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The Contours of Secularism in South Asian Minority Writing

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INTRODUCTION

The destruction of the sixteenth century Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya on 6 December, 1993, by Hindu nationalists was a pivotal moment in the history of the modern Indian secular state. The Hindu-Muslim riots that followed in its wake and the subsequent popularity of the Hindu Right demonstrated that secular nationalism, the dominant political doctrine since Independence that promoted “unity-in-diversity” and affirmed the rights of the abstract Indian citizen, had lost its credibility. But its legitimacy had already been whittled away by political upheavals in the late 1970s and 1980s. Regional political parties undermined the authority of the all-powerful Congress party in the electorate and oppressed groups—Other Backward Castes (OBCs, earlier referred to as “Sudras”) and Dalits (previously called “Untouchable”)—began to assert themselves in the public sphere. Furthermore, the political integrity of the country was challenged as separatist movements had arisen in Kashmir and Punjab. The state’s subsequent suppression of Kashmiri-Muslim and Sikh nationalisms and tacit participation in the 1984 pogrom against the Sikhs in northern India (following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards) revealed that despite the rhetoric of secular nationalism, ethnic and religious diversity was no longer respected in the state or in civil society.

Therefore, the Hindu-Muslim riots after the destruction of the Babri Masjid highlighted the inadequacy of secular nationalism to resolve the growing political and social unrest within the public sphere from a diverse number of sources—religious and
ethnic minorities, regional parties, separatist movements, lower-caste groups, and Hindu nationalists. Social activists, feminists, and public intellectuals have not only critiqued secular nationalism, but have debated whether secularism itself, as a political doctrine and a cultural project, should be retained as an ideal in the public sphere. The need to think through alternative models of citizenship and coexistence to replace secular nationalism became even more urgent after the horrific Hindu-Muslim riots in Godhra, Gujarat, in 2002, tacitly supported by the state government of the Gujarat.

While some critics examine the relevance of secularism as a political doctrine—one that defines the relationship between the state and religious and ethnic communities—others explore the adequacy of secularism as a cultural project. They explore whether secularism can create a healthy environment in civil society where religious, ethnic, gender, and linguistic differences will be recognized and accepted. The public debate over whether secularism is an effective political doctrine reveals fundamental disagreements even among its proponents and opponents. While some secularists argue that the state must guarantee the rights of minorities and that these rights are non-negotiable, others point out that community rights can only be satisfactorily created through a dialogue between the state and the different communities. There are equally differing positions among the anti-secularists. Some critics advocate that the state should not interfere in the relationships between communities, except to protect minorities from the majority and women from communities (minorities or majority) that are often patriarchal. Other opponents of secularism have argued for a complete overhaul of the political framework of the modern state. They claim that the majority/minority
binary can only be undermined when individual rights are replaced by community rights. These opponents believe that once an atmosphere is created in which communities (especially minorities) realize that they are no longer vulnerable to the majority community in the public sphere, they will be willing to recognize the diverse voices within themselves.

There is greater consensus among critics who debate the relevance of secularism as a cultural practice as they all emphasize the importance of dialogue between different communities. The anti-secularists argue that modernity (of which secularism is a part) is responsible for the contemporary conflict between the majority and minority groups, and claim that the pre-modern indigenous religious practices are adequately developed to promote harmony between communities. Though the secularists also recognize that religious practices play an important role in facilitating amenable relationships between communities, they are skeptical of religion as a panacea for the problems of the contemporary world. They recognize that modernity cannot be summarily dismissed and pay attention to those “modern” social and cultural practices that exist outside the domain of religion.

My dissertation, entitled *The Contours of Secularism in South Asian Minority Writing*, participates in this debate from within the discipline of literary studies. It examines the literature produced by writers belonging to minority groups from the 1940s, when secular nationalism was being conceived, to the first decade of the twentieth-first century, when alternative models of citizenship and community were being formulated. Each of the first four chapters explores how one or two writers belonging to one specific
minority community—Muslim, Anglo-Indian, Parsi, and Dalit—grapple with different aspects of secularism. Like most theorists and literary scholars, I am invested in the debate over secularism’s relevance in contemporary South Asia, but my dissertation also explores how secularism shapes or at least influences the aesthetic choices, specifically the formal structures, that these writers use. I therefore examine how each literary text engages different facets of secularism—a political doctrine, a cultural project, a mode of criticism, and an ideological framework that either informs how these writers engage their material or to which they are directly responding. Additionally, a fifth chapter introduces the Burgher minority of Sri Lanka. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how writers belonging to minority communities in different states in South Asia use similar literary strategies to challenge how secularism (as an ideological framework) shapes minority existence.

In this introduction I first summarize the way secularism is conceived as a political doctrine in India. I then examine the recent debate between academics, social activists, and public intellectuals over secularism’s relevance in the public sphere. Though this discussion is crucial to comprehend the political relationship between the state and minorities and cultural practices in civil society, it does not explore all the facets of secularism (that I have listed above). Also, while literary studies should evaluate how literary texts explore secularism as a political doctrine and/or as a cultural project, it must also pay attention to how secularism influenced the formal aspects of texts and the aesthetic choices that writers make. I therefore explore specific concepts that are crucial to a theoretical understanding of secularism, like “secular time” and the “secularization”
of identity that are relevant for my argument. I begin by sketching Charles Taylor’s history of secularism as it first developed in Europe, before I discuss David Scott’s and Aditya Nigam’s explorations of secularism’s transformation in South Asia via colonial rule. After developing this theoretical framework, I examine how the literary critics Priya Kumar and Amir Mufti explore the relationship between secularism and minority writing, and then I demonstrate the limitations of their approaches to this relationship. I conclude by providing a chapter summary of my argument.

Secularism and the Indian State

In “The Road to Xanadu: India’s Quest for Secularism” (1999), Rajeev Dhavan explores the unique nature of secularism in India. He argues that though the framers of the Indian constitution envisioned India to be a secular state, they did not define secularism as it was conventionally understood—a political doctrine to separate the state from religion. Rather, in their vision, a secular state would actively protect and promote the different religions and religious communities within India. Dhavan suggests that the framers were forced to recognize religion because religious identities had been reified during colonial rule. Though the British government administered the country through a uniform criminal and civil code, it did not interfere with the personal law and social customs of the people. Moreover, by creating separate electorates for different religious groups, the Raj politicized religious communities. Following independence, the framers of the new constitution abolished separate electorates but retained the personal laws of each community. While minorities were not completely satisfied with the rights they had received, Dhavan argues that “what emerged from these constitutional endeavours was an
accommodating secular compromise at a time when—in the aftermath of Partition—such a compromise seemed improbable” (47).

There are three salient principles that define the secular nature of the Indian Constitution, the first of which guarantees “religious freedom.” This allows any citizen to practice and preach his/her religion and guarantees freedom from discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste or gender. The second secular principle of “celebratory neutrality” and the depoliticization of religion was “devised to create a participatory secular State which would neutrally assist and celebrate all faiths in addition to generally not discriminating amongst them.” The third principle was that of social welfare and reform, with an emphasis on “regulatory and reformative justice” (48). Dhavan acknowledges that the principles can come into conflict with one another; this is especially true for the third principle which can mitigate the ideals of the first two. However, on some occasions religious practices needed to be regulated. For example, under the Hindu caste system, Dalits were not allowed to enter temples and women did not have the same rights as men. Here the State had to intervene in its capacity for “regulatory and reformative justice.” In other instances, the State’s intervention has been ambiguous. Dhavan argues that though the State was justified in taking control of Hindu temples that were mismanaged, this was still an unnecessary imposition upon the Hindu community. However, the framers of the Constitution intended to balance the rights of religious communities and the interests of the State. While they acknowledged the importance of religion and benignly supported and celebrated all faiths, the guarantee of
religious freedom was intended to allow for a consensus towards reform within the various religious groups (50). In conclusion, Dhavan points out:

The makers of India’s Constitution did not intend secularism to be seen as a modernizing whirlwind—sweeping away all ‘irrational’ beliefs and practices that lay in its path. Nor did they intend to create a State which stood wholly aloof from the rich cultural diversity of India. Moulded as a positive and participatory entity, India’s secular State was designed to celebrate all faiths and also enjoined to eliminate some specially invidious practices sanctioned by the religion in question. (60)

The Anti-Secularists

If Dhavan considers secularism to be a political doctrine that balances the interests between the state and religious communities, secularism’s detractors, like T. N. Madan and Ashis Nandy, argue that it is an expression of “Western” modernity that has created new, alienated subjectivities that have disrupted the social and cultural relationships between communities in India. In “Secularism in its Place” (1998), Madan quotes Peter Berger to argue that secularization in the West was a “process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of the religious institutions and symbols” (298). However, the process was not smooth, for while it was possible to separate economic interests from the domain of religion, it was far more difficult to separate political rights and practices from the influence of religion. The introduction of secularism in India created further complications. Only an elite minority were educated in modern (colonial) institutions based on secular and rational principles,
and they in turn stigmatized the “religious” majority as “superstitious” and “backward.”
Further, secularism as a political doctrine of the state was imposed by this educated elite, especially Nehru, upon the majority. Religious fundamentalism, a perversion of religion, is a reaction to the marginalization of religion in the political and social spheres.

In opposition to a non-negotiated secularism imposed by Nehru, Madan argues for an inter-religious dialogue associated with Gandhi, who realized that social harmony could only be achieved by recognizing the relationship between religion and politics. Madan is not advocating tolerance of religious differences, but attempting to find common principles that people belonging to different faiths can agree upon. The pluralistic religious traditions in India are examples of this inter-religious interaction. He therefore concludes by reformulating and distinguishing between two forms of secularism: a rational secularism must only be accepted as one kind of “faith” among a number of others; and a secularism that participates in inter-religious dialogues can be recognized as the national ethos.

In “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religion” (1998), Ashis Nandy, like Madan, criticizes the Indian elite for imposing secularism as a political doctrine upon the vast majority of religious Indians. However, he provides a clear explication of the relationship between secularism, modernity, and religious extremism that Madan only hints at. While Madan criticizes the relationship between rationality and secularism, Nandy attacks the whole project of modernity to which secularism is inextricably linked. He argues that “secularism comes as part of a larger package consisting of a set of standardized ideological products and social processes—
development, mega-science, and national security being some of the most prominent among them…” (333). Modernity, a project that includes ideas such as secularism and the nation-state, legitimizes itself in the name of “Reason” and “Progress.”

Nandy also provides a clearer explication of the relationship between secularism and religious extremism. For the sake of his argument he intentionally schematizes religion into two extremes: “religion-as-faith” and “religion-as-ideology.” Religion-as-faith is “a way of life, a tradition that is definitely non-monolithic and operationally plural,” while religion-as-ideology is defined as “religion as a substantial, national or cross-national identified of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic interests” (322). Though secularism is wary of both expressions of religion, it can competently engage religion-as-ideology that has tangible socio-economic interests and goals, while it has difficulty negotiating religion-as-faith which does not have a particular agenda that can be quantified or defined in material terms. Thus, secularism inadvertently reinforces those very aspects (political and socio-economic) that religious fundamentalism promotes. Nandy is not equating secularism with religion-as-ideology, but pointing to where the two overlap.

Partha Chatterjee provides the clearest theoretical exposition of secularism (and modernity) and also suggests a concrete political alternative to it. In his essay “Secularism and Tolerance” (1998), he agrees with Madan and Nandy that a modern Indian elite imposed secularism upon the people. However, he is interested in exploring the relationship between secularism as a political doctrine that guides the way the Indian state negotiates the rights of communities (Dhavan) and the process that he describes as
the “secularization” of religious communities. He points out that while the British reluctantly allowed each community its personal laws, the modern Indian (Hindu) elite attempted to create a uniform civil code after independence. They were embarrassed by the “irregular” and “irrational” practices of various Hindu traditions, and so attempted to homogenize Hindu law and rationalize it. However, this “secularization” (rationalization and homogenization) of Hinduism contradicted the secular principle of the separation of religion from the state (358). According to this principle, only religious communities had the right to reform their respective religions. This secularization of Hinduism also violated the Indian secular principle of equality of all religions because only Hinduism, the religion of the majority, was reformed. The State refused to dictate reforms to religious minorities because it argued that for specific historical reasons some communities were not ready (they lagged behind) to accept reforms based on rationality. A uniform civil code, though desirable, could be withheld until minorities felt comfortable to make the transition. This argument was especially intended to defend Muslim personal law.

To support these uneven relationships between the state and religious groups, proponents of secularism intentionally distinguish it from its Western counterpart. They argued that “Indian” secularism must respond to the historical and cultural realities within India, and this calls for a different relationship between the state and civil society. Also, Indian secularism must be flexible—it must have “many meanings”—in order to protect the cultural and religious diversity of the country (364-365). Chatterjee raises problems with both arguments. In the first instance, if Indian secularism is not neutral to religions
but favors them, then it should do so equally—all religions should have been reformed. In
the second instance, the legal recognition of differences based on the grounds of religion
contradicts “the homogenizing desire [of the State] for … a uniform civil code” (365).

According to Chatterjee, Foucault’s critique of “Governmentality” provides a
solution to the dilemma that Indian secularism has created. Foucault argues that
secularization is not simply the application of rationality, but also depends upon
deploying coercion and power. In addition, the process of secularization does not evoke a
uniform response from all groups. This resistance to the liberal-rationalist theory reveals
that when minorities assert “a collective cultural right [it] is in fact the right not to offer a
reason for being different” (371). This refusal to negotiate within the bounds of
rationalism, resists the foundational claims of secularism and liberal-democracy. Instead
of secularism, Chatterjee promotes a political conception of tolerance, one in which
religious minorities are entitled to be different without needing to rationally justify or
defend this difference. However, an advocate for this cause would also demand that
decisions made within the community be democratic and take into consideration the
diverse voices within it. In this way, Chatterjee argues that the advocate can “engage in a
strategic politics that is neither integrationist nor separatist” (376). Therefore, instead of a
secularism that is imposed by state from above, Chatterjee favors a harder option, one
“which rests on the belief that if the struggle is for progressive change in social practices
sanctioned by religion, then that struggle must be launched and won within the religious
communities themselves” (377).
The Secularists

The key difference between those who criticize secularism and those who advocate it, is how they define of modernity. Anti-secularists, like Madan, Nandy, and Chatterjee, consider modernity to be homogenous, non-negotiable, and responsible for the rise of fundamentalism. Secularists, like Akeel Bilgrami and Sumit Sarkar, however, consider modernity to be diverse, contradictory, nuanced, and ultimately, positive. In “Secularism, Nationalism, and Modernity,” the philosopher Akeel Bilgrami argues that neither modernity, nor its manifestations—nationalism and secularism—are monolithic. He critiques Nandy, who equates Nehruvian secularism with Hindu nationalism. Despite opposing each other, Nandy claims that both ideologies shared a desire to impose a dominant model of citizenship in the public sphere. However, Bilgrami argues that Nandy refuses to recognize that Hindu nationalism was a reconfiguration of “Brahminism,” whose origins can be traced to pre-colonial India.

Defending the complexity of modernity, Bilgrami praises and questions Nehruvian secularism. He credits Nehru for separating religion from politics because Hindu nationalism threatened to dominate the public sphere (392). However, he criticizes Nehruvian secularism for being “Archimedean,” or non-negotiable, because it was imposed through the state, as opposed to being a value created through a dialogue between various communities and the state. While sympathetic to Nehru’s ideals, Bilgrami argues that the separation of religion from politics has to be earned as opposed to being assumed at the outset (395-396).
Bilgrami also critiques Chatterjee for conceiving secularism as inherently Archimedean and for creating a binary and oppositional relationship between the secular, rational state and the “non-rational” communities. Chatterjee mistakenly assumes that states can only deploy “external” rational reasoning to reform minorities, and that communities will only reform themselves through “internal” intra-community efforts (407-408). Instead, Bilgrami offers an “emergent” and “negotiated” secularism that refuses to see reform by the state as necessarily distinct from the internal reforms taken by the community. He argues that states and communities can disagree by providing “internal” (non-rational) reasons to one another. Thus, “the state can be the site of internal reasoning, whereby substantive values of communitarian commitments can be addressed and, if necessary, different substantive internal reasons be given to each of them for a common secular purpose” (409). He describes this as a “thick secularism” because it attempts to revise communitarian commitments and move towards secularism through internally directed reasoning.

The Marxist historian Sumit Sarkar extends Bilgrami’s critique of Nandy in his essay “Authenticity, Community and the Anti-Secularist Critique of Hindutva” and argues that Nandy reduces the complexity of secularism. On the one hand, Nandy narrowly defines secularism as atheism or agnosticism associated with the Enlightenment and finds it incompatible with a deeply religious Indian population. On the other hand, he widens his definition of secularism to make it “bear the burden of guilt for all the manifold misdeeds and crimes of the ‘modern nation-state’” (84). Sarkar also critiques Nandy for equating Nehruvian secularism with atheism because as state policy,
Nehruvian secularism, at its best, affirmed and maintained an equal distance from the two major religious communities—the Hindus and the Muslims. In addition, Nandy also idealizes pre-modern India. Pre-Enlightenment faiths were never always non-monolithic and pluralistic, and dominant ideologies had been established in pre-modern India, even as they were further consolidated through the disciplinary strategies of modern technologies.

The most important issue that the anti-secularists and secularists disagree over is the status of modernity, of which secularism is an integral component. Nandy, Madan, and Chatterjee conceive modernity to be a homogenous entity that has had a profound impact on the way religion is conceptualized in India. Nandy and Madan reject modernity by basing their distinction between secularism and religion-as-faith on a Western/Indian binary. By contrast, Bilgrami and Sarkar claim that modernity is complex and that pre-modern religious configurations are equally responsible for the rise of religious communalism and nationalism. Chatterjee occupies an unusual position in comparison to both groups. Though he critiques modernity, he does not articulate this critique within the framework of a Western/Indian binary, and so does not eulogize the pre-modern past. At the same time, he refuses to comment on whether modern forms of religious and caste oppression can be traced back to pre-colonial political and social relationships. Thus, even as he is critical of modernity, he refuses to pass judgments outside this framework. In addition, Chatterjee and Bilgrami seem to be equally suspicious of “rationality”—what Bilgrami describes as “external reasons”—that liberal secularists advocate; however, they differ on their conception of secularism. Chatterjee assumes that secularism only operates
effectively when it is interlinked with coercion and power, while Bilgrami argues that secularism as a political doctrine is compatible with providing non-rational ("internal") reasons for the transformation of communities.

Theoretical Limitations of the Indian Debate over Secularism for Literary Analysis

The contribution of these scholars to the contemporary debate of secularism in India cannot be overstated as the conversation in the public sphere and within academia is framed within the paradigms that they have deployed—religion-as-faith versus religion-as-ideology, Archimedean secularism versus a negotiated secularism, and secularized religious identities versus pre-modern religious structures. However, as I am exploring the way in which minority writers engage, are informed, or respond to secularism, the above discussion is limited in two important ways. First, these scholars do not clearly explicate the broader conceptual and theoretical framework of secularism they are using—they simply take it for granted. For instance, Chatterjee defines the "secularization" of religion as a process that involves the rationalization and codification of religious traditions. But it is unclear why secularism should be associated with rationality. In other words, what is the relationship between "secularism"—a political doctrine that separates religion from the state—and "secularization" that is associated with the rationalization and codification of religion? Why does secularism move from the domain of politics to that of culture? In another instance, Nandy and Chatterjee argue that within the national imagination, the middle class and Hindus are considered to be "secular," modern, and rational, while the working class and Muslims are described as backward or lagging behind. But the relationship between secularism and
progressive/backward communities is simply asserted, not theorized. What then is the relationship between secularism (as a political doctrine), secularization (the rationalization of religion), and secular communities (those that are considered progressive as opposed to being backward)? I want to make it clear that I am not critiquing their engagement of secularism, per se; nor am I belittling their contribution to the debate in the public sphere. In fact, only after reading these critics, did I become aware that secularism is an extremely complex and diverse phenomenon. However, because they do not explore the relationship between secularism, secularization, and the secular, I have had to turn to scholarly work on secularism in other social and political contexts—Europe and colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka—for a comprehensive account on the subject.

The second important limitation of this debate for my dissertation is linked to the first. These political scientists, historians, and philosophers are responding directly to the crisis of the secular state in India, and so are invested in conceptualizing alternative political and cultural spaces and relationships in the public sphere that would otherwise be dominated by the Hindu Right. Though these ideas are crucial for contemporary politics, they are not effectively incorporated into literary studies. Rather, they are more compatible with cultural studies which foregrounds the engagement between cultural and artistic movements, politics, and every day existence. For example, the social activist and theatre critic Rustom Bharucha has written two books—In the Name of the Secular (1998) and The Politics of Cultural Practice (2000)—on the relationship between cultural activism and secularism. He describes the formation of mohalla committees between
Hindu and Muslim slum dwellers and the police in Bombay in order to prevent further inter-religious riots. He also discusses his own experiments in promoting secularism in the theatre. A theatre company, he argues, is a safe space for actors to become aware of and sensitive to their assumptions about caste without turning defensive or hostile.

Bharucha situates both these activities within an emergent secularism that can develop through negotiations between peoples belonging to different religious and caste groups in different social and cultural contexts.

Literary Criticism of Secularism in South Asian Literature

While South Asian literary studies has produced much scholarly work that has criticized nationalism from the perspective of minorities, these disciplines have done very little research on how secularism has mediated this relationship. This is because the theoretical paradigms used to analyze the relationship between nationalism and minorities are “hybridity” and “the subaltern,” associated with Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, respectively. One cannot deny the influence or the importance of these paradigms as they have reinvigorated South Asian literary studies and played a significant role in the consolidation of Postcolonial Studies, but the vocabulary associated with these paradigms, including oppression, subversion, resistance, liminality, and hegemony, cannot be effectively deployed to understand how minority communities engage secularism.

When literary critics do explore the relationship between secularism and South Asian minority writing, they only consider secularism to be a political doctrine or a cultural project. Though these aspects of secularism are crucial to cultural studies (as I
have discussed above), a literary analysis also needs to pay attention to the way in which secularism influences the aesthetics of a text. However, these critics ignore how a literary analysis lends itself to a nuanced exploration of the different facets of secularism. In *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film*, Priya Kumar argues that though a reason-based secularism is required to challenge religious dogmas and orthodoxies, “secularism as a concept is not expansive enough to accommodate the vision of multi-religious coexistence it has been asked to take on in India” (xxi-xxii). It promotes the homogenous, abstract Indian citizen as the norm, and so invariably legitimates the culture of the dominant community. Thus, we need to explore how values of tolerance and accommodation have developed in the domain of civil society (outside the purview of the state) to create alternative narratives of community. Literary and cultural products—fiction and film—can contribute to the intellectual and political discussion; they are sites that explore an “ethics of coexistence” that “go beyond liberation formulations of tolerance and an abstract secular citizenship” (xv). To this end, Kumar examines a number of novels, short stories, and films to explore different ways of coexisting—from cosmopolitanism in Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* and Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* to women’s perspectives in Lalitha Ambakani’s and Shauna Singh Baldwin’s short stories.

I do not disagree with Kumar’s evaluation of secular nationalism, except that she conflates secular nationalism with secularism—in other words, she confuses the part (secular nationalism) for the whole (secularism). Thus, she does not recognize other secular political and cultural projects within India. Even while Nehru was promoting
secular nationalism, the Tamil social activist and anti-nationalist Periyar critiqued it for spreading a North Indian, upper-caste, Hindu culture. Responding to secular nationalism, he did not turn to religion-as-faith, as Nandy advocates; rather, he was contemptuous of religion; advocated a Dravidian, lower-caste identity; and espoused “paguttarivu” or “intelligence born out of discernment.” Thus, not only did Periyar realize the pitfalls of secular nationalism at the moment it was being conceived, but he offered an alternative secular model of citizenship and community. Though Kumar critiques secular nationalism because it marginalized minorities, especially the (North Indian) Muslim community, she dismisses secularism without recognizing its political and cultural variants within the same state.

My fundamental criticism of Kumar’s work is the way she conceptualizes secularism. Because she conceives secularism as a political and cultural project, she fails to engage other aspects of it. Unlike the above critics, she traces secularism’s history from its origin in the Enlightenment to the way it has been defined in the Indian constitution. In this discussion, she also explores the relationship between secularism as a political doctrine and the secularization of religion. However, because she participates in the contemporary debate over secularism’s relevance in India, she limits her analysis to how literature either promotes secularism or imagines an ethics of co-existence (that is non-secular). She does not consider how the secularization of a religion or ethnicity might be the basis on which a novel or an autobiography begins to discuss and makes claims about religious or ethnic identities. Such an analysis would enrich a text’s engagement of secularism as a political doctrine, specifically with regard to the
relationship between secularism, majorities, and minorities. Another theoretical concept that I will develop later, but which bears some discussion here, is “secular time.” How does secular time operate in literary texts? Even while it is tangentially raised in the above debates in the guise of “progressive” and “backward” communities, it deeply affects, as I will show in the dissertation, the formal aspects of a text and the strategies that authors use to temporarily resolve the anxieties of minorities.

Aamir Mufti is perhaps the single most important literary critic to participate in the contemporary debate over the relevance of secularism in India. In a number of essays, including “Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture” (hereafter cited as “Auerbach in Istanbul”) and “Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times,” he deploys a mode of literary analysis called “secular criticism.” Secular criticism begins with the assumption that as we are unable to exist outside modernity and its manifestations (including nationalism and secularism), we can only critique the stability of these structures and the social relations that they reproduce from within, and therefore we should always be aware of the contingency of our claims.

Mufti developed his theory of secular criticism from Edward Said, who used the term to describe a mode of analysis that constantly examines and exposes how communities of filiation, such as the family or the nation, legitimize their authority on the grounds that they are “organic” or “natural,” while in reality they constantly marginalize identities, social relationships, and cultural practices that disrupt the status quo. Mufti argues that Said’s use of the term is catachrestic—secular criticism is not concerned with religion, but is primarily a “minority critique” of nationalism. The fundamental crisis
within modernity is the continuous eruption of a minority culture and community within the framework of the post-enlightenment secular state. Though a minority critique recognizes the rights of minority groups, the two need to be distinguished. Empirical minorities demand independence because they aspire to achieve a majority status. Thus, they replicate nationalism’s filiative structures, and in turn, suppress other minorities. A minority critique, by contrast, is “a critical consciousness constantly alert to the terms of experience of majority culture, a consciousness both assertive and on the defensive, both vocal and alert to its own quiet vulnerabilities” (“Auerbach in Istanbul” 108).

Mufti’s book length study Enlightenment in the Colony: the Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture begins with a commentary on the destruction of the Babri Masjid to highlight the crisis of the Indian secular state. He deploys secular criticism as a minority critique to argue that secular nationalism has failed to reduce Muslim “difference” to the position of a minority within India. Hindu-Muslim riots in India and their repercussions in Pakistan and Bangladesh have revealed the failures of nationalism—the penultimate project of modernity (not only of India, but of Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well). But, Mufti also criticizes anti-secularists like Nandy, who reject modernity and secularism to evoke pre-modern modes of religious tolerance. Nandy too assumes a majoritarian perspective by juxtaposing a secular elite minority to an ecumenical religious populace, and so fails to realize that this viewpoint also reinforces structures of filiation in the name of an alleged pre-modern majority. Mufti argues that there is “no unmediated recourse to the outside,” and instead, we need to develop “vernacular modernities.” He therefore examines Muslim writers like Saadat Hasan
Manto and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who recognize the importance of religion and secularism, while maintaining a skepticism towards an essential Islamic culture and absolute claims of the secular (1-21).

Despite Mufti’s nuanced exploration of secular criticism, there is a danger that he reifies the position of that minority community from which a minority critique originates. While I agree that the Indian secular state has failed to contain Muslim difference, Mufti overextends his claim when he suggests that “Indian” as a cultural formation is brought into crisis by the question of Muslim identity (*Enlightenment in the Colony* 7). This claim completely ignores how secular nationalism was challenged by the rise of Dalitbahujan movements in the 1980s. The conflict between upper-caste Hindus and OBCs (a section of Dalitbahujans) over the implementation of the Mandal Commission in 1990 revealed that secular nationalism was unable to overcome the problem of caste. Thus, though the figure of the Muslim does problematize Indian secularism, the crisis of Indian secularism cannot be reduced to only the Hindu-Muslim conflict.

I am also critical of Mufti’s work because, like Kumar, he predominantly considers secularism to be a political and cultural project in relationship to the nation-state. However, there are some crucial differences between the way Kumar and Mufti explore secularism. Though Kumar’s criticism of secularism needs to be distinguished

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1 Within the caste hierarchy OBCs rank just above Dalits. However, they are both considered to be lower caste, and are grouped together as “Dalitbahujans.” In 1990, the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. V. P. Singh (1989-1990) wanted to implement the Mandal Commission’s (1979-1980) recommendations to have fixed quotas in all public sector jobs for OBCs. Upper-caste Hindus across the nation protested the implementation because they felt they would be economically impoverished.
from Nandy’s (she promotes a reason-based secularism against religious orthodoxies, while he wishes to do away with secularism altogether), they both agree that secularism is not adequately developed to bring about religious co-existence and tolerance. By contrast, Mufti conceptualizes secularism as an aspect of modernity, a political, cultural, and economic condition that we exist within. Thus, any critique of modernity, and by extension, secularism, must be constantly aware that it is articulated within this framework. Instead of simply rejecting secularism, we need to recognize its value, even as we recognize the contingency of our claims. While Mufti’s conceptualization of secular criticism in nuanced, it is also limited because its horizon remains a “minority critique” of nationalism. Thus, secularism is a political doctrine or a cultural project (within the liberal state), or a mode of criticism (an analytic tool). Ultimately, Mufti and Kumar consider secularism to be a tool in cultural practice that can or cannot conceptualize alternative ethical practices (to secularism as a political doctrine).

The question that I raise in my dissertation is whether we can examine the relationship between minority literature and secularism without conceiving the latter as either a political doctrine, cultural project, or a mode of criticism. And by extension, if we begin with the assumption that secularism cannot only be reduced to a political or cultural tool, what is the value in examining the relationship between secularism and minority literature? While I do explore how minority writing engages secularism as a political and cultural given, and as a critical tool, I am arguing that it is not always productive to assume that secularism only functions in these terms. By refusing to begin with this assumption, or withholding it, we can begin to pay attention to how texts
otherwise engage secularism; how they are informed by it, shaped by it, and respond to it. Mufti comes close to conceptualizing this relationship between minority writing and secularism when he states that we cannot escape modernity. But because he assumes that that crisis of modernity is the inability of the secular state to incorporate cultural and religious difference, his whole discussion of secularism coalesces around this relationship between nationalism and minorities. Thus, secular criticism only examines how literature conceptualizes “solutions” to this conundrum. I too begin by recognizing the failure of secularism as a political doctrine to balance the interests of minorities and the state, but I argue that it is equally important for the literary critic to be sensitive to the way secularism, through its various manifestations—like secularization of religious identity and secular time—shapes and influences minority literary texts.

Let me briefly touch upon two examples in my dissertation which explore aspects of secularism in literary texts that problematize the national/minority framework that the above two literary critics foreground. I have already mentioned “paguttarivu”—intelligence born of discernment—that Periyar used to critique oppressive social structures. In Chapter 5 of my dissertation, I explore how Bama, a Dalit, Catholic writer deploys this rational critique to expose the cultural hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church and the OBCs, two minority groups, over Dalits. As the relationship between the majority and minorities does not feature in this relationship, secularism as a political doctrine or cultural project is not relevant to this conversation. Another example will not only complicate the national/minority framework, but explore the relationship between secularism and literary aesthetics. In Chapter 3, I argue that the Anglo-Indian writer I.
Allan Sealy deploys postmodern strategies to undermine realist narratives in which the Anglo-Indian minority is depicted as a “failed” community. Realist narratives operate in secular time within which national majorities are portrayed as “progressive” and minorities as “backward.” But Sealy’s techniques also challenge Anglo-Indian realist narratives during colonial rule that promoted Anglo-Indian identity and marginalized Indians. Thus, during a “colonial” secular time, Anglo-Indians considered themselves to be “progressive” and Indians to be “backward.” By foregrounding the different secular times through which Anglo-Indian identity is constructed, we perceive a more complex and varied perspective of a minority identity. I therefore find Mufti’s conceptualization of Muslim identity within the framework of the national/minority binary inadequate. He only conceives Muslim identity and writing as a reaction to Indian nationalism, but fails to consider how it might have been influenced by and responsive to colonialism.

My dissertation begins with the assumption that secularism, an important component of modernity, is complex, flexible, and contradictory. Instead of limiting secularism to a political doctrine and cultural project (Kumar), or a mode of criticism (Mufti), I begin by paying attention to the way the individual text engages its various manifestations. I therefore examine how secularism’s specific contours—whether as a political doctrine, cultural practice, critical approach, or as the social backdrop—are directly addressed by minority writers, and more importantly, even shape and influence their texts. I want to move beyond the debate over secularism’s relevance by arguing, with Mufti, that we cannot imagine a space outside modernity. If this is the case, then we need to recognize how secularism affects our social identity, even as we directly engage
it as political doctrine and cultural practice. Literature and literary studies provides an excellent segue into exploring these aspects of secularism that other fields like cultural studies and pragmatic philosophy—limited by their own disciplinary structures—are not able to engage. I do not wish to deny the invaluable work done in these fields towards an ethics of coexistence; in fact, I would argue that literary studies does not complement, but supplements their engagement with secularism. However, literary studies can participate in this conversation most effectively by playing to its strengths—foregrounding the relationship between aesthetics, and political and cultural projects—something that it is uniquely competent to carry out.

Aspects of Secularism: Secular Time and the Secularization of Religious Identities

In order to understand how secularism influences South Asian minority writing, I need to explicate aspects of it, specifically, of the secularization of religion and secular time. While I explore these ideas in detail in those respective chapters in which they are significant, here I provide an overview of how they first developed in Europe and were then introduced and reformulated during colonial rule in South Asia. Though the formulation of secularism in the “West” is not directly pertinent to my discussion, some background information helps clarify why it is associated with rationality and homogenous time. It also important to compare and contrast how secularism was transformed through colonial rule in South Asia, even as it continued to retain some of its major characteristics.

I want to categorically state here that the comparison that I make between secularism in Europe and in South Asia does not imply that European secularism is
authentic and South Asian secularism is a corruption. In fact, recent scholarship on the way secularism developed in Europe has demonstrated that it was a complex and contradictory phenomenon. I only explore European secularism in as much as it helps illuminate those aspects that are significant to my discussion. At the same time, I am invested in exploring secularism (and by extension, modernity) in a pragmatic manner, something that has to be lived through, with all its contradictions and tensions. Thus, my explication of secularism in Europe is primarily meant to give the reader a clear grasp of what I mean when I discuss, for instance, the “secularization” of Zoroastrianism in Chapter 4 or the position of the Burgher minority in the “secular time” of the nation in Chapter 1.

In “Modes of Secularism,” the philosopher Charles Taylor points out that the word “secularism” is derived from the Latin word, “saeculum.” Within Europe, saeculum meant “century” or “age” and referred to profane time, or the time of ordinary historical succession. This was juxtaposed to other modes of time, such as that of ecclesiastical time or God’s time. These times coexisted with one another, and different social institutions functioned in relation to different times. For all practical purposes, while the state existed in profane or secular time, it was the Church, as God’s representative on Earth, that had a greater authority and was grounded in ecclesiastical time.

In A Secular Age, his book length study on the subject, Taylor explores the changing relationship between ecclesiastical and secular time. According to Taylor, there was a gradual shift in the European polity from carrying out one’s moral obligation in profane or secular time on Earth so the individual and the community could join God’s
kingdom, to doing one’s duty for improving the individual and the community’s existence—the “common good”—on Earth. Additionally, moral obligation, which depended upon obedience to God’s will, now depended upon laws developed according to reason. In turn, the faith-based community made space for a “secular” public sphere that consisted of rational individuals. The former continued to exist, but as an option among a number of others that the rational individual could choose from. While the state protected faith-based communities from an intrusive public sphere, faith-based communities also transformed themselves. They now also prioritized the common good on Earth and willingly codified faith, which was less formal, into “religion,” that was defined by a set of principles, beliefs, and practices. Religion therefore became a distinct entity that could be practiced within the confines of individual religious communities. The gradual shift from faith-based communities to a rational public and the rationalization and privatization of religion is referred to as the secularization of society. This resulted in a heightened interest in the individual and people’s existence in profane or secular time. Nationalism, especially as it first developed in French and American Revolutions, marks the culmination of this process. Not only did human flourishing within the nation displace the transcendental flourishing in God’s kingdom, but now nations, as the embodiment of the people, could determine their own destinies.

David Scott and Aditya Nigam have made significant contributions to the study of secularism in South Asia. They both foreground how the secularization of religious communities and secular time were deeply imbricated in anti-colonial national movements. While Nigam’s work examines secular nationalism in India, Scott’s work on
secularism in Sri Lanka is crucial for my dissertation for two reasons. First, while the Subaltern Studies collective has reignited interest in the relationship between colonialism, Indian nationalism, and marginalized groups, this scholarly work has largely ignored the significance of secularism in the reconstitution of society, culture, and politics in India during colonial rule. As I have discussed above, Chatterjee only makes a passing reference to the secularization of Hinduism. By contrast, Scott foregrounds the process of secularization through which Buddhism and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism were constituted. I therefore extrapolate from Scott’s discussion of secularism in Sri Lanka to explore secularism in India. In addition, my first chapter deals with the Burgher minority in Sri Lanka to demonstrate how writers belonging to ethnic minorities in different South Asian states (India and Sri Lanka) deploy similar (though not the same) strategies in response to the failure of minorities to flourish in the secular time of the postcolonial state.

In *Refashioning Futures*, David Scott argues that peaceful coexistence between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil and Muslim minorities in Sri Lanka, is only possible if the secular, rational narrative that constitutes Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism is undermined. Though Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism spearheaded the anti-colonial movement in Sri Lanka, it articulated its resistance through a new subjectivity—the rational individual and the secularization of Buddhism—introduced during colonial rule. According to Scott, the Colebrook-Cameron Reforms of 1830 promoted the concept of the rational individual through a free press and a public sphere, an economy where individuals sold their labor, and a judiciary system based on rationality. This resulted in
the indigenous people developing a new subjectivity, one that “shift[ed] the site of individuality regulated not by the personal discretionary demands of a sovereign extracting tribute but the internal volitional agency of a rational free will” (47). The formation of the rational subject was complemented by the secularization of Buddhism. Buddhism had initially been a faith that formed the backdrop of the political, social, and moral life of the Sinhalese; however, it was reformulated into a codified set of laws and rationally justified to challenge secularized Christianity that was introduced by European missionaries. This secularization of Buddhism had a subsequent consequence—Buddhism now began to conceive of itself as superior to other religions on the island. Thus, the formation of the rational individual and the secularization and rationalization of Buddhism converged in the formation of a Sinhala-Buddhist national movement that challenged colonial rule in the name of the “indigenous” people, but also proclaimed the superiority of the Sinhala-Buddhist people over other social groups—Tamils and Muslims. In addition, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism also legitimized its authority by making an intrinsic connection between the nationalist movement of the present and an ancient Sinhala past. In this narrative, colonial rule was simply a disruption of the preexisting Sinhala-Buddhist state. Thus, in the postcolonial context, secular time is not only the means through which the nation fashions its future, but also constructs a past that is seamlessly incorporated into the present.

If secular time allows nations to consolidate themselves through forging links between the pre-colonial past and the present, it also is the means through which communities within the state can be described as “progressive” or “backward.” In The
Insurrection of Little Selves, Aditya Nigam argues that secular nationalism, like other national projects around the globe, conceives itself as developing in comparison to other nations in the homogenous or secular time of world history. However, in constructing a clear linear narrative, secular nationalism must also suppress multiple histories that exist within it. These alternative narratives demonstrate that other peoples within the state—ethnic or religious minorities—might exist in very different conceptions of time (17-20). For example, even though secular nationalism celebrated unity-in-diversity, it promoted the upper-caste Hindu as the model Indian citizen and was unable to incorporate the Muslim minority. It assumed that Hindus were middle-class, bourgeois, and progressive, while Muslims were poor, feudal, and backward. This discrepancy in the national narrative is a reflection of the different social and economic positions occupied by the Hindu and the Muslim elites at the beginning of the twentieth century. While the Hindu middle class had consolidated its position in the colonial hierarchy in an earlier period, the Muslim elite only began to assert a collective identity at the end of the nineteenth century. Realizing that they were economically and socially weaker than the Hindu elite, they negotiated with the British for privileges and stayed away from the national movement. They were thus described as “backward,” even though the Hindu elite had also collaborated with colonial rule prior to the national movement. Nigam therefore argues that the only way to recover the real meaning of the supposed late arrival of the Muslim minority elites, is by recognizing their history as separate and not part or section of a “national” history in which they exist in a subordinate position.
I now turn to explore how literature produced by writers belonging to specific minority communities—Burgher, Muslim, Anglo-Indian, Parsi, and Dalit Christian—directly responds to and is shaped by these different facets of secularism.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1, “Carnival and Artifice as Responses to the Secular in Carl Muller’s and Michael Ondaatje’s Fiction,” serves two important purposes. First, it begins with a detailed exploration of secularism, specifically of the secularization of religion and secular time, as they developed in Europe and were reframed in colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka. I examine conflicting interpretations of the role that modernity and secularism played in the creation of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Neera Wickramasinghe argues that Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism arose because secularism and modernity were “unevenly” introduced during colonial rule. David Scott, however, demonstrates that despite this uneven introduction, modernity and secularism created a new subjectivity and reformulated Buddhism. Like Chatterjee, Scott argues that communal harmony is only possible if democracy, that is grounded in the individual subject (and so legitimizes the right of the majority community to rule), is replaced by the rights of each community and a recognition of difference. The theory of secularism that I develop in this chapter provides the framework through which I approach the other chapters.

The second important purpose of this chapter is to explore the similar ways in which minorities within Sri Lanka and India engage secularism. The bulk of the chapter examines how Carl Muller and Michael Ondaatje, who belong to the Burgher community, focus on two important aspects of secularism—the secularization of identity
and secular time—in their fiction. Muller’s Burgher trilogy is deeply conflicted in its portrayal of the Burgher community’s history from its inception under colonial rule to its demise in contemporary Sri Lanka. On the one hand, it develops its story within secular time and so acknowledges that the Sinhalese are the genuine inhabitants of the island. On the other hand, within this historicist narrative, the trilogy turns to farce to celebrate the “golden years” of the Burgher community (between 1920 and the 1948) in order to resist lamenting the tragic decline of the Burghers after independence.

If Muller’s response to secular time is conflicted, Ondaatje in *Anil’s Ghost* refuses to narrate the civil war between the Sri Lankan state, the Tamil separatists, and the Sinhalese insurgents in terms of secularized ethnic identities within secular history. Like Scott, Ondaatje is critical of the way in which Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism depends upon secular history to legitimize its dominance. However, whereas Scott, an anthropologist, focuses on communal rights for minorities, Ondaatje suggests allegorical histories to challenge historicism. Though allegorical histories recognize the past, these are not communal histories that depend upon the accuracy of facts, but foreground the contingency of their claims. Thus, they explore how individuals make sense of their lives through personal interpretations (as opposed to communal conceptions) of the past. Ondaatje also undermines secularized religious identities by foregrounding how religion-as-faith can bring a sense of peace and closure to the individual in a civil war which has only perpetuated violence.

Chapter 2, “Envisioning the Human in Saadat Hasan Manto’s and Ismat Chughtai’s Fiction,” explores the importance and the limitations of secularism as a
cultural project in minority writing within India in the 1940s. It examines the literature produced by two Muslim writers, Ismat Chughtai and Saadat Hasan Manto, who responded to and were influenced by secular nationalism and by the Progressive Writers Association—a group of writers strongly committed to socialism. Recent criticism on Manto and Chughtai considers them to be “secular” writers for conceiving a social ethic that prioritized the rights of the individual human being over a commitment and allegiance to political and religious communities. Aamir Mufti applies secular criticism to analyze Manto’s work, and Priyamvada Gopal considers Manto and Chughtai to be radical humanists. Both critical approaches examine how these writers were equally committed to a critique of Indian nationalism and a homogenous Islamic identity. However, I find Gopa’s radical humanism more effective as a critical approach because its analysis does not operate solely within a minority critique of nationalism.

I examine two of Manto’s stories—“Mummy” and “The Price of Freedom”—to argue that Manto promotes a humanism that is grounded in a celebration of sexuality instead of an Indian nationalism that, in the name of respectability, forces human beings to deny physical desire. I then examine Chughtai’s semi-autobiographical novel The Crooked Line which is one of the first literary texts to explore the experiences of the modern Muslim female subject as she moved out of the domestic sphere and into the outer world. Thus, Chughtai’s protagonist inserts herself into a national narrative that she simultaneously constructs as Hindustani. While a narrative of Hindustan closely resembles secular nationalism in that it considers India/Hindustan moving along in secular time of world history, it also actively incorporates numerous Hindu and Islamic
cultural elements and histories, and is willing to accommodate the British influence on India, even as it is critical of colonial rule. Through the protagonist’s marriage to and later separation from an Englishman, the novel recognizes a universal human community, but also realizes that nations have not arrived at that “time” when individual citizens can put aside their historical differences as (English) colonizer and colonized (Indian).

Though Manto and Chughtai radically reinterpret what it means to be “human,” their work suffers from the typical lacuna associated with secularism in South Asia—the abstract individual subject tends to be male and/or middle-class. While Manto claims that human beings need to recognize their physicality, women are reduced to sexual objects while men are subjects who have agency. Similarly, in Chughtai’s conception of Hindustan, the middle-class individual is the subject of secular history, while the people can only be incorporated as objects in this narrative.

