4274829.html

[190] *Gangs of Wasseypur*, directed by Anurag Kashyap (New Delhi: Eagle Home Entertainment, 2012), DVD.

Wasseypur changes from a rural town at the edge of the railway tracks to a site for shady

political dealings between the coal and steel mafia and the politicians. Its relationship with the

regional city of Dhanbad traces the configurations and reconfigurations that the small town has

undergone over the years. Wasseypur is introduced as the stomping grounds for train robbers; by

the time of the movie's final scenes, the intrigues of the small town mafia have grown to such a

degree that it leads to the murder of the local politician who had wielded power from Dhanbad.

The economic growth of the small town, the criminality at its heart, ultimately, ends up

consuming the big city's political influence.

The association between criminality, self-improvement and class aspiration, and the space

of the small town, have, in post-liberalization India, become constant fixations that have

congealed into a discourse. *Wasseypur* was followed by a spate of visual representations that

engaged with similar confluences of individuals and society in the small town. *Mirzapur*

(2018)[191] and *Jamtara* (2020),[192] two TV shows produced by Amazon and Netflix respectively,

are emblematic of the international resonance that this spatial formation, and its discursive

mapping as, and of, a space of crime and class aspiration, have acquired. This aspect of

criminality, well associated with the constructions of what is popularly called "Bombay noir,"

have migrated back to the small town. In a fascinating article on the association between

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[191] *Mirzapur*, directed by Karan Anshuman and Gurmmeet Singh, Excel Production, https://www.primevideo.com/detail/Mirzapur/0PDOKMV9CRLOMO5EUKNCUJLG4Q

[192] *Jamtara: Sabka Number Ayega*, directed by Soumendra Padhi, Netflix, https://www.netflix.com/title/81183491. See also Tanul Thakur, "Netflix's 'Jamtara' Is a Refreshing Portrayal of Small-Town India," *The Wire*, January 22, 2020, https://thewire.in/culture/jamtara-netflix-review. Thakur's review obsesses over the how the show's dialogue "sounds authentic, remains true to the people and the place, and feels original. The dialogues are sharp, clever and frequently funny as well, peppered with unique Bihari lingo."

criminality and urban life, Lalitha Gopalan[193] has noted how Bombay has been constructed differently in gangster/noir movies, since the genre's inception as a site of nefarious violence in the 1980's through the late-2000's. The postmodern vacillations of *Johnny Gaddar* from 2008 highlight an exhaustion of the generic association that had strung together an image of urbanity and that of crime. Its historical reconstruction in Kashyap's *Bombay Velvet* (2015)[194] corresponds to a nostalgic structure of feeling within which the contemporariness of crime can only be seen in its small town manifestations, gentrified out of existence from the urban metropolis.

 A different kind of nostalgia is, ultimately, also the feeling that lies behind contemporary Hindi cinema's small town obsessions. "The cultural uprooting of the small-town middle-class" and its transformation into "the rise of the new migrant-middle class in Indian metropolises" lies at the heart of this nostalgia.[195] The imagined small-town is often also, to paraphrase M.N. Srinivas, a remembered small-town.[196] At the same time, "[t]he cinematic small-town is often an assemblage, some components of which can be mapped onto real towns while the rest of which cannot."[197] As it flits between its older role, of mapping the manner in which city and countryside are co-constituted, the small town itself in contemporary cinema has been robbed of its specificity, and an abstract space, reified as a set of mannerisms, comes to stand in for the small-town:

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[193] Lalitha Gopalan, "Bombay Noir," in *A Companion to Film Noir,* ed. Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013), 496-511 .

[194] *Bombay Velvet*, directed by Anurag Kashyap (Mumbai: Fox Star Studios, 2015), DVD.

[195] Akshaya Kumar, "Provincialising Bollywood? Cultural economy of north-Indian small-town nostalgia in the Indian multiplex," *South Asian Popular Culture* 11, no. 1 (2011): 62.

[196] M.N. Srinivas, *The Remembered Village* (New Delhi ; Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2012).

[197] Akshaya Kumar, "Provincialising Bollywood?," 63.

> [The small town] represent[s] the shadow-regions of the urban order, a region not yet sorted out – visually chaotic and performatively excessive. This exception lends itself perfectly to rhetorical flourishes of all human capacities, the linguistic being the foremost of them, so they can be maximized in an uninhibited manner. Situating a small-town as a state of exception also means imagining it as a fragment detached from its relationalities to adjacent fragments; it becomes a disaggregated chunk which would produce its identity in its performance. That is why the small-town re-presents the hidden archive of *a performative belonging*, a curious blend of arrogance and excess that uses the distance between the space and the place to further rhetoricise it.[198]

Belonging to the small town, rejected by Agastya, embodied fantastically by Raghuvar and Sonsi, and transformed into a way to assert individual identity by Murali, is, once again, reoriented in contemporary discourse.