In chapter 3, “Secular Nationalism, Historicism, and Anglo-Indian Writing,” I examine two Anglo-Indian writers, Frank Anthony and I. Allan Sealy, who explore Anglo-Indian identity in relation to the secular time of Indian nationalism. *Britain’s Betrayal in India* (1969), Frank Anthony’s historical-cum-autobiographical account of the Anglo-Indian community from its inception in the seventeenth century to the contemporary moment is convinced that the Anglo-Indian community can flourish in the secular time of the Indian state, while *The Trotter-Nama* (1988), Sealy’s postmodern mock epic, written twenty years later, demonstrates that the Community is marginalized in contemporary India.
I begin the chapter by discussing Aditya Nigam’s theorization of secular time through which he reveals that despite secular nationalism’s celebration of unity in diversity, Muslims were considered to be “backward,” while Hindus were described as “progressive.” As the leader of the Anglo-Indian community at independence, Anthony claimed that Anglo-Indians, despite their prior allegiance to colonial rule, were as progressive as Hindus and could contribute to the development of post-independent India. In order to make this argument he claims that Anglo-Indians are masculine, disciplined, and hard working, and envisions a secular national culture that is compatible with Anglo-Indian identity. However, despite his political allegiance to India, Anthony’s cultural referents are colonial, which suggests that in constructing Anglo-Indian identity he is primarily concerned with defending the Community against colonial stereotypes of interracial people. Thus, Britain’s Betrayal in India exists in two “times”—colonial and national—and therefore the transition of Anglo-Indians from colonial subjects to Indian citizens is not complete.

Published in 1988, twenty years after Britain’s Betrayal in India, when secular nationalism was on the verge of collapsing as Indians became disillusioned with the secular state, The Trotter-Nama reveals that the Anglo-Indian community is culturally and economically marginalized. Therefore, if Sealy, like Anthony, had to write a “realist” historical account of the Community, he would have written a “tragic” narrative to represent its marginalization. In fact, all the realist accounts of the Community in popular culture, despite being sympathetic, consider Anglo-Indians to be a tragic people. To resist these historicist and realist accounts of the present, Sealy deploys postmodernist
strategies to explore Anglo-Indian history and culture in the mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries—a period when racial, religious, and class identities were fluid. But by fusing Islamic and Hindu elements into his narrative, he also challenges Anglo-Indian histories, like Anthony’s, that intentionally portray the Community as exclusively Anglicized, homogenous, and masculine. However, Sealy also parodies his representation of this earlier historical phase to avoid contrasting a liberated and fluid past to a fixed, tragic present. Thus postmodern parody remains only a textual strategy and a limited expression of resistance to challenge the real and tragic socio-economic disempowerment of Anglo-Indians in secular time.

In Chapter 4, “Between the Community and the Individual: The Politics of Secularism and Religious Identity in Rohinton Mistry’s Family Matters,” I directly intervene in the current debate over the relevance of secularism as a political and cultural project, and whether religion provides an alternative way to think of an ethics of coexistence. The Parsi writer Rohinton Mistry situates his novel Family Matters in Bombay in the aftermath of the Hindu-Muslim riots following the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Written from the perspective of the Parsis, the novel draws a parallel between the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in the public sphere and the increasing extremist interpretations of Zoroastrianism. Given Mistry’s status as an established writer and that Family Matters directly addresses the debate over secularism, it is unusual that the novel has not received much critical attention. While it can be correctly faulted for its simplistic and obvious critique of secular nationalism in the public sphere, most critics have failed to recognize that its exploration of Zoroastrianism indirectly engages the
current debate over secularism’s relevance and whether religion-as-faith can offer an alternative to religious fundamentalism.

In the nineteenth century, Parsis actively secularized Zoroastrianism and constructed a Parsi identity that was racially pure, rational, and ethical in order to consolidate their favored position in the colonial order. Though this ideal lost its cultural and political capital in independent India, some sections within the Community have over emphasized these values to defend the uniqueness of the Parsis. In *Family Matters*, Mistry critiques two aspects of this secularized identity—Parsi honesty and the taboo against inter-religious marriages. While contemporary postcolonial writers like Ondaajte and critics like Nandy gesture towards religious faith as an alternative to secularized religion, Mistry demonstrates how religion-as-faith can lead to a secularized religious identity, and then into fundamentalism. Instead, he advocates a secular, rational individual who must remain wary of the demands of larger communities—nation and religion—even as s/he recognizes that these communities are indispensable to one’s identity. Thus, Mistry introduces the metaphor of the puzzle to explicate the condition of the individual who has to recognize the failures of these larger social projects—nation and religious community—while being aware that s/he cannot not inhabit these formations.

Even as I have shown that secularism does not always have to operate within a minority/national paradigm in the previous four chapters, all the minority writers, to varying degrees, have had to acknowledge either nationalism or the majority community. I examine the writings of the Dalit Catholic writer Bama in Chapter 5 “The Instrumental
Use of Rationality to Critique Religion and Caste in Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati,* to demonstrate the complete absence of national paradigms in her work. Rather, other minorities or marginalized communities (from a national perspective)—the Catholic Church, OBCs, and Dalit patriarchy—are responsible for the exploitation of Dalits and Dalit women. If the conventional categories associated with secularism as a political doctrine and cultural project do not operate in Bama’s writings, it is ironic that it is secularism as a rational critique—the kind of “reasoning” that anti-secularists (Nandy and Madan) and secularists (Bilgrami) have dismissed—that Bama deploys to challenge caste, religious, and patriarchal oppression.

Bama’s critique of caste, patriarchy, and religion is partially influenced by the Dravidian movement in South India, and especially Periyar, who, as I have discussed earlier, demonstrated the upper-caste, North Indian cultural norms that underpinned secular nationalism. Periyar not only promoted a Dravidian culture and a lower-caste identity as an alternative model of a national identity, but also developed a form of rational critique called “paguttarivu” (intelligence born of discernment) to demonstrate the way in which religion and patriarchy propagated norms that marginalized lower castes and women.

While Periyar’s Dravidian movement dissipated by the 1960s, his social critique, along with Marxism, deeply influenced Dalit movements in South India. In *Sangati* Bama uses paguttarivu to expose how women are exploited by Dalit and upper caste patriarchies. Through the conversations and debates between women characters and the dialogues between the narrator, and her mother and grandmother, Bama explores the
different layers of reasoning and critique through which women begin to recognize the social conventions and norms through which they are exploited. It is also through these conversations between women that Bama depicts moments of solidarity between them. In *Karukku*, she fuses *paguttarivu* with a reinterpretation of religious scripture to construct Christianity from a Dalit perspective. On the one hand, she uses *paguttarivu* to challenge how the Church in South India uses ritual, mysticism, and obedience to suppress Dalits. On the other hand, she is influenced by Dalit liberation theology, itself derived from Black and Latin American liberation theologies, to reinterpret Catholicism, keeping in mind Dalit history and culture, and so provides a sense of dignity to the marginalized.

**Conclusion**

By examining the relationship between secularism and minority identity, my dissertation explores facets of both—secularism and minority identity—that have not been addressed in South Asian literary studies. My analysis of minority existence through the lens of secularism demonstrates that the majority/minority binary does not adequately address the diverse influences or concerns of minority communities. And by engaging secularism through literary texts written by minority writers, I have been able explore aspects of secularism, which otherwise, is reduced to simply being a political doctrine and a secular project. Rather, my project proves that secularism is a complex and diverse phenomenon that we have to engage carefully because even as we critique it, we are still constituted through it.
CHAPTER ONE

CARNIVAL AND ARTIFICE AS RESPONSES TO THE SECULAR IN CARL MULLER’S AND MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S FICTION

Traditional historiography points out that unlike its larger neighbor India, where colonial rule concluded with strife between religious communities and the Partition of the sub-continent, Sri Lanka witnessed a smooth transition to independence in 1948 and amicable relations between the two major ethnic groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. However, less than ten years after independence, this “model colony” was marred by ethnic strife.\(^2\) The Sinhala Only policy of 1956 replaced English with Sinhala as the official language of the state, tacitly acknowledging that the Sinhala “majority” had a legitimate claim over the island. This was one act in a series of policies that led to the marginalization of “minorities” and a rising tension between the ethnic communities in Sri Lanka. In the early 1980s a conflict erupted between the state and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam), that represented a section of the Tamil “minority.” Though the political impasse finally came to a conclusion with the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the majority-minority conundrum that legitimized the rights of the Sinhala majority, while denying the same to minorities, has not been resolved and minorities are still vulnerable.

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There are at least two important conceptual frameworks used in academia to address this political dilemma. Traditional historians and archeologists trace the history of the conflict (as I have briefly done here) and use evidence to hold either the Sinhalese majority or Tamil minority accountable. More recently, anthropologists and literary critics, like David Scott and Qadri Ismail, respectively, have suggested that this debate between academics (who argue about which community is responsible for the conflict) is not constructive because it tacitly accepts the conceptual framework—the majority/minority binary—that has created the conundrum. Scott and Qadri argue that this political and intellectual impasse is a manifestation of a crisis of modernity and its structures—secularism, the modern state apparatus, and democracy—that were introduced during colonial rule. The only solution, according to them, is to think of alternative structures to these conceptual frameworks.

This chapter examines how fiction can provide a way to think outside these established but limited political and intellectual frameworks. I explore how Carl Muller and Michael Ondaatje, who belong to the Burgher minority, conceptualize the conundrum and the “fictional” strategies they offer to challenge it. Carl Muller’s Burgher trilogy (1993-1995) is a fictional account of Burgher life between 1930 and 1953, and it takes place against the backdrop of the ethnic rivalry and the rise of Sinhala nationalism. Anil’s Ghost (2000) by Michael Ondaatje is set between the mid 1980s and early 1990s in the midst of the ethnic conflict, and is the story of a “human rights” group which is investigating a political murder. Despite exploring different time periods and social issues, both authors, writing at the end of the twentieth century, engage the contemporary
crisis. They both grapple with specific aspects of modernity—“secular time,” “secularized identities,” and historicism—in their fiction. However, because they also have radically divergent political agendas, they problematize these aspects of secularism through very different narrative techniques.

“Secular Time” and “Secularized Religion” in Europe and Sri Lanka

I begin with an examination of the concepts of secularism that I will be exploring in this chapter, specifically “secular time” and “secularized religion.” I briefly trace how they developed in Europe and then were introduced and refracted during colonial rule in Sri Lanka, in order to fully explore how Muller’s and Ondaatje’s works are informed, engage, and critique them. *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor traces the overarching development of secularism in Europe and North America. Key aspects of this long process for my exploration of secularism in Sri Lanka are the “secularization” of Christianity and the flourishing of nations in “secular time.” According to Taylor, as a result of the Protestant Reformation there was a gradual shift in the understanding of moral obligation from carrying out one’s duty in profane or secular time on Earth so as to guarantee the individual and the people’s place in God’s everlasting kingdom, to doing one’s duty for the sake of the improvement of the individual and the community’s existence during their time spent on Earth. More significantly, moral obligation, which earlier depended upon (supra-rational) obedience to God’s will, was replaced by laws that had to be justified according to the dictates of “reason.” With the introduction of reason, a faith-based community was replaced by a secularism that included a public sphere of rational individuals and faith-based traditions, who together decided what the common
human good was. Faith-based communities continued to exist, but simply became one choice among a number of options that the rational individual could choose from.

But the development of the public sphere and the rights of the autonomous individual also transformed faith-based communities. Influenced by the rationale promoted by the state, these faith-based communities prioritized the common good of the people in secular time. In addition, “faith,” which had been less formal and did not make distinctions between the public and the private gave way to “religion,” which consisted of a set of fixed principles, beliefs, and practices that could be practiced exclusively in the private sphere. It should be pointed out that while this newly formulated religion was compatible with goals of the public sphere, this transformation from faith to religion took place within the communities themselves.

The process of secularization—the creation of laws based on reason for the sake of the people’s existence on Earth; the establishment of a public constituted by rational individuals; and the codification, rationalization, and privatization of religion—culminated in an exclusive interest in the individual and the people’s existence in profane or secular time. This process took place gradually in Western Europe, but was established with the American and French Revolutions where the notion of a transcendental flourishing in God’s time was replaced by the possibility of human flourishing within secular or profane time. The nation, which constituted and represented the will of the people, became the vehicle through which human flourishing in secular time was imagined:
Here the idea is invoked that a people, or as it was also called at the time, a ‘nation’, can exist prior to and independently of its political constitution. So that this people can give itself its own constitution by its own free action in secular time. … Nations, people, can have a personality, can act together outside of any prior political ordering. One of the key premises of modern nationalism is in place, because without this the demand for self-determination of nations would make no sense. This just is the right for peoples to make their own constitution, unfettered by their historical political organization. (Taylor 208)

I have discussed Taylor’s work to explore how the concepts of “secular time” of the nation and the “secularization of religion” were refracted through colonial rule in Sri Lanka. In Ethnic Politics in Colonial Sri Lanka, Nira Wickramasinghe implicitly accepts Taylor’s secular narrative— that people can flourish in secular time of the nation state—as normative. She traces Sri Lanka’s failure to achieve this ideal and the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism to the specific way in which modernity was introduced during colonial rule, one which prioritized ethnic identities as opposed to the autonomous individual. While English colonial rule was established in Ceylon during the first decade of the nineteenth century, it was only after the Colebrook-Cameron Commission of 1833 that the British colonial government granted certain rights to the colonized. However, instead of establishing the rights of the individual, the Commission only recognized ethnic communities. Furthermore, the people nominated to represent these communities in the colonial government invariably turned out to be an elite group who had no relation to the larger populace. Changes were made to this structure only on the recommendations
of the Donoughmore Commission in 1930. Wickramasinghe points out that the
Donoughmore Commission felt that communal representation had resulted in inter-ethnic rivalry, for it bred “self-interest, suspicion and animosity, poisoning the new growth of political consciousness and effecting the development of a national or corporate spirit” (79). The Commission hoped that universal adult franchise would allow people to think outside an ethnic framework, and more importantly, force elites to take into consideration the concerns of the masses who till now they represented, but did not engage with.

According to Wickramasinghe, while the Donoughmore Commission had good intentions, it unwittingly helped to reinforce ethnic identities and consolidate Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The Commission was aware that demands for independence would soon be made, and in addition to universal adult franchise, it recommended that the indigenous people of Ceylon be trained in running the country. It suggested that the Government initiate the process of “Ceylonization” of the bureaucracy and other government services. In Sri Lanka the ethnic minorities—Burghers and Tamils—had been more successful than the Sinhalese in gaining government employment. The Burghers were favored because of their “European” heritage and because English was their mother tongue, while the Tamils gained employment because they had been taught English by American missionaries who had worked in the vicinity of Jaffna, a Tamil stronghold. Though the Sinhalese had not been intentionally discriminated against, they were given preferential treatment in the Ceylonization of the country because they were the underrepresented majority. Ceylonization, therefore, predominantly implied a process of “Sinhalization” of the services. Thus, despite the Donoughmore Commission’s hope
that the expansion of political and economic rights would gradually lead to a healthy and vibrant democracy, its recommendations helped reinforce ethnic differences and consolidate Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

In *Refashioning Futures*, David Scott challenges the secular model—the flourishing of the individual in the secular time of the nation—that Wickramsinghe accepts as normative. Instead of critiquing the Colebrook-Cameron Reforms for enforcing ethnic identities, Scott problematizes the secular framework that it implicitly depended upon. For Scott, the Colebrook-Cameron Reforms themselves introduced a new subjectivity. Apart from implementing communal representation, they advocated the creation of a free press and a public sphere, a free economy where the individual could sell his labor, and a judiciary system based on rationality. This resulted in the indigenous people developing a new subjectivity, one that “shift[ed] the site of individuality regulated not by the personal discretionary demands of a sovereign extracting tribute but the internal volitional agency of a rational free will” (47).

A secularized Buddhism and a Sinhala-Buddhist identity arose simultaneously with the creation of the rational individual. When Christian missionaries arrived in Sri Lanka in the 1830s to propagate Christianity, the Buddhist monks welcomed them and encouraged them to preach. Buddhism was simply a faith that informed people about their lives; it was not a “religion” that was codified into a set of practices that could be contrasted and defended in opposition to a secularized Christianity. However, with the gradual erosion of Buddhism, Buddhist monks started resisting Christianity, but could only do so, according to Scott, by secularizing Buddhism. Scott describes this as
“Protestant Buddhism,” because Buddhism gained an ideological content and was contrasted directly with other religions. This conflict between Christianity and a secularized Buddhism led to the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Not only did Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism challenge Christianity and colonial rule, but it also attempted to legitimize itself by claiming to represent the Sinhalese, the majority of the Ceylonese population, while marginalizing minorities.

Scott argues that at the contemporary moment the debate over the legitimacy of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism is taking place within the discipline of history. Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism attempts to legitimize its authority over the island by claiming that Sri Lanka had been ruled by the Sinhalese until colonial rule. In order to defend this claim, it turns to the disciplines of history and archeology for evidence to prove the existence of an ancient and glorious Buddhist past. Left leaning historians have countered this claim by also using evidence to critique any correspondence between contemporary Sinhalese identity and the past. As both sides use facts to legitimize their cause, the conflict then is reduced to which set of historians have interpreted the facts correctly. If facts have failed to resolve the conflict, Scott argues that we need to work within a new problematic, one that will not be bound by epistemology. He wishes to refuse history its subjectivity, its constancy, its eternity; to think it otherwise than as the past’s hold over the present, to interrupt its seemingly irrepressible succession, causality, its eternity; its sovereign claim to determinancy. For in this thought a different possibility of community might have been made visible—community as project. (105)
Scott is also critical of democracy and wishes to replace it with “a politics of settlements.” Democracy is considered to be a legitimate form of government because it is based on numerical strength, and does not depend upon the claims made on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or community. However, because this neutral principle leads to the normalization of the majority, it authenticates the dominance of the Sinhalese nation. Thinking of an alternative to democracy, he suggests “a politics of settlements” which recognizes that social and cultural values cannot be reduced to a singular principle (majority/minority). It is only through the institutionalization of such cultural and political spaces that groups (as opposed to majority and minority communities) can formulate and articulate their moral-political concerns and self-governing claims in languages of their respective historical traditions. A politics of settlements:

- is not the depoliticization of community, not the exclusion of Muslim, Tamil, and Sinhala cultural values from the domain of public political life, but the fashioning of the institutional means of enabling traditional-bearing Muslims, Tamils, and Sinhalas to be active participants in their own self-government. (185)

I have discussed the relationship between secularism and the political impasse in Sri Lanka in order to provide a context from which I can begin to explore how fiction might provide alternative ways of engaging these issues. Like Wickramasinghe, Carl Muller, who has written extensively on the Burgher community in Sri Lanka accepts the linear narrative of secular history and the rivalry between the secularized identities, and so cannot think of a way out of the political impasse. By contrast, Michael Ondaatje, like David Scott, refuses to historicize the political situation in Sri Lanka. He does not provide
the historical background, nor does he name the various political factions involved in the conflict. Though both Muller and Ondaatje hold very similar positions to these respective social scientists, fiction provides them a space where they can engage the problematic in creative ways. Thus, Muller can legitimately disrupt historicism through, what I call, the “carnivalesque,” an approach that is equally radical and disturbing. Ondaatje, on the other hand, does not highlight community rights, but provides an alternate way of thinking through the conflict by emphasizing the singularity of character and situation, and the contingency of any interpretation.

Carl Muller’s Burgher trilogy

Carl Muller is one of the most controversial Anglophone Sri Lankan writers. Born in 1935, he worked in the Sri Lankan navy and the Port Authority before becoming a journalist in 1964. He published his first novel, *The Jam Fruit Tree*, in 1993 in “direct response to Penguin India’s claim that they were looking for ‘a Burgher book, like Michael Ondaatje writes’” (Salgado 95). Muller’s fictional account of the Burgher community gained immediate recognition when it won the Gratian Prize that same year, but it also stirred controversy. The novel’s explicit sexuality, its bawdy humor, and the use of “creolized” language offended Burghers, who felt they were being unfairly depicted as promiscuous, lower class, and ethnocentric.3 The two novels that followed—

3 The Burghers that Charles Sarvan interviewed for his essay on Muller’s Burgher trilogy were uncomfortable with Muller’s portrayal of the community. They insisted that Muller was writing fiction, not a sociological account. However, Sarvan’s attempt to read Muller’s account of the community as the literal truth is equally problematic. Charles P. Sarvan, “Carl Muller’s Trilogy and the Burghers of Sri Lanka.” *World Literature Today*. 71. 3 (Summer 1997) 527-532.
Yakada Yaka (1994) and Once upon a Tender Time (1995)—continued to represent the Burghers in the same vein. Though Muller then turned to other subjects, ranging from Sri Lankan mythology to science fiction, he continued to place an emphasis on bawdy humor and explicit sexuality. Critics find his humor and emphasis on sexuality disturbing because though these seem liberating, they actually reinforce misogynistic representations of women. While I cannot comment on Muller’s use of humor and exploration of sexuality in his entire oeuvre, in this chapter I examine how humor allows him to undermine historicism, and the intersection of humor and sexuality allows him to explore pedophilia in radical, if disturbing ways.

The Jam Fruit Tree, Yakada Yaka, and Once upon a Tender Time form a trilogy that represents the life of the Burgher community between 1930 and the 1953. The novels develop in a loose sequential order, exploring three generations of the von Bloss family and pay special attention to Sonnaboy von Bloss and his son, Carloboy. While the trilogy foregrounds the lifestyle and culture of the Burghers, it also touches on the larger historical context of Sri Lanka. Muller discusses the effects of the rivalry between the ethnic groups and the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism during this period. And though the plot concludes in 1953, he mentions the consolidation of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the late 1950s and the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in the 1990s. However, there is tension in the trilogy between this historicism and the depiction of the community. On the one hand, he accepts the logic of majority rule and recognizes that the Sinhalese are the rightful inhabitants of the island. On the other hand, the farcical representation of the Burghers disrupts the historicist account of the
relationship between the majority and minorities. Georg Lukacs’ and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of the novel and carnival, respectively, have helped me flesh out the larger implications of the trilogy. Lukacs’ exploration of the relationship between historicism and the historical novel provides me a means to examine how Muller represents the “totality” of the period through the “typicality” of his characters. Bakhtin’s emphasis on the comic and subversive elements of carnival allows me to explore how Muller uses this technique to not only disrupt historicism, but more importantly, to open a discussion about children’s sexuality.

Typicality, Totality, and Contradictions in the Historicism of the Burgher Trilogy

In The Historical Novel, Georg Lukacs argues that the rise of historical fiction at the end of the eighteenth century was not an accident; rather, it was a reflection of the growing awareness among people in Europe that they played an important part in making history. Lukacs, a Marxist, argues that history is a consequence of the struggle between classes—nobility and bourgeoisie, bourgeoisie and the proletariat—within the nation state. Deriving his theory from Hegel, he argues that there is “a process in history, a process propelled on the one hand, by the inner motive forces of history and which, on the other, extends its influence to all the phenomena of human life, including thought. [Hegel] sees the total life of humanity as a great historical process” (29). This Hegelian-Marxist conception of history which engages “the total life of humanity” is inherently secular because it assumes that history is determined not only by economic laws but also by humanity’s active participation. More significantly, it assumes that human flourishing
on earth exists as an end in itself and that the nation is the embodiment of the people’s hopes and aspirations.⁴

According to Lukacs, the nineteenth century European historical novel best captures this totality of history because it demonstrates that the present is the culmination of a series of historical struggles between nations and among classes struggling within the nation. It examines a significant historical juncture through the perspectives of individual characters who are forced to come to terms with changes in the social structure. These characters are “typical” because they embody different classes, but are not reduced to caricatures or mouthpieces of these groups. Rather, they are individualized, and so give the reader an insight into the struggle and pain that comes with historical change. Fredric Jameson, in his essay on Lukacs, summarizes this relationship between the typicality of the characters and the totality of the process: “[t]he typical is not at this point a one-to-one correlation between individual characters in the work … and fixed, stable component of the external world itself …. but rather an analogy between the entire plot, as a conflict of forces, and the total moment of history itself considered as process” (195).⁵

From one perspective, Muller’s Burgher trilogy can be considered historical fiction. It gives the reader an overview of the totality of colonial and postcolonial Sri Lankan history. The introduction and the conclusion of all the three novels of the trilogy

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⁴ Lukacs, a Marxist, implicitly considers the struggle to create (a mass-based) nationalism, a phase within the broader history of class struggle.

contextualize the struggle between the Burghers, the Sinhalese, and the Tamils within this framework. At the beginning of each of the three novels Muller briefly discusses the history of colonialism in Sri Lanka, the inter-racial origins of the Burghers, and the Community’s favored status during colonial rule. The first two novels of the trilogy conclude with the diasporic migration of the Burghers from Sri Lanka to Australia and England after the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the 1950s. He also accepts the dominant historical trajectory—in sporadic moments in the trilogy he acknowledges that Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhalese and criticizes some Tamils (he does not mention the LTTE) for carrying out terrorist acts. Within this larger framework, the trilogy explores Sri Lankan history between 1930 and 1953. Muller describes this period as the “golden age” of the Burgher community as they initially held affluent positions in the colonial hierarchy that allowed them to enjoy a middle-class life style. However, the trilogy simultaneously reveals that this was a period of transition as power devolved from the British to the Ceylonese population. The tension between the ethnic groups increased as other ethnic groups began to be treated on a par with and even given preference over the Burghers.

Through the course of the trilogy Muller explores how the “Ceylonization” of government services led to changes within the colonial hierarchy and rivalry between ethnic groups. Though he never directly refers to the Donoughmore Commission, the novels deal with the repercussions of its recommendations. In the first novel of the trilogy—The Jam Fruit Tree—Muller notes that the Burghers were no longer favored in government service. Rather, “[i]n the ranks of professionals were the Sinhalese, Tamils
and Malays and Muslims as well and the competition for slices of the cake grew fierce” (162). With other communities being able to take advantage of government services, the demand for English education arose. A number of religious communities—Buddhist, Catholic, Methodist, and Muslim—built schools to teach their children English (161). Only in the second book of the trilogy—*Yakada Yaka*—do we realize that the opening up of government positions and the expansion of education did not lead to the destruction of ethnic identities as the Donoughmore Commission had hoped; rather, it further consolidated community identities as each ethnic group aspired to achieve a middle-class lifestyle. Muller informs us that

> [w]ith education, more and more Sinhalese began to show unbelievable aptitude and started to compete fiercely for public service billets. Sinhalese parents had one aim: their sons must be doctors, or lawyers, or engineers or ‘government servants’; and their daughters must be married to doctors, lawyers, or engineers or ‘government servants’. (*Yakada Yaka* 113)

Muller explores how rivalries between communities persisted in school. According to him, Tamil students strove to better themselves as a group and maintained their distance from the Sinhalese and the Burghers. In turn, the Sinhalese used the Burghers to improve their English, but were critical of the latter whom they considered to be “after-drops of a passing of foreign urine” (114-115).

In *Yakada Yaka*, the ethnic rivalry that takes place in school, also occurs in government institutions. Muller refers to the decree passed by the Legislative Council of Ceylon implementing the process of “Ceylonization” through which the indigenous
people of Ceylon were trained to command the higher positions of Government service. However, the “Ceylonization” of Ceylon (or Sri Lanka) implicitly suggested the “Sinhalization” of the country. Muller, like the British, tacitly accepts this slippage. The Sinhalese Gonpala, who is being trained to take over as General Manager of the Railways, justly reprimands Sonnaboy, who is an engine driver, for bringing in his train late. When Sonnaboy threatens him physically, Gonpala turns a personal argument into an ethnic quarrel:

He would show this upstart Burgher driver that this was the Age of the Sinhala Administrator. Indeed, he would show all these Burghers where the power lay. Who were these fellows, anyway? … This was Sinhalese country and soon the Sinhalese would call the shots. (189-190)

Gonpala can straddle both identities—Ceylonese as well as Sinhalese. Educated in elite institutions in Ceylon and England, Gonpala represents the cosmopolitan Ceylonese “brown sahib” who is comfortable interacting with an English upper-class. But at moments of tension within the island this cosmopolitan culture is undermined by secularized ethnic identities. Thus, for Gonpala, the nation’s progress from colonialism to independence will result in the flourishing of the Sinhalese, who because they are the majority, are the legitimate inhabitants of the island.

However, the totality of history as a dynamic process is undermined throughout the trilogy because the plot consists of a series of humorous episodes revolving around the Von Bloss men, their families, and male friends. The sense of history being a process is minimized, and the trilogy takes delight in demonstrating the comic nature, the
bawdiness, and the vulgarity of the Burghers. For instance, though both the above examples reveal the rising tension between communities at the end of colonial rule, they ultimately demonstrate how Burghers outwit other ethnic groups and each other. In *The Jamfruit Tree*, the explosion in English education leads to a more competitive environment, and Burgher children have to learn far more than their parents. A historical novel might use examples to explain the gravity of the situation; Muller, instead, provides us with a comic anecdote. Carloboy practices Latin conjunctions and gleefully recites: “Faceo, Facere, Feci, Factum” (162). Beryl, his mother, who hasn’t learnt Latin, suspects that her son is abusing her (and perhaps he is, the chronicler leaves it open to interpretation). In *Yakada Yaka* the hostility between the school children concludes with a random story of a Burgher engine driver outwitting an English railway inspector. The point that Muller wishes to make is that despite the emerging conflict on the island, the Burghers continued their bohemian, happy-go-lucky existence (115-127). Similarly, the argument between Sonnaboy and Gonpala that has the potential of turning into an ethnic conflict becomes another example that demonstrates how ordinary Burghers can outsmart sophisticated Sinhalese (196). Sonnaboy’s official excuse for not bringing his train in on time is both hysterical and ludicrous. In an official letter, Sonnaboy claimed that his train was delayed because of wild buffaloes. The buffaloes didn’t know that Sonnaboy’s train was a “special,” and being creatures of habit, refused to move off the track. Gonpala and the senior administrators are more amused at Sonnaboy’s audacity than they are angry at the blatant lie. Thus, the whole ethnic conflict is reduced to farce.
A similar contradiction is apparent in the way the characters are developed—they are at once typical and farcical. They are typical in the Lukacsian sense of simultaneously providing an overarching picture of the Burghers during this period and being individuals who have to deal with their own personal crises. Sonnaboy, Beryl, and Carloboy represent average, hard working Burghers who are physically strong, have an enthusiasm for life, and remain optimistic despite ill fortune, but they also retain their individuality. For example, though Sonnaboy and Beryl are initially attracted to each other, they gradually grow emotionally distant. It becomes apparent that Beryl wants to be more than a wife and mother. Her frustration increases as Sonnaboy is unrefined, has no aspirations beyond being an engine driver, and is twenty years her senior. She therefore has a long term affair with Kinno Mottau who is the embodiment of everything that Sonnaboy can never be—he is closer to her age, is suave, and is more successful. Sonnaboy, in turn, abuses her, drinks excessively, and engages once more in homosexual affairs for emotional solace. Carloboy, who is loosely based on Muller, is the most complex character. Though he is stereotypically a Burgher—physically strong and disobedient—he also is a character in his own right. He enjoys Indian classical dance, feels humiliated after his peers tease him for having been molested, and rebels against his parents.

Yet, the complexity of these characters only emerges after reading all three novels. Muller’s primary purpose in exploring these characters, like he does historical events, is to demonstrate the bohemian character and tenacity of the Burgher community. These character traits of the Burgher are most apparent through their interaction with
other ethnic communities. In *Yakada Yaka*—and throughout the trilogy—the chronicler points out that the Burghers were “an example of agreeable living to the money-mad, scheming, conniving Sinhalese and Tamils who deplored yet envied the Burghers’ supremely careless attitude and their need to eat, drink and be merry and to Hades with tomorrow!” (114-115). This ethnocentric attitude, bordering on racism, is evident in Muller’s descriptions of the rivalry between ethnic groups in the school and the workplace that I have explored above. Yet, while Muller has been correctly accused of misogyny, his ethnocentric attitude has not stirred controversy in Sri Lanka. One obvious reason is that the blatancy of the ethnocentricism is intertwined with the sense of farce that turns almost every inter-ethnic quarrel into a comic episode. There are also numerous equally comic incidents in all three texts where the Burghers either outwit and physically dominate the British, Anglo-Indians, and more often, each other. For instance, there are more examples of the exceptionally strong Sonnaboy physically pulverizing other Burghers—men, women, and his own siblings—than the Sinhalese and Tamils who offend him.

I have pointed to Muller’s comic representation of the Burghers’ antics, not to excuse his ethnocentricism, but to argue that farce allows him to “legitimately” undermine the sense of historicism in the trilogy. Like Wickramasinghe, Muller accepts the historicist mode of thinking and so he grudgingly admits that Sri Lanka is a Sinhala-Buddhist country. If he had written a historical novel that foregrounded the role of the

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6 There may be a number of other reasons as well, including the fact that Burghers are no longer a political force on the island, that Muller recognizes the Sinhalese claim on the island, and that he is also far more critical of the Tamils than he is of the Sinhalese.
Burghers during this period, he would have to represent the Community in tragic terms because it dispersed or merged into the larger population at the end of colonial rule. He cannot, of course, write a heroic account of the Burghers, one that demonstrates their superiority over other Sri Lankans, as this would be “historically” inaccurate and ludicrous. Farce, as an aspect of “carnivalesque”—a literary mode that I will theorize a little later—gives Muller the license to simultaneously foreground the superior status of the Burghers during the period of transition, reject the tragic narrative of the community, and concede to the larger historicism. The comical, inane conclusions to the moments of tension between the ethnic groups only make sense within this framework.

The Carnival of Pedophilia

As the Burgher trilogy juxtaposes farce and historicism it might be considered Menippean satire, which, according to F. Anne Payne, requires the reader to “accept as necessary the presentation of simultaneous unresolved points of view” (*Chaucer and Menippean Satire* 4). One could argue that the tension in the trilogy between historicism and farce metaphorically resembles the unresolved conflict in Menippean satire created through the dialogue between stock literary characters—the all-knowing wise person and the fool or the ordinary individual (10-11). However, the diverse perspectives within Menippean satire have a specific purpose—to “remind us continually of the presence of alternatives, and of the uncertainty of any final answers” (11). By contrast, the tension between farce and historicism in Muller’s representation of the Burghers is not meant to intentionally explore the problem of identity and representation. Rather, it is the consequence, as I have demonstrated in the previous paragraph, of trying to celebrate
Burgher identity without turning the account into a tragic narrative, something which historicism would demand.

The celebration of “carnival” and the “carnivalesque” elements provides a more effective means to evaluate how farce functions in the trilogy. There are, of course, different theories of carnival. From one perspective, carnival, like menippean satire, is polyphonic. It juxtaposes alternative points of view and uses parody and humor to avoid legitimizing any one side of the argument. However, to appreciate Muller’s deployment of farce, I explore carnival as a space that is defined by its “unpredictable” nature. It can simultaneously promote a subversive and a conservative agenda. Farce in the Burgher trilogy operates within this dynamic. On the one hand, the trilogy is subversive because it mocks Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that dominates the public sphere in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, it is regressive as it reinforces colonial assumptions about racial hierarchies, with the Burghers represented as superior to the Sinhalese and Tamils. And yet at the same time, this logic is undermined by the way the Burghers are also ridiculed. This application of farce for contradictory purposes aligns it with the radical and the problematic politics of carnival.

Mikhail Bakhtin, the foremost theorist of carnival, only emphasizes its positive potential. In *Rabelais and his World*, he argues that Rabelais’s work can only be appreciated if one is able to understand how the author used folk and popular culture, that he derived from the carnival during the Medieval period and the Renaissance. It was during the carnival that the hierarchical structure was turned upside down and the culture and traditions of the people became the norm. Unlike the social hierarchy which
depended upon gravity and obedience to legitimize its authority, folk or popular traditions used humor—spectacles, parodies, and the use of obscenity—to “[offer] a completely different nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations” (6).

The celebration of the human body, in all its materiality, was one important feature of the carnival that continued to be practiced through the Medieval period and the Renaissance. Bakhtin describes Rabelais’s portrayal of the human body as “grotesque realism”:

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (Rabelais and his World 19)

The exaggeration and abundance of corporeality that represent the people, unlike the contained self of the bourgeois individual in a growing capitalist society, emphasizes “degradation.” The principle of degradation minimizes the spiritual, the ideal, and the
abstract of the medieval and bourgeois worlds; rather it recognizes the importance of “coming down to earth,” highlighting death, birth, becoming, and the continuous cycle of life in all its physicality. Thus, “[t]o degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, pregnancy, and birth” (21).

Bakhtin’s larger theoretical framework, whether it is the carnival in Rabelais and his World or heteroglossia and linguistic hybridity in The Dialogic Imagination, emphasizes the instability of social and linguistic structures. Academics across a range of disciplines, including Renaissance and Postcolonial Studies, have deployed these ideas to literary texts to show how the popular, the oppressed, and the marginalized have challenged dominant linguistic, political, and social structures.7 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in The Politics and the Poetics of Transgression, demonstrate that carnival has never only been a yearly ritual where the social order and norms were inverted, but “a mobile set of symbolic practices, images and discourses, which were employed throughout social revolts and conflicts before the nineteenth century” (15). Yet, they find Bakhtin’s representation of carnival to be highly utopian. They point out that despite being

[r]efreshingly iconoclastic, this nevertheless resolves none of those problems raised so far concerning the problem of carnival: its nostalgia; its uncritical populism (carnival often violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups—women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who ‘don’t

belong’—in a process of displaced abjection); its failure to do away with the official dominant culture, its licensed complicity. (19)

I think Stallybrass and White are correct—carnival remains a contradictory phenomenon because it simultaneously subverts and conforms to the norm. Yet it is precisely this unpredictability in conjunction with an ability to laugh at itself that makes carnival powerful. Stallybrass and White’s critique of carnival depends on a linear narrative of progress. They hope, and I agree with them, that in some future moment in secular time (not necessarily national) that those who do not belong—women, lower classes, and minorities—will be recognized as equals. But this hope itself depends upon a more fundamental assumption: a confidence in their (and our) ability and perspective as critics to recognize and speak with authority on the different kinds of oppressive structures. I find carnival problematic and yet powerful because its unpredictability forces us to re-examine our own convictions about what kinds of experiences and structures are oppressive and liberating. And it is able to effectively do so because its form, one that emphasizes the grotesque body, farce, and the ability to mock itself, is inherently non-hierarchal and democratic. I argue that it is at the intersection of the unpredictability of its rupture and its democratic self-critiquing humor that carnival forces us to re-examine the contingency of our own claims as academics and intellectuals in the public sphere.

I have already touched upon the ethnocentrism in the Burgher trilogy. I now examine how feminist critics explore the intersection of the carnivalesque elements—specifically, sexuality—and the representation of women in the trilogy. Neluka Silva has criticized Muller for over-emphasizing the sexuality of Burgher women instead of
acknowledging that they were among the earliest professional middle-class women in Sri Lanka and were at the forefront of proto-feminist movements on the island. By emphasizing their sexuality, Muller reinforces the dominant stereotype of Burghers being inherently promiscuous.8 In “Carl Muller: Genealogy Maps,” Minoli Salgado critiques Muller’s work (including the Burgher trilogy) for being a “paradoxical melding of carnivalesque linguistic subversion and ideological conservatism” (90). She correctly demonstrates that Muller deploys the carnivalesque elements—linguistic and sexual hybridity—to simultaneously endorse racial diversity and a culturally homogenous Burgher community. He thus tacitly acknowledges the legitimacy and difference of Sinhala nationalism. Salgado agrees with Silva’s critique, but suggests that Muller over-emphasizes the sexuality of Burgher women in order to consolidate the Community’s position within the nation. She also points out that in colonial discourse, racial hybrids (including Burghers) were considered to be degenerate outsiders; they were regarded as the products of racial miscegenation who could not themselves procreate. Therefore, Muller prioritizes female sexuality to challenge this colonial claim, but this in turn creates an anxiety about the certainty of male genealogy. He compensates for this anxiety by overstating Burgher masculinity and male sexual prowess (95-96).

Salgado emphasizes female sexuality as agency in the trilogy but critiques Muller’s misogynistic representation of women in her analysis of his epic novel, Children of the Lion (that deals with the establishment of the Sinhalese in “pre-historic” Sri

However, one can see traces of misogyny in the trilogy as well. Thus, Anna (Sonnaboy’s sister) and Beryl, two major female Burgher characters in the trilogy, are treated harshly for transgressing Burgher patriarchal norms. The trilogy resists racial miscegenation because though the von Bloss family grudgingly accepts Anna’s marriage to Colonto, a Sinhalese, she, unlike her other sisters, is infertile. Similarly, the chronicler is sympathetic towards Beryl’s desire for a life beyond domesticity and for the abuse she suffers, but he pays more attention to how the men (Sonnaboy and Carluboy) are affected by her actions.

Yet the attention Muller pays to female sexuality, whether it empowers women or is a direct threat to patriarchy, cannot be the only lens through which we understand male hyper-sexuality in the trilogy. The playfulness and violence of hyper-male sexuality—the male gaze on the male body, male homosexuality, pedophilia—exceeds the paradigm of gender and nation. This whole other space in Salgado’s essay is reduced to two sentences—“Muller deliberately challenges normative sexual codes, playfully celebrating sexual excess, transgression (such as homosexuality, incest, underage sex and, in *Children of the Lion*, bestiality) and linguistic ribaldry. The energy of his prose relies in large measure on this focus on the sexual activities of his characters” (94-95). But it is precisely this expression of the carnivalesque in Muller’s fiction that, while legitimizing patriarchy and Sinhala nationalism, destabilizes that most sanctified taboo against sexual relationships between adults and children. In this regard, the trilogy not only challenges the dominant conceptions of nationalism (which locates men, women, and children within very specific domains) but also the allegedly radical spaces within the
university—feminist, postcolonial, and queer studies—which refuse to theorize consensual sexual relationships between adults and children.  

The first few pages of *The Jamfruit Tree* introduce a carnivalesque description of pedophilia. Sonnaboy masturbates while fantasizing about his fiancé, Elaine:

> He was proud of his penis. … He made an elaborate show of soaping it as the servant girl crept closer to watch, and he thought of Elaine and how they would be married soon. Thin girl, Elaine, not much flesh on her thighs, boyishly undeveloped, small breasts, tight little bum. Yes, Elaine was just right. Like a boy. And Sonnaboy liked boys. (4-5)

There are elements of grotesque realism here: male and female sexual organs, bodily fluids, and “lower” body parts. Muller intentionally selects his words to create a range of responses—his description is simultaneously amusing, surprising, and disturbing. The quotation begins with a celebration of the male body, introduces a female voyeur, then shifts into a heterosexual fantasy, and finally takes a surprising turn to homoeroticism, one that hints at pedophilia because, as we discover later, Sonnaboy is thirty-five years old. This situation soon turns farcical as Sonnaboy falls in love with and proposes marriage to the fifteen-year old Beryl, who being “a roly-poly school girl, fresh [and]

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9 In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault briefly explores how, prior to the codification of sexuality and the construction of deviancy in the late eighteenth century, the sexual favors that the village “half-wit” received from “sharp” young girls in exchange for money were not considered criminal. They were “barely furtive pleasures between simple-minded adults and alter children” (32). While queer theorists and feminists have been influenced by his theorization of sexuality, they avoid dealing with this particular example. See, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume. 1*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1988. 31-32.
round-cheeked” (9), epitomizes everything that he is not attracted to. Though Beryl consents, both families only reluctantly agree to the marriage because she is still too young to be considered a woman. The relationship blurs the lines between pedophilia and sexual relations between consenting adults. Thus, the emphasis on sexual organs and fluids, farce, the humorous tone used, and the fluidity of sexuality—between heterosexuality and homosexuality, the female voyeur, and hints of sexual relations between adults and children—reinforce the idea of carnival.

Pedophilic relationships recur throughout the trilogy but are most comprehensively explored in Once upon a Tender Time, where they range from homosexual abuse to consensual heterosexual sex. In the foreword, the chronicler reveals that the novel is “based on the real experiences of many …. to create a single experience of child abuse, growing up, first loves, experiments and experiences” (xiii). Pedophilia, therefore, is only one kind of experience that creates the sense of carnival in the novel. However, I focus on it because its representation through the carnivalesque explores radical, if disturbing, possibilities. I pay attention to Carlboy’s gradual awareness of sexuality and his sexual experiences with adults, especially because the chronicler intervenes immediately after this to provide a page-long commentary on the issue. In the first incident, an adult laborer intentionally exposes himself to Carlboy, who in turn is not sure why the act excites him (29-30). Then, Uncle Alo, popular with all the children because he takes them for movies, teaches Carlboy how to masturbate (60-62). In the third incident, Carlboy has sexual intercourse with an adult maid (67-68). Muller is ambiguous in his exploration of Carlboy’s initiation into sex. The sense of carnival
comes through the confluence of the detailed descriptions of sexual organs and sexual acts and Carloboy’s fascination. Carloboy is intrigued by what Uncle Aloh is doing to him until he starts bleeding and he seduces the woman until she guides him through the act. At the same time, he is scared even as he is intrigued.

The chronicler then begins a lengthy commentary suggesting that most children were “besmirched more in mind than in body.” He evaluates different kinds of sexual interactions and how children responded to them:

Sodomy was, somehow, abhorrent. Virginity was rarely violated. The natural resilience of childhood helped too. The only fear was in being discovered and there remained, too, an initial sense of shame that prompted children to avoid further contact with any person who had inveigled them into a sex act, used their bodies briefly and rewarded them with coin or sweets. Of course, some found it a source of revenue and thought little of allowing this uncle or that to meddle with them as often as it pleased him. (69-70)

I have extensively quoted the chronicler’s comments because they reveal his ambivalence over pedophilia. He condemns sodomy and intercourse, but by claiming that children were rarely violated, he seems to tolerate other kinds of sexual encounters, such as masturbation. Furthermore, he suggests that shame—a social construct—as opposed to trauma (something that affects the individual’s psyche) is the reason why children rebuff
adults they have sexually interacted with. At the same time, he also points to the few children who saw no harm in actively engaging in sex if they received favors in return.  

To support this last claim, the chronicler then describes Carloboy’s cousin, Geordie, who is an extreme example. Geordie

became a darling of a long procession of men up and down the lane, of prefects and masters in schools, more prefects and masters in an upcountry school where he boarded and finally came to regard himself as a sexual plaything for any and every male who wished to use him…. He liked to be kissed by the men he openly courted and … would artfully tuck his member between his legs and walk tight-thighed like a girl, thus making him more attractive to all and sundry. (70)

Again, Muller is ambivalent in his representation of Geordie. He is passive in his interactions (“a sexual plaything”) but also an agent because he actively seduces the males around him. But the carnivalesque, and in this case, a sense of “pleasure,” comes through the description of Geordie’s sexual encounters. The repetition of “prefects and masters” reinforces the idea of “the long procession of men.” The image evokes a “delightful” atmosphere, one which seems to incorporate not only Geordie and the men, but also the chronicler. This atmosphere is reinforced through the concluding line which borders on the erotic.

This last particular representation of children’s sexuality is disturbing. Muller portrays Carloboy’s gradual awareness of and experimentation with his sexuality,

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10 His argument here strangely reverberates with Foucault’s point about pre-modern sexuality that I have mentioned in the previous footnote.
revealing a child’s conflicting responses to his abuse—his curiosity, confusion, discomfiture, and pleasure. However, his representation of Geordie’s sexuality is problematic. While describing Geordie’s sexual organs and the sexual acts he participates in, the carnivalesque element veers towards voyeurism, and the array of emotions that Carloboy experiences is replaced with a singular sense of delight that Geordie, but more troublingly, the narrator, experience.

I have argued that there is tension in Muller’s narrative. On the one hand, he endorses historicism which ends in the logical culmination of the Sinhalese as the rightful heirs of Sri Lanka. On the other hand, he is critical of Sinhala nationalism because it has marginalized minorities, specifically the Burghers. He therefore tries to resolve this dilemma by emphasizing the “carnivalesque” nature of the Burgher community. Through farce he simultaneously celebrates the community’s culture during its “golden years” and avoids writing a tragic history of the Burghers. If carnival’s humor allows him to momentarily disrupt the secular narrative of the Sri Lankan nation, its unpredictable and contradictory character makes the trilogy simultaneously conservative and liberating. Thus, bawdy humor, grotesque realism, and degradation reinforce ethnocentric attitudes associated with colonial rule and misogyny, but they also allow him to make a radical exploration into pedophilia. He opens up a space of sexual desire and sexual relations between adults and children, something that is disturbing to both conservatives and liberals. He therefore intervenes, not simply in a debate about historicism, but about what contemporary subjective experiences are considered normative and deviant. In the next
section, I examine the way Ondaatje critiques historicism, but also whether he is equally committed to the implications of the alternative subjectivities he introduces.

Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*

Michael Ondaatje, the naturalized Canadian writer, received international recognition when he won the Booker Prize for his novel *The English Patient* (1992). Part of the novel’s appeal derives from Ondaatje’s ability to skillfully portray diverse locations and peoples—it is set in the Sahara desert and in Italy, and has a cast of characters that includes an Indian sapper, a Canadian nurse, and a Hungarian adventurer. Ondaatje’s fascination with histories and cultures of different places and peoples is also evident in his other work. He has written an imaginative account of Buddy Bolden, the New Orleans’ Jazz musician, in *Coming through the Slaughter* (1976) and explored the contribution of Italian immigrants to building Toronto in *The Skin of a Lion* (1987). Though he could be described as a “global” author, it is his writing on Sri Lanka, where he was born and spent the first nine years of life, that has received the most scrutiny by his international readers, as well as by a Sri Lankan audience. His first book on Sri Lanka, *Running in the Family* (1983), a memoir, was criticized for being politically naïve, elitist, and pro-colonial. However, it is *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), where he grappled with the political conflict on the island that has proven to be the most controversial. Critics in Sri Lanka and abroad were disappointed that the novel did not deal directly with the political situation, and criticized Ondaatje for either legitimizing Sinhala nationalism and denying minorities a space, or conversely, for being prejudiced against
the Sinhala majority. The reviewers, in turn, argued with each other, for instance, over Ondaatje’s representation of Buddhism and Buddhism’s relevance to Sri Lankan politics.

That Anil’s Ghost can lead critics to make opposing claims about the novel’s politics, suggests that the political situation in Sri Lanka is sensitive, but also that the novel either intentionally refuses to take sides in the conflict, or at least does not depict the political situation clearly. For example, the Foreword to the novel, which is signed M.O., simply describes the conflict involving three groups between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s: “the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north.” By refusing to name these three groups at the very beginning of the text, Ondaatje indicates that he does not want to become a mediator through which his international readership can comprehend the “Sri Lankan” problem. If Carl Muller is conflicted about representing historicism, Ondaatje simply refuses to engage it. Like David Scott, he recognizes the inadequacy, and even the danger, of history and historicism to represent the contemporary situation. However, because Scott and Ondaatje work within different disciplines—anthropology and literature—they formulate very different ways to think through the political problem. Scott criticizes historicism and democracy, and argues that people can only live together in peace if the


rights of the different communities are respected. Ondaatje too, emphasizes the need for peaceful co-existence, but explores this possibility through “singularity” or the “unverifiable” narratives within literature.

In *Abiding by Sri Lanka*, the literary critic, Qadri Ismail, theorizes how literature can help think through the political impasse. Like Scott, he demonstrates that though Sinhalese and Tamil historians have used the same facts and claimed to be objective, they come to completely opposite conclusions, ones that coincide with their political agenda. He argues that instead of depending upon empiricism and the verifiability of facts, literature, with its emphasis on the singular and the unverifiable, can suggest an alternative way to engage the political situation in Sri Lanka. He states:

> As for the unverifiable, it means, or might be conceptualized as, the product of the imagination, not the archive or the field; it is something outside the reach of empiricism. The unverifiable is a concept, then, that makes possible readings, arguments, positions—and literature makes arguments, takes positions, intervenes within the social, just not using the protocols of analytic intellectual production—that cannot be settled on the basis of true/false or verisimilitude. (174)

*Anil’s Ghost* does not use historical facts or evidence to make a statement about the political situation; it refuses to frame the novel within the historical narrative that has come to define the conflict. Rather, it depends upon a singular, unverifiable narrative to suggest a way of co-existing peacefully. The novel revolves around a fragile community that comes together to investigate a political murder. Anil Tissera, an expatriate who lives in the United States, has been sent by the United Nations to investigate the political
killings. She is paired with Sarath Diyasena, an archeologist, who represents the state. Their only clue in the investigation is the “victim’s” skeleton, that Anil calls “Sailor.” In order to reconstruct Sailor’s face they hire the third member of the group, Ananda, a gem miner and artificer. Sarath’s mentor, Palipana, and Sarath’s brother, Gamini, a doctor, occasionally appear in the novel. Though all these characters are Sinhalese, they do not identify or sympathize with any side in the conflict. By contrast, those characters that represent the state, the insurgents, and rebels appear briefly and are described as specters, ghosts, or demons.

Postsecularism and Artifice

Despite Ondaatje’s narrative being singular, Ismail wrote a scathing review of Anil’s Ghost in Pravada. He criticized Ondaatje for not representing minorities, for having a bias towards the Sinhalese, and for refusing to engage the ethnic conflict.\(^{13}\) A closer reading of Abiding by Sri Lanka clarifies Ismail’s animosity towards the novel. In this larger theoretical work, he argues that the only way to engage Sri Lanka is to “abide” by it. To abide, according to Ismail, is to make a commitment, to intervene in the debates, to have a stake in the present and the future of Sri Lanka. He is suspicious of anthropologists who claim to provide an objective account of the island, implicitly suggesting that their neutrality allows them an unbiased view of the situation. They fail to recognize that they too have commitments, but specifically to and within their disciplines in the academy. Instead of an objective analysis or interpretations of the facts, the critic

must intervene in the debate by recognizing that s/he and the text that s/he is reading are necessarily informed by other political and cultural agendas. A reading, according to Ismail, “might be understood as interventionary—as opposed to academic work that only seeks to ‘understand’ …. or ‘interpret’…” (xxxviii). Distinguishing between the two—an interpretation and an intervention—he argues:

To interpret is to understand the object as different, as other—and as eventually knowable, masterable, however, difficult the task. To intervene is not to seek mastery, or understanding, and most definitely not to other. To interpret, ultimately, and paradoxically enough, is to be disinterested, to seek to make a truth claim of some sort about the object. To intervene is to be very interested and, obviously, not to make truth claims but statements that, eventually, take sides, statements that can and must be evaluated—on ethical and political grounds, not on those of accuracy or fidelity to the object. (xxxix)

If *Anil’s Ghost* is Ondaatje’s attempt to “read” Sri Lanka, we could argue that the novel makes an intervention. Ondaatje is not interested in providing an objective representation or making a truth claim about the political problem in Sri Lanka, but is committed to the politics of peace. But there is a fundamental difference in the kinds of intervention that Ondaatje and Ismail make. An intervention, according to Ismail, must also engage the debates and be part of the conversation between and within communities in Sri Lanka. Thus, even while he critiques historicism, he is invested in a “thick” engagement with the social and political particulars. *Anil’s Ghost*, as is clear from my brief discussion above, does not participate in this thick description.
There is also a significant difference in Ismail’s and Ondaatje’s confidence to engage Sri Lanka. If Ismail wants to distinguish between interpretation and intervention, Ondaatje consistently highlights that his intervention is always an act of interpretation. There are two distinct reasons why he consciously makes a “limited” intervention. One reason is that the diasporic writer is in a peculiar position; s/he is equally accountable to an international audience and his/her country of origin. I will examine this reason in the next section; here I want to argue that Ondaajte is inherently skeptical about making an intervention that denies complete objectivity because he is a “postsecular” writer.

In Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison, John A. McLure argues that postsecular fiction (in which he includes Anil’s Ghost and The English Patient) reflects a contemporary disillusionment with secular narratives of historical progress of humanity and the confidence in technology to solve the world’s problems. It is equally critical of the reactionary response to secularism, which is an absolute acceptance of institutionalized religion with its hierarchal structures. Thus, even though postsecular fiction turns once more to religion, it is wary of absolute claims, and so remains open to reflection, skepticism, and doubt (1-25).

In Anil’s Ghost, Ondaatje examines the contingency of both, interpreting and intervening in the debate over history. Important historical events, such as independence in 1948, the Sinhala Only policy of 1956, and the Sinhalese-Tamil riots of 1983 that are commonly used to historicize the political situation are never mentioned. The assassination of President Premadasa by the LTTE in 1993 is the only recent historical event that is mentioned in the novel.
importance of an “objective” and “subjective” engagement with history is demonstrated through Palipana’s career from anti-colonial epigraphist to mythic historian. Palipana begins his career as an enthusiastic young epigraphist who subverts Eurocentric history by seeing “his country in fathoms of colour, and Europe simply as a landmass on the end of the peninsula of Asia” (79). Later he discards secular historiography and turns to “mythical” histories: he begins to see the truth in unverifiable ancient histories of rebellion against the state, of literature written to escape censorship, and of Buddhist monks in conflict with their kings. Though he is accused of forgery and ostracized by his colleagues, these unverifiable histories, for Palipana, were “more of a trick, less of a falsehood in his own mind, perhaps for him it was not a false step but the step to another reality, the last stage of a long, truthful dance” (79-82). The arc of Palipana’s career reveals the importance of both, the interpretation of history and intervention for the sake of peace. During the colonial period a critique based on an interpretation of objective facts was a valid means to challenge colonial rule. However, in the present situation, a linear narrative based on facts must be replaced by an allegorical account. The mythic history of the past that distinguishes between the people (which includes the religious monks) and the state invites people in the present to make sense of the conflict, not on the basis of narratives that consolidate ethnic identities, but between the powerful (the state, the insurgents, and the rebels) and the powerless (the people).

Like Palipana, the mythic historian, Ondaatje, the novelist, highlights fiction’s ability to present the truth of a situation, one that has “religious” undertones, when the historical account of Sri Lanka has proven to be ineffective. He does this by drawing
parallels between a religious ceremony—the Buddhist Netra Mangala ceremony—and the act of writing fiction. When Palipana tries to convince Anil as to why Ananda, an artificer, would be the best person to help them reconstruct Sailor’s face, he explains the function of the artificer in the Netra Mangala ceremony. The artificer is a specialized painter who paints the eyes of the statue by looking at its reflection in a metal mirror, and in the process turns the statue into the Buddha/God. According to Palipana “[w]ithout the eyes [being painted] there is not just blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence. The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence” (99, emphasis mine). Critics have pointed out that the painting of the eyes is associated with the writing of fiction, and the novelist through fiction, like the artificer through painting, reveals the truth of a situation. Just as the believer has faith in the Buddha (after the eyes are painted), the reader has faith in the writer’s ability to represent the truth even while he avoids historicism. However, by foregrounding the ceremony or the act—whether of artifice or writing—that gives meaning to the object, Ondaatje emphasizes the importance of interpretation. He, therefore, distinguishes himself from the historian who claims to present an unmediated truth based on factual evidence and the radical critic (like Ismail) who has the confidence to intervene by taking a clear position on the political situation.

If Palipana turns to mythic stories of rebellion against the state to represent the political situation, Ondaajte explores the “timeless” story of mourning—a woman (not mother) mourning for a child—to capture an emotive truth about the violence. Moreover,

because Ondaatje highlights his interpretation, it resists being interpolated into the narrative of nationalism where women are represented as mothers who either inspire or need to be protected by the nation (her sons). I quote the passage in the novel at length also to point out that Ondaatje very consciously contrasts this emotive truth to secular—objective, scientific, and rational—truths. In the novel, Anil is confident that forensic science can help bring justice by discovering the perpetrators of political violence. However, Sarath remains wary of her optimism:

   Sarath knew that for [Anil] the journey was in getting to the truth. But what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photos. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter. There were dangers in handling the truth to an unsafe city around you. As an archeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use.

   And privately, … he would, he knew, give his life for a rock carving from another century of the woman bending over her child. He remembered how he had stood before it in the flickering light, Palipana’s arm following the line of the mother’s back bowed in affection or grief. An unseen child. All the gestures of motherhood harnessed. A muffled scream in her posture.

   The country existed in a rocking, self-burying like motion. The disappearance of schoolboys, the death of lawyers by torture, the abduction of
Ondaatje recognizes the importance of secular disciplines that attempt to discover the objective truth, but he is critical of the way in which these truths or facts have been narrated, as this can lead to further violence.\(^{16}\) Given the problems with presenting the objective truth, Ondaatje turns once more to allegory. He uses an ancient stone carving of a woman grieving for her child to capture the trauma of people caught in the civil war. However, the passage foregrounds the tension between the objective facts about the carving and the act of interpretation. Sarath emphasizes grief over affection in describing the emotional state of the woman, and imagines the figure of the child who is literally “unseen.” Therefore, Sarath chooses to interpret the carving to articulate the larger concerns of the country—the country as woman mourning for the children that are being killed. This image is reinforced in the final paragraph—a country in a “rocking, self-burying like motion” and the disappearance and death of people.

Secular and Postsecular Narratives

The mother-child allegory becomes the primary means through which the two most secular individuals in the novel—Gamini and Anil—are momentarily able to achieve some emotional sustenance. Gamini and Anil are committed to a politics of peace by engaging the violence through secular disciplines—medicine and forensic science. Yet, as McLure has pointed out, “They are dramatically self-destructive and angry

\(^{16}\) He is also commenting on his responsibility as an internationally renowned writer to represent the situation without unwittingly facilitating the violence. I will deal with this issue in a later section.
people. They remain prey to the ordinary secular modes of retreat from terrific stress: the intoxication of drugs and alcohol, and random passions. Their lives, as a result, are full of torment” (187). The only opportunity they get to escape their torment is when they partake in relationships that replicate the mother-child bond.

For Gamini, the mother-child bond is intensely physical—it is the image of “mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care” that must be a substitute for the naïve confidence in the abstract relationship between the secular state and the autonomous individual (Anil’s Ghost 120).

But Gamini is unable to replicate this “sexuality of care” for the casualties of the conflict. The one time he does care for a patient like “a mother” is when he operates on a boy with a congenital heart defect, a problem that is not a consequence of the conflict. Unlike Gamini, who separates his emotional needs from his professional life, Anil momentarily breaks this division. She becomes emotionally vulnerable when she realizes that the sense of peace that Ananda gives Sailor, through the reconstruction of his face, is not only for those who have died in the war, but a way to come to terms with the disappearance of his wife; Sirissa has been missing for three years. When Anil begins to cry, Ananda touches her “in a way she could recollect no one ever having touched her, except, perhaps, Lalitha [her maid servant when she was a child]. Or perhaps her mother, somewhere further back in her lost childhood” (187-188). This moment captures the two different ways through which the rock carving can be interpreted. On the one hand, Anil as mother “grieves” for those who have died; on the other hand, Ananda’s “affectionate” gesture gives the child, Anil, a sense of security.
In *Anil’s Ghost* only individuals who forge a personal relationship with the “divine” or “the mythic” are regarded as emotionally balanced. Even communities and bonds between people are untenable. The one successful community in the novel is that of Palipana and his niece, but they intentionally stay in the forest, outside the narrative of history that all the other characters struggle to resist. The only other community of Anil, Sarath, and Ananda is temporary, and falls apart when Anil, who does not completely trust Sarath, accidentally starts a chain of events that leads to his death.

McClure has convincingly argued that Sarath and Ananda turn to religion in order to reconcile themselves to the violence. Sarath, he argues, remains “a practicing Buddhist … seeking instruction from monks, making retreats, and paying homage to his teachers …” (187). But I want to emphasize that Sarath also sustains himself through ancient myths that evoke a sense of the spiritual, which is not the same as a historicized narrative where the individual sees himself/herself as a direct product of the historical events in the past. Palipana takes the mythical to the extreme as he can perceive ancient stories where there is no empirical evidence. But he and his niece also gain sustenance, not simply by living in isolation from the political conflict, but because they live in the Grove of the Ascetics—an ancient ruin that was once “the establishment of forest-dwelling fraternities—by monks who opposed rituals and luxuries” (86). Similarly, the rock carving that Sarath interprets as a woman mourning for her child, is only one of a number of ancient monuments that have “altered [his] perception of his world” (156). Palipana and Sarath are able to remain emotionally balanced because they turn to a mythic or
ancient past for emotional sustenance. Yet this larger narrative that they see themselves in relation to is not linear or fixed, but is constructed through their own personal investment.

Whereas Sarath draws on a mythic past, Ananda depends upon non-institutionalized Buddhism for sustenance. At the very end of the novel the Netra Mangala ceremony gives him the strength to come to terms with Sirissa’s disappearance. Performing the ceremony on the statue, he refuses to see himself as an artisan, but as an artificer: “[a]s an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, specters of retaliation” (304). It is the government that has commissioned work on the statue, and from one perspective, the ceremony consolidates Buddhism as the religion of the State. From another perspective, it is through artifice that Ananda reinterprets the message of the State—the “greatness of faith” is displaced by the individual’s personal relationship with the divine. By turning the statue into that of a God, Ananda momentarily takes on the gaze of the God, and seeing “into the heart” of things he is able to give Sirissa and himself a “sense of peace.” As a God Ananda can hear the heartbeats of birds in the far distance, “beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance” (307).

Ambivalence towards Human Rights

In the previous section I argued that Ondaatje uses the singularity of literature to undermine a historicist account of Sri Lanka, and in the process, turns to “partial faith” to conceptualize peace. He also avoids engaging historicism in his work because of his peculiar position as a postcolonial writer in the diaspora. Instead, he explores the ethnic
conflict in Sri Lanka within the context of the recent political upheavals in other parts of the world. He frames his engagement of this particular problem within the discourse of human rights. Though he remains skeptical of this discourse, he tacitly accepts some of its most basic assumptions that refuse to engage voices that cannot be incorporated into its narrative.

Coming to the defense of the postcolonial writer, the critic Chelva Kanaganayakam makes a direct co-relation between the anxiety of recent postcolonial writing and the tense political situation in many postcolonial states. Contemporary conflicts between states and the struggles within them make it difficult for the writer to determine which side has legitimate grievances, or even if such a claim is possible. In addition, writers in the diaspora, living away from their countries of origin, are no longer familiar with the political situation and are wary about representing it. They also have to be sensitive in portraying these places, while they are scrutinized by an international public. Thus, one senses in their work “the need for a new vocabulary, a new grammar of sorts to address the new political reality” (45).17

In an interview with Maya Jaggi, Ondaatje discusses his own anxieties in writing about the Sri Lankan conflict in Anil’s Ghost. While he realized that he could not prevent his book from being used for “literary tourism,” he intentionally refused to directly address the political situation. He neither wanted to be condescending towards his Canadian (and by extension, international) readers by instructing them about Sri Lanka,

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nor did he want them to expect him to provide an authoritative account about the conflict. He was also worried about the reaction in Sri Lanka, because making “assured judgments about what should be done … is often incendiary and facile” (253). In order to diffuse the attention paid to the political conflict, *Anil’s Ghost* was conceived as “[his] individual take on four or five characters, a personal tunneling” (251). He wanted to explore how individuals dealt with their fear of political reprisal. The novel, therefore, “isn’t just about Sri Lanka; it could be Guatemala or Bosnia or Ireland” (253).

Critics have, likewise, recognized that *Anil’s Ghost* is Ondaatje’s attempt to grapple with a political problem that exists in various parts of the globe. Most of these critics have framed this problem within the discourse of human rights. Antoinette Burton has commended the novel for foregrounding the historical specificity of Sri Lanka, but has also linked it to contemporary literature on human rights with regard to the Holocaust, the massacre in the Dominican Republic, and the Apartheid Regime in South Africa.\(^\text{18}\) Manav Ratti demonstrates that Ondaatje is critical of the Eurocentric bias in the discourse of human rights, while simultaneously recognizing the necessity of rights for all human beings.\(^\text{19}\) Teresa Derrickson argues that Ondaatje recognizes the need for human rights, but he does point to the arbitrary method through which the rights of human beings are enforced. Though Anil believes she is fighting for a just cause, she fails


to realize that she is simply part of a larger set of complicated negotiations between the Sri Lankan state, its Western allies, and the United Nations (149).²⁰

There is ample evidence in Anil’s Ghost that justifies a reading within the framework of human rights. The first scene of the novel introduces the issue—Anil is part of a team of forensic pathologists investigating political murders in Guatemala. Shortly after this, the United Nations sends her to Sri Lanka to carry out a similar investigation. The plot of the novel revolves around an investigation into the Sailor’s murder. The story goes into a detailed discussion about the possible causes of Sailor’s death, the attempt to discover his identity, and to hold his murderers accountable. Towards the end of the novel, Anil and Sarath realize that Sailor is the skeletal remains of Ruwan Kumara, a toddy tapper and a gem miner, who was executed by the state. This exploration of human rights is supplemented by a detailed discussion about forensic science: deriving a person’s age from his/her skeleton, the procedures for protecting bones from disintegrating, and how chemical reactions caused by insects on bones provide clues about where bodies might have been buried.

I am not convinced, however, that Ondaatje completely endorses the conceptual framework of human rights discourse; he remains ambivalent in representing it. In a review of Anil’s Ghost, Tom LeClair quotes an interview where Ondaatje states:

“Certain words, certain phrases are said so often that they come to have no reverberation. ‘Human rights,’ the phrase is indivisible, but the words mean nothing to me. When I hear the word ‘politics’ I roll my eyes, or if I hear a political speech I can’t listen to it. And so in a way I burrow underneath these words, and I try not to refer to them. The words are like old coins. They just don’t feel real”. (32)

The phrase “human rights” then becomes a convenient short hand that is deployed to make sense of complex situations. Even in his interview with Jaggi, Ondaatje makes connections between Guatemala, Bosnia, Ireland, and Sri Lanka that do not hinge on a narrative of human rights, but on the feeling of vulnerability during political upheavals. There are moments in Anil’s Ghost where Ondaatje goes beyond pointing to the politics involved in human rights, to criticizing its conceptual framework. While investigating Sailor’s identity, Anil is disheartened because she realizes that he is only one among thousands who have died in the political turmoil. Her commitment is renewed, however, when she recollects the words of her professor speaking about human rights work in Kurdistan: “One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims” (176). Given my previous discussion about the importance of artifice in the novel, I argue that it is not the villages or the victims who “speak” for each other, but the human rights activist (whether Anil or her professor), who speaks in the name of (represents) and makes connections between those who have died. Anil also fails to distinguish between a murdered human being and a “victim.” In these lines Ondaatje explores the problems with the conventional narrative of human rights: by turning murdered human beings into (passive) “victims,” a human rights discourse controls the
way these people are represented. But this representation is displaced because the
discourse simply sees itself as a conduit through which the dead speak.

The problematic implications of the term “victim” in the discourse of human
rights in the novel can be further explored by examining how people were turned into
“martyrs” during the Partition of India to endorse a sense of community solidarity. Both
terms—“victims” and “martyrs”—represent those who have died during political
upheavals and are deployed by social groups in order to promote their own political
agendas. As the criticism of martyrdom is more commonly discussed in literary studies, I
introduce it here as a means to prise open the problematic construction of the “victim” in
human rights discourse. In the riots that broke out between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs
during the Partition of India in 1947, tens of thousands of people were killed because of
their religious identity. In one of his short stories, the Urdu writer, Saadat Hasan Manto,
examines how Hindus and Muslims committed atrocities against each other in the name
of those who had been “martyred” during the riots. Manto interrogates this narrative of
martyrdom: were the dead really martyrs who willingly died for the sake of their religious
faith, as those who continue to fight in their name claim? Or could they have been
innocent victims, who might have refused to validate the slaughter? Similarly, Urvashi
Butalia, a feminist, writing forty years after Partition, has questioned a contemporary
Sikh narrative of the event. In this account, Sikh women willingly killed themselves or
asked Sikh men to kill them in order to escape being sexually assaulted by Muslim men.

These women are considered to be “martyrs” because they willingly died to protect the “honor” of the community. Butalia critiques this narrative because it is told by the survivors, who are predominantly men; the dead women’s voices cannot be recovered. She argues that while it is possible that many women willingly died to protect the (false sense of) honor of the community, many women might have wanted to live. They must have seen their brothers, fathers, and husbands as the perpetrators of violence. Furthermore, because our notions of violence are patriarchal, it is difficult to acknowledge that even if women committed suicide (for patriarchal honor) they were also violent beings. The narrative of martyred women, according to Butalia, denies the possibility of other kinds of violence.  

I do not wish to conflate Manto’s and Butalia’s perspectives on violence during Partition. However, they both critique religious communities for interpellating those who have died into a narrative—in this case, of martyrdom—to affirm the community’s sense of self and demonization of others. By extension, I argue that the discourse of human rights transforms those who have been murdered in political conflicts into “victims.” In doing so, it takes upon itself a mandate to pursue the perpetrators of violence in the name of these victims. It therefore suppresses or refuses to recognize that these victims might have very different “responses.” What if these victims would have preferred revenge instead of justice, conflict over reconciliation, and hatred over peace? I am not suggesting that revenge or violence should be valorized, or that it is “realistic” to expect people to

demand revenge. Nor am I claiming that the perpetrators of violence should not be held accountable for their crimes. But I do want to critique human rights for imposing a narrative upon the dead to legitimize its own cause. My criticism over the problematic representation of human rights is also extrapolated from Talal Asad’s work on the subject in his book length study on secularism entitled *Formations of the Secular: Christianity Islam and Modernity*. Asad argues that while people (especially in “non-Western” states) are hostile towards and resist those states or corporations that oppress them, they do not necessarily deploy the language of human rights to do so. Yet the discourse of human rights must make this claim in order to challenge those institutions that exploit and abuse people.

I have demonstrated above how Ondaatje consistently deploys artifice when he makes an intervention in secular history, Buddhism, and archeology; however, the artifice he uses to represent those involved or affected by the violence is problematic. While he uses artifice to represent the perpetrators of violence, he is ambivalent towards the way he represents those who have died or are missing. Thus, he intentionally describes the state, the insurgents, and the rebels as “ghosts.” They only exist as shadowy presences and evoke dread in the novel. Ananda realizes that if he doesn’t remain an artificer, he will become a demon: “The war around him was to do with demons, spectres of retaliation” (304). By describing the perpetrators as ghosts, Ondaatje refuses to give them a narrative or a voice. But this unsatisfactory representation is intentional. The artifice Ondaatje deploys here reveals that he refuses or is aware that he is unable to engage the political actors in the conflict.
However, Ondaatje deploys artifice in a contradictory manner when he represents the “ghosts” or individuals who have died or are missing. Thus, the resolution to Sirissa’s disappearance is arbitrary. There is a brief description of Sirissa on the morning when she disappears. While walking to work she sees the heads of school children on stakes, and instead of running away, the scene ends with her “running forward, and then she sees more” (175). It is only at the end of the novel, when Ananda paints the eyes of the Buddha, that he is able to construct a narrative of her “death” that gives him a sense of peace. Though Ananda needs closure, the reader realizes that it is an arbitrary act. The novel refuses to represent her and only emphasizes the struggles of the “living” to make sense of those who are missing.

Ondaatje’s representation of the way in which the skeleton, Sailor, becomes Ruwan Kumara is more problematic because it tacitly accepts the discourse of human rights that turns bodies into victims. Throughout the novel Ondaatje highlights the artifice involved in constructing Sailor—the cleaning and the painting of the skeleton, the removal of the skull, and the name Anil gives it. Even when Ananda constructs Sailor’s face to give him a sense of peace, we realize that it is still an act of artifice—a way for the living to make sense of the violence. However, the moment Anil and Sarath discover Sailor’s identity, the moment he is given a name—Ruwan Kumara—the act of artifice in constructing his story is replaced by an unmediated narrative, one that reduces him to a victim. We are informed that Ruwan Kumara was taken away after an individual in the community accused him of being a rebel sympathizer. The description of the

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23 I owe much to Steven Nassar for pointing me in this direction.
event—only a paragraph long—is also effective because it depends upon spectacle. The individual who accused Ruwan Kumara is described as a “billa,” a fictional character, “a monster, a ghost, to scare children in games” (269). However, in the context of political violence, the billa, with his head masked by a gunnysack, with two slits cut out for his eyes, becomes a horrific figure. This brief narrative reduces the dead body to a victim and deploys the spectacle of violence, and in doing so, denies the possibility of artifice which otherwise permeates the novel.

While I do not deny the necessity of justice, I raise “perverse” questions about choices that the novel refuses to interrogate. What if Ruwan Kumara was a sympathizer, was involved in the conflict, and did wish to oppose the State? How far did his sympathies against the State go? Could Ruwan Kumara also have been a perpetrator of violence? Could he have also been a “specter?” Even if we assume that he was a victim, would he want justice or revenge? If his “ghost” could speak, would it want to put an end to the violence or perpetuate it? By suppressing the artifice in his construction of the narrative, Ondaatje assents to a discourse of human rights that derives its legitimacy by reducing the dead to victims.

Conclusion

Writing at the end of the twentieth century, against the backdrop of the political conflict in Sri Lanka, both Muller and Ondaatje seem forced to engage (secular) historicism in their fiction. Yet they engage this problematic in very divergent ways. This is partially because they examine two very different moments in Sri Lankan history, but also because of their own predisposition towards or against historicism. There are
contradictions in Muller’s trilogy. While he acknowledges that Sri Lanka is a Sinhalese country, at other moments he is critical of Sinhala nationalism for discriminating against the minorities, especially the Burgher community. These contradictions, however, give us a clue as to why he turns to the carnivalesque to represent the Burghers. Historicism would force Muller to write a tragedy of the community, but in a fictional account he can break the rules and deploy carnival to undermine a historicist tragedy. Ondaatje, by contrast, refuses to represent the political conflict within a historical framework. Rather, he focuses on the singularity and unverifiability of literature to think of a way out of the political and intellectual impasse. He replaces historicism with mythical narratives that become allegories for the present and he emphasizes the need for partial faiths for emotional and moral sustenance.

Though both these writers resist secular historiography, they diverge in their ability to explore non-secular, alternative subjectivities. Through carnival, Muller explores disturbing and radical subjectivities. Despite the racism and the misogyny in the Burgher trilogy, Muller is able, through the earthiness of his humor—an emphasis on body parts and self-mockery—to prise open children’s sexuality and their sexual relationships with adults. The carnivalesque allows him to blur consent and coercion, opening up possibilities that are radical, just as they are extremely problematic. By contrast, although Ondaatje uses artifice to challenge historicism or to demonstrate the contingency of the alternatives—mythic history and partial faith—he is unable to apply artifice with the same rigor to the discourse of human rights. The narrative of human rights reduces the dead to “victims” in order to represent them. But victimhood depends
upon denying that the dead might not want justice or reconciliation, but further violence. These possibilities cannot be represented within the discourse of human rights for they lie beyond the conceptual framework of Anil’s Ghost.
CHAPTER TWO
ENVISIONING THE HUMAN IN SAADAT HASAN MANTO’S AND ISMAT CHUGHTAI’S FICTION

Secular nationalism, associated with Nehru, dominated the political and social landscape in India for the first two decades after independence. It propagated the idea of “unity in diversity,” celebrating the numerous religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities within India, and recognized that these groups practiced a plethora of traditions that constituted “Indian” culture. However, the confidence in secular nationalism was undermined when civil liberties were suspended during the Emergency of 1975-1976, and the model fell apart in the 1980s with the resurgence of militant Hindu nationalism; the influence wielded by regional political parties and the weakening of the Congress; the rise of nationalist movements in Kashmir, Punjab, and Assam; and the development of popular lower caste movements which included Bahujan and Dalit communities. The increasing influence of these diverse political and cultural actors has not only forced scholars to examine the reasons for the failure of secular nationalism, but also to scrutinize the concept of secularism itself and whether alternative models of citizenship need to be explored to comprehend these identities.

However, debates regarding the relevance of secularism and the turmoil surrounding political and cultural identities are not new in India. In the decades prior to independence and the consolidation of secular nationalism, not only did the Congress
spearhead the national movement against colonial rule, but ideologically diverse political
inganizations, such as the Muslim League, the Kisan Sabha, the Justice Party, and Dalits
under Ambedkar’s leadership challenged the Congress’s claim to represent and define
India. In addition, cultural and literary organizations like the Indian People’s Theatre
Association (IPTA) and the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) argued for a
necessary correlation between political emancipation and internal reform, suggesting that
independence from colonial rule would be meaningless if people were not also free from
repressive indigenous social norms.

This chapter examines the work of two Urdu-Muslim writers—Saadat Hassan
Manto and Ismat Chughtai—who were associated with the PWA. Though Manto wrote
between the 1930s and the 1950s and Chughtai from the 1930s through the 1960s, I
examine their writing just prior to India’s independence when secular nationalism was in
the process of being formulated, and the creation of Pakistan was imminent. Though
Manto and Chughtai were Muslims, they remained skeptical of the relationship between
religious and political identity; Chughtai chose to live in India even while a large section
of her family immigrated to Pakistan, and Manto reluctantly joined his family in Pakistan
after he felt personally threatened while working in the Bombay film industry. Both
writers conceived of a secular India in their writing, but one that remained very distinct
from and critical of Nehruvian secular nationalism. In mapping the possible contours of a
secular India, they highlighted tensions within and between religion, gender, and
sexuality that secular nationalism tended to side step by the celebration of unity in
diversity.
The PWA Debate between Marxism and Humanism

Manto’s and Chughtai’s aesthetics, the social and cultural values they explored, and their conception of the Indian nation and national identity were informed not only by the political context in which they were writing, but also by the literary and social movements of the period. The PWA was the foremost literary movement of the period, and both these writers were influenced by and responded to it. The Association consisted of a diverse group of novelists, short story writers, and poets who believed in humanism and aspired to create a world where the individual would be liberated from oppressive social, political, and economic structures. The desire to create an organization that would promote these ideals was originally conceived by a group of Indian students in England in 1933. Having experienced the inequalities of colonial rule in India and witnessing the rise of fascism in Europe, they found in Marxism, which was popular in British academia during the 1930s, a conceptual framework that critiqued and provided a solution to both these oppressive structures. They also used a Marxist rationale to challenge exploitative social and cultural practices, like caste, patriarchy, and religious conservatism within India. Belonging to affluent families, these students realized that the only effective way that they could help bring about social change was through writing about these problems. They drafted a manifesto in 1934 that called for the creation of an organization that would promote a people’s literature, which was then circulated in India and also published in England. The version published in the *Left Review* in February 1936, stated:

It is the object of our association to rescue literature and other arts from the priestly, academic and decadent classes in whose hands they have degenerated so
long; to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people; and to make them the vital organ which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future.

…..We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence today—the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjugation, so that it may help us to understand these problems and through such understanding help us to act. (“The AIPWA: The Early Phases” 10-11)¹

Though these Indian students had a high regard for the “best” of India’s literary and cultural heritage, they felt that the recent literary genres (in Urdu and in other Indian languages), though refined and sophisticated, dealt with esoteric issues expressed in an artificial language that the average person could not appreciate. A new literature was required to address the basic conditions of the people in a language that was accessible to everyone.² In the extract that I have quoted from the manifesto, realism became the means through which a critique of oppressive social and cultural structures was possible.

The manifesto created a stir on the Indian literary scene, and the PWA did transform the direction of Indian writing. At the same time, the PWA was also the latest, and perhaps the most influential, expression of a literary trend that began in the late


nineteenth century which used realism to engage social issues. The Bengali writer and Nobel Prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore had already critiqued colonial rule, nationalism, and indigenous cultural practices in his fiction. And Premchand, who used ordinary Urdu in his short stories to critique the caste hierarchy, the position of women, and religious intolerance, was a model for Progressive writers. The organization, however, was directly inspired by a collection of short stories in Urdu called Angaare (Embers) that was published in 1932. Written by Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar, Rashid Jahan (the only woman in the group), and Sajjad Zaheer, these stories were controversial because they criticized patriarchy, religiosity, and the hypocritical attitude towards sexuality of the North Indian Islamic establishment. The colonial government banned the book under popular pressure and Sajjad Zaheer, who wrote the most provocative stories in the collection, went to England to put some distance between him and the controversy.³ It was Sajjad Zaheer who played an instrumental role in drafting the PWA manifesto in England, in organizing the first PWA conference in Lucknow in 1936, and being the chronicler of the early phase of the organization. Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar, and Rashid Jahan also joined the organization in 1936.

The inaugural conference of the PWA in 1936 was a great success. Tagore promoted the conference and Premchand was invited to be its first president. In his presidential address, Premchand affirmed the importance of realism and a social critique

in order to challenge oppression. Writers from different parts of the country, writing in different languages, including Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, Telegu, and Urdu participated in the conference, and during the conference the PWA decided to organize chapters for each linguistic group. In addition, the PWA had close links with the Communist Party of India (CPI). Marxism has been one of the major inspirations for the movement, and many of the writers, including Sajjad Zaheer, were official members of the CPI.

However, the relationship between the Marxists and those not affiliated to the CPI was tense. The Marxists demanded that progressive writing should prioritize the lives of the workers and the peasants, while the non-Marxists found this approach prescriptive. Though they were inspired by Marxism’s commitment to the working classes, they believed in a generic humanism that advocated the political, social, and economic emancipation of all people. Ahmad Ali, who left the PWA in 1939, stated that “[p]rogress to us has not meant identification with the worker and the peasant alone nor the acceptance of a particular ideology or set of political beliefs. Accepting one set of dogmas and sticking to it is the very negation of progress” (Ali 45). The Marathi writer Prabhakar Machwe, who also resigned from the PWA, argued that he “[did] not care whether [he was] labeled a progressive or socialist or realist, but [he did] want man’s betterment” (Machwe 66). Manto and Chughtai also criticized the PWA for expecting them to write according to the demands of the Party. Manto left the organization after the leadership accused him of being preoccupied with sex in his stories. Though Chughtai

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was deeply influenced by Rashid Jahan and maintained a commitment to the PWA, she refused to be dictated to. In “Progressives and I,” an essay on her relationship with the PWA, she notes that she refused to write about peasants and workers because she was unfamiliar with their lives: “I cannot know and empathize with the peasant class as closely as I can feel the pain of the middle and lower-middle class. And I have never written on hearsay, never according to any set of rules, and never have I followed the orders of any party or Anjuman” (131).

If the differences between the Marxists and non-Marxists caused a breach in the Association, Independence and the Partition of the country were responsible for the movement’s decline. The tension between Hindus and Muslims and the subsequent riots turned some of the writers into partisans of their respective religious communities. The Association was further undermined by the division of the country and the official recognition and positions given to some writers in the newly independent states. In India, Progressives, who had worked in the film industry as scriptwriters and lyricists before Partition, became more active in the industry now that colonial rule was over and they could pursue their individual interests. Despite the gradual demise of the movement by the 1950s, the PWA did influence the Indian and Pakistani literary scene and made people conscious of social inequality. When Ismat Chughtai was invited to Pakistan for a

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function held to honor her as a writer, she acknowledged that the PWA had come to an end, but that the spirit lived on and informed the literature, films, and poetry of those Progressives who were still alive. The Progressive Movement, according to Chughtai, could not be reduced to a literary movement, but began “when the first man in the history of mankind, groaned under the oppression experienced through injustice, the usurpation of his rights, exploitation, inequality and tyranny. As long as there is the possibility of progress on this planet, progressivism will live” (“Progressives and I” 129).

Contemporary Approaches to Manto and Chughtai: Radical Humanism and Secular Criticism

At the contemporary moment, critics across a variety of disciplines have been trying to conceive of political and cultural practices to fill the vacuum that has been created with the demise of secular nationalism after the riots that followed the destruction of the Babri Masjid. While political theorists, historians, and social activists have begun to theorize new models of citizenship to promote mutual respect between religious communities and recognize the formation of new social and political constituencies, literary critics have returned to examine how cultural and literary movements like the PWA, and writers influenced by them, like Manto and Chughtai, critiqued secular nationalism and provided alternative models of citizenship. Priyamvada Gopal and Aamir Mufti, the two most significant literary scholars in the Anglo-American Academy to have examined the relationship between secular nationalism and the PWA, draw a correlation

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between the Islamic background of many of these writers and their critique of secular nationalism. Gopal uses “radical humanism” that she derives from Fanon to analyze the work of Chughtai and Manto, while Mufti develops the concept of “secular criticism” that he borrows from Said to examine Manto’s literature. As both critical lenses approach secular nationalism from different ideological positions, Gopal and Mufti emphasize very different aspects of Manto and Chughtai’s work; I therefore delineate their arguments in order to examine their differences and to show how I position my critique in relation to them.

Gopal’s exploration of Muslim writers and the PWA in *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence*, is grounded in the conception of the nation as a contested space where different social movements and organizations struggle to define its shape. Exploring the historical moment when colonialism is replaced by the rule of sovereign nation state, she sees similarities between the injunction that Fanon upholds for the radical intellectual and how members of the PWA examined their own subjectivity. According to Fanon, the national bourgeoisie had betrayed the nation because they had completely assimilated colonial thought, which made them into intermediaries between capitalism and the postcolonial state. However, if the nation was going to forge a new humanity, the task of the radical intellectual was to engage the people in a register that was not paternalistic or condescending. This dialectic engagement between intellectuals and people would “educate the masses politically … [and] … make the totality of the nation a reality to each citizen” (9). Intellectuals on the Left in India, especially the writers of the PWA, were also aware of the difference
between their own subject position as middle-class intellectuals and the variegated life experiences of “the people.” Gopal suggests that Chughtai and Manto began to engage this issue in their work, and she describes their attempt as “radically humanist” for they were invested in “making human beings rather than taking human nature as an unchanging essence. … Even when this modernity becomes something of an imaginative blind spot for these writers, the idea of the human serves reflexively to open up possibilities beyond the temporal and historical limits of modernity” (9). Following Neil Lazarus, Gopal argues that the problem does not lie with humanism or universal values per se, “but a selective application of them, which sees some as truly human and others as less so” (9-10).