Belonging is now marked with fetishistic obsession, through a different kind of postmodernity from the one championed by Shukla's novel. There, a heightened attention to the names of flora and fauna, local sites, and regional customs, went hand in hand with the linguistic constructions of belonging, which were limited from the outset. Meanwhile, the allegorical manifestation of small town as nation, vaguely evoked by *Wasseypur*, has, since then, faded into disuse, as symbolic reconstructions have emerged that flatten and close-off relationships between small town and the state, no more than gesturing towards its existence (as in the 2015 movie, *Dum Laga Ke Haisha,*[199] in which the protagonist is a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, the militant faction of the ruling BJP). The general way of life in the small-town, as pointed out above, recedes further into the distance, almost entirely unmoored from national concerns. In a word, the small-town has become a space to enunciate the construction, and often

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[198] Akshaya Kumar, "Provincialising Bollywood?," 63-64.

[199] *Dum Laga ke Haisha*, directed by Sharat Katariya (Mumbai: Yash Raj Films, 2017), DVD.

failure, of class aspirations under neoliberalism. The national realm, as an imagined social unit, does not emerge as a site of longing or belonging in these texts, as upward social mobility takes its place. The symbolism at the heart of the small town homogenizes the variegated forms of relating to the national identity through this abstract space. Belonging to the small town can only be enunciated through the figure of a speaking being who linguistically marks and *performs* into existence their relationship to this place, and the place *qua* place itself. The heightened attention to performance ultimately detaches the small town from any relationship to totality, making it into a space of "exception" as noted above.

In sum, the small town has emerged as a genre, a form, of a specific kinds of representation, complete with its own archetypal figures and stylistic markers. While depictions of the small town have, therefore, moved away from showing its location within a national framework, or its productive relations with the state, choosing instead to highlight its relationship to criminality, there has been a simultaneous rise, in the same historical period, of xenophobic forms of nationalism in Indian society. A society obsessed with nationalism is made explicitly visible behind the genres of the historical movie and the war film in India, but its manifestation takes a more convoluted route in recent visual representations of the small town. Because this genre is concerned with questions of belonging to the space of an unspecified "Indian" location, it performs a sorting function that implicitly guides the viewer to question the relationship between figure and ground, as manifested in speech and dress, among other things. At the same time, this genre's way of seeing is reminiscent of the most famous example of the Indian small town in cultural production, the abstract and conservative landscape of R.K. Narayan's Malgudi:

> In the hegemonic Indian Hindu nationalist context, Malgudi does indeed have universal appeal. Narayan's Malgudi functions as a cultural reproduction of a Utopian present and future India sketched from the point of view of an upper-class/caste intellectual…Narayan's fiction served as a means by which upper-caste (or caste-observant), urban, Indian bourgeois readers, who were more comfortable in the English language and its literature and with city life, could recognize, experience and participate in what was otherwise not available to them in such an immediate and aesthetically pleasing manner - small town/village India. Malgudi, the small town, with its villages, forests, and hills on hand, became the flexible space between urban and rural.[200]

Perhaps the small town has emerged, once again, in order to construct, on an empty canvas that can speak *of* both urban and rural concerns, and *to* people from both types of places, the very idea of belonging, as this latter idea undergoes a nationalist, Hindu transformation.

Here, the idea is not so much as to portray the evils of a religion (the depiction of Islam in historical films) or country (Pakistan and China in war movies), but rather, to focus and fixate on the nature of nativism, on what makes a subject belong to a space. The space itself simply needs to fulfill certain formal criteria to be read as a small town, at this point of generic development. However, because a focus on social hierarchies is one of these formal devices through which this conservative small town is constructed, the subject who longs to belong disappears. They have been replaced by subjects whose belonging is no longer questioned, or rather, placed under any kind of duress. Within this claustrophobic universe, it is now a question of whether these subjects can shed the marks of belonging that they carry, through which they have been constructed, and whether they can imagine themselves in any contexts outside of the small town society, and if they can, then on what terms?

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[200] Rosemary Marangoly George, "Of Fictional Cities and 'Diasporic' Aesthetics," *Antipode* 35, no. 3 (July 2003): 565.

In a poignant scene near the end of *Gangs of Wasseypur*, an emotional Faizal Khan wonders why his father ever returned from his successful criminal life in Dhanbad to the small town, entangling his family, who were leading a quite life in Wasseypur, into the same nefarious networks that had consumed his life.[201] From *Badrinath ki Dulhania* (2017)[202] to *Sui Dhaga* (2018)[203] we encounter characters from the small town who are placed in globalized, cosmopolitan setting; here, either they are unable to function, showing their inability to exist in any social form that doesn't mirror the intense, conservative ties of belonging to which they are accustomed, or their way of being is fetishistically celebrated for its rootedness in its place of origin. The punitive generalization of belonging to a general way of life, which Adiga provides is in *BTA*, has been internalized in contemporary discourse of the small town - subjects no longer resist it, but belong in a manner so markedly generalizing that they cannot conceive of themselves in any other way or through any other site of belonging. The small town, now, follows the subjects it has given birth to, incessantly drawing them back into its folds again and again, refusing them the ability to become anybody but a resident marked by discursive forms of this belonging.

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[201] *Gangs of Wasseypur*, dir. Anurag Kashyap, DVD.

[202] *Badrinath ki Dulhania*, directed by Shashank Khaitan (Mumbai: Reliance Big Entertainment, 2017), DVD.

[203] *Sui Dhaga: Made in India*, directed by Sharat Katariya (Mumbai: Yash Raj Films, 2018), DVD.

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