In contrast to radical humanism that explores nationalism by emphasizing the different subjectivities of the bourgeoisie and people, secular criticism begins by critiquing nationalism itself for promoting an inherently “filial” relationship. In “Secular Criticism” Edward Said argues that secular criticism is that form of critical inquiry that constantly examines and is willing to expose how communities of filiation, such as the family or the nation, are seen as “organic” or “natural” while in reality they suppress identities or cultural practices that might prove disruptive to the status quo. In “Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture” (“Auerbach in Istanbul”), Aamir Mufti elaborates on this idea, arguing that Said’s use of the word “secularism” is catachrestical; secular criticism is less interested in engaging religion and is primarily a “minority critique” of nationalism. The fundamental crisis in modernity is the problematic of a minority culture and community within the framework
of the post-Enlightenment secular state, and the earliest example of this phenomenon was the figure of the Jew who brought the modern European state into crisis. According to Mufti, Said develops the idea of secular criticism by engaging the work of Jewish intellectuals such as Auerbach and Adorno, who, though they lived in exile when fascism arose in Europe, were able to engage their social identities (as Europeans and Jews) without “strengthening those aspects of the culture that require mere affirmation and orthodox compliancy from its members” (104). Therefore, Mufti argues, “[t]hrough the figure of the Jewish exile, Said makes direct links between the experience of minority existence in modernity and the problematic of exile in social, political, and cultural terms” (104). He underscores his argument by pointing out that the minority position does not refer to empirical minorities, who demand independence because they aspire for a majority status, but is instead, “a critical consciousness constantly alert to the terms of experience of majority culture, a consciousness both assertive and on the defensive, both vocal and alert to its own quiet vulnerabilities” (108). Furthermore, the critic’s role is to make apparent the constant processes through which affiliative relationships gradually reproduce filiative structures, including the creation of new hierarchies. At the same time, Mufti is careful to point out that secular criticism is not against universalism per se, but is conscious of the fact that all claims to universalism are particular ones, and that “it means rescuing the marginalized perspective of the minority as one from which to rethink and remake universalist (ethical, political, cultural) claims, thus displacing its assignation as the site of the local” (112).
In the “Prologue” to *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture (Enlightenment)* (2007), Mufti develops this argument by drawing parallels between the position of the Jew in Europe and the Muslim in India. He argues that Indian nationalism was able to consolidate its secular project by the division of the country into India and Pakistan, thereby reducing Muslim “difference” to the position of a minority. However, at critical historical moments, such as the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the tension between Hindus and Muslims is not circumscribed to India but has repercussions in Pakistan and Bangladesh, which suggests that the confinement of the Muslims to a minority within India has failed. Mufti therefore argues that just as Jewish European intellectuals had to engage their European and Jewish heritage while maintaining a distance from both, Muslim writers, including Manto, make apparent the structures of affiliation implicit in Indian nationalism and call into question the normative values of an essential Muslim culture (1-3).

Despite his nuanced exploration of secular criticism, Mufti betrays a tendency of over extending its application. In *The Politics of Cultural Practice*, Rustom Bharucha suggests that the construction of a minority critique derived from the position of the Jewish intellectual in exile is “too precise a lens for the epic canvas of the millions of homeless and displaced who are, for theoretical purposes, categorized as ‘minority.’” Rather, secular criticism must be viewed only as one kind of approach among a variety of “differentiated minority experiences and histories” (15).

This leads me to raise another problem with secular criticism: there is a danger that it may simply reify the position of that minority community from which a minority
critique originates. Thus, despite its claims to separate a minority critique from a minority community, it fails to do so. This tendency is present in Mufti’s work; it exists in “Auerbach in Istanbul” but is most apparent in his “Prologue” to Enlightenment. He begins the Prologue by rehearsing a point that he has developed in his previous essays, which is that the Indian secular state has failed to reduce the figure of the Muslim to that of a minority, but then he suggests that “Indian,” as a cultural formation, is brought into crisis by the question of Muslim identity (7). This fetishization of the Indian-Muslim conundrum marginalizes the perspectives of other religious and ethnic minorities. Though the figure of the Muslim does problematize Indian secularism, the problems with Indian secularism cannot be reduced to the Indian-Muslim conflict. However, this slippage on Mufti’s part raises a second problem with the Indian-Muslim dilemma. The binary is only successful if its two terms remain stable, and I suggest that it is not as stable as Mufti claims; rather Indian nationalism is far more fluid, for even while on the one hand, it does legitimize the identity of the upper-caste Hindu male subject, on the other hand, at various moments it can and does incorporate differences, including the Muslim minority. Chughtai’s and Manto’s fiction demonstrate the fluidity of Indian nationalism and its ability to incorporate the Muslim difference.

Secular criticism can also be critiqued by comparing the way Mufti and Gopal engage the historical framework in their arguments for secular critical and radical humanistic approaches, respectively. Mufti approaches Muslim intellectuals and writers writing at the cusp of Independence and Partition, keeping in mind the current crisis of the Muslim minority in India. It is with this framework in mind that Mufti, in his essay
entitled “A Greater Story Teller than God,” reads Manto’s “entire oeuvre as a series of literary attempts to dislodge, from within, the terms of nationalist resolution of the question of selfhood and belonging” (3). While Manto’s work can indeed be read as a critique of Indian nationalism, to read his “entire oeuvre” as a critique of nationalism prioritizes contemporary concerns over the range of issues that the author is interested in. Mufti is aware of the different social and cultural issues that Manto explores, but he summarily dismisses them because they undermine his argument which depends on demonstrating that Manto’s primary objective is a critique of Indian nationalism. By contrast, Gopal approaches Manto and Chughtai by prioritizing the historical backdrop (World War II and the struggle against colonialism) and the social movements of that period (the national movement, the PWA, and the IPTA); she therefore implicitly suggests that the relationship between the Muslim minority and Indian nationalism is only one issue that these writers are invested in. Thus, even while Gopal is also critical of Nehruvian secular nationalism, she argues that Manto, who was horrified at the kind of violence that men were capable of carrying out during Partition, explored the possibility of reconstructing masculinity, and by extension a national culture (Gopal 105).

Taking radical humanism as my starting point, my chapter demonstrates that Manto and Chughtai assume that if a national culture is to be moral, it must recognize the importance of the individual human being. Their conception of the human is secular by default because they accept the public-private binary that is fundamental to secularism: the assumption that people engage the public sphere as individuals, and religious and social identities are options that they can choose to pursue in the private sphere. Two of
Manto’s short stories—“Mummy” and “The Price of Freedom”—argue that physicality, specifically the sexual impulse, is integral to being human, and that this must be the basis for a (moral) national culture. In *The Crooked Line*, Chughtai’s semi-autobiographical novel, the protagonist struggles to balance her public identity as a Hindustani (as opposed to Indian)\(^8\) with her private desire to be an independent woman, free from communal constraints. Yet despite Manto’s and Chughtai’s attempts to go beyond the dominant social identities in their constructions of the human, these identities still intrude in their literature. I am therefore interested in exploring this tension between their need to recognize the human as the foundation for a national culture and the religious, ethnic, and gendered norms that recur in their writing.

A Note on Translation and Transliteration

I have used English translations of all three texts—*The Crooked Line*, “Mummy,” and “The Price of Freedom”—that are originally written in Urdu. However, Khalid Hassan, whose translations of Manto’s texts I am using, has been criticized for not accurately translating “The Price of Freedom.” As I cannot read Urdu, I therefore use the Hindi transliteration of the story in order examine details that the translation has either ignored or failed to successfully represent.

\(^8\) Typically, “Hindustan” is understood to be the Urdu equivalent for “India.” However, as the translator, Tahira Naqvi, has retained “Hindustan,” and not chosen to replace it with “India,” in her translation of *The Crooked Line*, she seems to be implying that Chughtai might be harkening back to an older conception of the sub-continent which undermines the distinction between Hindus and Muslims. The word “India” does not capture this connotation. I discuss this in more detail later in the chapter.
The transliteration of Urdu literature into Hindi is controversial in contemporary India, but the problem originated during colonial India when the two languages, that share a common history, gradually came to represent two different religious communities. Though Hindi and Urdu derive from Hindustani, and are phonetically the same language, they use different scripts. Hindi uses the Devanagari script derived from Sanskrit, while Urdu uses an Arabic script. Until the late nineteenth century Urdu was the mother tongue of most North Indian Muslims and many Hindus. However, with the rise of the Indian national movement, Hindi came to be identified with the Hindu majority and Urdu with the Muslims. Immediately after Partition and Independence, the Indian state officially recognized Hindi, but discriminated against Urdu. Though the government has provided funds to promote Urdu since the 1960s, these attempts have been half-hearted at best and fluctuate with changes in the political situation.

A debate about the status of Urdu in India took place in the Economic and Political Weekly and in The Annual of Urdu Studies as recently as the mid-to-late 1990s. Most of the critics agreed that the Indian state’s bias towards Hindi was responsible for the declining rate of literacy in Urdu, but they also criticized the Muslim intelligentsia for not promoting the language and the literature when it had the opportunity to do so. However, they disagreed over the value of transliterating Urdu literature into Hindi. Some scholars are justifiably suspicious that this is an attempt to do away with their linguistic and cultural heritage, while others, like C. M. Naim and Ralph Russell,

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recognize that transliteration will facilitate the development of Urdu. They argue that the larger Hindi-literate audience is keen to read Urdu literature, and that this interest in an “Islamic” language and culture would undermine the cause of the Hindu Right that has attempted to Sanskritize Hindi and deny that Hindus and Muslims have a common linguistic and cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{10} David Mathews straddles both positions. He agrees that the Devanagari script can help popularize Urdu literature, but that the complexity of the ideas is lost in the transliteration. For instance, while Hindi speakers might find Ghalib’s verses “sweet,” they are completely unaware of the rich tradition that Ghalib is in conversation with.\textsuperscript{11}

Recent theoretical developments in translation studies and Postcolonial Studies have questioned the distinction between the (superior) original and the (inferior) translation that Mathews takes for granted. In their introduction to \textit{Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice}, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi demonstrate that from a postructuralist perspective, the idea of the original is a myth because any text is always a translation of previous texts, and language itself is a translation of the non-verbal world and a continuous translation between signs and between phrases (3). In addition, postcolonial theorizations of translation, influenced by Bhabha’s theory of


hybridity, have emphasized the creative potential in the liminal space produced through the difference between the original and the translation (5-6).

Despite recognizing that the translated text produces new alternatives, Bassnett and Trivedi are also aware of the politics involved between languages. They argue that English translations of Indian writing have achieved a hegemonic status even though more texts are being translated between different Indian languages. This status is reinforced by a postcolonial agenda set in the Western academy where translation is no longer a literal transgression of the boundaries between languages (as discussed above), but an act through which a privileged few are able to spatially transgress the division between the first world and the third world. Developed by writers like Rushdie and critics like Bhabha, this form of translation ignores the kind of cultural exchanges and interactions between languages and peoples that take place within the ex-colonies (11-13).

Ironically, a return to reading the text in the original language and a recognition of the particular context within which the text was written can de-emphasize the fascination with a “translated” subjective experience. Though I cannot read Urdu, a transliteration of the text in Hindi is still valuable. A person reading a transliterated text might be unaware of the nuances in the original, but can still recognize the political and social implications of the words used, something that might not be possible in the translation. A transliteration becomes even more important when the translation is drastically different from the original. Leslie Flemming, who has written extensively on Manto and Urdu literature, is satisfied with the quality of Tahira Naqvi’s translation of The Crooked Line,
even though it does not capture the brilliance of Chughtai’s prose. However, Khalid Hasan, the most prominent translator of Manto’s stories, has been criticized for his work. M. Asaduddin has censured Hasan for changing the titles of stories and summarizing dialogues and paragraphs without a valid reason (132). He also critiques Hasan for either leaving out or including information to make the stories more accessible to an English speaking audience unfamiliar with South Asian Islamic traditions (138). In the case of “The Price of Freedom,” Asaduddin notes that Hassan has deleted eleven thousand words from the original (132).

Hasan’s translation of “The Price of Freedom” minimizes Manto’s sexualization of the female body and summarizes the religious rituals. I suspect he does this because he wants to present the narrative persona, who is typically equated with Manto, in a positive light and to make the text more readable for an English speaking audience. A close reading of the translation reveals the narrator’s gaze on the female body, but in the transliteration this objectification is explicit. Furthermore, in the transliteration, the narrator is attracted to a Kashmiri girl sworn to remain celibate, and so he decides to seduce the female maid in his house. We never know whether he carries out his plan because at the next moment his attention is riveted on something else. The translation does not mention this “scheme” of his. This blatancy of the sexuality and the moral ambiguity of the narrator in the original are transformed into a more “objective” and likeable narrator in the translation. I will explore this issue in more detail when I analyze the story.
Mufti’s Secular Critique of “The Black Shalwar”

I begin my analysis of Manto’s work by foregrounding how Mufti applies secular criticism to his stories, specifically “The Black Shalwar,” to argue that Manto’s entire oeuvre is a critique of Indian nationalism. I then deploy Gopal’s concept of “radical humanism” to two of Manto’s short stories—“Mummy” and “The Price of Freedom”—to argue that he is not dismissive of Indian nationalism per se but suggests that a national identity can only be validly conceived if it recognizes the physicality, specifically sexuality, of the human being. Yet, even while I trace Manto’s attempt to think through a national identity based on the idea of the “human” in these short stories, religious identities infiltrate his broader agenda. My analysis, therefore, straddles this tension in Manto’s fiction to explore the possibilities and the limits of being human.

In “A Greater Story-writer than God: Genre, Gender and Minority in Late Colonial India,” Aamir R. Mufti argues that Manto’s stories need to be read as an inherent critique of Indian nationalism. Mufti examines Manto’s pre-Partition stories that deal with the figure of the prostitute, and interprets these to be a series of literary attempts that disrupt the (Indian) nationalist resolution towards collective selfhood and belonging. He inserts Manto’s critique within an argument that he makes elsewhere, which is that the dominant secular consciousness of Indian nationalism establishes the Hindu male subject as the norm. This identity can only be consolidated when it reduces the figure of the Muslim to that of a minority culture and history, therefore sidestepping cultural difference which lies at the heart of the national community.
Though Mufti touches upon the prostitute figure in a number of stories, such as “Mummy,” “The Insult,” and “Babu Gopi Nath,” he suggests that it is in “The Black Shalwar” that Manto most clearly develops his critique of nationalism. Through a close reading of the text, Mufti convincingly argues that the brothel and the prostitute are a reconfiguration of the culture of the courtesan, which represents a Muslim milieu within national consciousness. Whereas the nation-as-Mother was deployed to interpellate the male secular subject into the national imaginary as an organic relationship through the metaphorical association of the family, the courtesan-turned-prostitute represents a Muslim ethos, symbolizing a collective whose allegiances with men are tributary (in terms of a monetary exchange) and voluntary (non-organic/filial). Mufti’s reading of “The Black Shalwar” is meta-allegorical in as much as the prostitute/customer binary of the brothel, allows the reader to reexamine the mother/male subject binary of the nation, revealing how woman-as-mother is exploited. Furthermore, unlike the nation that suppresses women’s subjectivity through the representation of woman as “mother,” the prostitute and brothel come to represent an alternative affective structure, one that incorporates aspects of motherhood and home, but does not propose a singular ethic (like the middle class family). Rather, this space makes apparent its vulnerability to exploitation, betrayal, and the loss of love. It must be pointed out that Mufti does not see Muslims as inherently more ethical than Hindus, but rather within the context of Indian nationalism, where Muslims are reduced to a minority culture, Urdu literature and Manto’s short stories in particular, reveal the different forms of suppression implicit in this binary.
Secular Criticism and “Mummy”

“Mummy” begins with the narrator-author and his wife on a vacation in Pune. He accidentally meets Chadda, a friend and colleague in the film industry, who introduces him to Stella Jackson, a middle-aged Anglo-Indian lady, whose friends call her “Mummy.” Though Manto is initially repulsed by her garish make up and withered face, he realizes that Mummy is a genuine person who isn’t inhibited by social conventions. On the one hand, Mummy has parties where Chadda and his bohemian roommates at Saeeda Cottage, who also work in the film industry, socialize with young Anglo-Indian women, and together they drink, dance, and behave promiscuously. On the other hand, she is a mother figure to these young people, and the story reaches its climax when she prevents Chadda, her favorite “son,” from taking sexual advantage of Phyllis, a naïve fifteen-year old girl. She also nurses Venkutrey’s wife after her miscarriage, looks after Thelma who is infected with a venereal disease, and almost single-handedly is responsible for Chadda’s recovery from a near-fatal illness. Whereas Manto admires Mummy, his wife mistrusts Mummy’s desire to help her “children.” The story concludes with two episodes: an inmate at Saeeda Cottage kills another after the latter continuously sexually abuses him, and Mummy is forced to leave Pune when the police try to coerce her to participate in their schemes.

A secular critical approach would begin by pointing out how the gender roles that authenticate nationalism are undermined in the story; Mummy is both, pimp and mother figure. If Mummy’s house is a space where promiscuous behavior and sexuality is acceptable, it is also a space that is nurturing and protective. In addition, this particular
space surrounding Mummy is not absolutely ethical but is one that makes apparent with embarrassing clarity the sexual, racial, and economic politics that help foment these relationships. The men try to speak English in order to impress the Anglo-Indian women at the party (209), revealing how sexuality is interwoven with racial and national politics.

In *The Nation and its Fragments* Partha Chatterjee has argued that as a cultural discourse, nationalism conceded that the West was superior in the material sphere but that India had a cultural heritage that was older and more sophisticated. Thus, as long as Indians acknowledged the superiority of their culture, it was acceptable to emulate and even desire Western material norms, especially because these were encoded with power. In this division between Indian and Western, or the spiritual and the material, the desexualized Indian woman came to epitomize Indian culture, while the Western or Westernized woman came to represent a culture that was morally vacuous, and therefore she could be sexualized. Within this discourse, Anglo-Indian women, who belong to a community that collaborated and appropriated many of the cultural values of the British, spoke English, and wore “western” clothes, were also sexualized.12 This is most apparent in the rivalry between the men over Phyllis, who is desirable because of her blonde hair.

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12 The model that I use to theorize the sexualization of the westernized woman has been derived from Partha Chatterjee’s discussion of the relationship between women and the national movement. However, Alison Blunt, without directly referring to Partha Chatterjee, discusses the sexualization of Anglo-Indian women outside the domestic sphere because of their Western cultural referents in terms of behavior and dress. While Blunt discusses this in relation to the 1960s, I suggest that the same phenomenon existed in the 1930s and 1940s, as is apparent in “Mummy.” See Alison Blunt, *Domicile and Diaspora: Anglo-Indian Women and the Spatial Politics of Home* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005) 156-157., and Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
that signifies the quintessential white woman. Neither are the Anglo-Indian women
innocent; they befriend the Indian men partially for financial reasons. Dolly tries to
convince Gharib Nawaz to lend her some money, and Ranjit Kumar promises to buy
Polly a couple of dresses. At the same time, the sense of camaraderie at the party suggests
that Mummy’s home has become a space where people can give up social pretensions.
Chadda entertains the women with his vulgar limericks; Venkutery instructs Thelma by
teaching her classical dance (at the party!) even though they both realize that it is futile;
and other characters are drinking and conversing with each other (209-210).

In opposition to this bohemian environment, Manto’s wife (referred to as “Mrs.
Manto”), though she makes brief appearances in the story, comes to represent the
respectability and morality of the Indian middle-class. She is “extremely formal” (196)
and feels that Chadda is “always transgressing the limits of … correct behavior” (200).
This is apparent at the very beginning of the story when she takes offense at Chadda’s
attempt to shake her hand (196), when he jokes that Manto and he are pigs (200) or that
Manto could never be a mullah (196). While she disapproves of Manto’s friends, she is
extremely critical of Mummy. She reasons that Mummy only prevented Chadda from
taking advantage of Phyllis because “Phyllis was related to Mummy or the old lady
wanted to save her for some better client” (212). Later, when the narrator informs her that
Mummy has nursed Chadda to health, Manto’s wife “icily” suggests that “[s]uch women
are generally good at these things” (214). In both instances, she finds it hard to reconcile
the two opposite poles of national discourse: the desexualized (Indian) mother figure and
the (Western) promiscuous woman. In the first instance, instead of censuring Chadda and
admiring Mummy, she is forced to use a convoluted argument to critique Mummy. In the second instance, she fails to provide a reason for Mummy’s action, and simply depends upon her hostility to turn what almost seems like a defense of Mummy’s actions—“such women are generally good at these things”—into a critique. Mummy is a threat because she demonstrates an alternative morality, one in which “motherly” love and sexuality can exist in the same space, and so challenges nationalism’s attempt to separate the two.

Continuing to deploy secular criticism in analyzing “Mummy,” one could argue that the story reveals the hypocrisy within the domestic sphere, that bastion that supposedly demonstrates the superiority of Indian culture to that of the West. During the vacation Manto’s wife prefers staying with Manto’s friend, Harish, and his wife; she finds the conventional domestic arrangement more comfortable than the all-male space of Saeeda Cottage. Considering that Harish and his wife are the only other married couple mentioned in the story, they come to embody and uphold, by default, the conventions and morality of a middle-class culture, one that is far removed from the non-traditional social interaction between Indian men and Anglo-Indian women. However, the sanctity of this space is undermined because Harish, an actor, has extra-marital affairs with women in the film industry (206). The story demonstrates that the relationships pursued in Mummy’s house are more honest about sexual desire and exploitation, while the domestic arrangement that claims to uphold Indian morality is hypocritical and turns out to be restrictive for middle-class women.
Indian Nationalism and its Multiple Others

So far my analysis of “Mummy” has followed Mufti’s general argument, which is that Manto’s story is a critique of Indian nationalism and offers an alternative community, one not dependent on bonds of kinship, but of affiliation that is more ethical because it makes apparent the sexual and economic fault-lines in the relationships between the two sexes. By contrast, nationalism idealizes women’s position within the domestic sphere and refuses to acknowledge that they are economically and sexually exploited. However, the cultural politics in “Mummy” demonstrates that the westernized woman represents a minority perspective, while the Muslim is interpellated into the Indian national imagination. Mummy and the young women are marked as Anglo-Indian, while Manto’s wife and Harish’s wife are Indian because they are not described in terms of their ethnicity or religion. Yet, Manto’s wife is Muslim, and embodies national culture in the story. After all, it is the Muslim-as-Indian woman whose Indian (Islamic) sensibilities are offended when Chadda jokes that Manto and he are pigs (200), or when he warns her that she will not be able to make a mullah (read “respectable middle-class individual”) out of Manto (196).

Yet other instances in the story demonstrate that the Indian/Western binary cannot be the sole means through which Indian nationalism is constructed. The culture of the film industry in the story reveals how the Indian is constituted through the marginalization of religious, but also, ethnic and linguistic difference. The film industry, like Mummy’s home, is a space that threatens national culture as women and men interact intimately outside the confines of marriage, and so women’s sexuality cannot be
controlled. As mentioned above, Harish has a girlfriend in the industry, and later in the story is romantically involved with a married actress. However, I am not concerned with the relationship between gender and nationalism in the Bombay film industry, but the way in which the story presents the industry as undermining ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences in the process of constructing an Indian identity that is primarily North Indian and Hindu. The Muslim community is only one kind of minority that is marginalized in this process.

Though the film industry in India developed simultaneously in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bombay film studios emerged as the industry leader by the 1940s. In “Secularism and Popular Indian Cinema,” Shyam Benegal argues that this change occurred when sound was introduced. While silent films allowed regional cinemas to compete for audiences across the country, audio led to the dominance of the Bombay film industry which used Hindustani (Hindi-Urdu), the lingua franca of northern India. The Bombay film industry now came to portray an “Indian” experience, one that presented the upper-caste Hindu as the norm while also excising all markers of caste so that the films could have a mass appeal. In the aftermath of the communal violence during Partition and the formation of the secular state in India, the upper-caste Hindu continued to be the norm, but religious minorities, especially Muslims,

There is an interesting paradox in the Indian film industry. On the one hand, Indian popular cinema, in representing women, reinforced the upper-caste Hindu woman as the norm. The “heroine” in popular films was desexualized and usually circumscribed within the space of the home. However, as the industry itself employed women as actresses, singers, and dancers, the economic and cultural practices within the industry contradicted its own representation. Thus, it undermined normative gender relations.
were portrayed with sensitivity, albeit one that we now recognize as problematic because it stereotyped the minority. A separate genre called “the Muslim social” emerged that explored problems exclusive to the Muslim, as opposed to Indian (and so Hindu) community. It “presented a flattened image of the Muslim community as cultivated and essentially feudal, extolling virtues once again of self-sacrifice, loyalty, friendship, and family honor” (230). At the same time, film industries in other parts of the country also saw themselves as distinct from Indian cinema. Thus Satyajit Ray, whose films came to be seen as representing Indian cinema by Western film viewers, disavowed this status, claiming that he made “Bengali” films. Similarly, in Kerala, where the cultural interaction between Hindus, Muslim, and Christians differed from the (Hindu) majority-(Muslim) minority relationship in North India, cinema was not divided into Indian and Muslim socials (225-238). The point that I derive from Benegal’s essay is that in the construction of the Indian identity, not only is religious difference undermined but regional and linguistic differences, as well.

Like Benegal’s essay, Manto’s exploration of the Bombay film industry in “Mummy” reveals that Muslims are only one among a number of constituents who are marginalized in the construction of an Indian identity. The events in “Mummy” occur between 1939 and 1945, \(^\text{14}\) at same time when Bengal argues that the Bombay film studios were on the verge of dominating the industry and establishing a “pan-Indian” identity. While the story centers on the community that surrounds Mummy, it also depicts

\(^\text{14}\) Manto mentions that the price of basic commodities has become exorbitant due to the war (he is obviously referring to World War II).
the culture of the film industry as Manto discusses his work as a script writer, and the lives of his friends and acquaintances, especially the all-male company at Saeeda Cottage, who are established film stars, aspiring actors, and music and dance directors. In describing these male characters, Manto touches upon the religious, ethnic, and regional diversity in the studios. Saeed, one of Chadda's roommates at Saeeda Cottage, is a Muslim but uses a generic Hindu name—Ranjeet Singh—as he aspires to be a film star (201). However, to prioritize the fact that Muslim difference cannot be incorporated into an Indian identity ignores how other kinds of identities—linguistic, cultural, and regional—are also marginalized. In his biographical sketches on famous stars of the Bombay film world entitled *Stars from Another Sky: the Bombay Film World of the 1940s*, Manto mentions Ashok Kumar, a Bengali, who gave up his real name—Kumudlal Kunjilal Ganguly—in order to be acceptable to an Indian audience. In the story, Chadda and Shyam’s girlfriend are Punjabi; Venkutery, the dance instructor, is Marathi; Gharib Nawaz, the actor, belongs to an aristocratic (Muslim) family from Hyderabad; and Sen, the music director, is Bengali. All these characters participate in the creation of a pan-Indian identity that excludes their linguistic, cultural, class, and regional identities that would mark them as different. Therefore, Saeeda Cottage, and by extension the film industry, is a family that is not based on filial relationships, and in their personal lives these characters do not accept the conventional gender relationships. Yet, paradoxically, they and the industry produce films that advocate a filial relationship between the upper-caste Hindu male and being Indian.
My analysis of “Mummy” has explored two important issues. First, by focusing on the Muslim-as-Indian woman and the marginalization of diverse identities in the construction of the Indian subject, I have attempted to demonstrate that Mufti’s emphasis on the Indian/Muslim binary in Manto’s writing is fundamentally flawed. Rather, my analysis demonstrates that in different contexts the constituents of Indian nationalism keep changing. Thus, in relation to Mummy, Manto’s wife—a Muslim—comes to embody the respectability of the Indian middle-class woman, but in the context of the film world, an upper-caste Hindu identity becomes the norm and religious, and ethnic differences are marginalized. Second, if the figure of Mummy collapses the mother figure and the pimp, and can advocate sexuality and love, not only is Manto criticizing the culture of Indian nationalism (which is not exclusively Hindu), but implicitly suggesting an alternative way of being “human.” Mufti doesn’t allow for this possibility because his analysis of “The Black Shalwar” prioritizes the Indian/Muslim binary, and so he interprets the story as introducing a pre-colonial Islamic identity, albeit one that has also undergone a revision because of modernity. Yet, “Mummy” deals with the Anglo-Indian woman, and so cannot work within this structure. However, in both stories Manto seems to be exploring the possibility of a moral existence based on the relationship between sexuality and love.

Radical Humanism and “The Price of Freedom”

If “Mummy” gestures towards an alternative construction of the “human,” one
which can incorporate (motherly) love and sexuality, “The Price of Freedom” (“PF”)\textsuperscript{15}
develops this idea further by arguing that the foundation of humanism must begin by
acknowledging and respecting our physical, especially sexual, desires and impulses. In
the story, Manto explores how the national movement is influenced by a culture which
elevates the spiritual or the religious over the physical, and in the process undermines the
dignity of the human being. Yet, despite Manto’s dismissal of religion in the story, I
examine how religious practices and identities fail to be completely excised in Manto’s
construction of the human. My analysis of the text therefore explores this tension
between a humanism that is based on physical desires and a religious identity that gains
security through rituals and religious practices.

The story is divided into two halves; it begins with the older narrator-author,
Manto, reminiscing about his youth, when he and his friend, Ghulam Ali, participated in
the national movement a few years after the massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh in 1919. The
second half of the story takes place between the late 1930s and early 1940s when Manto
meets Ghulam Ali in Bombay. The story revolves around Ghulam Ali, whom is briefly
the leader of the Congress party in Amritsar, and Nigar, a fellow volunteer, who he falls
in love with. Realizing that he will soon go to jail, Ghulam Ali asks Babaji, a spiritual
figure who is deeply respected by the nationalists and the larger population, to marry
them. Listening to Babaji’s sermon that a strong nation can only be created when people

\textsuperscript{15} I have used Khalid Hasan’s translation entitled “The Price of Freedom” for the bulk of
the analysis. However, occasionally I have referred to the Hindi transliteration of the
original because Hasan has either summarized or ignored sections of the text that are
important to my argument. When using the Hindi transcription I refer to the story as “For
Freedom’s Sake” (“FS”).
prioritize their spiritual development over their physical desires, Ghulam Ali publicly vows that he and Nigar will not have children until India has achieved freedom. When Ghulam Ali is imprisoned, Nigar temporarily joins Babaji’s ashram. Many years pass before Manto accidently meets Ghulam Ali in Bombay who owns a shoe shop and has prospered. However, Manto is surprised that Ghulam Ali does not sell shoes made of rubber and that he has two children. In the remainder of the story Ghulam Ali explains the connection between his refusal to sell rubber goods and breaking his vow.

The story explores how the national movement is ensnared by the aura of religion, represented by Babaji, which dehumanizes people, instead of liberating them. Babaji, the holy man in Amritsar, is a fictional representation of Gandhi. His smooth skin, serene confidence (“PF” 63), and his “lawyer’s” voice (“PF” 64) hints that Manto has Gandhi in mind. This is confirmed when we discover that Babaji is revered by Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and untouchables; that his young female volunteers sing Hindu devotional songs (“PF” 62); and that politicians visit him for guidance and people receive darshan (being blessed by being in the presence of a person who is considered semi-divine) in his presence (“PF” 62). In addition, just as the colonial authorities were unable to counter Gandhi’s use of non-violent techniques to further the national movement (Metcalf and Metcalf 179-180), Babaji is something of an enigma to the British authorities who realize that he is responsible for the political unrest in Amritsar but are unable to prove that he was involved (“PF” 62). That Manto is describing Gandhi becomes obvious when Babaji claims that it is only through the disciplining of the body and mind that the individual can serve the country. Blessing Ghulam Ali and Nigar’s wedding, Babaji states that their
marriage would help them strengthen their resolve for “swaraj” or “self-rule.” Unlike Europe where marriages prioritize the physical relationship, in India, claims Babaji, “those people who throw out lust and desire out of their marriage are worthy of respect” (“FS” 65). Babaji then draws parallels between marriage and eating, arguing that people who consider both as ends in themselves misunderstand the purpose of these activities, which are simply a means for individuals to develop their spiritual and moral selves, and to further the development of their country (“FS” 66).

Though the term “swaraj” was first espoused by Bal Gangadhar Tilak during an earlier phase of the national movement to demand that Indians were capable of ruling their own country, in Gandhi’s repertoire “swaraj” also came to be associated with individual self-discipline. In a speech to college students entitled “The Satyagraha Ashram,” Gandhi draws a correlation between individual and political self-rule, arguing that emancipation from colonialism would be futile if individual Indians were not also emancipated from their own desire for material wealth or from physical passions. It was therefore necessary that individuals be guided by “religious” principles before they began participating in the political life of the state. For Gandhi every individual has within himself a religious sensibility which can be enhanced by following the rules laid down by religious scriptures. Apart from discussing a number of rules including the practices of ahimsa, honesty, and the patronage of the village economy as opposed to a national economy, he also states that people should control their physical desires because these distract them from spiritual development. He therefore suggests that people should eat only in order to live and not for the sake of taking pleasure in food. Also, people should
marry for the purpose of friendship and not prioritize sexual relations. Both sources—
food and marriage—if used correctly can help the individual develop his religious
sensibility (140). For Gandhi, therefore, religion provides an ethical framework for
political movements that are otherwise in danger of being corrupted or misguided, and it
is only through disciplining the body, the mind, and the social relations between
individuals that the national movement can develop integrity.

While Babaji, the Gandhi-like figure, promotes and expects adherence to rigorous
religious-ethical standards, the participants in the national movement in “The Price of
Freedom” are undisciplined and fail to think carefully through the implications of their
actions. Looking back at his youthful past, Manto uses irony to describe the euphoria of
people who were inspired to boycott British goods, convinced that independence was at
hand. As a boy, Manto felt the urge to create a secret terrorist organization to facilitate
India’s independence, while he failed to realize that it was the government, for which his
father worked, that provided for his family (“PF” 58). Similarly, the youth who lead the
Congress party, since the leadership is in jail, seem unaware of the contradiction in
choosing a series of dictators, in imitation of Germany and Italy, to head the national
movement against colonial rule (“PF” 60). This blind optimism on both fronts—on the
part of the general public and the national movement, proper—was supplemented by a
spirit of romance and youth. Though Manto had learnt about the martyrs who sacrificed
their lives at Jallianwalla Bagh, he recollects sitting at the garden and fantasizing that one
of the girls living in the opposite houses would fall in love with him (“PF” 58). Likewise,
inspired by Ghulam Ali’s speech, Manto was not aware of politics but of the “youth and
the promise of revolution” and wished to become a human bomb for the sake of independence. He goes on to describe Ghulam Ali as having the audacity of a young man who would propose love to a random woman on the street (“PF” 66-67).

Despite this chaos, no political movement took place in Amritsar without Babaji’s consent (“PF” 62), and therefore, Manto is implying that Babaji was aware of the contradiction between the discipline he advocated and the confused motives that propelled the movement forward. This criticism levied against Gandhi—the tension between his principles and the more practical and mundane requirements of the movement—is not atypical. The protagonist in *Waiting for the Mahatma* by R. K. Narayan joins the national movement because he falls in love with a female volunteer. Though she informs him that Gandhi demands that people speak the truth, they both realize that romance is not a valid reason for his becoming a nationalist. Similarly, if he is to follow Gandhi’s edict to obey his elders, he would have to listen to his grandmother, who is critical of the movement and supports the colonial government. He finally leaves his grandmother and joins the national cause for the sake of love, and Narayan implies that while the national movement enjoys a moral veneer, it willingly compromises on principles for pragmatic reasons. The novel therefore gently critiques Gandhi who, in the text, is aware of these contradictions but who conveniently ignores the dilemmas that they raise for his own convenience. Manto makes a similar argument in “For Freedom’s Sake”: there is a discrepancy between Babaji’s rhetoric that allows him to maintain an aura of spirituality and the realpolitik of the movement.
However, even while Manto is critical of youth and romance being unable to comprehend the kind of commitment required for the sake of independence, these same qualities allow him to critique the relationship between religion and nationalism. The tension between the two—religion and youth—is apparent when Ghulam Ali, who vows not to have children until India is liberated, seeks Babaji’s help to keep his resolve (“FS” 68). Similarly, when Manto visits Babaji with Ghulam Ali and Nigar, he is overwhelmed by Kamal, a young and beautiful Kashmir Pandit woman who is singing a patriotic song in Babaji’s presence (“PF” 63-64). In retrospect, he wonders why Kamal, “who was young and fresh, made up entirely … of honey, milk and saffron” was living in an ashram (“PF” 65). By contrast, Manto finds ashram dwellers to “have pale faces and sunken eyes, [and] they somehow remind [him] of cows’ udders” (“PF” 65). Realizing that Kamal’s sexuality and beauty will wither away with the unhealthy rigors of ashram life, Manto is able to interrogate the correlation between physical discipline and the national movement: “What had ashrams got to do with India’s freedom?” (“PF” 65). This idea is further developed when he immediately realizes that Nigar will also join Babaji’s ashram when Ghulam Ali goes to prison. He comments that despite the religious piety the inhabitants of religious institutions—Hindu ashrams, Muslim madrassas, saints’ shrines, and orphanages—display outwardly, “their faces never showed any trace of that inner light prayer is supposed to bring about” (“PF” 65). By contrast, Nigar was “not a Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or Christian, but a woman …. Why should she who was herself pure as a prayer, raise her hands to heaven?” (“PF” 65). The simile not only refutes Gandhi’s distinction between an ethical life and physical desire, but in metaphorically advocating
the “worship” of the physical, Manto suggests that the recognition and acceptance of physical desire can be the foundation for a moral life.

It is important to note that if Manto is critical of religious norms that discipline the human body, he is equally critical of religious norms that discipline the body politic. Both ideas are further developed in the second half of the story when Ghulam Ali informs the narrator why he has children and why he refuses to sell shoes made of rubber. Looking back at his life in Amritsar, he points out that:

man may be good or evil, but he should remain the way God made him. You can be virtuous without having your head shaved, without donning saffron robes or covering yourself with ash. Those who advocate such things forget that these external manifestations of virtue, if that be indeed what they are, will only get lost on those who follow them. Only ritual will survive. What led to the ritual will be overlooked. (“PF” 71)

By separating moral principles from rituals, Ghulam Ali is suggesting that rituals or rites can only be acceptable if they are judged by the touchstone of reason. But the foundation for an ethics for Manto must begin with the physicality of the human being: “man … should remain the way God made him.” Ghulam Ali elaborates on this idea in the next paragraph, suggesting that having taken the oath not to have children, he suffered because he “violated human nature” and that “the most vital part of [his] being was paralysed” (“PF” 71). Therefore, Manto, in contrast to Gandhi, argues for the need to accept the physical, especially the sexuality of the human being, as the founding block of an ethical existence.
Religion’s Resistance to Humanism

Before I elaborate on the relationship between political movements and a humanism based on physical desire, I need to explore how religion, despite Manto’s critique of it, undermines the humanism that he promotes. To summarize the argument so far: in the story, Babaji and the national movement argue that political emancipation from colonial rule is unacceptable if people themselves are not religious or moral human beings, and therefore they need to practice rituals that will control their physical instincts. For Manto, Babaji and the national movement fail to realize that rituals are the outward manifestation of ethical principles, and so can be discarded as long as the principles that inform them are upheld. Yet, in commenting on religion, both Manto and Gandhi (in “The Satyagraha Ashram”) seem to perceive religion in abstract terms, stripped from its social and cultural contexts.

However, despite the national movement’s promotion and Manto’s critique of “religion” in abstract terms, both parties are aware of the importance of rituals and rites that define people as Hindus or Muslims. Thus, in describing Nigar, Manto informs the readers that she was the first Muslim woman in Amritsar who did not wear a veil to join the Congress (“FM” 22). While she normally wore white saris, during the wedding ceremony she wears a sari with the colors of the Indian flag. Though a maulvi and Babaji bless their wedding, at the advice of a female volunteer Ghulam Ali puts a sindoor (a red mark on a Hindu woman’s forehead signifying that she is married) on Nigar’s forehead, much to the delight of the audience that consists of fellow volunteers (“FM” 64). Through the cultural markers and rituals associated with a middle-class Hindu culture
that informs the national movement, Nigar is transformed from a “Muslim” woman to “Indian” woman. This example also demonstrates that despite Babaji’s promotion of religious rituals that simply discipline the body so that people can become better human beings, rituals also become the means through which bonds are fomented between a select group of people, and therefore reinforce specific kinds of identities while marginalizing others.

Ghulam Ali’s argument that rituals are the external manifestation of ethical principles is also undermined because he turns to them in a moment of crisis. In the second part of the story, Ghulam Ali and Nigar circumvent their oath to Babaji by using contraceptives or “rubbers;” thus they disobey the “spirit” of the oath even while they literally follow it. However, this proves to be unsatisfactory; Nigar wants to have children, and Ghulam Ali, disgusted with the “unnatural” sensation of rubber, begins to experience his body as “blubbery,” his hands as “clammy,” and he even felt his food turning into rubber (“PF” 72-73). Then, when he comes across a passage in a religious text that states “[i]f a man and woman are joined in wedlock, it is obligatory for them to procreate,” he gladly “peeled off [his] curse and [has] never looked back” (“PF” 73). Even though he doesn’t mention details, Ghulam Ali uses a verse from an Islamic text to nullify his oath to Babaji. This incident demonstrates that despite his rational critique and abstraction of contemporary religion as being the repository of hollow rituals, at a moment of crisis he turns to Islamic conventions—cultural practices that inform his sensibilities—to solve his problem.
The Artificial Texture of Indian Nationalism

It is significant that Ghulam Ali uses the literal act of removing a used contraceptive—“peeled off [his] curse”—to describe his disavowal of the oath that he made to Babaji. By explicitly equating Gandhian principles to a used contraceptive, Manto implicitly suggests that Gandhian principles are equally “rubbery,” or synthetic and unnatural. Extending the comparison, one could argue that just as a literal contraceptive has inhibited him physically, Gandhian principles have inhibited him psychologically. Therefore, Manto is suggesting that in order to be a whole person one has to give up the physical and psychological restrictions that are imposed upon the individual.

If Gandhian principles have inhibited the individual’s well being, they are equally responsible for undermining the national movement. Even while Ghulam Ali is relieved to give up his oath, he makes it clear to the narrator that he is willing to die for the cause of India’s freedom. However, he is disillusioned with the national movement and comes to realize that the political situation and leadership of the movement are not mature (“PF” 71). Manto has developed this critique throughout the story; he uses irony at the beginning and criticizes Babaji in the middle of the text. However, by comparing Gandhian principles to a used contraceptive, Manto, through Ghulam Ali, is suggesting that it is only through artificial values—Gandhian principles—that the national movement is propped up, and that this in turn does not sustain it but creates confusion about its goals and objectives. And just as one must discard Gandhian principles to embrace one’s physical well-being, on which an ethical life can be founded, so must the
national movement discard Gandhian principles, in order to realize its goal of political emancipation from colonial rule.

By recognizing the importance of physical, especially sexual, desires for the human being, Manto reverses the spiritual/material or the Indian/Western binary that is fundamental to Gandhian thought, the national movement, and to the culture of Indian nationalism. For Manto it is the spiritual and the religious that are artificial, and the material and the sexual that are fundamental to being human. Valuing the material over the spiritual, sexuality over celibacy, and the natural over the artificial, Manto conceives of a genuine national movement in hetero-normative and phallic terms: a national movement that begins with a recognition of the human, can sustain itself and be committed to birthing the independent nation, but the Indian national movement sheathed by Gandhian principles (read celibate, spiritual, artificial) will be confused between the impulse for physical and political emancipation, and the artificial constraints of religious practices.

Secular Subjects and Secular Objects

Manto’s humanism, I have argued, demonstrates the importance of the physicality, especially sexuality, of the human being. But it is the articulation, the narration, and the exploration of these ideas voiced through the stories, that are equally important. The “ideal” conception of humanism implicit in Manto’s work is a dialectal relationship between the physical and the cognitive. I use the word “ideal” because both components of the human—the physical and the cognitive—are divided on the basis of gender. In both stories women are predominantly the objects or the means through which
men are able to articulate their critique of Indian nationalism. Critics, of course, have highlighted Manto’s representation of women as sexual objects; I have extended their argument by examining it within the framework of the human (physical and cognitive).

In “The Price of Freedom” Manto emphasizes the physical description of Nigar and Kamal; Kamal is “young and fresh, made up entirely … of honey, milk, and saffron” (“PF” 65), while Nigar, though not “beautiful … was very feminine. She had acquired that hard-to-describe quality so characteristic of Hindu girls—a mixture of humility, self-assurance and the urge to worship” (“PF” 61). I criticize Manto, not because he sexualizes women, but because these women lack the kind of subjectivity that the men are given. Thus, while Manto and Ghulam Ali narrate and theorize their perspective on sexuality, religion, nationalism, and human beings, the female characters barely speak.

There is one instance in “For Freedom’s Sake” when Manto does give Nigar some subjectivity. After Babaji blesses Ghulam Ali and Nigar’s wedding, Ghulam Ali whispers something (we don’t know what) in Nigar’s ear, and then asks her in public whether she would mother “slave children.” Though Nigar publicly agrees that she won’t have children until India gains independence, Manto notes that just before she consented, there was a look of consternation on her face (68). Are we to assume that Nigar is taken aback at being asked to publicly assent to a vow, especially as she has no time to think it over?

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Or could she not have heard him correctly, or not agreed (since Manto does not suggest that she assents to what Ghulam Ali has whispered), but is forced to accept this decision because he makes it public? Except for this one instance, it is the male characters—Ghulam Ali and Manto—who are explored through their action, conversation, and commentary.

Unlike in “For Freedom’s Sake,” Manto the narrator remains an objective observer in “Mummy.” At Mummy’s parties, he simply describes the interaction between the characters and doesn’t take part in their activities. For instance, whereas the men treat Phyllis as a desirable object to be conquered, Manto, when he finally sees her, is struck by her immaturity. Thus, the sensual atmosphere created in the first part of “For Freedom’s Sake” with the description of Kamal and Nigar, is absent in “Mummy,” even though the story is dominated by a sense of carnival. Here too, the male characters have histories and personalities, while most of the women remain objects. Apart from Chadda, through descriptions of and conversation between the minor male characters—Gharib Nawaz, Venkutery, Ranjit Kumar, and the servant at Saaeda Cottage—we get an idea of their ethnic, religious, and family background, as well as their individual traits and peculiarities. By contrast, the young Anglo-Indian women are not equally developed. They have generic names that rhyme—Polly, Dolly, Kitty, Elma, and Thelma—which suggests that Manto is not invested in their stories. It could justly be argued that Manto is an outsider to this particular community, and is able to provide intimate portraits of the men because they are his colleagues and friends, and it is only while interacting with them that he occasionally meets the women. However, it is odd that Mummy, after whom
the story is titled, and who is pivotal to the plot, is viewed primarily through Chadda’s and through Manto’s comments. For instance, at the end of the story, Chadda tearfully informs Manto that Mummy is forced to leave Pune to avoid being exploited by the police; yet he is hopeful that she will illuminate the lives of other young men wherever she goes (220). Considering that Manto has met Mummy and admires her, it is strange that we never get to know what Mummy thinks of being forced to move. Throughout the story, she is only the mother figure that nurtures, and at times admonishes her children. Thus, even while Manto’s exploration of female sexuality challenges a national narrative that relegates women to the domestic sphere, women still remain the objects of a narrative that is produced by men.

Ismat Chughtai’s *The Crooked Line* and the Modern Female Subject

While Ismat Chughtai is best known for her short stories that explore the lives of middle and lower-middle class Muslim women within the home, her novel *The Crooked Line* is important because it is semi-autobiographical. Like Chughtai, the novel’s protagonist, Shamman, belongs to a middle-class Muslim family, receives an education, refuses a marriage that her parents had arranged, completes her Bachelor’s degree, works as a principal of a school, and joins the Progressive Movement. However, whereas Chughtai married the film maker Shahid Latif and worked in the Bombay film industry, Shamman has an unsuccessful marriage with an Irishman, and the novel concludes with her expecting their child. The novel is also significant because it is a record of the movement of middle-class women from the domestic to the public sphere between the 1920s and the 1940s, and the process through which these women were converted into
nascent citizens of a country that was about to achieve independence. It examines how
gender and sexuality were crucial to the construction of the modern female subject during
this period of transition.

*The Crooked Line* is divided into three parts, roughly coinciding with the three
phases of Shamman’s life. The first phase explores how children are gradually socialized
into their respective cultural communities. Shamman is born and grows up in the
domestic environment of a middle-class Muslim family, though she is never at ease with
her prescribed gender role. In the second phase, she joins an all-girls school, and though
she initially dislikes the disciplined environment, she comes to prefer it to the “chaos” at
home. In addition, same-sex romances in the school are considered normative, and she
only gradually becomes aware that she is supposed to be attracted to men. In the third
phase of her life, Shamman becomes aware of the larger world and is introduced to the
public sphere after she joins the university. Receiving this exposure, she decides not to
get married and instead, pursues her education, becomes a principal of a school, and is
economically independent. Yet her personal life remains unsatisfactory; Ifthikar, a man
she loves, betrays her trust, and she unsuccessfully attempts to adopt a child. She then
meets and marries Ronnie Taylor, an Irishman, and though they are in love, their own
experiences as colonized and colonizer, respectively, affect how they perceive themselves
and each other. The novel ends with Ronnie deciding to join the army during World War
II; his certain death is the only way he can end their marriage. In the meanwhile,
Shamman discovers that she is pregnant and is filled with hope and trepidation for the
future.
In her chapter length study on the novel, Gopal explores the development of the female subject from the beginning of the novel, when Shamman is born, to the conclusion, when Shamman discovers that she is pregnant. Examining the construction of the modern Indian woman in its entirety, she fails to pay adequate attention to the third phase of Shamman’s life which highlights the dilemmas of this female subject. The modern Indian woman is, paradoxically, more independent than those women confined to the domestic sphere, but is also dissatisfied with this sense of “freedom,” and specifically, with secular citizenship. Two reviewers of Naqvi’s translation have completely opposing views about this particular section of the novel. Flemming argues that though the novel provides a detailed exploration of Shamman’s psycho-social development, it does not examine the thoughts and emotions of other characters or provide physical descriptions of locations. As a result, neither does the reader discover other perspectives, nor does s/he get a sense of place in the novel. It is only after the Second World War is introduced, that the narrative “mention[s] … events outside [Shamman’s] own tight circle” (“Out of the Zenana” 202). Ironically, M. Asaduddin critiques the novel for attempting to go beyond the personal to engage national and global events. He argues that the novel loses focus when it moves away from Shamman’s “personal odyssey” and her critical engagement with the Progressive activists, and begins to explore the “implications of the national movement for independence, the Bengal famine, and the Second World War” (Rev. of *The Crooked Line* 301).

These conflicting interpretations of this particular section reveal the tension within the development of the modern Indian woman who struggles to balance her
personal development with important contemporaneous national and global events. Though secular citizenship is important for the development of the modern individual woman, it can’t adequately resolve her personal anxieties or help her relate to larger communities of affiliation. It is only through a filial bond that Shamman is able to resolve this tension between her personal needs, her identity as a citizen of Hindustan, and her desire to be part of a common humanity.

Marriage and Secular Female Subject

Shamman’s exposure to the public sphere first makes her aware of the possibility of new experiences. Though she had moved outside the domestic sphere when she attended school, it is only when she joins the university that she “realized how big and expansive the world was” (103). This awareness of the world beyond the domestic horizon is established through the metaphor of a train journey: “she was soaring in a train and when suddenly the train came to a junction she had to get off and submerge herself in the hustle and bustle she saw around her” (104). The metaphor is not coincidental, for the train as representative of colonialism and modernity connects different places to one another within the colonial-modern Indian landscape, and so allows the nascent secular subject new kinds of experiences and opportunities that are otherwise not available to most women belonging to a middle-class Muslim household.

The new experiences that Shamman faces at university are both exciting and disconcerting. On the one hand, she is enthusiastic about attending lectures, listening to fiery political speeches, participating in literary discussions, and discovering that heterosexual romances are not only considered normative but are openly and avidly
discussed by the student population (104-105). On the other hand, Shamman is expected to behave and dress in the manner that befits a modern woman. At the annual college banquet Shamman is unnerved that she has to engage in polite conversation with male students that she does not know, and is made even more uncomfortable when she has to wear a sari, put on a kumkum dot, and walk in high heels (112-115). Gopal suggests that through this experience Shamman is introduced to the model of the “New Woman,” who has a pan-Indian status “that escapes regional, communal or linguistic specificities” but is still Hinduised (77). At the same time, Shamman is also exposed to the culture of “English-India,” and so is introduced to Romantic, Victorian, and modern Indian literatures. Tagore moves her, she begins to identify with Bronte’s and Hardy’s heroines—Jane and Tess—and passionately reads Shelly, Byron, and Keats who “shook her to the very depths of her soul” (*The Crooked Line* 121). Gopal astutely points out that the exposure to a pan-Indian experience and to the culture of English-India comes together in her romantic interest for Rai Sahib, the father of her Hindu friend (78). However, Rai Sahib’s rejection of her, his daughter’s hostility, and his sudden death shortly after, leads to her emotional and physical collapse, and she returns home to recover from typhoid.

If Shamman fails to be completely incorporated into Hindu-India, she also has difficulty adjusting to the middle-class Muslim household. When Ejaz, a distant cousin, hints that he is interested in marrying, Shamman momentarily mistakes it to be an offer that he is making her, one that she is willing to accept as she is vulnerable: she is recuperating from her emotional and physical breakdown after being rejected by Rai.
Sahib, there is a visible sense of anticipation and excitement in the house at her cousin, Noori’s impending marriage, and Ejaz has transformed from a poor, awkward boy to a good looking, confident, and wealthy young man. However, Ejaz and Shamman also represent the newly university-educated Muslim middle class whose sensibilities differ from those of their parents. Both imagine a domestic sphere, one that prioritizes the relationship between husband and wife, and is represented through the image of a secluded bungalow (136, 138-139) which is radically different from the extended Muslim family that consists of parents, unmarried siblings, married brothers and their families, as well as distant relatives living together in a dilapidated house. Furthermore, Ejaz views himself as “broad-minded,” certainly in juxtaposition to their (his and Shamman’s) “backward” extended family (139). Of course, when Shamman realizes that Ejaz has broached the subject of marriage so that he can woo Bilquis, Shamman’s friend, through proxy, she refuses to help him and feels humiliated that she was even romantically inclined towards him. Later, when the family expects Ejaz to marry Shamman out of a sense of duty to the family, she rejects his offer.

At the same time that Shamman explores the possibility of marrying within the Muslim middle class, two other women—Noori and Bilquis—are on the verge of marriage. Shamman is critical of Noori whose marriage has been arranged but who carries out a romantic charade. Noori coyly fantasizes about her future married life by demonstrating that she is knowledgeable about her husband’s personal habits, though she has learnt about these through his family and has barely met him (151-152). By contrast, Bilquis belongs to a more sophisticated class. Though initially she and Shamman had
been classmates, she had been sent to an English medium school so that she could be
more refined, and has suitors who have successful careers in government service.

However, she confesses to Shamman that though she goes through the motions of
romance she will ultimately marry for economic security and wealth, and not for love.

Bilquis and Shamman come to the conclusion that from the perspective of women,
marrag and prostitution are similar as both are economic investments and they only
differ from each other in the length of the contract (137).

If Shamman is critical of marriages that have the veneer of romance but are
actually economic transactions, she also becomes aware that there are no practical
alternatives for middle-class women. While attending Noori’s marriage Shamman
recollects a conversation with Ifthikar, the president of the Student Union, who espouses
“free love” that is the complete opposite of marriage based on economic necessity. “Free
love” proposes that people should not be inhibited by social and cultural norms, and that
only by submitting to their emotional and physical desires could they be free. Shamman
realizes that Ifthikar, being a man, fails to recognize the unequal social pressures on men
and women: women are more vulnerable to be ostracized and abused for their
“misconduct” than men, and in addition, women are burdened physically because of the
danger of becoming pregnant (156-158). Thus, marriage becomes a legitimate means
through which women are able to express their sexuality.

The novel then examines how modern educated women explore their sexuality as
they negotiate their individual desires and the norms and obligations of society.

Shamman’s engagement with modern sexual relations is complex. Marriage is both a
commercial transaction and a means through which women’s sexuality can be socially accepted. Furthermore, Shamman’s rejection by Rai Sahib and Ejaz, and her gradual criticism of marriage and free love impel her to think through a subjectivity, one that is modern but also outside the conventional expectations of modern middle class women. However, Shamman’s movement from the domestic to the public sphere where she becomes a secular subject is not predetermined or only a result of the rational decisions that she makes; rather her decision to remain single and economically independent is a result of her personal experiences, the examples that she witnesses, as well as the opportunities that she has that are not available to other women.

A Secular Interpretation of Hindustan

Having predominantly focused on Shamman’s interaction within the domestic sphere before she decides that she will remain single, I now focus on her involvement in the public sphere that helps facilitate this decision and allows her to conceptualize an alternate identity for herself—that of a Hindustani. Shamman’s life at the university can be divided into three phases; each phase is separated by a visit to her home where she becomes increasingly dissatisfied with the gender relations in the domestic sphere and returns to the university, every time more committed to participating in the public arena and fashioning her own identity. Thus, during her first visit home she is initially disappointed that Ejaz has slighted her, but she also realizes that marriage and prostitution are both economic transactions involving women. She returns to the university, joins the Students’ Union that espouses a progressive politics, and is influenced by Alma, a fellow-female student who is the Union’s secretary. When she had
initially joined the university she had passively accepted new ideas and perspectives; now she feels liberated because she actively participates in university activities and is aware that she is accountable only to herself (148). She visits home a second time to attend Noori’s wedding and is critical of Noori’s coquettish behavior but also comes to the realization that free love is not a practical alternative for women. Shamman returns to the university the third time, becomes an officer of the union, and realizes that Alma is more knowledgeable but not her intellectual superior. She is now wholly committed to a life outside the domestic sphere but even as she attempts to discover her “self” outside social and cultural structures, she becomes perplexed because she isn’t able to come to any satisfactory conclusion as to who she really is (166-167).

One of the ways in which Shamman is able to ground her “self” is by identifying with the nation—Hindustan. She then begins to chart an individual subjectivity that could be described as “secular” because she consciously rejects the three identities that have been explored thus far in the novel—those of the modern middle-class Muslim woman, the pan-Indian woman, and the sexually liberated woman—and chooses a national identity, instead. By deciding that she belongs to Hindustan, and being Hindustani, Shamman mediates her individuality with colonial India and the World; yet, gender, religion, and an “Indian” (as differentiated from a Hindustani) identity still influence her and affect her perception of Hindustan.

Alma first introduces the word “Hindustan” in the text; in her speech as secretary of the Students’ Union she argues that “the only cure for Hindustan’s eternal enslavement and instability was absolute destruction” (143). While the debate within the Union is
whether Hindustan is a sick woman who needs “medicine” to be cured, or whether she needs to be destroyed and rebuilt, this particular narrative of the enslavement of Hindustan, and by extension, her people, informs Shamman’s perception of the country and becomes the key means through which she constructs her own identity in relation to the larger world. Within the subcontinent, the word “Hindustan” has a much longer history than the word “India” and does not simply mean “the land of the Hindus.” Rather, the word “Hindustan” is derived from Arabic, and refers to that geographical area east of the river Indus. In all probability, Hindustan is a derivation of the word “Indus.” By extension, the word “Hindustani” simply refers to the people who populated this region, which consisted of a number of communities and castes, each with its own history, culture, and traditions. It was only during colonial rule that the British assumed that the communities living in Hindustan were one people who followed one religion (later described as Hinduism), which happened to follow the religious texts and culture of the Brahmins.\(^{17}\) When the words “Hindustan” and “Hindustani” are used in the novel, they evoke the older meaning that recognizes the diversity within India as opposed to conceiving it exclusively in terms of a Hindu nation.

However, Alma and Shamman’s narrative of Hindustan, as a country that has known “eternal enslavement,” is influenced by colonial historiography. At the same time, Chughtai, through Shamman, revises this narrative and so provides an alternative perspective to the colonial, communal, and national (associated with Nehru and the

Congress) historiographies. All three historiographies of India have assumed a tripartite narrative for Indian history, dividing it into Ancient-Hindu India, Medieval-Muslim India, and Modern-Colonial India. In *Communalism in Modern India* Bipan Chandra has argued that this historical framework had been used by the colonialists to legitimize colonial rule in numerous ways. The British argued that colonial rule was not a fundamental disjunction in Indian history because India had always been ruled by outsiders, and the British were simply the most recent foreign rulers; colonial rule was benevolent because it prevented Hindus and Muslims from fighting with one another; and the colonizers posited that colonial rule protected the Hindus who had been at the mercy of the Muslim rulers during the Medieval period. Hindu and Muslim communalists accepted these clear divisions of Indian history (ignoring the complex relationships between Hindus and Muslims during Medieval India) but began to interpret history with their own agenda in mind. Hindu communalists evoked a glorious Ancient-Hindu past that was civilized in contrast to the “Dark Ages” of Islamic rule, and therefore clamored for a renewal of a Hindu-India. Alternatively, Muslim communalists imposed a narrative of a glorious “Muslim” period that subjugated an inferior Hindu population for “a thousand years” only to be supplanted by the British, and therefore demanded that the British colonialists, keeping this history in mind, cede power to the Muslims. Bipan Chandra suggests that secular nationalists, who were predominantly Hindu, unintentionally accepted the idea that Hindus were oppressed by Muslim rule, even while they tried to balance the interests of Hindus and Muslims in modern India (209-236).
In 1944, when *The Crooked Line* was published, India was in turmoil. On the international front the Indian government had joined the Allies against the Axis powers in World War II. Within the country the population had become increasingly restive; realizing that independence was at hand, people increasingly agitated against colonial rule but were also extremely anxious about the shape of the future country, wondering whether India would be divided into separate states drawn on ethnic, religious, regional, and caste lines. In this regard, the predominant concern was whether Pakistan would be created to protect the interests of the Muslim community. Hindu and Muslim communal sentiments that originated in the nineteenth century increased during the twentieth, and according to Bipan Chandra, were popularized through written literature, theatre, stories, oral tales, and speeches (210-215). It is within this context that the narrative of Hindustan that Chughtai explores in the novel becomes significant. Like Alma, Shamman looks upon the history of Hindustan as one of continuous invasions and the suffering of its people. Contemplating the significance of the World War II for Hindustan, Shamman realizes that Germany’s conquest of India would only be the most recent in a series of invasions that began with the entrance and domination of Aryans over the Dravidians, followed by Alexander, and continued by the Persians, Afghans, Tartars, Mughuls, and the British (207). Though this narrative has its roots in colonial historiography, it does not legitimize colonial rule, and by simply listing the invasions it refuses to accept communal histories that sympathize with one religious community over the other.

At other moments in the text, even though Chughtai presents a history of Hindustan that is centered around Islam and Islamic culture, she does not accept the
rationale of Muslim communal historiography. For instance, she considers it impossible for India to replicate Germany’s attempt to create a racially pure nation. Imagining her (Muslim) family as representing the people of Hindustan, she realizes that it has its “share of Aryans, the Iranis, … the Afghans, Mongols and Arabs, and what about this fresh English blood which had come home filled in red canisters along with other military wares? Hindustani soil imbibes every seed” (264). She refuses to view the antecedents of her Muslim family as only originating from “Islamic” nations to the west of India, and rather sees it as the product of a continuous intermingling of races and ethnic groups that constitute Hindustan. Similarly, even examining the Islamic influence on Hindustan, she prioritizes the suffering of the people over a glorious Islamic past. Experiencing a personal crisis while being a principal of a school, Shamman goes on a train journey without deciding where precisely she wishes to go. However, her journey takes her to Agra, Lahore, and Delhi, places in North India that have been influenced by Islamic culture. This is apparent from the associations she draws from these places: in Agra she visits the Taj Mahal, in Lahore she goes to Shalimar Gardens and Nur Jahan’s tomb, and in Delhi she sees the Qutb Minar. The other common thread running throughout her perception is the squalor that she associates with these cities, whether it is poverty and prostitution in Agra, her own personal anxieties in Lahore, or the corruption and filth of Delhi. Though the British have planned and built New Delhi according to “modern” architectural designs, and it is “[c]lean, tidy and isolated,” it is only populated with “bats or spirits” (270), and by default, antiseptic. Far from lamenting a glorious Islamic past, Chughtai intentionally juxtaposes the past to the present to point out its irrelevance to
contemporary problems that Hindustan faces. The history of Hindustan that Chughtai presents in her novel must be distinguished from colonial and communal historiography because it rejects the tripartite division of Indian history, critiques the undertone of racial purity in religious identities, and perceives the suffering of people irrespective of whoever rules them.

Abstract Citizenship and the People

Even while Shamman’s conception of Hindustan challenges colonial, national, and communal historiographies, there is constant tension between her subjective experience and the abstraction of the people into objects whom she simultaneously pities (because they suffer), and as I will show below, dislikes. I suggest that we frame Chughtai’s construction of Hindustan within the project of secular nationalism. Having discussed aspects of secular nationalism in the introduction to this chapter and in other parts of this dissertation, I wish to emphasize here that integral to the national project was the assumption that the middle-class Indian subject who comprehended Indian history had to reform and incorporate the majority of Indians—the objects—in the historical narrative. While there are important differences—in content and structure—between Chughtai’s Hindustani secular nationalism and Nehru’s Indian secular nationalism that I will examine a little later, Chughtai and Nehru both approach the people as fundamentally different from the middle-class subject, and this leads to their frustration and sometimes dismissal of them.

Thus, while the domestic sphere and school are represented in detail in the earlier sections of the novel, the narrator gradually spends less time exploring Shamman’s
interaction with other characters while in college, and even less time when she becomes a school principal. By contrast, there is a widening chasm between herself as the middle-class “subject” and the people that she engages with who are either inept and undisciplined characters that she has no patience with, or are “objects” whom she cannot identify with. She becomes frustrated that she isn’t able to do her job, which is to educate predominantly Muslim middle-class girls into becoming national subjects. Her efforts are thwarted because the school manager, teachers, and staff are corrupt, inefficient, and lazy (177-184, 195-201), and the girls are involved in same-sex romances (194-195). It is ironic that Shamman, now in the name of morality, has to prevent the girls from exchanging love letters when she herself, as a young girl, was involved in affairs like these.

The difference between the secular subject and the people also becomes apparent whenever Shamman faces a personal crisis. She undertakes her first train journey to escape the environment in her school, and waiting for a train to arrive, she becomes aware that while the sole Englishman has the privilege of sitting in the first class waiting room, “all other people, black and yellow, were piled on top of one another everywhere on the platform” (The Crooked Line 208). Though Gopal rightly points out that the platform becomes a microcosm of the colonial world, with the English living in comfort because they are the rulers, while Indians are forced to live in squalor (82), I am particular interested in the secular subject, who, (forced to be?) in the midst of the squalor on the platform, remains a critical observer of the people around her. Shamman describes the particularities of the different groups on the platform—the beggars and orphans, the
rakish young men trying to impress her, a group of “burqa-clad” women playing football but with the “crippled intellects of these men,” a young man reading a sex manual and lewdly smiling at women on the platform, a demure bride, and an ill-mannered young boy with a maid servant (*The Crooked Line* 208-211). Though Shamman does not describe them as a suffering and defeated people, she views them as objects of her criticism; she is fatigued by their “antics,” their poverty and filth, and their crass behavior and anti-intellectual attitude. What is particularly intriguing about these two examples—the school and the platform—is not her criticism per se, which might be appropriate, but the implicit social and intellectual distance that Shamman puts between herself and these characters. The only person on the platform she finally communicates with is the disobedient child who is attractive and looks familiar; she soon discovers that he is Alma’s illegitimate child, and therefore is on the path to becoming another secular subject.

A Critique of Secular Nationalism

Yet Chughtai’s secular nationalism can be distinguished from secular nationalism associated with the national movement because it constantly remains critical of its own subject position. Thus, Shamman examines how participants in the national movement and the Progressives claim that they wish to emancipate the people but promote their self-interest. While studying at the university she is critical of those girls, who, coming from indigenous capitalist families, promote nationalism and swadeshi but speak English, wear western clothes, and ignore the exploitation of the working class (167-168). Similarly, Gopal suggests that even if Chughtai’s blanket criticism of the Progressives is reductive
and lacks nuance, she correctly problematizes elements in the movement that celebrate radical politics for its own sake. Thus, even as Progressive artists and social workers advocate the rights of prostitutes, celebrate erotic poetry, and predict that a working class revolution will liberate the people, Chughtai is “justly critical of the unexamined sexual politics of a great deal of radical poetry” and what she “really critiques in Progressive discourse is the celebration of mere eccentricity or avant-gardism for its own sake to the detriment of wider analysis and action” (Gopal 80).

Though Chughtai critiques the claims of modern subjectivity by revealing the class and gender politics of nationalism and Progressives, respectively, she does not consequently dismiss them outright, but requires that the secular subject be aware of her limits to be able to represent and engage different subject positions. When Germany attacked USSR during the Second World War, the CPI was directed to support the British war effort in India. Many PWA members, who also belonged to the CPI, began to actively participate in the war effort as the USSR was seen to champion the rights of the masses against capitalism, colonial rule, and indigenous forms of exploitation. In *The Crooked Line* Shamman is skeptical of this enthusiasm for “Russia” (as the USSR is called in the novel), and is critical of the means that the Progressives use to promote the war effort. She finds it ironic that the Progressives enlist the help of the zamindars to convince the peasants to support the war:

[These illiterate villagers] don’t know that Germany is bombing Britain.

So used to peace, how will they endure this conflagration? What will happen to
them when they discover that the world is not just comfortable rooms, it is also
the sun’s blaze, the chill of ice, and gusts of wind?

But these starving, naked beggars don’t belong to anyone. Hindustan’s
riches and its wealthy inhabitants can be conquered, but its straining, struggling
paupers and their silently mutinous hearts cannot be won over.

In the evening the entire village received orders from the rulers to offer
prayers for the victory of the rulers. The temple bells clanged vociferously and
calls to prayer echoed from the mosques, but the hearts of these dejected farmers
remained mute. What curses can they have for any enemy when for centuries they
have been praying for the longevity of their own enemies. (emphasis mine, 219-220)

In the first paragraph of the quotation Shamman sympathizes with the nationalists and
Progressives who are critical of the peasantry for being oblivious to the larger events of
the world, and the dire social and economic consequences these can have. However, in
the second paragraph, Shamman undermines this claim as she becomes aware that it is
the wealthy, including the zamindars and the middle class, that have prospered under
colonial rule, who are anxious, and not the poor who have nothing more to lose. In the
final paragraph, Shamman points to the paradox in this request: the peasants are ordered
to suddenly dislike the Germans—an “oppressor” that is yet to oppress them—when they
have been ideologically conditioned to always rally in support of their current oppressors,
in this case, the landlords and the English. She is suggesting that it makes no difference to
these Hindustanis—Hindus and Muslims—whether their enemy is the zamindar, the
British, or the Germans, since they will continue to be oppressed. This is an incisive critique of the claims of allegedly modern forces: the national and progressive organizations that in the name of humanity claim to represent “the people” but paradoxically depend upon a feudal structure (the zamindari system) and use bribery (free food) to mobilize opinion about global events, which as the novel suggests, in no way will alter the conditions of these “naked beggars.”

From one perspective, this is another example of Shamman’s objectification of the people, and she describes them as being “overwhelmed with reverence, bewildered, as if they could not believe that there was such a thing as rural upliftment” (219). However, there is a certain integrity to this objectification of non-secular subjects, and it needs to be contrasted to the national project of the PWA. In my previous discussion about the PWA, I had pointed out that despite pressure from the leaders of the organization, Chughtai refused to write about peasants and workers because she was not familiar with their experiences. The example quoted above reveals two kinds of responses by the middle-class intellectual. One fails to realize that while it claims to sympathize with the peasant and the worker, it is the hopes and aspirations of the middle-class intellectual that underwrite its representation of the people. The other acknowledges its own limits to honestly engage the people by refusing to identify or claim to speak for them.

The Secular Subject, Filial Relationships, and a Common Humanity

The title of the novel, *The Crooked Line*, is a metaphor for the lives of secular women like Shamman and Alma; their lives are “crooked” because they choose to live
outside the dominant models available to modern women during this period. The choices that Shamman makes distinguish her from Noori and Bilquis, who are representatives of modern middle-class Muslim women. Furthermore, though Shamman and Alma accept the dress code of the pan-Indian woman, and so wear saris and put on bindis, they reject its moral strictures. Alma has a child with Sathil, refuses to marry him because they aren’t intellectually compatible, and remains financially independent. Like Alma, Shamman is also economically independent and remains single. The third section of the novel therefore also explores how these women have to struggle to forge their own narratives, but it also reveals the limits to secular citizenship and the necessity of “organic,” “biological,” or “filial” bonds.

The metaphor of the crooked line occurs three times in the novel and only in the third section. On all three occasions Shamman experiences a personal crisis and desires a filial relationship. The metaphor is used for the first time after Shamman discovers that Ifthikar has betrayed her. Though in college she rejected Ifthikar’s desire for “free-love,” she is in love with him, and because he claims to be a poor bachelor she occasionally supports him financially. However, when Shamman discovers that Ifthikar is married, has children, and seduces vulnerable single women in order to get their money, she has an emotional and mental breakdown. Trying to overcome her pain, she “wanted to scream for her mother, not the mother who was in her father’s house… No, she wanted the mother in whose warm, loving lap she could curl up like a tiny bundle and forget this chill in her soul…” (246-247). Shamman’s desire to be nurtured reveals that the secular citizen’s relationship to the state, in this case Shamman’s insertion into the narrative of
Hindustan, is inadequate, and that a filial relationship will resolve her problems as “every
curve will be erased, [and] this crookedness will have straightened” (248). Even though
this mother figure is absent in her life, Shamman realizes she can still metaphorically
become a child. She therefore turns to consumption, turning physical objects and
romantic relationships into commodities that she can “purchase” or discard as she pleases
(247-248). By accepting the physical and sensual pleasures of a middle class consumer,
she is convinced that the emotional and moral dilemmas that she has faced as an
independent single woman will be resolved.

Yet, being a consumer without any responsibilities, and indulging herself like a
child, fails to emotionally satisfy her. Though she has affairs with men belonging to the
Progressive Movement, she becomes exhausted with the charade (249-262). Yet, while
the men have other resources that they can draw upon to sustain themselves emotionally,
including “respectable” women that they marry, Shamman, being an independent woman
is once again isolated. She wishes she could “draw a new line, a neat and clean line. But
these curves had become too firm, like a steel wire. Her eyes closed, she began running
on these crooked lines” (262).

She realizes that she needs to recreate the domestic sphere—to become a mother
or to gain a mother—to become emotionally stable. When Shamman goes home to
re recuperate she discovers that there are a number of children in her extended family. She
now wishes to become a mother but is unable to successfully adopt any of the children;
she is either unfamiliar with what mothers are required to do or is exhausted by the role.
Some of the children don’t like her, and the baby that she finally adopts dies through neglect (264-266).

Shamman is able to control her anxiety about lacking a filial relationship by going on a train journey to Lahore, Delhi, and Agra (as discussed earlier). Witnessing the suffering of the people, she is able to make sense of her own pain. However, this is only a temporary solution. When she later meets and marries Ronnie Taylor, an Irishman, she discovers that though they both belong to opposite sides of the colonial divide, they belong to a common humanity. However, this aspiration to forge a unity across peoples is problematized by her awareness of the role of colonial rule in Hindustan. It is only through a filial relationship that Shamman is able to balance her anxiety about her own person, her identity as a Hindustani, and being part of a common humanity.

Shamman strives to balance her desire to belong to a common humanity and her public identity as a Hindustani through love and marriage. On the one hand, she and Ronnie have much in common, despite the colonial divide. They both love the Romantic poets and read Omar Khayyam to one another (295), they discover that they have similar experiences while growing up (301-302), and Shamman revises her opinion of the British as a villainous and imperious people to recognizing that they are also human beings. On the other hand, Shamman is constantly aware that their different positions within the colonial experience shape their perspectives on politics, language, and culture, which are fundamentally in conflict. Their marriage, though initially successful, unravels, and the interaction between an Irishman and a Hindustani woman foregrounds the intersection of race, patriarchy, and nation, bringing to high relief the possibilities and limits of
belonging to a common humanity. Shamman and Ronnie’s first major conflict occurs during their honeymoon; she suspects that the novelty of their romance has worn off for Ronnie and that he has made a mistake in marrying her, even though he vociferously denies this (296-297). However, their private anxieties are exposed and heightened when they are seen together in the public sphere which is dominated by colonial and national narratives of race and gender. Ronnie is deeply affected by the hostile treatment that he and Shamman receive from the British, and he begins to feel embarrassed, despite himself, about his marriage to a Hindustani (297-298). Shamman not only feels humiliated because of this, but in turn is also embarrassed as she realizes that “her people” are offended that she has married a colonizer and consider her worse than a prostitute (299-300, 305).

It is ironic that she becomes aware that her sexuality is being scrutinized by the Indian public when she is married, because she was not conscious of it being an issue when she was single and flirted with Indian men. This sudden acknowledgement of an Indian public while interacting with an Irishman, and the guilt she experiences reveals that despite being single and forging her own path, despite identifying with a Hindustan that embraces people of all races including the English, and despite her awareness that zamindars and indigenous capitalists, like the English, exploit the people, she implicitly accepts, or cannot resist, the gender norms of Indian nationalism that expect women’s sexuality to remain confined within the domain of the “home.” Thus, even while Shamman, unlike other modern women, departs from the domestic sphere and
participants in public life, she feels that she has betrayed “her people” by marrying outside the nation.

Shamman’s struggles to balance her desire to belong to a common humanity—through her marriage—and being Hindustani, is temporarily resolved through filial love. Hearing about her son’s marriage, Ronnie’s mother, writing two thousand miles away in America, becomes their “confidante, who putting aside advice and a lecture on colour and nationalism, had chosen instead to send them loving felicitations” (308). Shamman has temporarily found the mother figure she has been searching for, and she realizes that this Irish woman “was like one of her own—no, she was more than that” (308). Once again, this filial relationship is explored through the metaphor of the crooked line; Shamman believes that she is no longer lost for “[t]here’s a long straight road ahead, shimmering like gold leaf. On it, two, no three, tiny toy-like people were advancing forward. Ronnie, she and Mummy!” (309).

This is only a temporary respite and the road becomes crooked once more. Though Shamman and Ronnie successfully rekindle their love when they receive “Mummy’s” letters, and their anxieties over public censure recede to the background, Shamman becomes aware that they have very different political, aesthetic, and cultural views, primarily because they come from opposite sides of the colonial divide. For instance, Ronnie finds The Great Dictator by Charlie Chaplain entertaining, and uncritically accepts its portrayal of the Allies and the Axis powers. Shamman is irked by his reaction because while Ronnie is quick to condemn the Germans for attacking European nations, he defends Britain’s colonization of India (311). Though she
acknowledges that Ronnie is liberal, she also realizes he will never be able to engage his own culture from her perspective or be able to fully appreciate her culture. By contrast, Shamman is anxious that “despite her staunch opposition to Europe, she was slowly becoming coloured by the European way of life”. She is comfortable using cutlery, sleeping on a bed with a mattress, and observing minor English customs (314). Having to interact with a British colonizer, Shamman becomes aware that her own identity as a Hindustani is defined by cultural and ideological positions that otherwise are not apparent. She still believes in a common humanity but realizes that the political and cultural differences need to be addressed, for “[t]he mildew that had accumulated over a period of centuries could not be scraped off so easily” (314). Shamman struggles to be independent of Ronnie, and by extension, of colonial culture. She intentionally wears Indian clothes, begins to take lessons in Indian classical music (312-313), and participates in the public sphere by volunteering to distribute grain to the poor, as the regular supply has been disrupted because of the war (312-324). However, these turn out to be very small steps towards becoming independent, and she is still emotionally and economically dependent on him. While Shamman attempts to balance being part of a common humanity and being true to her identity as a Hindustani, Alma surrenders her critical perspective when she decides to marry Nathan, an Englishman. Like Shamman, Alma sees parallels between Germany’s potential conquest over Britain and Britain’s colonization of India. However, this leads her to sympathize and identify with the British people because they are being oppressed like the Hindustanis (272). Alma, who had been critical of colonial rule as a college student is now willing to sacrifice her critical
disposition because of her relationship, and future marriage to Nathan.

Shamman can successfully balance her identity as a Hindustani and be part of a common humanity through a filial relationship. Her dilemma and the novel come to an abrupt conclusion with Ronnie’s sudden departure after an argument between the two. Shamman discovers to her simultaneous horror and relief that in order to escape their marriage he enlists in the army, and will most certainly die on the front. She also discovers that she is pregnant and is filled with trepidation about the future; though she is worried having a baby, she is also overjoyed at becoming a mother. Motherhood, in *The Crooked Line*, can only be a biological (natural) phenomenon; adoption is not tenable. By becoming a biological mother she can “legitimately” be a part of an unconventional family:

[Ronnie’s] mother in America, so anxious to knit all the woolens, Ronnie, borne on winged cobras and flying towards the jaws of death … and a life closer to her than her own self—was she alone in the midst of this expansive clan. True, they are far away from each other, thousands of miles separate them, but at this moment she felt as though the whole world had shrunk into her own being (330-331).

The role of the mother that Shamman now assumes works on three different levels. On the immediate level, Shamman is going to be a mother, something that she had either been in search of or wanted to become ever since Ifthikar betrayed her. This filial relationship also resolves the tension within Shamman between her allegiance to Hindustan and belonging to a common humanity. Through her unborn child, who is half
Indian and half Irish, Shamman is literally able to become a part of a common humanity since her family consists of people from different parts of the globe. It is through this inter-racial family that racial discrimination, a consequence of colonial rule, a “mildew” that has covered humanity for centuries, is in the process of being scraped away. At the same time, the novel also ends on an allegorical note. The child about to be born comes to represent a Hindustan that is on the cusp of Independence. “Modern” Hindustan, that is about to be created, is therefore the product of colonial rule and its indigenous people. The inter-racial child comes to represent colonial history that needs to be incorporated into Hindustan as opposed to summarily being dismissed as alien. This works within the narrative of Hindustan, one that accepts people of all races, irrespective of their origins and historical legacy.

Conclusion

I have used radical humanism to examine how Manto and Chughtai question Indian nationalism while simultaneously being critical of their natal community—the North Indian Muslim middle class. My argument seems to coincide with Mufti’s critique. He deploys secular criticism to argue that Manto (and other Muslim writers) are critical of bonds of filiation (nation or religious community) that legitimize certain kinds of social identities while delegitimizing others. However, I argue, like Gopal, that Manto (and Chughtai) are not only interested in a critique but very much invested in affirming and/or constructing alternative notions of what it means to be “human.” Thus, through an analysis of Manto’s short stories—“Mummy” and “The Price of Freedom”—I have argued that Manto is invested in affirming the physicality, especially sexuality, of the
human being. A national movement and culture based on respecting human desires will successfully emancipate people politically and socially. However, because the Indian national movement is guided by religious rituals and practices that have an aura of morality but in reality do not comprehend basic human nature—“our physicality”—people remain socially and politically confused. Unlike Manto, who prioritizes the physicality of the human being, Chughtai explores the subjectivity of women who have the opportunity to move out of the domestic sphere to become citizens in the public realm. However, secular citizenship, despite the material and intellectual advantages women gain from it, proves to be inadequate. Neither can it provide the emotional security of the domestic sphere, nor can it give the individual a proper understanding of her place in the larger world. Therefore, Shamman, the protagonist in The Crooked Line, recreates the domestic sphere through a filial relationship and recognizes that she belongs to a common humanity.

Even while both authors embrace radical humanism—one that prioritizes the need for human beings to question and be skeptical of those social and cultural relationships and identities that are external to their “being”—there are constant limits to their ability to either escape their particular social and cultural past, and humanism itself isolates them from other people. In the case of Manto, despite his critique of religion, religious social structures and practices still inform his sense of identity. This is most apparent in “The Price of Freedom.” In addition, despite his call for embracing the physicality of humans, there is a tendency in both his stories for men to be subjects while women are reduced to sexual objects. While Chughtai remains sensitive to the women’s perspective and critical
of the sexual politics of the national movement and the Progressives, there is the danger that the secular citizen, like the colonialist, distinguishes herself from the people and is contemptuous of them. Though Chughtai is aware that the secular citizen is the subject of history and the people are its objects, it remains a problem that the novel cannot resolve. Thus, even while the novel conceives of a common humanity across races, it cannot conceive of intimate relationships within more local contexts.
CHAPTER THREE
SECULAR NATIONALISM, HISTORICISM, AND ANGLO-INDIAN WRITING

“Hybridity” is one of the most important concepts to be developed by and associated with Postcolonial Studies. While the word “hybrid” was initially used in the discipline of biology to describe the offspring of two different species of plants, it came to refer to the children of inter-ethnic or racial relationships. By the eighteenth century, “racial hybridity” came to describe inter-racial populations that had come into being through the sexual liaisons between the European colonizer and those who had been colonized. Racial hybridity was an important subject in anthropology and within the scientific community there were heated debates as to whether inter-racial people had inherent physical, mental, and social character traits and whether they were biologically inferior to the races that had produced them. Postcolonial studies, which became a significant field of study in the 1980s, appropriated “hybridity” as a metaphor to describe the liminal space and culture produced through the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. This concept has also been used to analyze the culture created by recent immigrant populations in Europe and North America.¹

While Postcolonial studies celebrates cultural hybridity because it disrupts the boundaries between cultures and challenges the homogenous, linear narrative of nationalism, racial hybridity and racial hybrids—the people created as a result of this

encounter between the colonizer and the colonized—have been ignored by the discipline. And even when the racial hybrid is discussed, s/he is primarily a metaphor for cultural hybridity. The most popular example of this in South Asian literature is the figure of Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. The son of a working-class Indian (Hindu), Vanita, and an English gentleman, Methwold, this “Anglo-Indian” figure is symbolic of an India that must recognize the multiple and contradictory identities that constitute it. While the “Anglo-Indian” as representative of a culture produced through the colonial encounter is popular in Postcolonial studies, the Anglo-Indian community—a people that are the product of the legitimate and illegitimate liaisons between the Europeans (primarily the British) and the indigenous population in India—a people whose history spans over three hundred years, is not taken into consideration.

To address this lacuna the *South Asian Review* brought out a special edition in 2006 that paid attention to the way in which Anglo-Indians are represented in fiction and film. In her introduction to the special edition, Deepika Bahri criticizes cultural hybridity for silencing a discussion on racial hybridity, and calls upon critics to examine the relationship between the two kinds of hybridity so that both can mutually benefit from each other. But Bahri is also unsatisfied with hierographical accounts produced by leaders of the Anglo-Indian community. In a footnote to her essay she contrasts this earlier sympathetic writing on the Community, like Herbert Stark’s *Hostages to India or The Life of the Anglo-Indian Race* (1926) and Frank Anthony’s *Britain’s Betrayal in India: The Story of the Anglo-Indian Community* (1969) to recent critical work done in

Though Bahri is correct in (sympathetically) criticizing these earlier apologist accounts for not being as “objective” or “critical” as the recent academic work, she is collapsing two distinct kinds of writing that have very different purposes. Even as the apologists claim to be writing Anglo-Indian histories, they are invested in defining and shaping the identity of the Community. For instance, on the very first page of *Britain’s Betrayal in India: The Story of the Anglo-Indian Community* (Britain’s Betrayal in India), Frank Anthony states that his book “is something more than a historical record. I have, therefore, deliberately called it a story” (i). Anthony is not simply writing an objective account of the Anglo-Indian community from its inception under British colonial rule to the contemporary moment; he is simultaneously molding a narrative for the Community. He is attempting to guide Anglo-Indians, who had considered themselves to be subjects of the British Crown, to become citizens of independent India.

If Anglo-Indian hieroglyphics are not meant to be factual accounts, but narratives that are formulating the Community’s identity, then we need to evaluate their objectives and examine how these objectives are carried out in the texts. In the case of *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, we need to explore whether it provides an effective “map” to guide the Community’s transition from being colonial subjects to becoming Indian citizens, or

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whether this narrative it wishes to construct is limited by the Community’s association with British colonial rule. *Britain’s Betrayal in India* is an important document in the history of the Anglo-Indian community because Frank Anthony, its author, was the undisputed leader of the Community from 1942 till his death in 1993. Between the 1940s and 1960s, when India was in turmoil—over Partition, Independence, the creation of linguistic states within the country, and the rise of Hindi nationalism—Anthony skillfully negotiated with the Congress to protect the Community’s rights and its economic and political interests. And in fighting to preserve the Community in independent India, he also attempted to define and formulate Anglo-Indian identity.

Anthony also played an important role in defending minorities in the public sphere; first, as a member of the Constituent Assembly (that was responsible for framing the Indian Constitution) and of Parliament, also as a lawyer in India’s Supreme and High courts, and lastly, as an intellectual in the public sphere. Fighting for the rights of minority communities through the legislative and judicial branches of the state and in civil society, Anthony invoked secular nationalism, the dominant ideology of the period that claimed that all Indians should be respected and their religious and cultural beliefs affirmed in the public sphere. At the same time, he also provides his own unique perspective on secular nationalism, emphasizing those aspects of it that protect the interests of the Anglo-Indian minority.

*Britain’s Betrayal in India* is ostensibly a history of the Community from its inception in the seventeenth century to the moment that Anthony is writing—the late 1960s. However, more than half of the text focuses on the social, economic, and cultural
life of the Community between 1914 and 1967 and on Anthony’s battles in the legislature and the judiciary to protect minorities who were vulnerable to the political machinations of the central and state governments. Therefore, on the one hand, *Britain’s Betrayal in India* aspires to construct a national narrative in which minorities and the majority can enter as equals; and on the other hand, it is an attempt to convince the public and the Community that Anglo-Indians are a “progressive” minority, and as citizens of India they will make an invaluable contribution to the economic and social development of the nation.

By contrast, I. Allan Sealy’s novel, *The Trotter-Nama: A Chronicle* (*The Trotter-Nama*), published in 1988, approximately twenty years after *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, is a satire on the Anglo-Indian community, and less directly, on India. By the late 1980s, not only had the project of secular nationalism failed to achieve its goals, but the Anglo-Indian community, at least according to Sealy, was economically and socially marginalized. Being a mock epic, *The Trotter Nama* tells the story of the Anglo-Indian community from its inception under the aegis of colonial rule till the mid-1980s, but also continuously undermines this narrative.

*The Trotter-Nama* bears a strong resemblance to *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, even as it is also strikingly different. For instance, both texts trace the Community’s story through the same historical events and are dedicated to the “Anglo-Indians.” Anthony very obviously refers to the Anglo-Indian community when he dedicates *Britain’s Betrayal in India* to “my small but gallant Community that I have had the privilege to lead for the past 26 years in a tumultuous period of Indian history.” Sealy ambiguously
dedicates the *Trotter-Nama* to “the Other Anglo-Indians.” Writing in the shadow of *Midnight’s Children*, he is certainly referring to those Indians who recognize that they are cultural hybrids. At the same time, in the Prologue, the novel’s narrator, Eugene, gestures towards the Anglo-Indian community when he claims that it his responsibility to “garner[] the past. ... Someone’s got to do it, or it’ll blow away. … And so we forget. Past masters in the art of forgetting, my people” (*The Trotter-Nama* 7). However, there is an important difference in tone in these two dedications. Whereas Anthony’s is heroic because he believes that his “gallant” Community has weathered India’s tumultuous transition into independence and democracy, Sealy’s is a lament—he is critical of “his people” for forgetting their past. Yet this lament is simultaneously undermined in the Prologue as Eugene is an unreliable narrator—he appears to be immature, is a petty schemer, and is apparently being pursued by “a bounty hunter” called Carlos. *The Trotter-Nama* has an important story to tell, but intentionally calls attention to itself so that the reader remains skeptical of its assertions.

This chapter examines how Anthony and Sealy construct Anglo-Indian identity and history, and the way in which Sealy’s narrative depends upon and diverges from Anthony’s account. If Anthony is confident that the Community is “middle-class” and can easily enter the national narrative, Sealy, writing twenty years later, is critical of both claims. Yet *The Trotter-Nama* is directly influenced by *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, and so I examine how Sealy accepts Anthony’s basic premises, even as he explores alternative narratives that Anthony refuses to engage. I therefore begin by analyzing how Anthony appropriates secular nationalism and defines Anglo-Indian identity in relation to
it, before I demonstrate how Sealy critiques Anthony’s account of the Community and questions the claims of Indian nationalism.

Secular Time, Secular Nationalism, and Minorities in Britain’s Betrayal in India

In The Insurrection of Little Selves: The Crisis of Secular Nationalism in India the political theorist Aditya Nigam examines secular nationalism that dominated the Indian state from the 1940s through the 1980s. He argues that even though secular nationalism had a unique vision—to celebrate and protect the religious and cultural diversity within India and emancipate the people from poverty through heavy industrialization—it is conceptually similar to national projects in other parts of the world. Despite the variety of nationalisms, they are all constituted as projects that envision themselves as developing in homogenous-calendar or “secular time” and in relation to each other within the broader narrative of world history. Furthermore, each nation, in attempting to articulate its uniqueness in relation to other nations, must either incorporate or suppress the multiple histories that exist within it into a clear linear narrative from past to present: “Its central problem is of aggregating what have been, till then, so many different social, cultural, and geographical entities into a single entity of the nation” (18). Not only do these alternative narratives challenge the assertion of a single identity to represent the people, but they also imply that different peoples within the state might exist in very different times (17-20).

Nigam theorizes the possibility of the existence of different times in the same state in order to explore why secular nationalism, even as it celebrated unity-in-diversity, was not able to incorporate the Muslim community. To illustrate his critique of secular
nationalism he summarizes and then criticizes Javeed Alam’s recent study (India: Living with Modernity (1999)) on the relationship between the Muslim community and the anti-colonial struggle in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. According to Alam, by the late-nineteenth century an English-educated, middle-class Muslim elite came into existence and began to assert itself in the colonial public sphere. Being aware that a corresponding Hindu elite had already successfully established itself in the colonial economy, this Muslim elite turned to the British to balance the discrepancy between the two groups. While it did not support the national movement, it would be incorrect to simply critique Muslims for being pro-colonial. Previously, the Hindu middle class had also collaborated with the British, except that in that period the anti-colonial movement did not exist. By the time the Muslim elite asserted itself, the anti-colonial movement had already been consolidated and Muslims were considered to be pro-colonial, backward, and conservative. Though Alam critiques nationalists (including the Left) for refusing to recognize the different phases in the development of this modern subjectivity, Nigam points out that Alam still works “within the notion of a linear, homogenous, empty time” (25). Instead, he suggests that the only way we can “recover the real meaning of the supposedly ‘late arrival’ of the minority elites is by recognizing their history as a separate history, not as a part or a section of the history of the nation that is yet to be instituted” (25-26).

Thus, despite secular nationalism’s claim to protect the diversity of the Indian nation, Nigam argues that the model Indian citizen is the upper-caste Hindu male, and Muslims are considered to be economically, socially, and culturally backward. To
support his argument, he points out that Nehru, the principal architect of secular
nationalism, was critical of the “communal” Muslim League for prioritizing the interests
of the Muslim community over India’s independence. He was more sympathetic towards
the “communal” Hindu Mahasabha because it was primarily concerned with India’s
freedom from colonial rule. Though Nehru was secular, like the Hindu Mahasabha he
believed that on “the stage of World-History then, the Hindus represented the
progressive, bourgeois forces of nationalism while the Muslims were still caught in the
mire of feudal conservatism” (72). Nigam argues that

there is something in the abstract universalism of secular modern politics and its
understanding of Progress and History, that, in its effort to erase markers of
difference, privileges the dominant/majority culture as the norm. By de-
legitimizing such difference and disallowing articulations of ‘different’ voices,
modern secular universalisms reproduce the common sense of the
dominant/majority cultures as hegemonic. (73)

I have discussed Nigam’s work on the relationship between secular nationalism
and the Muslim community because it helps me evaluate how Frank Anthony, in
Britain’s Betrayal in India, engages secular nationalism from the perspective of the
Anglo-Indian minority. Anthony’s faith in secular nationalism and confidence that
Anglo-Indians will not only be successful in independent India, but also facilitate the
progress of the nation, raises important questions: First, how will Anglo-Indians insert
themselves successfully into the secular time of the nation, especially as they have
collaborated with the colonial regime? Implicit in this first question is a second one—
Anthony must assume that Anglo-Indians are not a “backward” community, and if this is so, how does he compare it to other communities—the Hindu majority and other linguistic and religious minorities? Third, in insisting that Anglo-Indians can enter the secular time of the nation as equals, how does Anthony conceptualize secular nationalism? What facets of this particular ideology does he prioritize? I now turn to explore these questions in more detail.

The subtitle of *Britain’s Betrayal in India* states that it is “the story of the Anglo-Indian Community,” and to this end the text traces the Community’s history from its inception in the late seventeenth century to its status in contemporary India. However, only the first eighty pages record Anglo-Indian history from 1678 to 1857, while the bulk of the text—over three hundred and fifty pages—examines the political, social, and cultural life of the Community from 1914 to 1968. So this historical-cum-sociological-cum autobiographical text is primarily invested in exploring the Community’s transition from being collaborators and subjects of colonial rule to becoming citizens of independent India. The three longest chapters explore Anthony’s negotiations with the Congress just prior to independence, his political opposition to the rise of linguistic nationalism in independent India, and an overview of the Community’s “Social and Psychological Pattern” after 1857. Later in the chapter I will discuss the way Anthony constructs Anglo-Indian identity in order to demonstrate that the Community will be an asset to independent India; here I examine how he conceptualizes secular nationalism so that Anglo-Indians can thrive after independence. I explore Anthony’s perspective on three important political crises between 1945-1967: Partition and Independence in 1947,
the rise of linguistic sub-nationalisms within India in the 1950s, and the threat of Hindi nationalism in the 1950s-1960s.

Anglo-Indians, Muslims, and Secular Nationalism

Anthony’s discussion of Henry Gidney’s leadership of the Anglo-Indian community in 1920 marks the beginning of the transition for Anglo-Indians from being colonial subjects to becoming Indian citizens. Not only did Gidney politically unite most of the Anglo-Indian associations representing the Community in different parts of the country, but he was also the first leader to describe Anglo-Indians as citizens of India, and not British subjects. In Anthony’s account, Gidney, unlike previous Anglo-Indian representatives, became increasingly critical of the colonial government for taking advantage of the loyalty of the Anglo-Indians but sacrificing their economic interests when it was politically expedient. Therefore, Gidney aligned himself with other Indian political parties by criticizing the British for discriminating against Anglo-Indians and Indians, alike (Britain’s Betrayal in India 91-127). When Anthony became the Community leader in 1942 he realized that independence was imminent and that he needed to safeguard the interests of Anglo-Indians. Thus, like Gidney, he not only continued to find common cause with Indian political parties against the British, but went a step further to define the Community as “Anglo-Indian” by community and “Indian” by nationality (Britain’s Betrayal in India 150-157, 173-174). By claiming that Anglo-Indians were not simply citizens of India, but “Indians,” Anthony simultaneously attempted to forge a new identity for Anglo-Indians, one that would suit the Community
in independent India (which I will explore later), and also attempted to conceptualize what it meant to be Indian.

In 1946, when the Cabinet Mission met the Congress, the Muslim League, and other political parties to discuss the future shape of the country, Anthony recommended the establishment of a united India and affirmed secular nationalism. Instead of including his memorandum to the Cabinet Mission in *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, he inserted two newspaper articles that summarize his position on independence and the entrance of the Community into the national imaginary. Thus, a March 1946 editorial in *The Hindustan Times*, “the leading nationalist English daily in New Delhi” quotes from Anthony’s memorandum to the Cabinet Mission:

The European has affected and canalized an attitude of superiority to Indian and Anglo-Indian alike. The Anglo-Indian has been guilty of affecting an attitude of aloofness to his Indian brother. By way of retaliation, our fellow-Indians have regarded us with mistrust and unfriendliness. … But today, the Anglo-Indian Community has awakened to the fact that it is one of India’s communities and that the hopes and aspirations of India are also our hopes and aspirations.

The editorial then summarizes Anthony’s concerns about the protection of minorities after independence and the danger of Partition:

The only danger to minorities is from local prejudices and animosities getting exaggerated importance through passion and propaganda. … A strong center, in the legislature and executive in which the minorities will be duly represented, will
be a valuable protection against the exploitation of communal passion by local vested interests (Britain’s Betrayal in India 175-176).

This editorial’s reasoning, tone, and choice of words reveals that it participates in the rhetoric and rationale of secular nationalism. It describes the conflict as one between a rational and sensitive democratic state and “local vested interests” that are irrational, have a narrow political vision, and are manipulated by political leaders. Though it does not explicitly name the communal group, it is referring to the Muslim League which suspected that Muslims would be discriminated against in a centralized state that was dominated by Hindus. But this conflict is not only between a neutral and tolerant state and the communal Muslim community. By identifying Anglo-Indians as one of “India’s communities,” and stating that they both “share the hopes and aspirations of India,” Anthony is tacitly contrasting rational, tolerant Indians (including Anglo-Indians) who will flourish in independent India to the communal and obstinate Muslim community that is impeding this goal.

Anthony’s hostility to the Muslims is not only based on objective principles (the unity of the country); it is also a reaction to the rivalry between the two communities during colonial rule. In a speech to the Anglo-Indian community in July 1947, he describes his relief that the creation of Pakistan has not led to the division of the Community, as the bulk of Anglo-Indians lived in India. However, the speech becomes an occasion for criticizing the Muslim community and its leadership. According to him, Muslims were “[e]ducationally and economically … more backward than the Anglo-Indians, [and] have been largely dependent on Government service.” Not only did
Muslims demand that Central government job quotas for Anglo-Indians be reduced or abolished, but their “[u]nabashed, brazen and fanatical communalism” led to unqualified Muslims gaining employment in the Post and Telegraph Department (*Britain’s Betrayal in India* 201-202).

While Anthony can describe the Muslims, who threaten the economic interests of the Anglo-Indians, as “backward” and “communal,” he is reticent in his criticism about the marginalization of Anglo-Indians in independent India. Now he qualifies his comments by stating that it is “odious” to compare communities, and simply points out that the quality of government services has declined as Anglo-Indians are no longer in charge (254, 262). Though he hints that Anglo-Indians are more progressive, he does not name the communities that are more backward. He might be unable to publicly compare Hindus and Anglo-Indians because Hindus are in the majority in independent India. By comparison, it is easier to critique the Muslim minority. But I suspect, as I will demonstrate clearly in the next section, that he can identify Muslims as “backward,” but cannot make the same case for Hindus because the discourse of nationalism authorizes a critique of the former.

I have argued that Anthony is a proponent of secular nationalism because as long as the rights of minorities are secure, he is confident that the Anglo-Indian community can keep abreast of the Hindu majority in the secular time of the nation-state. Moreover, these two groups share an affinity because both are progressive and rational in comparison to a backward, communal Muslim minority. Yet this insertion of the Anglo-Indian community into the narrative of Indian nationalism is not only dependent upon
how “progressive” Anglo-Indians are, but also upon the way in which the Congress and the Anglo-Indian community can politically benefit from each other. For instance, Anthony not only had to identify the Community as “Indian,” critique colonial rule, and be committed to an independent, united, secular India, but he had to politically align the Community with the Congress in order to guarantee its rights after independence. Thus, in 1946 Gandhi, Nehru, and Patel were willing to officially recognize the Community because Anthony could guarantee that all the Anglo-Indian representatives in the different state legislatures would support the policies of the Congress. However, when Anglo-Indian members of the Punjab and Bengal legislatures disregarded Anthony’s instructions and voted against the Congress, not only were Congress leaders irritated, but the Community was condemned in public for “betraying” the Indian cause. The Amrita Bazar Patrika, a leading newspaper in Calcutta, even demanded that Anglo-Indians should not be represented in the Constituent Assembly that was to frame India’s Constitution (Britain’s Betrayal in India 193).

Anthony touches upon the public anger against the Community to suggest the fragility of the Community’s political position at the time of independence. Yet the public’s response must be contrasted to the articles that lauded Anthony for recommending a secular united India to the Cabinet Mission the previous year (1946). The difference between the positive reviews of Anthony’s recommendations to the Cabinet Mission and the shrill and bitter condemnation of the mistakes made by Anglo-Indian representatives in the same newspapers reveals that the Community is not incorporated into the Indian national imagination. While the Congress and the public’s
outrage at the Community are understandable, these contrasting responses demonstrate that the project of secular nationalism was extremely vulnerable.

Secular Nationalism and Linguistic Nationalism

As secular nationalism became the dominant ideology at Independence, India was considered to be a rational, tolerant, secular state, while Pakistan, in comparison, was considered to be communal. Yet, secular nationalism’s hegemonic status was threatened shortly afterwards in the 1950s and 1960s by the rise of linguistic nationalisms. A number of linguistic groups demanded that the country be divided along linguistic lines, so that each group could protect its own linguistic heritage and its political and economic interests. At the same time, a powerful movement in North India clamored for Hindi, the language of the largest linguistic group, to be the national language of the country. As the Anglo-Indian representative in the Indian Parliament and a member of the Constitutional Assembly, Anthony debated the representatives of various linguistic groups, as well as the Hindi nationalists. He argued that the state should focus on the economic and social development of the nation instead of prioritizing the interests of linguistic communities that were already well established.

In a speech in Parliament in August 1952, he criticized the creation of Andhra Pradesh from the Madras Presidency. In the name of secular nationalism he advocated a secular state and the emancipation of Indian citizens from poverty through industrialization, and critiqued the promotion of regional identities on the basis of language. Here he uses the same rationale that he deployed to critique the creation of Pakistan:
I blame all the parties, the Praja Socialist, the Communist and others; they are all playing the same game. They know it is a problem of language—a highly emotional problem. It is like the Muslim problem of “Islam is in danger.” It is an irrational problem. They know that an emotional, irrational problem can be exploited by political adventurers as a vote-catching device. (Britain’s Betrayal in India 272)

According to Anthony, the creation of Andhra Pradesh is irrational because the language, culture, and identity of the Telegu people (a large minority) have flourished despite the lack of autonomy. The primary beneficiaries of this new state will be the politicians who are elected and the civil service that will have to be expanded. He suggests that the financial resources invested in the creation of linguistic states should be spent developing the economy, the infrastructure, and eradicating the rampant poverty (271).

In this same speech, however, Anthony moves beyond the conventional secular-national critique to argue that Parliament is willing to accept linguistic-regional autonomy because it is grounded within the logic of a Hindu universe. He reprimands it for refusing to allow the Sikhs a separate state within India and for not officially recognizing Urdu, the language of the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh. The requests of the Muslims and Sikhs were considered to be “communal,” yet Parliament was willing to accede to the demand of Telegu-speaking people for Andhra Pradesh because it was made by a Hindu community (269-270). Anthony is not advocating a separate state for the Sikhs; rather, he is simply critiquing Parliament for tolerating linguistic differences within the (religious) majority, but denying religious minorities the same rights. He is
sympathetic toward the Muslim community because he believes that the state needs to officially recognize the languages of smaller minorities who would otherwise be socially, politically, and culturally marginalized. However, he is not simply being altruistic; his concern for the Muslim minority is a reflection of his anxiety for Anglo-Indians, who, he realizes, can only flourish in independent India if their mother-tongue, English, is officially recognized.

Anthony’s criticism of linguistic nationalism gives us a clearer understanding of his conception of secular nationalism. He is skeptical of claims for regional autonomy made on the basis of religious or ethnic or linguistic differences. This is a logical extension of the critique made against the formation of Pakistan—both linguistic and religious nationalism are based on irrational claims and politicians manipulate the people for their own advantage. However, he develops his conception of secular nationalism further by arguing that regional states (and by extension, the Indian state) need to be grounded on multi-religious and multi-linguistic identities, without one community dominating the others. Only those minorities who cannot have regional ambitions and whose culture and heritage is threatened should be actively protected by the state.

Despite asserting what secular nationalism should create—a multi-lingual and religious country—he is aware that the Indian state is undergirded by a Hindu nation. Though he draws parallels between Muslim communalism at Independence and Telegu communalism in the 1950s, he does not describe Telegus as backward. This is because linguistic difference is authorized by the Indian (Hindu) nation. I am not suggesting that he should accuse Hindus and Telegus (or Muslims) of being backward, but rather that
this would be the logical culmination of his critique against the Muslims. He cannot make
this assertion because it is only the Indian (Hindu) nation that can legitimize this kind of
language, after which it gains authority.

Hindu Nationalism versus the Secular, Rational, English-speaking Middle Class

Anthony develops his most comprehensive vision of secular nationalism through his opposition to Hindi becoming the national language. His hostility to Hindi is primarily community-driven: if Hindi became the national language, it would replace English as the official language of the state and the medium of instruction. This in turn would lead to the dissolution of the Anglo-Indian community, a linguistic minority that is identified by its dependence on English and the culture surrounding it. Thus, in parliamentary debates and in national conferences he argued that both Hindi and English should be “official” (not national) languages of the state. Though he acknowledges that he writes from the perspective of a smaller minority and that he cannot be completely objective in his criticism, the thrust of his argument against Hindi depends upon deploying the logic of secular nationalism: the unity and the economic and social progress of the country should trump the interests of a large, illiterate linguistic group (the Hindi speaking community).

Anthony’s reasons to retain English as the official language of the state are built on his argument for secular nationalism that he has developed previously. For instance, he believes that India’s political unity is largely dependent upon the strong, centralized administrative service that the British introduced, and that English is the only means of communication that allows this system to operate effectively (Britain’s Betrayal in India
Anthony’s defense of English coincided with arguments made by regional states and important civil and technological institutions across the country that wanted to retain English as the official language of the state. People in regional states, especially in southern India, feared that they would be socially and economically discriminated against if they did not speak Hindi and that their linguistic and cultural heritage would be marginalized (*Britain’s Betrayal in India* 300-301). Anthony also mentions professionals, educators, and scientists who argued that Hindi was not adequately developed to replace English in higher education and in some branches of government, like the judiciary. In addition, Indian professionals would be at a disadvantage as most of the developments in the sciences and international law were written in English. He refers to a number of important government and civil institutions, such as the Medical Council of India, the Council of Institution of Engineers (India), and the Bar Council of India that petitioned the government to keep English as the official language of the state (*Britain’s Betrayal in India* 330-331, 346-347).

If regional states and the English-speaking professional class are represented as a concerned, educated, informed Indian public in *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, the Hindi nationalists are represented as corrupt, communal, and illiterate. There are numerous examples of the latter in the text. For example, Anthony criticizes the Parliamentary Committee of Education (1967) for making an arbitrary decision to recommend that Hindi replace English as the medium of higher education. It ignored the advice of the Kothari Education Commission that took twenty-one months to come to the conclusion that English should remain “the link language for academic and intellectual
intercommunication and in the all-India Institutes and the major universities” (323). The Committee further recommended that 940 standard works in the humanities and 395 works in sciences and technology should be translated from English into Hindi in a period of five years, which Anthony argues is not practical. But he also suspects the Parliamentary Committee of being corrupt (323-325).³

In one of his speeches in Parliament, in which he argues that Hindi should not be the national language, Anthony presents himself as rational, while the Hindi supporters who interrupt his speech come across as obstinate, communal, and insensitive. Debating whether the national civil services exams should be held in regional languages (including Hindi), the members of Parliament who support Hindi invoke “popular democracy” to argue that the largest number of seats should be reserved for Hindi speaking people because they represent the majority. Anthony counters this argument by arguing that democracies need a disciplined and well-trained administration to function effectively. As Hindi is not adequately developed to replace English, ergo, those who study in Hindi medium schools are not trained to govern the country. In addition, individuals who belong to Hindi speaking regions make up only 3-5% of the total who pass the civil service exam, which implies that the level of literacy and academic advancement is lowest in these regions. Thus, the policy of reservation would create sub-standard officers who would impede the functioning of the state (Britain’s Betrayal in India 311, 314-315).

³ Triguna Sen, who had been a co-signatory on the Kothari Education Commission, had changed his mind as chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee, and was promoted to Minister of Education.
Anthony provides an over-all perspective of his conception of secular nationalism through this debate between two opposing political ideologies over the position of Hindi in the nation. On the one hand, an English-educated, middle-class elite—one that is based on meritocracy, is economically and socially successful, and is highly mobile—can fulfill the promise of secular nationalism by unifying a multi-lingual and religious state and emancipating the people from economic and social suffering. On the other hand, a linguistic majority whose leadership is communal, illiterate, and corrupt will economically, intellectually, and morally bankrupt the nation.

Anglo-Indians in the Secular Time of the Indian Nation

*Britain’s Betrayal in India* examines the history of the Anglo-Indian community from its inception under British colonial rule to its contemporary status in independent India, to argue that Anglo-Indians can enter the secular time of the nation as equal citizens. Between these two moments the book follows the successes and failures of the Community through colonial and postcolonial Indian history and world events (the two world wars). In the previous section I focused on those chapters in which Anthony conceptualizes secular nationalism so that he can narrate the Community into the secular time of the nation. Now I explore those sections of *Britain’s Betrayal in India* in which Anthony formulates Anglo-Indian identity so that Anglo-Indians are presented as model citizens. I argue, however, that this transition from being colonial subjects into becoming “progressive” Indians is not complete. *Britain’s Betrayal in India* still exists in a colonial universe, one based on racial distinctions between Anglo-Indians and Indians. Yet, in
attempting to justify racial distinctions, Anthony inadvertently reveals that secular nationalism tacitly accepts difference based on caste.

Anthony’s primary objective in Britain’s Betrayal in India is to demonstrate that the Anglo-Indian community is progressive and will contribute to the economic and social development of independent India. The history of the Community that he constructs demonstrates that Anglo-Indians are inherently hard working, disciplined, and masculine—they served the British loyally during colonial rule, and will be even more loyal to independent India because they will be treated as equals and not be discriminated against. Thus, Anglo-Indians were scholars of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu and held prominent positions in the armies of the British and Indian rulers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; they were successful entrepreneurs, educators, and built community solidarity despite being marginalized by the British in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries; and they served the British during the revolt of 1857 and the two world wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He dedicates one whole chapter to discussing the physical prowess and discipline of Anglo-Indians at the contemporary moment. In Chapter X “The Sportsmen and Sportswomen of India: Builders of the Key Services,” Anthony draws a correlation between the Community’s contribution to the development and running of the government’s administrative services—railways, post and telegraph, customs, police, and hospitals—and its contribution to the nation’s athletes in sports, like hockey, boxing, track and field, and hunting. Being equally successful at work and in physical activities, the Community is inherently masculine, disciplined, and responsible (227-263).
Anthony is convinced that in independent India Anglo-Indians will flourish and will identify as Indians. During colonial rule the Community was intentionally discriminated against, and only those individuals who could “pass” as Europeans and compete against them succeeded in the colonial economy. However, this resulted in the emasculation of the Community as some of its most “progressive” members had to deny their roots in order to be promoted. After independence Anglo-Indians would be successful without denying their inheritance, and the Community, in turn, would also progress socially and economically. To further demonstrate its “Indian” credential, he also emphasizes the rivalry between Anglo-Indians and the British (*Britain’s Betrayal in India* 388-389, 400). Discussing Anglo-Indian athletes, he intentionally foregrounds how amateur and professional Anglo-Indians consistently defeated their professional British counterparts. Again, in one of the last chapters of *Britain’s Betrayal in India* that examines the “psychological pattern” of the Community, he touches upon the rivalry between Anglo-Indian men and British soldiers (specifically those who belonged to the working class and were derogatorily referred to as “Tommies”) and provides episodic evidence of the former besting the latter in a fair fight (*Britain’s Betrayal in India* 375-376).

Therefore, there is a comfortable fit between Anthony’s conception of secular-nationalism and the core values of the Anglo-Indians. In the previous section I argued that he believes that national integration is not possible through communal passion (religious or linguistic nationalism), but only through an English-educated elite who can effectively run a centralized administration. Anglo-Indians speak English, have
generations of experience running lower-level central administrative services, and are disciplined. Thus, it is possible for the Community to make a smooth transition from being colonial subjects to becoming Indian citizens.

Racial Hybridity and the Colonial Universe

Despite Anthony’s attempt to write a narrative in which Anglo-Indians can become “progressive” Indians, *Britain’s Betrayal in India* is fraught with contradictions. One important source of tension in the text is the contradiction between the political framework, which is national, and the cultural references, which are colonial. As *Britain’s Betrayal in India* was published in 1969, twenty-two years after independence, one would expect that Anthony would be concerned about whether the Community has effectively integrated into the larger Indian national imagination. However, in the introduction to the text, Anthony appears to be equally interested in defending the Community’s heritage and culture against Western and Indian stereotypes. He acknowledges that the “[a]verage Briton and American who has never visited India” has a false perception of Anglo-Indians and “members of other Indian communities” have a vague idea about the Community’s background (ii). Yet, Anthony is concerned with Western preconceptions of the Community because throughout the text he addresses anxieties about racial hybridity. He is responding to a European debate, one that concerned the popular imagination and the (European) scientific community from the late-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century with regard to the status of interracial people—whether people created as a result of miscegenation between European colonizers and the native inhabitants were biologically, culturally, and socially inferior to
both races.\footnote{For a detailed history of the debate in Europe over racial hybridity see Robert Young, \textit{Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race}. New York: Routledge, 1995.} Thus, he criticizes British colonial writers like Beverly Nicholas (352) and Rudyard Kipling, as well as the Domiciled European novelist John Masters for intentionally painting a lurid picture of the Community. In order to rebut these claims of the inferiority of inter-racial people, he discusses (European) scientific research done on hybrids. He quotes the British scientist Lord Oliver, who argued that racial hybrids are inherently robust (iii-iv, 370), points to the anthropologist Cedric Dover, who proved that racial purity is a misnomer, and that Indians and the British are also racially mixed (iii, 370),\footnote{Though Cedric Dover was an Anglo-Indian and not European, he gained a reputation as an anthropologist in Britain and the United States.} and uses sequential logic to demonstrate that if plants and animal hybrids are considered superior, then by extension hybrids among humans should be acceptable (370).

Anthony’s assumptions about race and culture suggest that he is operating within a colonial universe. With the exception of a passing reference to Nirad C. Chaudhri, an important Bengali writer and intellectual who was briefly associated with the national movement, he does not mention the way in which Indians stereotyped Anglo-Indians. Rather, he criticizes Anglo-Indians for demeaning Indians, and discusses the Indian hostility toward the Community because of this. He supports his claim by briefly mentioning Nehru’s autobiography, people he has personally interacted with, and the experiences of Indians who studied in Anglo-Indian schools. Therefore, Anthony works under Anglo-Indian assumptions about the hierarchal structure in colonial India—the
British existed at the top rung of the hierarchy, Anglo-Indians below them, and Indians at the bottom rung.

*Britain’s Betrayal in India* thus faces in two different directions. On the one hand, it attempts to make the transition into the secular time of the Indian nation and politically aligns the Community with progressive Indians. On the other hand, culturally, it is still concerned with colonial stereotypes of the Community. Thus, Anthony’s discussion about the Community’s physical prowess, that I have discussed above, is not only his attempt to align the Community with Indians, but also to repress his anxiety that Anglo-Indians are inferior to the British.

Indian Nationalism and Anglo-Indian Stereotypes

I want to return to Anthony’s passing reference to Nirad C. Chaudhri because it provides a segue to examine the reasons *Britain’s Betrayal in India* might suppress Indian stereotypes of Anglo-Indians. Though Anthony condemns Chaudhri’s description of the “alleged psychological inhibitions” of the Community as being nonsensical, he does not mention any specific inhibition that Chaudhri accuses Anglo-Indians of having (352). Yet, in an article on Anglo-Indian stereotypes in popular literature, Megan Stuart Mills criticizes Chaudhri for stereotyping Anglo-Indian women as “unstable, promiscuous, [and], degenerate.”⁶ In fact, the Anglo-Indian prostitute was a stock figure

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in much British and Indian fiction. Though Chaudhri was a self-proclaimed Anglophile (and we can assume that Anthony includes him in those “Western” writers who made derogatory remarks on the Community), Dipesh Chakrabarty has recently demonstrated that Chaudhri’s autobiography, *An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, is similar to other nationalist autobiographies. It primarily focuses on the individual’s life in the colonial public sphere, while refusing to discuss the individual’s intimate interactions in the domain of the home. In the thousand odd pages of the autobiography there is only one reference to his relationship with his wife.  

Though both Indian nationalists and Europeans stereotyped Anglo-Indians as promiscuous and degenerate, the former came to this conclusion through the construction of a sacrosanct Indian national culture, while the latter arrived at this stereotype through the discourse of race theory. As discussed previously, the European preconception of the Community depended upon scientific and academic disciplines (biology and anthropology), and Anglo-Indians were regarded as only one example of a larger degenerate inter-racial population that came into existence during the colonial encounter. In *Half Caste*, the anthropologist Cedric Dover briefly discusses the histories of various inter-racial people across Africa, the Americas, and Asia, describes the specific stereotypes associated with each, and then rebuts these arguments.

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However, the discourse of Indian nationalism draws distinctions between Indians, the
British, and Anglo-Indians within the domain of culture. Nationalism consolidated itself
through the distinctions made between the outer, material sphere dominated by the
colonial state, and the inner, spiritual realm where the Indian nation was deemed to be
inherently superior. If Indian nationalism was willing to accept the sovereignty of the
West in the sciences, statecraft, and technology, it considered itself to be supreme in the
domain of language, culture, and religion. And within the discourse of Indian
nationalism, women came to be marked as repositories of national culture.9 Anglo-
Indians, and especially Anglo-Indian women, were considered to be inferior because they
were considered culturally “Westernized,” racially impure, and economically vulnerable.
From mid-nineteenth century Bengali literature to late-twentieth century popular Indian
cinema, Anglo-Indians have been represented as sexually and morally loose, predisposed
to “Western” vices (alcohol and tobacco), and inept because they are regarded as racially
and culturally impure.10

Apart from the single reference to Nirad C. Chaudhri’s criticism of Anglo-
Indians, Britain’s Betrayal in India does not pay attention to national stereotypes of the
Community. This is justified if we assume that Anthony considers Anglo-Indians to rank

9 See Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial

Cinema.” South Asian Review. 27.1 (2006). 182-203. This is even true for sympathetic
representations of the Community. See Aparna Sen’s 36 Chowringhee Lane (1981) and
Anjan Dutt’s Bow Barracks Forever (2004). However, not all Indian representations of
the Community are negative. See Satyajit Ray’s Mahanagar (1963).
above Indians in the colonial hierarchy. The Community, therefore, can easily insert itself into the narrative of secular nationalism as it is culturally and economically equal (if not superior) to Indians. However, hints of these stereotypes exist throughout the text. Anthony acknowledges the poverty in the Community, but focuses exclusively on the middle-class; is critical of lower castes and “Indian Christians” who claim to be Anglo-Indians in order to qualify for jobs; and refuses to directly engage the negative stereotypes of the Community (for instance, he does not describe the “psychological inhibitions” that Chaudhri ascribes to the Community). If Anthony had elaborated on these instances, he might not have been able to insert Anglo-Indians into the secular time of the state. He would have had to defer agency to the Indian nation that would have condescendingly raised the Anglo-Indian minority out of its economic, social, and cultural marginality. Paradoxically, then, he would have had to acknowledge an Indian nationalist narrative in which Anglo-Indians and Muslims are both backward: Muslims are communal and conservative and Anglo-Indians are promiscuous, undisciplined, and given to “Western” vices.

Caste, Race, and Secular Nationalism

When Anthony is forced to defend the Anglo-Indian community’s political and cultural interests in *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, the two suppressed narratives—of racial difference and the anxieties about the Community’s middle-class status in independent India—become more explicit in the text. These issues are raised in Chapter XII “The Social and Psychological Pattern” where Anthony justifies the Community’s hostility towards inter-community marriages and refuses to accept “lower class” Indians as Anglo-
Indians. Yet in order to defend the anglicized, middle-class culture of the Community, it seems odd that Anthony deploys the language of caste.

In the first instance, Anthony argues that the Community has been racially, linguistically, and culturally homogenous since 1857 and its hostility towards inter-community marriages is a “reflection of the caste system.” Thus, he argues, his aunt refused to allow her daughter to marry a Brahmin. Anthony admits, however, that the Community accepted European men (as long as they were not working class) who had married Anglo-Indian women and remained in India (Britain’s Betrayal in India 368). He, therefore, legitimizes an Anglo-Indian patriarchy because the Community becomes the only possible home in India for European men who married Anglo-Indian women, while Anglo-Indian women who married Indian men would be lost to the Community as they would be incorporated into their surrogate Indian patriarchal (and occasionally, matriarchal) families. Despite Anthony’s rationale against inter-community marriage with Indians and an affirmation of an Anglo-Indian patriarchy, it is obvious that he aspires towards being culturally and racially affiliated with the British. For example, elsewhere in the text he mentions Anglo-Indian women who married Englishmen and settled in Britain. As he does not touch upon this issue in the section on inter-community marriages, he does not need to justify how this “loss” would have been acceptable to the Community.

In the second instance, Anthony argues that the Anglo-Indian Community is willing to assimilate people who accept its linguistic and cultural heritage, but not those who wish to take advantage of the Community’s economic, social, and political
privileges. Thus, while he accepted a number of Armenians and Jews, he refused to recognize the Feringis of Kerala, some of whom were of Portuguese descent, though the majority were lower-caste converts to Christianity. Not only were they culturally alien to the Community and wished to be defined as Anglo-Indian so that they could take advantage of the Community’s privileges, but they also wanted Anglo-Indians to be included in the Scheduled Castes.\(^\text{11}\) In a conversation with a Brahmin Member of Parliament (MP) who was convinced that the European-descended Feringis should be incorporated into the Anglo-Indian community, especially as a secular Indian state wanted to break the social divisions that separated people, Anthony points out that though Brahmins and Bhangis (a Dalit sub-caste) were both Hindus and Indians, Brahmins (and by extension, the Brahmin MP) would not accept that they were Bhangis (*Britain’s Betrayal in India* 380-381).

What is the larger significance of these two instances in which Anthony justifies the Community’s insularity in independent India? It is clear that he equates Anglo-Indians with Brahmins, the dominant caste within the Hindu hierarchy. This is apparent in the second example (where Anglo-Indians are to Brahmins as Feringis are to Bhangis), but more subtly addressed in the first. The only reason why the Brahmin and the Anglo-Indian do not marry is because they belong to different communities—otherwise, intellectually, economically, and socially they are the same.

\(^\text{11}\) Scheduled Castes is the official term used to describe Dalit communities. India’s Constitution guaranteed the Scheduled Castes specific economic and political rights in the hope that they would gradually become socially and economically independent in the future.
At the same time, Anglo-Indians are not a caste, but a community that have a middle-class status and an inter-racial identity, and so Anthony welcomes those who are familiar with its linguistic and cultural heritage. Thus, middle-class Armenians and Jews who have lived in proximity to the Community, have been influenced by it, and have “European” antecedents can be incorporated. However, he refuses to accept the Feringis because they threaten to undermine the Community’s middle-class culture and stature. This is evident from his horror at being compelled to think of the Community as part of the Scheduled Castes.

More importantly, taken together, both examples reveal that secular nationalism is compatible with difference and discrimination on the basis of caste, and that Anthony can deploy the language of caste to defend the way Anglo-Indians racially discriminate against Indians. This is obvious in the second example I mentioned. By comparing the difference between Anglo-Indians and Feringis to the difference between Brahmins and Bhangis, he translates racial-cum-class discrimination, into the terms of caste discrimination. The first instance is more complex. Implicit in Anthony’s argument (in which he defends the Community’s resistance towards inter-community marriages) is the assumption that he is responding to an accusation that Anglo-Indians consider themselves to be racially different/superior to other Indians. His discussion of the Community’s willingness to marry Europeans strongly suggests that there is truth in this accusation. However, in independent India it was assumed that racial difference would not be tolerated as Indians had fought against the British for discriminating against them on the
basis of race. However, as Anthony uses the language of caste to defend the insularity of the Community, his argument becomes acceptable.

Secular nationalism therefore is closely aligned with the upper-caste, middle-class Hindu culture. It would be justifiably offensive if Anglo-Indians *racially* discriminated against Indians, but caste-*difference* (between Brahmins and Anglo-Indians) and caste-*discrimination* (against Bhangis and Feringis) is acceptable. Therefore, despite his desire to conceive of India as nationally integrated through its political and administrative structures, Anthony inadvertently recognizes the Hindu social structure as culturally normative in India. At the same time, Anthony still exists in a colonial universe. Therefore, it would be incorrect to say that he makes no distinction between caste and race, but he realizes that race must operate in the guise of caste for Anglo-Indians to maintain an identity that is grounded in racial difference.

*The Trotter-Nama*—a Response to and Critique of *Britain’s Betrayal in India*

After *Britain’s Betrayal in India* was published in 1969, the most important account of the Anglo-Indian community by an Anglo-Indian writer is the *Trotter-Nama* (1988) by I. Allan Sealy. Like Anthony, Sealy writes a history of the Community from its inception to the contemporary moment, but does so through fiction. Therefore, his novel, and consequently his representation of the Anglo-Indian community, is deeply influenced by the literary aesthetics introduced into Indian writing in English after the publication of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in 1981. Rushdie’s novel made Indians aware that English was not simply the language of the colonizer but an Indian language, and a new generation of writers emerged who began to mould it to explore new subjects and
experiences. However, even within this diverse group of Indian writers, I. Allan Sealy is atypical. On the one hand, he is recognized as an accomplished novelist. In 1989 he won the Commonwealth Best Book Award for his first novel, *The Trotter Nama: A Chronicle* (1988). He received further recognition when his third novel, *The Everest Hotel: A Calendar*, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1998, and with the publication of *The Brainfever Bird* (2003) and *Red* (2006), he consolidated his reputation as an established writer. On the other hand, Sealy is highly unconventional. While some of the most reputed Indian writers in English, including Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, and Arundhati Roy, explore contemporary social and political issues, including nationalism, the corruption of the postcolonial state, and the Indian diaspora, or give a voice to the marginalized—women, religious, ethnic and sexual minorities, and subaltern groups—Sealy’s writing is comparatively idiosyncratic. For instance, even in *The Trotter Nama*, his only novel to foreground the experience of a minority—the Anglo-Indians—he constantly strives to undermine anything that faintly resembles an Anglo-Indian subjectivity.

*The Trotter-Nama* first caught the attention of critics because it resembled *Midnight’s Children*. They were correct to point out that Sealy’s novel, like Rushdie’s, is a repository of postmodern excess: it is (mock) epic in scope, has an unreliable narrator, plays with history and time, blurs facts and fiction, and makes numerous intertextual references—from using the conventions of the Mughal namas, through parodying colonial fiction and art, to mocking the “filmi” songs of postcolonial Bombay cinema. However, whereas *Midnight’s Children* is concerned with the Indian nation, and subtly
weaves the Muslim minority into its narrative, *The Trotter-Nama* foregrounds the story of the Anglo-Indian community, while the Indian nation remains in the backdrop. Much of the literary criticism on *The Trotter-Nama*, as I will show a little later, focuses on the novel’s postmodern strategies that challenge the dominant narrative of Indian nationalism, but does not consider how the text participates in a conversation with Anglo-Indian historiography.

In *The Trotter-Nama*, the Anglo-Indian community is represented by the fictional Trotter family who live on San Souci, an estate near Nakhlau (based on Lucknow in northern India) and incorporates the major historical events and important figures of the Community into the story of the Trotters. It begins by exploring the relationship between Anglo-Indians and the British in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: how the Community facilitated colonial rule, was economically and socially marginalized by the East India Company, and then failed to become independent of the British. It then traces how Anglo-Indians continued to depend on and contribute to colonial rule from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries—they supported the British during the Revolt of 1857 and the two world wars, and worked in the lower echelons of the administration. Finally it examines the Community’s anxiety about its status at independence, its reliance on government service, and its athletic prowess in (colonial and) independent India. *The Trotter-Nama* also provides fictional counterparts to important figures of Anglo-India, including eighteenth century soldiers like Claude Martin and James Skinner, nineteenth century Community leaders such as John Ricketts and Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, and
briefly touches upon twentieth century advocates of the Community—Henry Gidney, Cedric Dover, and Frank Anthony.

I seem to be making contradictory assertions about *The Trotter-Nama*. On the one hand, I claim that it undermines a minority experience. On the other hand, I have provided a brief synopsis of the novel to demonstrate that it is about the Anglo-Indian minority. This contradiction can be resolved if we understand that the novel tells the story of the Anglo-Indian community, but foregrounds how this narrative is constructed through numerous texts from the past and the present. By revealing the fissures in the narrative, Sealy is able to simultaneously write the story of the Anglo-Indians, while refusing to produce a subjective experience to encapsulate the Community. I argue that Sealy deploys this strategy because he believes that the Community does not flourish in the secular time of the Indian nation. If he had to write a realist or historical account, he would be forced to conceive of Anglo-Indians as a tragic people, which is how “national” realist fiction and films represent the Community. The novel resists this clichéd representation by demonstrating the textuality of all narratives. But as Sealy’s evaluation of the Community’s marginal status in contemporary India directly contradicts Anthony’s claim, I also explore how *The Trotter-Nama* is influenced by and critical of the Anglo-Indian narrative forged in *Britain’s Betrayal in India*.

*The Trotter-Nama* faces two directions. It is in conversation with Anglo-Indian historiography, specifically *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, but deploys postmodern strategies

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12 See my discussion of this in the previous section on Anthony’s *Britain’s Betrayal in India*. 
to reveal the silences in the latter narrative. On the other hand, it agrees with realist accounts of the Community’s marginalization in independent India, but uses these same postmodern strategies to challenge clichéd depictions of the Community. Its solution is intriguing—it imaginatively recreates an earlier phase of Anglo-Indian history to escape the marginalized present, but in conceptualizing this past it deploys postmodern intertextuality and parody to avoid writing a tragic narrative.

My introduction has provided an overview of my argument and I now explore my claims in more detail. I begin by arguing that *The Trotter-Nama* should be read as historiographic metafiction because it recognizes the importance of previous Anglo-Indian histories, but as histories are constructed, it demonstrates the contingency of this knowledge. I then examine how the novel primarily depends upon *Britain’s Betrayal in India* for its history of the Community, but reveals alternative narratives at crucial junctures in Anthony’s text. I conclude by exploring the radical way in which it escapes the narrative of secular time and the limits of this attempt.

*The Trotter-Nama* as Historiographic Metafiction

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction questions the conventional distinction between history and literature. While history claims to present the truth or state the “facts,” fiction assumes that it is original and unique. Recent postmodern theories have examined the rhetorical structure of historical writing and literature to argue that both genres have much in common. These theories demonstrate that historical accounts select facts and fashion them into a teleological narrative in a manner similar to traditional fiction.
Likewise, fiction, which is considered to be original, is always dependent on a variety of
texts, including the literary, historical, and political narratives that have come before it.
Whether it agrees or disagrees with these earlier texts, it is still influenced by them.

Historiographic metafiction, however, does not attempt to completely do away with the
distinction between the two genres, but illuminates how both are constructed and the
ways in which they overlap. It therefore needs to be distinguished from historical fiction
which uses literature to recreate a historical period. Historical fiction introduces
characters that are considered to be “typical,” incorporates accurate descriptions of
artifacts, and includes historical personages with the sole purpose of providing an
authentic picture of a particular historical moment. By contrast, historiographic
metafiction introduces atypical characters, incorporates historical data but refuses to
assimilate it, and includes historical personages only to foreground its inability to
accurately represent them (114-115). Historiographic metafiction, therefore, is a
paradoxical phenomenon: “it installs totalizing order, only to contest it, by its
provisionality, intertextuality, and, often, fragmentation” (Hutcheon 116).

In a subsequent essay in her anthology, Hutcheon explains the rationale behind
the use of intertextual parody in historiographic metafiction. She argues that
postmodernism assumes that we can only know the world (of the past and present)
through texts. Thus,

Historiographic metafiction … is overtly and resolutely historical—though,
admittedly, in an ironic and problematic way that acknowledges that history is not
the transparent record of any sure ‘truth.’ Instead, such fiction corroborates the
views of historians like Dominick LaCapra who argue that ‘the past arrives in the form of texts and textualized reminders—memories, reports, published writings, archives, monuments, and so forth’ (1985a, 128) and that these texts interact with one another in complex ways. This does not in any way deny the value of history-writing; it merely redefines the conditions of value. (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* 128-29)

Not only does historiographic metafiction foreground its references to other texts (intertextuality), but it also uses parody “to put into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* 129).

*The Trotter-Nama* can be described as historiographic metafiction in this sense because even as it recreates the two hundred year history (from the late 1700s to the late 1900s) of the Anglo-Indian community, it consistently foregrounds the contingency of its narrative. At the structural level, the novel’s fictional narrative is continuously punctured by brief and extended, divergent descriptions of artifacts, cultural practices, and social and political histories of the Anglo-Indian community, colonial and postcolonial India, and nonsensical and miscellaneous topics. Thus, the text describes artifacts of Anglo-India: the dooley (a storage device used before the introduction of the refrigerator), Radio Ceylon, and the recipe for Trotter curry. It includes Indian political and cultural history: the importance of “nil” (indigo) to the colonial economy, the pankha, and songs from
Bombay cinema. And it also discusses fictitious and random topics, such as the construction of the gypsometer, the oiling of camels, and how suspense is created.

At a thematic level, *The Trotter-Nama* introduces historical figures who are intentionally treated in an exaggerated manner so that the reader becomes aware of the text’s inability to capture the absolute truth about them. For instance, the fictional founder of the Community, Justin Trotter, is based on the French adventurer Claude Martin. Though Justin’s life loosely follows Martin’s, Justin’s success as a general, inventor, and scholar are described in comic terms. This strategy highlights how the “grandeur” associated with Martin’s life is not obvious, but written from a certain perspective and constructed through a selection of certain facts. The novel also incorporates historical material—government orders, letters, petitions—without assimilating it completely. Thus it juxtaposes the fictional account and official documents to examine the beginnings of Colonial discrimination against the Community in the late-eighteenth century. But instead of providing clarity about the history of this discrimination, *The Trotter-Nama* introduces these documents to reveal contradictions in the official policy with regard to the Community’s position within the colonial hierarchy and the confusion over the legal definition of an Anglo-Indian. While the East India Company’s directive of 1791 ordered that “no person the son of a Native Indian would be allowed to work for the Company” (201), the Governor General’s proclamation of 1795 stated that “[n]o person the son of a European by a Native mother shall serve in the Company’s army as an officer” (202). These official orders demonstrate the confusion within the Colonial administration about the kinds of positions that Anglo-Indians were debarred from, and also reveal
contradictory assumptions about who Anglo-Indians were. While the Governor-General’s proclamation defined Anglo-Indians as the offspring of European men and Native women, the Company’s directive (unwittingly?) allows for a more fluid sense of identity. Anglo-Indians could legitimately describe themselves as or emphasize that they were “the sons of Europeans” (even if they were also children of Indians) to qualify for Colonial service.

Critical Reception and Anglo-Indian Historiography

Most critics have argued that the historiographic metafictional aspects of The Trotter-Nama undermine dominant narratives of the Indian nation. Judith Plotz situates the novel within the recent trend in Indian writing in English (beginning with Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children) that grapples with the multiple political and social movements that have challenged the attempts made by the colonial and national elites to conceive India in terms of “unitary metaphors and single narratives” (32). According to Plotz, The Trotter-Nama, like other contemporary novels in English, takes a “synoptic vision of the whole, or a whole of modern Indian history,” but also recognizes that this must ultimately be “adequately incoherent” (34).\footnote{Judith Plotz, “Rushdie’s Pickle and the New Indian Historical Novel: Sealy, Singh, Tharoor, and National Metaphor.” Journal of Postcolonial Writing 35. 2 (1996). 28 – 48.} Rukmini Bhaya Nair examines the intersections between The Trotter-Nama, Rudyard Kipling’s Kim, and Rabindranath Tagore’s Gora to contrast the alternative visions of India conceived in each text. Though all three texts conceptualize India from the perspective of people who are “inter-cultural,” Kim and Gora foreground colonial and national narratives, respectively, while The
*Trotter-Nama* is a subaltern text because it introduces the perspective of an inter-racial people who have been marginalized by both, colonialism and nationalism. Nair suggests that Sealy parodies *Kim* for the purpose of “rip[ping] up the colonizer’s history as if it were the paper it is written on, interweaving Mik’s [Justin’s son’s] story with ‘other’ historical records that reveal the Raj’s shabby treatment of the Anglo-Indians” (180).¹⁴

Despite the valuable contribution of these scholars to the critical discussion on *The Trotter-Nama*, they are overly preoccupied with the discourse of nationalism to the exclusion of the Anglo-Indian community. In this criticism Anglo-Indians only function as a minority that challenges a national narrative; the Community is not a subject in its own right. Two literary critics, Geetha Ganapathy-Dore and Loretta Mijares, foreground the postmodern strategies the text uses to represent the Anglo-Indians. Ganapathy-Dore provides a detailed explication of Sealy’s account of the Community and examines the intertextual devices (diaries, radio programs, advertisements) he incorporates into the narrative. In her excellent essay, “‘The fetishism of the original’: Anglo-Indian history and literature in I. Allan Sealy’s *The Trotter-Nama*,” Mijares provides an overview of the techniques Sealy uses and the intertextual references he makes to construct a contingent history of the Community. She glosses these intertextual references that Sealy “uses” and “abuses,” including Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Kipling’s *Kim*, Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Desani’s *All About H. Hatterr*, eighteenth century Parliamentary debates, and Anglo-Indian histories.

Mijares does not explore how *The Trotter-Nama* interacts with the histories of the Anglo-Indian community because she is interested in providing an overview of the sources and techniques the novel uses. However, I wish to examine the text’s conversation with Anglo-Indian histories, specifically with *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, and its use of postmodern parody to undermine the arguments developed in Anthony’s text. Apart from poking fun at Anthony, who enters *The Trotter-Nama* in the guise of Marris Trotter, Sealy does not acknowledge Anthony or *Britain’s Betrayal in India*. But as I have mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, there is a strong resemblance between the two texts. Both are dedicated to the Anglo-Indian community, both claim to write holistic histories of Anglo-India (even though Sealy mocks his own claim), and Sealy’s account of the Community’s history (that I summarized earlier) depends upon Anthony’s account in *Britain’s Betrayal in India*.

Anthony’s text is not only the most holistic, but is also the only substantial history of the Anglo-Indians written in independent India. The other important histories—Herbert Stark’s *Hostages to India: or the Life Story of the Anglo-Indian Race*, Cedric Dover’s *Cimmerii?: or Eurasians and their Future*, and Kenneth Wallace’s *The Eurasian Problem, Constructively Approached*—were written in the 1920s and the 1930s and so only conceptualize the Community’s identity in relation to the political and social debates taking place within colonial India. For instance, Stark’s account, published in 1926, is constructed to argue that the British should be bound by a sense of duty to protect the interests of the Anglo-Indian community. While this history records an important phase
in the Anglo-Indian story, it is irrelevant to the Community’s identity and concerns after Independence when Anglo-Indians became Indian citizens.

Also, Anthony and Sealy do not explore alternative narratives that were open to the Community in the 1920s and the 1930s. Unlike Stark, Dover and Wallace in *Cimmerii* and *The Eurasian Problem*, respectively, criticized the Community for trying to consolidate its position within the colonial hierarchy by demanding that it be officially recognized as “Anglo-Indian.” Till the 1920s, Europeans who had settled in India and their racially pure children who continued to live in the country were called “Anglo-Indians,” and the inter-racial community (now known as Anglo-Indians) was described as “Eurasian.” However, “Eurasian” was an expansive category for it included inter-racial people across classes, castes, and religions. For example, the descendents of the Portuguese, who had merged with the economically and socially underprivileged working-class populations in India, were also described as Eurasian. Dover and Wallace point out that the Community attempted to escape the derogatory references and gain respectability when it successfully petitioned the government that it be recognized as “Anglo-Indian.” It was thus able to distance itself from the negative stereotypes associated with inter-racial working-class people, while it consolidated its middle-class stature and whitened itself by aligning itself with Europeans. Moreover, Dover and Wallace also argue that once the Community was legally called Anglo-Indian, this new designation undermined an attempt at unifying a Eurasian population, which included the Anglo-Burmese, Anglo-Chinese, Anglo-Indians, and Anglo-Malays. These communities had common political, economic, and cultural interests because of their similar
experiences under colonial rule, but the term “Anglo-Indian” created barriers between them. Dover and Wallace were extremely critical of the Community’s leaders for sacrificing the long-term political goal of creating a Eurasian community for a short-term concern for “Anglo-Indian” respectability.

Anthony and Sealy avoid discussing these alternative narratives of the Community. Although Anthony mentions the various names that were associated with the Community during its history, such as “country-born,” “East Indian,” “Eurasian,” and “Anglo-Indian,” he considers these to be simply different descriptions for an “essential” identity. Sealy challenges a homogenous identity for the Community and must be aware that these different names evoke diverse ways in which insiders and outsiders can be defined. While it can be legitimately argued that Anthony ignores Dover and Wallace’s argument because it threatens his account of the Community, Sealy’s decision not to include this narrative cannot be a result of an anxiety over the racial identity or the middle-class status of Anglo-Indians. Rather, he chooses not to insert the Eurasian episode because he is concerned, like Anthony, with the Community’s condition in independent India.

_The Trotter-Nama_ and Historicism

If historiographic metafiction uses and abuses history, then _The Trotter-Nama_, despite playing with the historical record, accepts “historicism” and makes evaluative, if tentative, judgments about the condition of Anglo-Indians in independent India. Whereas Anthony argues that the Community will make a positive contribution to an independent India, Sealy, writing twenty years later, believes that it is culturally and economically
marginalized. In *The Trotter-Nama*, there is one clear example where Sealy makes a metacritical comment about the Community’s status in contemporary India. Justin envisions that his estate, San Souci, will become a miniature kingdom, and so he hires Marazzi to depict its construction. But San Souci is poorly constructed and left unfinished because Justin was in a hurry to complete the project. In addition, Marazzi only arrives after the construction has been discontinued. When Justin examines Marazzi’s depiction of San Souci, he is furious that the artist has “reduced [his chateau] to a battered fortress—a ruin—an hotel” (141). Marazzi replies:

‘I am faithfully reproducing (or you might say producing) it. Only, since I was not present at the time of building (I lay bleeding at Borromini) I am compelled to rely upon memory. And memory (especially memory of what one has not seen) is a most coquettish thing; wanton, one might almost say (if one might say).’

…

‘You see,’ [Marazzi] said without turning, ‘I was obliged to paint her as she might have been, and this might-have-been (especially when it might yet be) (but probably will not) is a most elusive thing; spectral, one might almost say (if one might say). Let us say (may we?) it might have been a place of experiment, of vision, of breadth, but the people who lived there did not have enough (how to say) faith (?) in themselves.’ He spoke as one looking back at the future. (141-142)

It is obvious in these lines that San Souci represents the Anglo-Indian community, its history, and its dismal future. The first and the third parenthetical statements in the first
paragraph underscore the claims of historiographic metafiction. Sealy suggests that the history of the Community is never simply “reproduced” but always “produced,” especially because historians and artists are equally dependent upon the historical records, artifacts, and documents through which they construct a narrative of the past. It is this interplay between historical records and fiction that he emphasizes is necessary for the production of the Community’s history. Sealy, like Marazzi, can only imagine the Community’s history, and so (re)produces it.

The second paragraph simultaneously makes a historicist evaluation of the Community’s status in independent India, while recognizing the contingency of this claim. But Sealy makes this evaluative judgment in response to Anthony’s arguments about the Community in Britain’s Betrayal in India. Sealy craves to write a heroic history of the Community that is similar to Anthony’s, and believes that the Community had the potential for greatness (“it might have been a place of experiment, of vision, of breadth”). However, he rebuts Anthony’s claim that it was able to forge a successful identity for itself during colonial rule and in independent India. Yet the parenthetical comments suggest that there is always the possibility that Anglo-Indians might be successful. These comments also disrupt the narrative which otherwise reads as a tragedy of the Community—a people that had potential but failed to take advantage of it.

Anglo-Indian History and the Indigo Rebellion

I now examine the way Sealy uses postmodern strategies to unearth alternative narratives at important junctures in Anglo-Indian history. Through intertextual references, the juxtaposition of different genres—including autobiography, critical
commentary, fiction, and painting—the introduction of fictional characters who represent more than one historical figure, and by merging different historical events into one another, *The Trotter-Nama* engages the silences, the tension, and the contradictions in traditional accounts of Community history. I explore how the text re-conceptualizes three such important moments in Anglo-Indian historiography: the ambivalent relationship between the Community and the British in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, Anglo-Indian contribution to colonial rule during the Revolt of 1857, and the relationship between the Community and the national movement from the late nineteenth century.

*The Trotter-Nama* fuses fiction and facts and conflates historical narratives of India and Anglo-India to reveal the fluidity of the cultural identity and political interests of Anglo-Indians in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. If Justin, the founder of the Trotters, remains socially superior to his “Indian” retinue, his Anglo-Indian son, Mik, is socially and culturally affiliated with the nilchis (the laborers responsible for the production of indigo)—one of the most oppressed groups in the colonial economy. The text compares how the nilchis and the Anglo-Indian school boys, like Mik, were forced to lead a regimented life in order to maintain and reproduce the colonial order. It uses fiction to demonstrate this—both groups are fed a coarse diet daily tire (yogurt) and rice for the Anglo-Indian boys and chickpeas for the nilchis) (169). This fictional comparison is supplemented by a historical document: a letter written in 1829 by W. Webb that describes how Anglo-Indian boys at Mr. Bell’s school, Madras, were disciplined by a frugal upbringing—they only ate tire and rice, slept on the ground, and
had three changes of dress (175). Thus, peasants led regimented lives to produce the prized blue dye from indigo and Anglo-Indians were disciplined to serve the empire in the lower echelons of government. The text also points to the cultural affinities between the two groups. The word “nilchis” is derived from “nil” (which means blue in Hindi), and Mik is blue-skinned (“nil”) as a child because he frolics in the indigo baths. In addition, as a child he prefers the mobility of a vagabond to the regimented life of school.

But *The Trotter-Nama* intentionally undermines this comparison between these two “subaltern” groups. While the nilchis remain marginalized in the colonial hierarchy, Mik becomes a surveyor, then a soldier, and finally a general in the colonial army. If the child-Mik culturally identified with the nilchis, the adult-Mik is politically aligned with the colonial regime and is responsible for suppressing the nilchis when they rebelled against the inhuman conditions they worked under.

Sealy intentionally collapses two distinct historical narratives here to explore the silences in Anglo-Indian historiography. Mik’s career through school and in the military closely resembles that of James Skinner, the most famous general of Anglo-India, who served and won battles for the Marathas and then the English in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The uprising of the nilchis represents the beginning of the indigo rebellion by Bengali peasants against the colonial state that began in 1831 and continued till 1860. By merging these two histories, Sealy examines the possibility that Anglo-Indians participated in the exploitation and the brutal suppression of other marginalized people. After all, it is Justin and Mik who own the indigo fields and factory in San Souci. Anglo-Indian historical records do not mention the Community’s
participation in this particular enterprise, but *The Trotter-Nama* raises suspicions that it must have been complicit in this form of exploitation.\(^{15}\)

*The Trotter-Nama* further ruptures Anglo-Indian historiography by inserting the story of Mik’s suppression of the nilchis in the middle of a debate within the Community about its future in colonial India (297-306). In 1829 Anglo-Indians argued amongst themselves as to whether they should continue to depend on the British for patronage, or whether they needed to become economically and politically independent. In the novel, Jacob Kahn-Trotter, who resembles John Ricketts, and Henry Luis Vivian Fonseca-Trotter, who resembles Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, embody these divergent trends within the Community, respectively (283-290, 306-311). As both historical events occur roughly at the same time, by literally introducing the indigo rebellion and its suppression in the midst of the debate about the Community’s future, Sealy makes a conceptual intervention about the way in which Anglo-Indians need to conceive their past. His point here is not that the Community’s participation in oppressing the nilchis is truer or more authentic than its anxiety about its future in colonial India; rather, both early-nineteenth century narratives of the Community are equally valid, even while they remain disconnected from each other. Neither is comprehensive in itself, nor do they together provide a comprehensive picture of the past, but are simply two important texts that challenge any clear, linear account of the Community.

\(^{15}\) For example, *Britain’s Betrayal in India* mentions that before Henry Louis Vivian Derozio lived and worked in Calcutta, he was an accountant on his uncle’s indigo farm (54). While we cannot make a particular claim about Derozio’s uncle, we can assume that Anglo-Indians, like the British, benefitted from the indigo trade and exploited their laborers.
In portraying the Revolt of 1857, *The Trotter-Nama* simultaneously accepts and challenges the conventional narrative of Anglo-Indian histories that depict the Community’s contribution to the British in heroic terms. It initially makes use of the conventions of historiographic metafiction to explore how our knowledge of the Revolt is always constructed through a variety of texts. Thus, it introduces critical commentary to acknowledge the violence carried out by colonial and rebellious armies, as well as frenzied mobs, upon the civilian population (Anglo-Indian, British, and Indian). It incorporates historical anecdotes, including the circulation of chapathis to signal people in rural areas to prepare for the revolt (325), and mentions Cyril Brendish, the Anglo-Indian telegraph officer responsible for alerting the British that Lucknow was under the control of the sepoys (327). However, when *The Trotter-Nama* includes fiction to flesh out the Anglo-Indian contribution to the defense of the Nakhlau (Lucknow) Residency, it uses comedy to highlight that it is imaginatively constructing events as opposed to simply stating the truth. Thomas Henry Trotter, a clerk in the colonial government, believes that the Revolt provides him the perfect opportunity to be as heroic as great-grandfather Justin and grandfather Mik. The extract from his (fictional) autobiography, *My Path to the Victoria Cross*, that is incorporated into the novel describes how he and Gunga Din, an Indian washer man, crossed enemy lines to guide the relieving British force safely to the

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16 Just prior to the Revolt chapathis (unleavened bread) were sent from one village to another to spread the news to the rural population that a rebellion was being planned against the British. The information itself facilitated unrest and excitement within the rural communities.
Residency (344-346). But throughout the narrative and the extract, Thomas Henry comes across as comic, and he and Gunga Din succeed more through luck than heroism.

However, it is through the description of the “The Relief of Nakhlau” by T. Jones Barker and the critical commentary on it that Sealy explores colonial representations of the Revolt and simultaneously criticizes Anglo-Indian histories for trying to imitate this aesthetic presentation. The painting depicts the British forces rescuing those trapped in the Nakhlau Residency in heroic terms. In the foreground are two British generals relieving the third who led the defense of the Residency and in the background is the paraphernalia of war: scattered military equipment, (Indian) looters scavenging corpses, and Gunga Din providing water to a dying soldier. The heroism in this scene is undermined through Eugene’s commentary on the conditions under which the painting was created and on its content. He reveals that Barker’s painting was based on a series of sketches by Egron Lungren. Though both the novel and the painting depend upon other accounts of the past, the chronicle is self-reflexive about its construction as text (revealing the sources it depends upon), while the realist painting hides its sources to present itself as an authoritative version of the event. In addition, Eugene is critical of the painting for deploying “Victorian melodrama” and notes that Thomas Henry, who guided the relieving army, is not present in it. He sarcastically points out that if one was to look hard and long at “that grey smudge” in the middle of the painting, one could imagine an outline of Thomas Henry’s figure (348-350).

From one perspective, Sealy follows Anglo-Indian historiography to argue that the Community’s efforts were not recognized in British historical accounts of the Revolt.
The painting represents the culmination of Thomas Henry’s aspirations to be memorialized in the grand colonial narrative that he so desperately wants to be a part of, and the irony is that he is the only substantial figure in the event who is missing. However, Eugene’s description of the way in which the British and Indians are inserted into this narrative reveals why Anglo-Indians are absent from the painting. By foregrounding the three British generals, the painting consolidates the superiority of the British—the besieged British successfully resisted the larger number of Indian sepoys, while the superior British forces convincingly defeated the Indians. By inserting Indians in the backdrop, it implies that the British can include a people considered to be completely other, either as the villains (the looters) or by condescending to include them as faithful servants (Gunga Din is robbed of agency in the painting). As racial distinctions connote an essential cultural difference between the civilized and the barbaric (or those who can be civilized), there is no place in this narrative for a people who by blurring racial difference, also threaten the distinctions between the civilized and the barbaric.

Ultimately, the critical commentary on the painting and the comic descriptions of Thomas Henry are a satire on Anglo-Indian historiography that demands that the Community be presented as heroic. When Eugene scathingly describes the painting as “Victorian melodrama” he is not judging the role of the Anglo-Indians, British, or Indians in the Revolt, but critiquing the way these roles are aesthetically represented. In a witty pun, Eugene comments that Thomas Henry’s absence provides the only “relief” from “The Relief of Nakhlau.” Sealy does not deny the Anglo-Indian contribution to the British during the Revolt, but he does question the heroic mode deployed by Thomas
Henry. In contrast to Anglo-Indian historians who feel compelled to recreate the narratives of valor in order to incorporate Anglo-Indians into British historiography, he intentionally mixes genres (including the painting) and deploys criticism and humor to undermine any univocal account of the Community’s role in the Revolt. He therefore provides an alternative model to a historiography that, as I will later demonstrate, traps the Community in a tragic narrative.

If Eugene criticizes the British and Anglo-Indians for writing heroic accounts, in an interesting twist in the text, he argues that popular Indian cinema is a contemporary rendition of Victorian melodrama. The epic scale of the conflict, the division of the cast into heroes and the villains, and sentimentality are all hallmarks of Bombay cinema.17 For Eugene, the only “relief” from this exaggerated narrative is the interval in the middle of the movie, when it is possible to buy snacks. The reader is meant to be suspicious of Eugene’s claim because not only is the comparison forced, but Eugene is a glutton and will do anything for the sake of food. If Eugene is an unreliable narrator, then his evaluation of “The Relief of Nakhlau” is also suspect, and so Sealy wishes to make the reader aware of the contingency of any critique.

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17 Sealy’s second novel, Hero: A Fable, is a satire on Bombay cinema. He therefore might be aware that contemporary Indian cinema was strongly influenced by nineteenth century Parsi theatre, which in turn was influenced by Victorian melodrama. Parsi theatre and Bombay cinema are genres in their own right and were influenced by other sources—including the Hindu epics—so I am not suggesting that they were influenced only by Victorian theatre.
The Anglo-Indian Dialect and the National Movement

I have previously demonstrated that *Britain’s Betrayal in India* intentionally perceives Indian nationalism to be a political phenomenon. Anthony can therefore argue that Anglo-Indians can retain their middle-class culture even though they are a political minority. *The Trotter-Nama*, however, draws a correlation between political minoritization and cultural marginalization. It traces this marginalization of the Community to the rise of political nationalism in the late nineteenth century, and introduces it via the Community’s reaction to the heated debate surrounding the Ilbert Bill (1883-1884). The Bill created a controversy because it allowed Indian magistrates to judge European subjects. While it was embraced by Indian nationalists, it offended the sensibilities of the British, as well as the Anglo-Indians. In *The Trotter-Nama*, Thomas Henry’s daughter, Victoria Montagu-Trotter, leads Anglo-Indian opposition to it. In response to her husband and cousin who support the Bill (the only Anglo-Indians to do so), she retorts that “[i]t’s not right for servants and all to go judging their masters. I wouldn’t want an Indian to sit in judgment over me, and that’s that” (397, emphasis mine).

Victoria’s response ironically undermines her claim that Anglo-Indians are politically and culturally superior to Indians. Though she assumes that she does not belong to the inferior term of the two binaries—“servant” and “Indian”—she is not completely incorporated into the superior term. She can view herself as a “master” (as she assumes that Anglo-Indians are superior to Indians) but the word “me” hides the racial distinction between the Anglo-Indians and the British. These lines are more
significant, however, because they reveal the beginning of the cultural minoritization of the Community as the phrases “and all” and “that’s that” demonstrate a shift in the way Anglo-Indians speak in the novel. From this period onwards the text is peppered with similar phrases and words that reveal an “Anglo-Indian dialect” that distinguishes it from the “standard English” spoken by previous generations of Trotters. This shift is reaffirmed because Victoria, a parody of Queen Victoria, becomes a symbol of the transformation in the Community’s values and culture.

Though this change from standard English to dialect takes place within the confines of the Community, it is symptomatic of the changing status of Anglo-Indians from simply being one community among a number of others in India, to becoming a “minority” that must be contrasted to an “Indian” majority. It is not a coincidence that *The Trotter-Nama* introduces this dialect at the same time that it also introduces an “Indian” national consciousness. But as Partha Chatterjee has already informed us, before nationalism entered its political phase in the 1880s, a national culture had already been consolidated in the 1850s. I have already explored this in my analysis of *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, so here I briefly mention that if European culture was considered to be inferior within this narrative of Indian nationalism, then Anglo-Indians, who were racially and culturally mixed, were considered morally and socially degraded.

The relationship between cultural and political nationalism helps explicate why the Community in *The Trotter-Nama* is culturally marginalized at the moment when political nationalism asserts itself. As the novel progresses and explores the Community’s reaction to the national movement, Partition and Independence, and the five-year plans in
independent India, the Anglo-Indian dialect is more frequently used and reveals the 
continuing decline of the Community within the Indian social hierarchy. Sealy is careful 
not to make absolute claims, and so he also includes middle-class Trotters who use 
standard English. However, by the end of the novel Marazzi’s prediction comes to pass—
San Souci (the symbol of Anglo-India) is sold, converted into a hotel, and collapses 
during the monsoon rains, and Eugene, who earns a livelihood as a third-rate tourist 
guide, only speaks in the dialect.

The Possibility of Alternative Narratives

If historiographic metafiction, according to Linda Hutcheon, “abuses” but also 
“uses” history, then it makes sense that The Trotter-Nama accepts Britain’s Betrayal in 
India’s claim that after 1857 the Community was culturally, socially, and linguistically 
homogenous. Thus, while it explains the diverse political and cultural trends within the 
Community in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries through Mik, Henry 
Luis, Vivian, and Jacob Kahn-Trotter, during the Revolt of 1857, when Thomas Henry 
supports the British, the Community is not only politically and economically dependent 
on the British, but culturally identifies with the colonial state. After Victoria ascends the 
figurative throne of Anglo-India in the late-nineteenth century, the Community still 
identifies with the British, but is in the process of becoming culturally and politically 
marginalized by the national movement. Sealy does include alternative narratives into the 
two latter phases. Thomas Henry’s cousin, Alina, dresses like a “native” and speaks 
Hindustani and Montagu is an avowed nationalist, supports the Ilbert Bill, and wears a 
dhoti in public. But The Trotter-Nama is interested in representing the “larger” history of
Anglo-India, and in comparison to the detailed exploration of the multiple narratives in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, Alina’s and Montagu’s differences are marginal not only within the Community, but in the space they occupy in the text.

However, Anthony and Sealy have diametrically opposing views of the Community’s status in independent India which directly influence the way they construct their narratives. Anthony’s belief that Anglo-Indians will flourish in the secular time of the Indian nation leads him to prioritize the Community’s recent political struggles and depict it as middle class. The longest chapters in *Britain’s Betrayal in India* discuss Anthony’s battles to protect the Community in colonial and independent India (1942-1969) and defend the racial uniqueness and cultural practices of the Community after 1857. Though he does recognize the cultural diversity among Anglo-Indians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in Chapter 3, “Free Lance Soldiers: Scholars and Poets,” he mentions Anglo-Indian scholars of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, he also ignores the implications of this diversity because his primary purpose is to argue that the Community is culturally and linguistically homogenous. Within this larger narrative, the military exploits and the cultural diversity of a pre-Revolt Community only function to affirm the general character of the Community; to explore these figures in their own historical moment might weaken his argument about the homogenous culture of the contemporary community.

Writing twenty years later, Sealy believes that Anglo-Indians are economically and culturally marginalized in independent India. Only by recognizing that he is making a historicist claim about the Community, can we rationalize why he spends more than half
of *The Trotter-Nama* exploring the Community’s story between the mid-1750s and 1857, with decreasing amounts of space given to historical characters and events after the Revolt. And within this earlier period, the novel mainly focuses on the first two Trotters—Justin and Mik. On the one hand, this preoccupation with the distant past is an escape from an increasingly restricted narrative, for as “history” progresses the Community is ultimately stuck in a story in which it is culturally and economically marginalized. On the other hand, this is also an exciting period because of the fluidity and diversity within Anglo-Indian identity. But Sealy also parodies this history to avoid falling into a trap of lamenting the Community’s past, something that historical and realist accounts perpetuate.

Justin and Mik are “overdetermined” characters and comically treated in order to demonstrate a fluid Anglo-Indian identity during the early stages of colonial rule, and to prevent writing a tragic history of the Community. Justin is loosely based on Claude Martin, but he also resembles pre-colonial Mughal rulers, Babar and Akbar, and Mik is associated with James Skinner, Kipling’s *Kim*, and Krishna, the blue-skinned, semi-divine figure in Hindu mythology. However, Justin and Mik are also parodies of these historical, mythical, and literary characters. Justin, like Babar, willingly sacrifices his life

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18 Babar was the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India that lasted three hundred years in North India between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the height of its power in the seventeenth century, the Mughal Empire stretched from Kabul in Afghanistan to the Deccan plateau in southern India. It was Akbar (Babar’s grandson) who was primarily responsible for creating the Empire. At the same time, he is also considered to be respectful of the diverse faiths practiced within the Empire. Krishna, an incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu, played an important role in the Hindu epic, the Mahabharatha. In his youth he was mischievous and had amorous relationships with milk maids.
to save his son from illness, but whereas Babar dies so that Humayun may live, Justin continues to flourish after Mik is saved. Though Mik’s early life resembles Kim’s, there is a sneaking suspicious that Mik (the short form of Mikhail) and the Buddhist lama are Russian spies who blow up buildings that represent colonial authority.¹⁹ And as famous military leaders (Claude Martin and James Skinner) of Anglo-India, it remains unclear whether Justin and Mik win their battles by skill or by accident.

By associating Justin and Mik with figures in Hinduism, Islam, and Anglo-India, *The Trotter-Nama* simultaneously explores the cultural diversity of the pre-revolt Community and uses these multiple and discontinuous texts to prevent the Community from being considered tragic. For instance, Justin straddles Christianity and Islam as he gives up his European attire for an “Islamic” dress that he realizes is more suitable for the heat. Though Islamic and Roman Catholic rites are used at Justin’s funeral, his “subjects” believe that he is Muslim and so he is buried accordingly. Mik is culturally associated with diverse Indian traditions, suggesting that an exclusive Anglo-Indian identity has not been established. He prefers to live with the Buddhist lama, rather than join the Upper Military orphanage for Anglo-Indian boys in Calcutta, and is associated with Krishna and the nilchis, suggesting a close affinity between Hindus and Anglo-Indians. However, Justin and Mik are not ethical models to be imitated. Justin, on occasion, sadistically abuses his subjects and Mik, as discussed previously, brutally suppresses the nilchis.

The overdetermination of character, the use of parody, and the sense of humor undermine Justin and Mik as characters in their own right. Rather, it is their textuality that is foregrounded. The emphasis on character as “text” as opposed to character as “individual” refuses to let the reader sympathize, dislike, or identify with either of these characters, and so they do not come across as heroic, tragic, or unethical. Though *The Trotter-Nama* does pay attention to Justin and Mik’s descendents— Thomas Henry, Victoria, and Montagu—they are not fully developed characters that the reader can identify with. Through the overdetermination and the range of characters, Sealy refuses to allow the reader to be emotionally invested in the novel. Rather, these strategies prioritize an intellectual or cerebral engagement with the Community’s history, and so, even while the Community’s fortunes decline through the centuries, the novel does not turn into a tragedy.

**Conclusion**

From one perspective it would seem that *Britain’s Betrayal in India* and *The Trotter-Nama* prioritize mutually exclusive periods of Anglo-Indian history. The former examines the political challenges the Community faced in early and mid-twentieth century India and the latter extracts suppressed Anglo-Indian histories in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, I have argued that both construct their narratives in response to whether they believe that the Community can enter the secular time of the Indian nation as equals to the Hindu majority or whether it is a “backward” minority.
In *Britain’s Betrayal in India*, Anthony argues that Anglo-Indians are economically and socially progressive and will contribute to the development of independent India. In order to support this claim he conceptualizes an Anglo-Indian identity and a secular national culture in such a way that they complement each other. Yet there are fissures in his conceptualization of community and nation; these become apparent when he has to fight for minority rights in Parliament and when he has to defend the Community’s insularity. Through an analysis of Anthony’s text, I have demonstrated that secular nationalism is undergirded by Hindu nationalism and is compatible with difference and discrimination based on caste. At the same time, Anthony’s cultural referents are primarily colonial. He thus tacitly assumes that Anglo-Indians are middle class and racially different from Indians. By constructing Anglo-Indian identity in this manner, he does not need to address the national stereotypes that would otherwise threaten his confidence that the Community will prosper in India.

*The Trotter-Nama*, published twenty years after Anthony’s text, assumes that the Anglo-Indian community has not been able to enter the secular time of the Indian nation as equals. I have argued that Sealy draws a direct correlation between the rise of Indian nationalism and the Community’s gradual economic and cultural decline. He therefore recreates a historical period in which colonial and national narratives had not been consolidated, and correspondingly, Anglo-Indian identity was fluid. At the same time, *The Trotter-Nama* is a direct response to *Britain’s Betrayal in India*. It is equally “epic” in its scope, discusses the same historical events and figures, and most importantly, intentionally examines those moments in Anglo-Indian history that *Britain’s Betrayal in
India glosses over. Whereas Anthony examines the past to legitimize the “heroic” nature of the Anglo-Indian community at the present moment, Sealy parodies this past in order to avoid constructing a tragic narrative of the Community, given its current marginalization in India.
CHAPTER FOUR

BETWEEN THE COMMUNITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL: THE POLITICS OF SECULARISM AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN ROHINTON MISTRY’S FAMILY MATTERS

On those rare occasions when Homi Bhabha discusses his personal life, it becomes clear that the theoretical concepts associated with his name—hybridity and third space—derive, in part, from his experiences growing up as a Parsi (those who follow Zoroastrianism) in the city of Bombay. In “Between Identities,” an interview with Paul Thompson, Bhabha describes Parsis as having “a distinctive flavour, or style, rather than a distinctive tradition” (181). They are a minority community that immigrated to India from Persia in the seventh century and were favored by the British during colonial rule. These diverse influences—Persian, Indian, Colonial—resulted in a family lifestyle that Bhabha calls “postmodern.” Thus, in his home, modern European art works existed beside the sacred Zoroastrian prayer table, the family was equally familiar with French literature and Parsi traditions, and he listened to conversations in French and Gujarati (184). According to Bhabha, the city of Bombay too, at its best, also had “a mixture of cultures, a cosmopolitanism: an ability to cite and quote and relocate, repeat and revise cultural styles, traditions and identities, which is quite remarkable” (187). These diverse and sometimes disparate experiences that he was exposed to are echoed in his conception of the “third space,” which he describes as “a space that is sceptical of cultural
totalization, of notions of identity which depend for their authority on being ‘originary’ or concepts of culture which depend for their value on being pure” (190).

Not all Parsis of Bhabha’s generation are convinced that cosmopolitanism can stem the desire for authenticity within communities. Though the Parsi fiction writer Rohinton Mistry shares Bhabha’s experience—he also grew up in Bombay, is equally at home in Western culture and Zoroastrian traditions, and established a reputation in literary circles after migrating to the West (Canada)—he believes that the cosmopolitan sensibilities of the Parsi community and Bombay are continuously threatened by the impulse for narratives of purity within both. At one level, the difference between these two Parsis is one of emphasis. Both recognize the alternative perspective, but whereas Bhabha believes that the diversity of cosmopolitan Bombay (and by extension, the Parsi community) will overcome the desire for authenticity, Mistry is afraid the former will be suppressed by the latter. At another level, the difference between the two lies in their conception of politics. For Bhabha, the existence of disparate cultures in the same space creates the conditions that allow the individual or the community (Parsis and Bombay) to remain skeptical of cultural totalization. Mistry does not foreground this tension between cultures; rather, he argues through his fiction that the secular, rational—though by no means, abstract—individual must vigilantly guard against the claims of homogenous narratives that remain intolerant of diversity.

The individual’s attempt to navigate between the claims made by his/her community and the public culture (usually represented by the city of Bombay) is the dominant theme in all of Mistry’s fiction—Swimming Lessons, and Other Stories from
Firozsha Bagh (1987), Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1995), and Family Matters (2002). However, whereas the first three publications explore the problems in the 1970s—corruption of the state machinery, the vulnerability of marginalized groups and religious minorities, and the disparity between the middle-class (to which the Parsis belong) and the poverty of the majority—his most recent novel, Family Matters, is set in 1995 and pays attention to the rise of religious fundamentalism in the public (Bombay) and private (the Parsi community) spheres. Within the Parsi community it explores the increasing intolerance of the Orthodox faction towards diversity; within Bombay it examines the dominance of the Shiv Sena (a militant Hindu political party) which suppresses minorities and those individuals who demand that India continue to be guided by the secular principles it was founded on.

The exploration of religious intolerance in Family Matters takes place against the crisis of the secular state in India and the rise of Hindu nationalism in the mid-1990s. While the Hindu Right failed to effectively mobilize popular opinion for forty years after independence in 1947, it gained a great deal of publicity after its kar sevaks (volunteers) destroyed the Babri Masjid (mosque) at Ayodhya on December 6, 1992. The subsequent riots between Hindus and Muslims all over India heralded the rise of the Hindu Right in the public sphere. The riots were especially horrific in Bombay, and the Shiv Sena, an

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1 In his most recent work Mistry seems to be shifting away from an interest in public and community identities. In 2008 he published a single short story entitled “The Scream” that deals with an elderly man coming to terms with his impending death in his Bombay apartment.
ultra-nationalist Hindu party that instigated them, won the Maharashtra state elections and used its power to discriminate against minorities.

Given the significance of this historical event and the work that has been generated across disciplines—history, political science, literature, theatre and film studies—with regard to secularism, religious fundamentalism, faith, and communal violence in India, it is odd that very few literary critics have engaged with *Family Matters*. This lack of critical attention is more unusual because Mistry has established a reputation as a skilled novelist; his previous novels were short-listed for the Booker Prize, and *Family Matters* received very positive reviews from *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New Yorker*.² Perhaps one reason for the lack of attention is that though *Family Matters* takes place in 1995, in the aftermath of the Hindu-Muslim riots, its exploration of Indian secularism—the idea of “unity-in-diversity”—reflects concerns of the 1970s and 1980s. This, I would argue, is due to Mistry’s diasporic status. Despite his desire to engage with India so as not to be viewed as an apathetic migrant, the novel reveals that he is unfamiliar with the current debate over secularism in India after the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s. Another reason is that in comparison to *A Fine Balance* (which many consider to be his magnum opus), *Family Matters* pays more attention to the anxieties regarding Parsi identity in the private sphere, and though events in the public sphere have consequences for the Parsis, these events become a backdrop to the crisis within the Community.

Despite these two limitations in Mistry’s work, I argue that *Family Matters* is still relevant because in presenting the perspectives of two minority communities it intervenes in debates about secularism, minority rights, and the rights of communities as opposed to those of the individual. The novel engages the public sphere by examining the anxieties of an Indian cosmopolitan class, a tiny minority that consists of a conglomeration of Anglicized Indians who are marked by their fluency in English, are highly westernized, and are predominantly urban. Deploying the theme of Indian secularism—unity-in-diversity—this class aspires to cultivate its own cultural identity in the public sphere, but given that it is extremely small and elite, it falters in the face of the intolerance of Hindu nationalism. I argue that Mistry, who belongs to this class, is deeply ambivalent in his representation of it. Though he is critical of the cosmopolitan class’s fascination with the West, the novel is permeated with those very cultural referents that distinguish this class from other Indians.

However, Mistry’s exploration of extremism within the Parsi community is extremely significant for theorists debating the relevance of secularism in South Asia. Peter Morey, one of the few critics to have engaged *Family Matters*, has argued that the novel explores how religious intolerance in the private sphere of the Parsi community parallels Hindu fundamentalism in the public sphere. While Morey’s point is valid, I argue that it is through Mistry’s critique of a “secularized” Parsi identity that he makes a nuanced intervention in the current debate regarding secularism and religious

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3 See Peter Morey, “Communalism, Corruption and Duty in Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters*.”
fundamentalism in South Asia. Secularized religious or ethnic identities construct authoritative narratives of community that highlight their purity, claim to be culturally homogenous, and implicitly suggest their superiority over other groups. While all communities—majorities and minorities—are susceptible to these secularized narratives, secularized majorities in democratic societies are the most dangerous because they can use their numerical strength to oppress minorities.

Postcolonial critics like Partha Chatterjee and David Scott argue that a polity based on the rights of all communities, as opposed to one based on democracy (through which majority communities dominate the public sphere because of their numerical strength), could protect religious and ethnic minorities. Mistry reveals problems with this alternative through an examination of it within the confines of the Parsi community. Instead, Mistry, I argue, prioritizes the secular individual, one who needs to maintain “a fine balance” between one’s religious identity and individual desires, acknowledging the necessity of both even while being aware of their limitations. Mistry’s solution is also unusual as most contemporary South Asian fiction in English prioritizes “faith”—something which recognizes and respects the plurality of religious doctrine and personalizes the relationship between the devotee and God—as an alternative to secularized identities. In Anil’s Ghost (2000) by Michael Ondaatje and The Hungry Tide (2005) by Amitav Ghosh, faith becomes an anchor for people who are otherwise threatened by the rhetoric of religious nationalism, an impersonal government, or the

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3 For a critique of secularized religious identities and for the necessity of communal rights, see “Secularism and Tolerance” by Chatterjee and Refashioning Futures by David Scott.
forces of nature. Both texts are skeptical of the ability of the secular, rational individual to negotiate these problems. Mistry disagrees with this trend in contemporary postcolonial literature; he critiques faith and emphasizes the individual’s ability to discern the problems that s/he has to face.

Before I explore secularism in *Family Matters*, a brief summary of the plot will be helpful to substantiate my claims. The novel is narrated by an omniscient narrator and takes place in 1995, two years after the Bombay riots. Though the seventy-eight-year-old Nariman Vakeel stays in a spacious seven-room apartment with his middle-aged stepchildren, Coomy and Jal Contractor, their relationship is not cordial, and when he breaks his ankle he is sent to live with his own daughter, Roxana Chenoy. This development creates financial and emotional complications in Roxana’s household, because the Chenoy family, which includes her husband Yezad and their two sons Murad and Jehangir, live in a one-bedroom apartment and are barely able to sustain a middle-class lifestyle. Feeling pressured to earn more money, Yezad, who is the manager of a shop that sells sports equipment, schemes to earn a larger salary by trying to convince the owner, the ecumenical Mr. Kapur, to stand for elections in order to root out corruption and challenge the Shiv Sena. His scheme has tragic consequences when the Shiv Sena has Mr. Kapur killed. Coomy also dies; not wishing Nariman to return, she intentionally damages the ceiling of his room and is accidentally killed when a beam falls on her. In the meanwhile, Yezad is unable to bear the emotional and financial strain he is under; he gradually turns to religion and becomes a devout Parsi, a far cry from his initial skepticism towards religious faith. The epilogue takes place five years later and is written
from Jehangir’s perspective. We discover that Nariman has passed away, the Chenoy family has moved in with Jal after Coomy’s death, and Yezad has turned into a religious fanatic. Tension continues to pervade the family as Yezad demands that Murad, who is now a rebellious college student, be mindful of Zoroastrian traditions. The novel concludes with Jehangir saddened at his father’s behavior, but aware that he has to negotiate between his responsibilities to his family and the Parsi community, and his own individual desires.

Constitutional and Cosmopolitan Secularisms

The crises that keep recurring within the Parsi family in *Family Matters* are caused by the failure of two forms of secularism: secularism as a political doctrine and a cultural project to protect minorities in the public sphere and the “secularization” of the Zoroastrianism within the private sphere. I deal with the consequences of the secularization of Zoroastrianism later in the chapter; here I focus on the failure of secularism as a political doctrine and cultural project in the public sphere.

In “The Road to Xanadu: India’s Quest for Secularism,” Rajiv Dhavan distinguishes between “secularism,” which is conventionally understood to connote a division between church and state, and “Indian secularism” as embodied in the Indian constitution, which officially recognizes the different religious communities in India and charges the government with the responsibility of benignly supporting and celebrating all faiths. Given the historical context within which the constitution was framed—the violence between Hindus and Muslims at the time of Partition, and the deep faith that people had in religion—the framers felt the necessity of not only protecting the
fundamental rights of citizens, irrespective of their religious affiliation, but also
protecting and supporting each religious community (48–50). It is within this context that
two seemingly contradictory forms of secularism exist in India: first, the idea of the
abstract Indian citizen whose individual rights must be guaranteed by the state; second,
“unity-in-diversity,” which emphasizes the importance of the different religious communities within India. I will refer to this political doctrine forged by the state as
“constitutional secularism.”

Aditya Nigam is critical of constitutional secularism, tracing the rise of these two aspects of secularism—unity-in-diversity and the abstract Indian citizen—to the idea of
“secular nationalism,” a cultural project that evolved out of the Indian national movement in the 1940s, most clearly represented in the writings of Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister. In *The Insurrection of Little Selves: The Crisis of Secular-Nationalism in India*, Nigam argues that unlike Gandhi, who recognized the importance of different religious communities and agonized over the conflicts between Hindus, Muslims, and Dalits (of the “Untouchable” caste) while steering the national movement against British rule, Nehru claimed that Indian nationalism represented the abstract Indian citizen. He marginalized the anxieties of religious minorities who sensed that the national movement paid more attention to the Hindu majority. Their suspicion was valid as Nehru collaborated with Hindu nationalist organizations, like the Hindu Mahasabha, who also prioritized India’s independence over the rights of minorities. However, once India achieved independence, Nehru sidelined the Hindu nationalists, accommodated the concerns of minorities, and propagated the idea of unity-in-diversity. Nigam’s argument
here is that despite Nehru’s claim that secular nationalism promoted unity-in-diversity, in reality, it conceived of Indian history and culture within a Hindu ethos:

I have been arguing that not only was Nehru a Hindu by default, and drew on the work done by Hindu scholars before him, but that there is something in the abstract universalism of secular modern politics and its understanding of Progress and History, that, in its effort to erase markers of difference, privileges the dominant/majority culture as the norm. By de-legitimizing such difference and disallowing articulations of “different” voices, modern secular universalisms reproduce the common sense of the dominant/majority cultures as hegemonic.

(73)

Though Nigam correctly makes the connection between an abstract secular citizenship and an upper-caste Hindu identity, he does not take into consideration how ethnic and religious minorities viewed secular nationalism. Emphasizing the theme of unity-in-diversity, minority communities presented different ways through which the abstract Indian was imagined. *Family Matters* evokes secular nationalism, but from a minority perspective that demonstrates a very different “Indian” ethos from that of the upper-caste Hindu norm. However, in order to distinguish it from the majoritarian variant of secular nationalism, I will refer to it as “cosmopolitan secularism.” It is also important to emphasize that constitutional secularism has a powerful appeal to elite ethnic and religious minorities because it allows them to imagine a cultural space within India where they can see themselves on par with the Hindu majority. I argue that *Family Matters* explores this intersection between constitutional and cosmopolitan secularisms, revealing
the flaws of both and lamenting their failure to provide a solution to the corruption and
the rise of Hindu fundamentalism that dominates contemporary India.

Constitutional Secularism and the Public Sphere in *Family Matters*

The failure of constitutional secularism is a recurring theme in Mistry’s novels. In
his first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), the residents of an all-Parsi apartment
building are temporarily able to prevent the municipal authorities from breaking down a
wall, one that protects their privacy from the public sphere, when an artist paints symbols
of the different religions in India on it. While the wall comes to symbolize unity-in-
diversity, reminding the state that it needs to be sensitive to the concerns of minorities, it
develops “sacred” proportions when passers-by stop to pray to their respective gods.
However, the novel ends tragically when the municipality decides to demolish the wall
anyway, revealing that the autonomous state, in prioritizing its own agenda, fails to
recognize that it exists to serve the people, including minorities.

In *Family Matters*, constitutional secularism comes to be represented by The
Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium, the shop where Yezad works, and the Jesuit school
that Murad and Jehangir attend. The sports shop becomes a symbol for the Indian nation-
state, as Mr. Kapur, a Hindu, is the owner, Yezad, a Parsi, is the manager, and Hussein, a
Muslim, is an employee. This echoes the secularism that the State disseminated through
advertisements in cinema halls and national television in the 1970s and 1980s that
portrayed a variety of people marked by their religious affiliation coming together to
express their solidarity as Indians. Mr. Kapur, in the cooperative spirit of the Indian
constitution, practices unity-in-diversity: “‘You know my policy: in our cosmopolitan
shop, we honour all festivals, they all celebrate our human and divine natures. More the merrier”” (253). He takes this sentiment a step further when he decides to propagate this form of religious harmony and contrasts the ideals of the Constitution with the Shiv Sena: “If the Shiv Sena crooks can get thousands from us, why not some gifts for the children in our neighborhood? Besides, they will learn about other communities and religions, about tolerance, no? They hear enough from Shiv Sena about intolerance”” (314).

Likewise, St. Xavier’s, a Jesuit school and minority institution, becomes a replica of the Indian nation where students learn the virtues of good citizenship. Miss Alvarez, Jehangir’s teacher, has student monitors evaluate the homework of their peers in order to make them aware of the necessity of social responsibility:

The goal, she said, was to inculcate the qualities of trust, honesty, and integrity in her students. She told them that the classroom was a miniature model of society and the nation. Like any society, it must have its institutions of law and order, its police and judiciary. And it could be a just and prosperous society only when the citizens and the guardians of law and order respected and trusted one another.

(188)

Students therefore give up their social and cultural baggage when they enter the classroom; they are turned into abstract citizens who need to be trained in the way that the state (represented by the teachers and class monitors) and civil society (the rest of the students in the classroom) function.

However, these diverse formulations of the secular in the public sphere break down in the novel. Mr. Kapur’s murder at the hands of the Shiv Sena results in the
closing of the shop, that symbol of religious harmony; Yezad and Hussein are unemployed, and so forced to rethink their futures, literally, as individuals, and symbolically, as communities (348–149). While this breakdown reveals the failure of secularism to check the rise of the Hindu nationalism, Mistry suggests that there are problems internal to the practice of secularism. Even in the highly controlled space of the classroom, abstract citizenship fails to take root, and the economic concerns of the outside world corrupt it. Wealthy students bribe Jehangir, a class monitor, with money so that they can be excused from doing their homework. Jehangir, who wishes to supplement the family income that is being drained in looking after Nariman, at first takes this money hesitantly, but then begins to aggressively extort money from students (191, 210–212).

If corruption proves to be one stumbling block towards the propagation of secularism, another problem is the failure of the state to implement the ideals of constitutional secularism in the public sphere. Unity-in-diversity should have led to the majority Hindu community to be familiar with and welcoming of the religious practices of minorities. However, in *Family Matters*, the misunderstanding between Mr. Kapur, playing Santa Claus, and a Jain father and daughter, while humorous, reveals the potential hostility of (some, not all) Hindus towards diversity:

“Rona nahi [Don’t cry], my child,” said Mr. Kapur, holding out a hand from which she flinched. “You understand English?”

“My daughter is in standard one, English medium,” said the father haughtily, insulted by the question.
“Excellent,” said Mr. Kapur. “So why are you crying, my little girl? You’ve never seen Santa Claus?”

The father said frostily, “We follow the Jain religion.”

“That’s good,” said Mr. Kapur. “Myself, I am Hindu. But no harm in a bit of Christmas fun. And modern Santa Claus is secular, anyway.” (318–319)

While the little girl’s fear is understandable, the father’s hostility towards Christmas and Santa Claus reflects the inability of the state to disseminate a secular culture that professes to celebrate the cultural practices of minority communities. Yet the tense exchange between Mr. Kapur and the girl’s father reveals an overlap between constitutional secularism (unity-in-diversity) and cosmopolitan secularism. For middle-class Indians of Mr. Kapur’s generation, educated in English medium schools (first run by European Christian missionaries, and later mostly by the Christian minority) and familiar with European culture, Christmas is not exclusively associated with Christians (“Santa Claus is secular”), and so can be celebrated by people belonging to other communities without impinging on their own religious beliefs. Christmas, therefore, is part of a cosmopolitan culture. The Jain pair come to reflect those struggling to be incorporated into the Indian middle-class; the father’s “haughty” claim that his daughter is in an English medium school is a defensive reaction to Mr. Kapur’s confusion as to whether the Jain family fit the expectations of the English educated class (Notice that Mr. Kapur first uses Hindi—“Rona nahi”—and then switches to English when talking to the girl). However, the failure to recognize the cultural connotations of Santa Claus and the hostility towards this allegedly secular symbol also reflect a certain change in the cultural
make up of the English-speaking middle-class sensibility, from one that is cosmopolitan to one that is redefining itself within a Hindu middle-class ethos.

*Family Matters* holds two aspects of constitutional secularism accountable. First, though India under Nehru carried out a project of heavy industrialization in order to create jobs and eradicate poverty, the failure of this project resulted in an expanding middle class being underemployed. Yezad’s failure to gain employment suitable to his college degree and his inability to sustain a middle-class life-style leads members of the family—Yezad and Jehangir—to become corrupt. Furthermore, corruption is also clearly apparent in those who are economically successful, as the boys who bribe Jehangir belong to affluent families. Therefore, the project to create the ethical abstract Indian citizen seems to have failed. Second, secularism as cultural practice has not been able to cultivate an awareness and sensitivity towards religious and cultural practices of minorities.

The Absence of Popular Politics

In *Family Matters* the demise of constitutional and cosmopolitan secularism leads to a political and cultural vacuum in the public sphere. However, Mistry’s representation of the public sphere in Bombay does not consider the contemporary conversation on secularism and the alternative political practices being discussed in India. Not only has a large section of the middle-class intelligentsia, including social activists, feminists, and lawyers, criticized the state for not disseminating unity-in-diversity effectively, but have begun to actively interact with working-class people, and pointed to the independent
action taken by the Hindu and Muslim working class against Hindu fundamentalism.\(^4\)

The social activist and theatre practitioner Rustom Bharucha has summarized both cultural movements in his book *In the Name of the Secular*. He describes the attempts made by middle-class theatre activists to challenge the dominance of the Hindu Right in the public sphere and the formation of mohalla (neighborhood) committees that consist of working-class Hindus and Muslims who have begun to talk to each other and come to respect each other’s differences for the sake of communal harmony. Bharucha describes these movements as parts of the “democratization” of secularism. Unlike constitutional secularism that is disseminated by the state, democratic secularism is a result of the active participation by citizens to resolve the conflicts of everyday in the public sphere.

Mistry is partially unable to explore the diversity of social movements that have challenged the Hindu Right since the destruction of the Babri Masjid because he writes about India from the diaspora. Yet a close examination of his representation of the working-class characters and middle-class social activists in *Family Matters* reveals that Mistry is skeptical of any kind of progressive politics in the public domain. This is a recurring perspective in Mistry’s novels. For example, Nagesh Rao critiques *A Fine Balance* for only sympathizing with the marginal characters, but that

the element of subaltern activity, of political agency, … is constantly kept at bay.

The murdered student revolutionary, the numerous anti-government protests that are mentioned in passing and the occasional newspaper articles about

\(^4\) See Anand Patwardan’s *Father, Son and Holy War* and Meher Prestonji’s *Mixed Marriage and Other Stories* and *Pervez: A Novel*. 


troublemakers and strikers alert us to the presence of organized resistance. This resistance, however, hovers phantom-like in the background, unseen and unheard throughout the novel. *A Fine Balance* thus accomplishes the task of evoking the reader’s sympathy, but it remains fundamentally blind to the possibility of the agency of the subaltern classes.⁵

Rao simply makes a claim about the politics of the novel and not about Mistry. However, the similarities that I see between Rao’s critique of *A Fine Balance* and my analysis of *Family Matters* reveal that Mistry belongs to a cosmopolitan class that is uncomfortable with a progressive politics where its perspective is not prioritized. Working-class characters and middle-class social activists are caricatured in *Family Matters*. Hussein, the peon, suffers from depression because he is traumatized after seeing his family killed and his house burned down during the Hindu-Muslim riots. When he isn’t depressed, Hussein is stereotyped as the endearing servant, and comes across as child-like: he desires to please Mr. Kapur by literally forcing children and their parents into the shop to receive Christmas goodies; like the children, he is horrified at seeing Mr. Kapur transform into Santa Claus; he gleefully shares a beer with Mr. Kapur and Yezad; and he panics when he hears that Mr. Kapur has been threatened by the Shiv Sena. Hussein is clearly sentimentalized and is the most developed example of the poor, the working-class, and the marginalized who are only victims of circumstances and oppressive forces.

Mistry also uses Vilas, Yezad’s friend, who reads and writes letters for laborers, to

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present a litany of one-sided horror stories of village life where the poor are continuously oppressed. If all the working-class characters are consistently sentimentalized and lack agency, the two middle-class social activists and reporters, Gautam and Bhaskar, are comics. Though they are committed to fighting the Shiv Sena and social evils—domestic violence, corruption in the political and administrative class, and gambling—they consistently bicker over the finer points of theatrical execution: what constitutes hamartia and catharsis, and theories about the relationship between actors and their audience (287). Vilas calls them “pseudo” as they have “become blind to real life with their intellectualizing. Stanislavsky-this and Strasburg-that, and Brechtian alienation is all they talk about” (181).

Mistry’s representation of working-class characters as victims and middle-class social activists as caricatures fails to recognize the kind of work being done by both these groups in India, as is evident in Bharucha’s account, but also reveals an unease with a progressive politics in the public sphere. Democratic forms of the secular undermine the character of cosmopolitan secularism because the former depends upon cultural and political engagement with diverse political and cultural actors, something that threatens the isolation and privilege of the latter. Thus, it is easier for Mistry in Family Matters to represent the dominance of the Hindu Right in the public sphere, sentimentalize the working class as victims, and draw caricatures of middle-class activists who attempt to improve the public sphere. In this way, the novel could have justified its lack of engagement in the public sphere and maintain its isolation by withdrawing exclusively
into the private sphere. I am criticizing Mistry, not because he doesn’t pay adequate attention to the public sphere, but because of the problematic way in which he does.

The Ambivalence towards Cosmopolitan Secularism

If cosmopolitan secularism fails to make inroads in the public sphere in *Family Matters*, it flourishes in the private sphere. Yet Mistry remains uneasy in his representation of it. Though the Parsi characters celebrate or reminisce about Christmas (309, 323, 335) and converse with ease about British literature, Western classical and popular music, American films, and British and American historical figures, Mistry is ambivalent towards these cultural references. For instance, though the Chenoys live in a one-bedroom apartment on the verge of poverty in the bustling city of Bombay, both Murad and Jehangir are steeped in British children’s fiction. Jehangir imagines himself to be part of Enid Blyton’s Famous Five and fantasizes about living in the English countryside, having his own room, eating an assortment of English food, and changing his name to John Chenoy (79). In response to Murad and Jehangir’s identification with “Western” norms, Yezad feels that his children “needed … an Indian Blyton, to fascinate them with their own reality” (101). Yet Mistry is also ambivalent towards Yezad’s desire that his children engage with their own social context, for at the very next moment in the novel Yezad serenades Roxana by singing along with Englebert Humperdinck on the radio (101), oblivious to the fact that he too is completely at “home” in Western culture.

In an interview with Angela Lambert, Mistry expresses his “double” ambivalence about his own relationship to Indian and Western cultural norms. Having grown up in Bombay and received an education in an English medium Jesuit school, Mistry confesses
that the English-educated class he belonged to was more familiar with British literature than with Indian writing. On the one hand, he does not denounce his Westernized upbringing, yet on the other, Mistry reveals that “[p]art of the tragedy of the educated middle classes in Bombay was this yearning for something unattainable that came from what they had read. Would that sense of a future elsewhere have been avoided if we had concentrated on an Indian literary canon? I don't know” (“Touched with Fire”). Mistry’s yearning, a result of being schooled in British literature and living in India, suggests that he acknowledges a binary opposition between Indian and Western identities and cultures. Thus, while Yezad’s desire for an “Indian Blyton” might be ironic, as he too is Westernized, it is a genuine heartfelt lament that though this particular class lives in India, its cultural referents are always outside it.

While Yezad’s and Mistry’s laments are sincere, implicit in their desire for the creation of an Indian Blyton is an impulse towards cultural hegemony in India. The necessity of an Indian Blyton assumes the absence of this particular cultural norm in India, that none of the other cultures or traditions in India can be adequate substitutes, and therefore the desire of this cosmopolitan class to create and propagate its own cultural values. Antonio Gramsci, the cultural Marxist, provides the means to think through the larger implications of Yezad’s remarks. Gramsci argues that every class creates its own intellectuals, and the purpose of these organic intellectuals is to provide a sense of “homogeneity and an awareness of [the class’s] own function not only in economic but also in social and political fields” (5). Apart from giving the group a sense of purpose and direction, the organic intellectuals help facilitate the hegemony of the
group over civil society by asserting its culture as normative (12–13). In the Indian context, secular nationalism, Hindu nationalism, and cosmopolitan secularism are cultural representations of specific social groups who compete with one another to define “India” and what it means to be “Indian.” While a cosmopolitan class is tiny in comparison to the social groups that advocate secular nationalism or Hindu nationalism, what is significant is the desire or the impulse of this group to formulate an Indian culture, one in which its experiences will be seen as the norm. Yezad’s lament reveals that Mistry is in search of an Indian experience that embodies the culture of the cosmopolitan class which can be propagated in the public sphere. However, in the absence of this norm, the novel continuously oscillates between a secular Western culture and Parsi traditions and values.

In my analysis of Family Matters, I foreground a distinction between “Western” and “Indian” in order to explore the dilemma and the aspiration of the cosmopolitan Indian class to represent the Indian nation. My interpretation therefore goes against the recent trend in postcolonial criticism that deconstructs binaries, especially ones that juxtapose an “essential” Indian national identity with an “alien” Western culture. In “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” Homi Bhabha interrogates the idea of univocal nationalism by arguing that the modern nation is not

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7 See Dominance Without Hegemony by Ranajit Guha and The Nation and its Fragments by Partha Chatterjee for an examination of the way in which Indian nationalism attempts to represent the larger Indian population and aspires to define what it means to be Indian.
homogeneous but inherently ambivalent, existing in double time through the pedagogical and the performative:

We then have a contested cultural territory where the people must be thought in a double time: the people are the historical “objects” of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the “subjects” of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process. (297)

The point that Bhabha makes is that the articulation of the pedagogical and the performative in the same place produces a liminal space that resists the linear narrative of national pedagogy. It is this liminal space that allows for a minority discourse to disrupt any claims of some essential origin of national identity.

To read *Family Matters* within this framework, one could argue that Christmas, the Western cultural referents disrupt the pedagogy of Hindu nationalism and secular nationalism, inasmuch as these Western cultural norms evoke a different narrative of what it means to be Indian. An article by Rashna B. Singh entitled “Traversing Diacritical Space: Negotiating and Narrating Parsi Nationness” makes such a claim about the novel. Singh’s argument, which she derives from Bhabha, is that those cultural attributes associated with the West also have a legitimate value, and to juxtapose Western referents with Indian ones assumes an essential Indian culture that suspiciously represents India in
terms of an exclusively Hindu identity while ignoring the fact that India also consists of cultural elements that can be described as Hindu, Parsi, and Western, among others (42–45).

I argue that this kind of critical engagement, of which Bhabha’s work is representative, has limited value for two significant reasons. First, if Mistry, as author of the novel, views this Western/Indian binary as essential to understanding the experience of the cosmopolitan class, then we need to explore the significance of this binary as opposed to simply deconstructing it. In addition, while postcolonial critics are justified in being critical of this binary as it becomes a convenient tool for the forces of nationalism to assert a homogeneous national identity and undermine differences within the state, Mistry writes from the perspective of a minority, even if it is a cosmopolitan class, and so we need to pay close attention to this subject position and not simply prioritize currently popular modes of analysis. The second reason derives from the first; the two parts of the binary that Bhabha deploys—the pedagogical and the performative—are conceived as inherently neutral entities, with the former being problematic because it is dominant and suppresses difference, while the latter is significant because it challenges the norm. This allows critics to present Indian and Western cultural norms as value-free, and so they legitimize Western cultural referents that undermine an essentialized Indian culture. However, my analysis demonstrates that the cosmopolitan class, in competition with secular nationalism and Hindu nationalism, strives to present a secular culture in order to claim a hegemonic status over other communities in India, and so I call into question the innocence or value-free cultural practices of this elite minority. I have demonstrated that
the novel sentimentalizes the working class in the public sphere and is isolated from the popular politics which would highlight its own cultural and political isolation. The point here is not to summarily dismiss Western cultural practices, just as it would be inappropriate to condemn an upper-caste Hindu culture, but to realize that they, like other cultural norms, are encoded with specific values that represent specific classes or social groups that strive to dominate civil society. The framework of the pedagogical and the performative fails to take into consideration the complex ways in which the Western/Indian binary operates between these rival social groups.

Colonialism and the Secularization of Parsi Identity

If *Family Matters* deals with the anxieties of the cosmopolitan class in the public sphere, it also explores the relevance of cultural values that are associated with the Parsi community. The crisis within both social groups is not a coincidence, but stems from their imbrications with colonial power. This is most clearly elucidated in the novel through the debilitating effects of two significant cultural norms—honesty and racial purity—that are viewed as intrinsic to Parsi identity. These norms that came to be identified with the Parsi community were part of a broader reformulation of Zoroastrianism during colonial rule—a process that is described as “secularization.” I need to elaborate on what the process of secularization involves in order to fully demonstrate the implications of Mistry’s critique of Parsi honesty and racial purity in *Family Matters*. Therefore, I briefly discuss the way in which secularism developed in Europe and how it was introduced and revised in South Asia during colonial rule. The formulation of secularism in Europe and South Asia is complicated by the political and
social contexts in each region, so my discussion is confined to those aspects of secularism (in these regions) that influenced the Parsis when they reformulated Zoroastrianism in nineteenth century India.

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor explores the secularization of religion in Europe through two significant movements. First, in the “social imaginary” there was a gradual shift in the understanding of moral obligation from carrying out one’s duty on Earth so as to guarantee the individual and humanity’s place in God’s everlasting kingdom, to doing one’s duty for the sake of the improvement of the individual and the community’s existence—or “the common good”—during their time spent on Earth. More significantly, moral obligation, which earlier depended upon (supra-rational) obedience to God’s will, was replaced by a morality that had to be justified according to the dictates of “reason.” Second, with the introduction of reason, a faith-based community was replaced by secularism that consisted of both, multiple faith-traditions and a public sphere of rational individuals, who could decide what the common good was. Faith-based communities remained important, but became one among a number of options that the rational individual could choose from. Similarly, the individual’s identity became separable from previous determinants such as ethnicity and nationality.

But the rise of the public sphere and the rights of the autonomous individual also had significant implications for faith-based communities. While the state protected these communities from a potentially intrusive public sphere, they in turn, were influenced by the rationale promoted by the state. Like the state, faith-based communities prioritized the common good of the people in secular time. In addition, “faith,” which had been less
formal and did not make distinctions between the public and the private gave way to “religion,” which consisted of a set of fixed principles, beliefs, and practices that could be practiced exclusively in the private sphere. It should be pointed out that while this newly formulated religion was compatible with goals of the public sphere, this transformation from faith to religion took place within the communities themselves.

Colonial rule introduced and mediated the secularization of religion in South Asia, and this has had a significant impact on the way religious communities came to comprehend themselves. In *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*, David Scott argues that the secularization of religious communities in Ceylon/Sri Lanka during British colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries played an instrumental role in creating the conflict between Sinhala-Buddhist majority and the Tamil-Hindu minority. Scott, influenced by Foucault, argues that in the nineteenth century the colonial government ruled Ceylon on the basis of communal representation, and though it decided to recognize the rights of individuals in 1930, these communal identities had already been coalesced, and the Sinhalese, who were the majority, came to dominate the political process. Furthermore, British Christian missionaries tried to convert the Sinhalese by demonstrating the superiority of a “rational” Christianity over the “superstitious” faith of Buddhism. In response, the Sinhalese selectively appropriated cultural values from Buddhism and a pre-colonial Sinhalese history to demonstrate that Buddhism and the Sinhalese people were more rational than Christianity and the British colonizers. This rationalization of Buddhism and the dominance of the Sinhalese majority in the colonial public sphere resulted in the creation of a Sinhala-Buddhist national movement that
challenged colonial rule, but also began to see itself as superior to other communities, like the Tamils (who were predominantly Hindu) and the Muslims. Scott’s larger argument is that the Sri Lankan state is in a moment of crisis because Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism asserts its democratic credentials (it represents the majority) and deploys rational arguments—the historical evidence of a glorious Sinhala-Buddhist past—to justify the marginalization of minorities. Scott therefore argues that there is an urgent need to break out of these narratives of secularized identities and instead emphasize the importance of the rights of each community, irrespective of its size, history on the island, and whether or not it is guided by reason.

Before I discuss how *Family Matters* intervenes in this debate about the current crisis of secularized identities in South Asia, I need to demonstrate how the Parsi community was secularized in colonial India. While the Sinhalese rationalized Buddhism in order to challenge colonialism in Sri Lanka, the Parsis, a minority in India, rationalized Zoroastrianism in order to align themselves with the colonial order. In *The Good Parsi*, the anthropologist T. R. Luhrmann argues that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Parsi community appropriated a set of cultural attributes associated with the British in order to demonstrate that they were more rational than other

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While the Sinhala-Buddhist and Parsi identities were both secularized during colonial rule, the secularization of Hinduism, which began during the colonial regime, was completed only after India achieved independence. Gail Omvedt discusses the reconstruction of Hinduism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Partha Chatterjee examines how the independent Indian government codified Hinduism into a set of rules and laws that were governed by “reason” and were considered progressive. See “The Construction of Hinduism” by Omvedt and “Secularism and Tolerance” by Chatterjee.
Indian communities. According to Luhrmann, “Like the British colonizer, the good Parsi
was more truthful, more pure, more charitable, more progressive, more rational, and more
masculine than the Hindu-of-the-masses” (16). She argues that in order to conceive of
themselves as more rational and inherently different from Indians, the Parsis selectively
reinterpreted a set of universal morals that Zoroastrianism ascribes to a good person—
truthfulness, purity, and charity—and combined these with less central concerns to pre-
colonial Parsis, such as progressiveness and rationality, to create an intrinsic cultural
identity. Some of these values that Zoroastrianism shared with Hinduism were
transformed into a powerful political argument to show that Parsis were superior to
people belonging to other religions. Thus, religious virtues such as truthfulness,
associated with business; purity, associated with the need to avoid the contamination of
unclean objects (a value also practiced by Hindus); and progress, associated with the
ethical progress of the world, came to be associated exclusively with Parsi identity. Parsis
now saw themselves, in comparison with other Indians, as intrinsically truthful, racially
pure, and rationally and socially progressive. For instance, the idea of charity moved
from the realm of religion to the political and economic sphere. Therefore Parsi charity
was viewed as superior to Hindu charity because while the former was rational in that it
had helped build the city of Bombay, the latter simply advanced the establishment and
enhancement of religious sites (Luhrmann 99–107).

Luhrmann demonstrates throughout The Good Parsi that with the rise of the
national movement, India’s independence, and the growth of an Indian middle class
whose cultural referents are grounded in Hinduism, the idea of Parsi difference is in
crisis, as the values and norms that the community appropriated to distinguish itself from other Indians no longer have the same cultural valence. Her argument is similar to Scott’s, in that both point out how secularized identities in South Asia have led communities to define themselves in essential ways that might have been effective during colonial rule but have led to an impasse at the contemporary moment. In Sri Lanka, the creation of a Sinhala-Buddhist identity does not allow the Sinhalese majority to accept that minority communities deserve equal rights; in the case of the Parsi community in India, the idea of Parsi difference—represented through Parsi honesty and racial purity—developed during colonial rule has proved to be an impediment to its ability to adjust to present-day India.

In *Family Matters*, Mistry uses “myth” as a device to explore the secularization of Parsi identity. Later in the chapter I will examine how myth becomes the means through which the Community can avoid being trapped in a secularized narrative; in this section I explore how myth is used to criticize the secularized value of Parsi honesty. Mr. Kapur trusts Yezad with the shop’s finances because “the Parsi reputation for honesty [was] well known” and wishes that “more communities” were equally responsible. Even though Yezad is skeptical about the intrinsic honesty of Parsis, Mr. Kapur suggests that “even if it’s a myth—there’s no myth without truth, no smoke without fire” (134). The second example that comes to symbolize Parsi honesty is the clock which the bank presented to Yezad’s father, its employee, in gratitude for risking his life to protect its money (201). The repeated references to the clock and the story behind it demonstrate that the Parsi community sees honesty as integral to its identity. Yezad uses the story to inculcate
honesty in his children (201), and it, in turn, prevents him from stealing Mr. Kapur’s money (324).

In the contemporary moment, Parsi honesty, which came to be a marker of Parsi identity during colonial rule (as the above examples reveal), cannot adequately address the complex problems in the public and private spheres. Note that in the quotation above, when Mr. Kapur wishes that “more communities” were as honest as the Parsis, he implicitly contrasts an ethical minority with a corrupt majority and laments that honesty is not an ethic in the public sphere. Mistry hints at the complexity of this problem:

Though Mr. Kapur and Mr. Hiralal, the diamond merchant who buys Yezad and Roxana’s apartment, praise the Parsis for their honesty, they deceive the state by refusing to pay their taxes. Yet they defend their deception on the grounds that the government is corrupt and charges an exorbitant rate of interest on income (134, 388). Similarly, within the Community, Jehangir and Yezad turn to blackmail and gambling respectively, not because they are immoral, but because they wish to maintain a middle-class lifestyle.

Towards the end of the novel, Yezad and Roxana sell their house on the black market in order to avoid paying the tax imposed by the government (388). Yet the myth of Parsi honesty is directly challenged through the devolution of Yezad’s character. He starts out as the epitome of the masculine Parsi, physically strong, ethical, and Westernized, and as the novel progresses he schemes, evades paying his taxes, and ultimately refuses to accept responsibility for Mr. Kapur’s death. Notice that the contrast between past honesty and present ambiguity is structured along the lines of “narrative” versus “plot/action,” respectively. As Parsi honesty is simply constructed through a narrative of past—myth
and the story of the clock—Mistry does not deny its factuality but also suggests that it is reductive. I will return to this problem later in my chapter; here I simply want to point out that the plot of the novel undermines the narrative or the myth of Parsi honesty.

Secularization, Racial Purity, and Interreligious Marriages

In addition to their presumed honesty, the idea that Parsis were a unique and racially pure community was another means through which the community attempted to distinguish itself from other Indians. Jesse S. Palsetia’s book-length study of the Parsi community, *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City*, points out that while it was common practice among the pre-colonial Parsis to practice rituals belonging to Hinduism and Islam, to pray to deities of other religions, and to frequent places of worship that belonged to other faiths, by the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries these practices were banned because they undermined the purity of Parsi identity. However, the ban was not imposed by the Parsi religious authorities, but by the Parsi Punchayat, a select group of lay members elected to lead the Parsi Anjuman (Community) of Bombay. Though, historically, authority within the Parsi community resided with the priests, by the end of the eighteenth century the Parsi Anjuman in Bombay began to define Parsi identity by decreeing which practices were considered Zoroastrian and which were not. Exercising this authority was possible because the Bombay Parsis had become extremely wealthy and influential by collaborating with the British, and the colonial government recognized the Parsi Anjuman of Bombay as the representative of all the Parsi communities in India and the overseas colonies. Previously, a priestly class prescribed religious practices, but because its authority was not
centralized, religious strictures had never been absolute. However, during colonial rule the Bombay Anjuman secularized Parsi identity because it became the sole arbiter in deciding the religious prescriptions of Zoroastrianism and the definitive cultural practices of the Parsi community. In the following passage, the term “Parsi” is interchangeable with the term “Parsi Anjuman”:

It is significant that the Parsis were particularly concerned with the regulation of those features of community life that affected the cohesiveness of the community. It was over such issues as marriage, gender duties, and religious observances that the Parsis came to define the features of their social, cultural, and religious identity. (Palsetia 93)

Whereas the Parsi Anjuman successfully suppressed the diverse beliefs and practices among the Parsis in order to construct a Parsi identity that could be conceived as exclusive and different from other Indian communities, the idea of racial purity was constantly threatened through inter-religious marriages. Beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing to the contemporary moment, the Reformists within the Community have wished to recognize marriages between Parsis and non-Parsis, whereas the Orthodox faction has evoked the narrative of racial purity, one that has its roots in the construction of Parsi identity during colonial rule. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the idea of racial purity was easier to defend in the context of an Indian middle class that consisted of different religions and castes that did not usually intermarry; however, with the increase and diversification of the Indian middle-class, especially one
that is predicated on being cosmopolitan, the argument for racial purity is less convincing.

The debate has been further complicated by an increasing number of Parsis who have migrated to Australia, Europe, and North America, where they have formed their own organizations that have undermined the authority of the Bombay Punchayat. In “Parsis in India and the Diaspora in the Twentieth Century and Beyond,” John R. Hinnells discusses a growing number of organizations, such as the Federation of Zoroastrians Associations of North America (FEZNA), Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe (ZTFE), and World Zoroastrian Organization (WZO), that have come to represent the growing population of Parsis in the diaspora (265–272). Some of these organizations have begun to recognize that the Community needs to adapt to changing environments and discard some of the values appropriated. For instance, the key issue for FEZNA is inter-religious marriages, and though the controversy has not been resolved, the spouses and children of these relationships are “quietly welcome at most functions” (269, emphasis added). The WZO has proven to be more controversial because it openly recognizes inter-religious marriages and wants to accept converts into the community (271–272).

While Mistry fails to represent the more radical reformulation of secularism from the perspective of economically marginalized social groups in Bombay, he is aware of the current debate over inter-religious marriages within the Parsi community. Family Matters refers to the controversy in the early nineteenth century between the Orthodox and Reformist factions (406), and examines it more closely in the mid-twentieth century
through the debate between Mr. Vakeel, Nariman’s father—a member of the Orthodox faction—and Mr. Arajani, a Reformist. The conflict between the two erupts when a Parsi priest carries out the najvote ceremony (through which an individual is formally incorporated into the Parsi community) on a child whose mother is Parsi and whose father is not. Whereas Mr. Arjani accuses Mr. Vakeel of being a racist, Mr. Vakeel defends his position on the grounds that “the purity of this unique and ancient Persian community, the plinth and foundation of its survival, [is] being compromised” (113).

More significantly, the plot turns on the stigma of inter-religious marriages. Through Nariman’s dreams we discover that as a young man his parents dissuaded him from marrying Lucy Braganza, a Christian. Obeying his parents, he enters into a loveless marriage with a Parsi widow, Yasmine Contractor, and adopts her two children, Jal and Coomy. Though the birth of Roxana does provide the family with a glimmer of hope, Lucy, devastated by his actions, gradually becomes senile and attempts to commit suicide by jumping off the roof of the building where Nariman lives. Yasmine tries to pull her off of the parapet, but they both fall, and Nariman, who is on the roof with them, fails to hold them back. Coomy suspects that Nariman might have intentionally let them die, and this suspicion creates a tense and bitter relationship between stepfather and stepdaughter. Nariman is thus sent to Roxana’s house when he breaks his ankle, which in turn leads to problems in the public and private spheres. Fragments of the Lucy-Nariman-Yasmine story are revealed through Nariman’s dreams, and the anguish that he experiences suggests that he realizes he made a mistake in listening to his parents, and that Jal, Coomy, Yasmine, and Lucy pay the price for it. Fifty years later, on the cusp of the
twenty-first century, the controversy is introduced once more as Yezad, who has become a zealot, criticizes Murad for dating a Hindu.

It would seem, then, that this controversy surrounding inter-religious marriages is a recurring problem for the Parsi community, and that the conflict between Yezad and Murad is the latest round in the fight between the Orthodox and the Reformists. However, though Mr. Vakeel and Yezad are similar in that both believe in the purity of the Parsi race and culture, Yezad’s extremism is qualitatively different from that of Mr. Vakeel. Towards the end of the novel we discover that despite Mr. Vakeel’s affiliation with the Orthodox faction of the community, he and his family did keep relics and pictures associated with Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam (421–422). While this act is superficially an expression of constitutional secularism, in actuality it reveals the limits to which the Parsi community was secularized; people maintained faith in other religious deities despite the attempts of the Anjuman to weed them out. Yezad discovers these objects and consults the Orthodox section of the community who decide that they need to be discarded, a signal that the kind of religious ecumenism practiced by Mr. Vakeel is no longer appropriate (426–427). In contrast to Mr. Vakeel, who can exist with the conflicting narratives of religious ecumenism and racial purity, Yezad is an extremist. He comes to the conclusion that Mr. Kapur’s murder, Coomy’s accidental death, and Jal’s decision to invite the Chenoy family to live with him in Chateau Felicity were divinely ordained because these incidents have turned him towards religion. At the end of the novel, Yezad refuses to work and devotes his life to following religious prescriptions. He
imposes rules of purity and pollution on the family, and commands Roxana to stay in seclusion when she is menstruating (428–430).

*Family Matters*, therefore, is critical of the secularization of religion. Whereas Taylor views the secularization of religious identity in positive terms because it allows the individual to choose whether he or she wishes to participate in a specific religious community, in the postcolonial context, as explored through Scott, Luhrmann, and Mistry, the secularization of religion perpetuates a religious identity that sees itself in competition with other secularized identities. Through the differences between Mr. Vakeel and Yezad, the novel explores the ability of faith to exist in the gaps of a secularized Parsi identity, one that not only tolerates but also accepts and participates in a diverse set of religious beliefs that are not rationally justified.

Religion-as-Faith and Secularized Ritual as Alternative Solutions

Though the injunction against inter-religious marriage is the origin for much of the suffering in the novel, Mistry does not repudiate religion completely and makes a distinction between secularized religion and faith. Another way of contrasting secularized religion and faith is to use the distinctions made by Ashis Nandy—“religion-as-ideology” and “religion-as-faith.” Religion is ideological, according to Nandy, when its goal is to protect the “non-religious, usually political or socio-economic interests” and it becomes dependent on a text that prescribes the specific rituals and behaviors that the community must adopt. By contrast, religion-as-faith is “a way of life, a tradition that is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural.” While the two forms are not mutually exclusive and can overlap, one way to think of the difference “is to conceive of ideology as
something that, for individuals and people who believe in it, needs to be constantly protected and faith as something that the faithful usually expect to protect them” (322).

Though religion-as-ideology has much in common with secularized religion—they both are ideologically grounded in protecting extra-religious interests—religion-as-ideology does not necessarily imply the rationalization of religion, something distinctive to a secularized religion. For instance, a secularized religious identity and religion-as-ideology might both evoke a narrative of racial purity; however, a secularized religious identity will have to use reason to defend this claim whereas religion-as-ideology is not obligated to do so. For the context of my paper religion-as-ideology and secularized religion are used interchangeably.

In *Family Matters*, one could argue that both religion-as-ideology and religion-as-faith are present in Mr. Vakeel. On the one hand, he is a purist (as he is opposed to inter-religious marriages) but on the other hand, he follows a pre-secularized Parsi practice of not simply tolerating, but worshiping deities belonging to other communities. These opposing formulations of religion are separately examined though Coomy and Roxana. Mistry explores religion-as-ideology through Coomy who practices the rituals out of a sense of duty and prioritizes these over her responsibility to people around her. For instance, she considers it her duty to visit the fire temple on her mother’s death anniversary while Nariman, who has just been discharged from the hospital, remains uncared for (53). By contrast, Roxana is pragmatic about her religious obligations, carrying them out only when she doesn’t have to look after the family. The rituals also give her a sense of peace and fulfillment, something Coomy never seems to have, and
even though Roxana encourages her sons to partake in the rituals, she does not impose these upon them.

Yet Mistry does not whole-heartedly endorse religion-as-faith; rather, his perspective on ritual is complicated. In his interview with Lambert he confesses that he is “not a practicing Parsi [sic] but the ceremonies are quite beautiful. As a child [he] observed [them] carefully in the same way as [he] did [his] homework, but it has no profound meaning for [him]” (“Touched with Fire”). How are we to unpack this paradoxical response—rituals are aesthetically pleasing but practiced out of a sense of obligation? This paradoxical perspective is also evident in the novel. Mistry remains skeptical of religion-as-faith while criticizing religion-as-ideology, and yet the three most powerful and evocative passages in the novel describe the Parsi ceremonies and rituals.

We can only appreciate the power and the beauty in Mistry’s description of the rituals in these three passages if we realize that he is tapping into, perhaps unconsciously, a pre-modern conception of ritual and revelation. In *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Talal Asad explores the transformation of the meaning of ritual from the pre-secular era to the modern world. He makes a distinction between the Bible as “the letter of divine inspiration” in a pre-modern era and the Bible as “a system of human significances” in the modern secular world. Before modernity, the divine word was material and the devotee’s body was “taught over time to listen, to recite, to move, to be still, to be silent, engaged with the acoustic of words, with their sound, feel, and look. … The proper reading of the scriptures that enabled [the devotee] to hear divinity speak depended on disciplining the senses (especially hearing, speech, and sight).” This
relationship between the devotee and scripture changed with the introduction of Higher Biblical Criticism which “rendered the materiality of scriptural sounds and marks into a spiritual poem whose effect was generated inside the subject as believer independent of the senses.” By the time of the Reformation “an unmediated divinity became scripturally disclosable, and his revelations pointed at once to his presence and intentions” (38, emphasis added).

Though Zoroastrianism in India was secularized during colonial rule and the “good Parsi” was modeled on the colonial Englishman, it is problematic to explore ritual in the novel about twentieth century Parsis by referring to transformations in religious practice in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. My application of this idea to Mistry’s exploration of ritual is ahistorical, but it does provide me with the means to make sense of his paradoxical perspective in the interview. By comparing rituals to homework Mistry secularizes the former; by implying that he was obliged to carry them out he makes no correlation between the practice of the ritual and an insight into the divine. At the same time, he describes the rituals as beautiful, which suggests that he is able to relate to them at some level that is not rational, beyond the outward expression (signifier) of an idea (signified), whether it is the beauty of the words, the intonation of the chant, or the physical gestures involved, or some combination of the three.

In Family Matters rituals are described on three different occasions, and their beauty and power do make an impact on the characters and the reader. All three descriptions of ritual are equally important. The first two map Yezad’s transformation from an agnostic to a devout Parsi in order to retain some security in a world—public and
private—that is spiraling out of his control. In the first scene Yezad sees a man praying at the fire temple; he is tempted to partake in the ritual because it brings back pleasant memories of his childhood (266-268). In the second scene, Yezad decides to visit the temple and the description reveals how the power of ritual can provide solace. The detailed descriptions of formal elements required to practice the ritual (wearing the cap with the seams at the back) and the particular structure of the ritual (beginning with the prayer before offering the sacrifice) are represented as a rediscovery of a past that Yezad has voluntary given up, but realizes that he always has access to because of a bond that depends on what might be described as a “filial” structure. For instance, despite his rational assumption that the steps in the ritual are arbitrary, his “training from decades ago forced him” to say the kusti before taking his offering to the fire. It is through this instinct that he rediscovers that he can recollect the prayer with ease:

And now, to [Yezad’s] amazement, the words of Kem Na Mazda rose silently to his lips as though he’d been reciting the prayer all his life, morning and night, without missing a day. Phrase upon phrase, into the next section, through Ahura Mazda Khodai and manashi, gavashni, kunashni, into the final preparation for retying the kusti. (294-295)

Note that Mistry does not explain (to his non-Parsi reader) what the significance of the ritual is, but simply describes its performance. Yezad is surprised that he (re)discovers the pleasure in practicing the ritual—the chanting and the tying of the kusti. However, the ritual does not only involve his physical senses. He is reminded of his childhood when he visited the fire temple with his parents, but it also takes him back to a distant and
imagined past when he realizes that his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents must have stood in front of the same fire which has been burning for a hundred and fifty years (295-296). If the secular time of the nation-state brings disillusionment, the “higher time” where ritual connects the generations to one another provides Yezad with a community, one that, unlike the cosmopolitan elite or the secularized Parsi community, is not ambivalent about its identity. There are a couple of moments in this section when Mistry explains facets of rituals for a non-Parsi audience, but by and large the reader simply remains an observer of Yezad’s reawakened religious sensibility and gains a glimpse of the beauty that Mistry sees in ceremonies and rituals of the Parsis.

Yet Mistry is skeptical of religion. If Yezad initially turns to ritual for protection from the vicissitudes of the outside world, he later stringently practices rituals because he believes that religion needs to be defended from the corruption of the outside world; religion-as-faith turns into religion-as-ideology. Though Roxana never turns to religion-as-ideology—she is critical of the menstruating laws—her faith is also criticized. In the epilogue she fails to understand why Zoroastrianism becomes a point of contention between the religious Yezad and the secular Murad. Jehangir, who narrates the epilogue, points out that his mother refuses to acknowledge that Yezad’s extremism is a result of his dependence on religion and not because of the influence of his Orthodox friends, whom she blames (405). Implicit in Jehangir’s comment is the fact that Roxana’s faith will never allow her to criticize religion.

Though Mistry is critical of religion-as-ideology and religion-as-faith, he still acknowledges the importance of religion. His ambiguous comment in the Lambert
interview—that he finds the rituals beautiful but they have no profound meaning for him—is best summarized through Nariman’s perspective on rituals in *Family Matters*. Returning from his stay in the hospital, Nariman is disappointed that Coomy is not present to perform the Parsi ritual of greeting. Though Nariman, Mistry informs us, “never set great store by rituals,” the “Parsi traditions around birthdays, navjotes, weddings, arrivals, departures normally earned [his] indulgence” (53). It remains unclear as to why Nariman enjoys certain rituals and not others; we never know whether his choice of rituals is based on an arbitrary desire or whether it is based on a rational choice. However, it is significant that all the rituals mentioned are auspicious occasions that affirm a sense of community; their celebration depends upon the interaction between human beings who practice the same religion, and reinforce a sense of group identity. The pleasure that Nariman’s takes in these Parsi celebrations needs to be distinguished from the personal solace that Yezad and Roxana achieve through their practice of ritual. Neither does this sense of belonging depend upon or perpetuate a secularized identity or history. In this conception of religion, rituals provide a sense of community identity and engage the physical senses of the participant. Religion is therefore secularized but works outside the paradigm of religion-as-ideology and secularized identity.

*Family Matters* affirms this alternative form of secularized religion in its conclusion through a detailed description of the ritual to commemorate Murad’s eighteenth birthday (431-432). On this occasion the religious Yezad and the secular Murad are able to put aside their differences for the moment and come to a brief reconciliation as father and son. There is always potential for the situation to turn ugly—
Roxana fears that Murad might be annoyed if Yezad begins a lengthy chant. But both characters compromise; Yezad does not begin a long prayer and Murad willingly participates in the ritual.

Myth and a Fine Balance: Solutions to the Secularization of Identity

I have discussed Mistry’s nuanced position on religion, one that rejects religion-as-ideology and is wary of religion-as-faith, but acknowledges the importance of religion that reinforces bonds within the community. However, the religious community is a supplement to a more significant identity—that of the secular individual—that displaces the secularized Parsi. Previously, I had hinted that Mistry problematized the secularized value—honesty—of the Parsi community by conceiving it as “myth.” I had demonstrated that this norm was constructed during the past—through the clock and Mr. Kapur’s assertion of Parsi honesty—but is constantly compromised through plot and action in the present as characters are forced to behave unethically to survive or be successful. This reinterpretation of secularized narrative as myth is most clearly elucidated in the novel when Vilas, Yezad’s Maharashtrian friend, suggests that Parsi honesty is a myth that does not serve the community in the present context:

“Myths create the reality. Point is, there was a time when living according to certain myths served your community well. With the present state of society, those same myths can make misfits of men. Even the British knew when to observe their myth of ‘not cricket, old chap’ and when to hit below the belt, kick you in the balls, poke you in the eyes.” (183)
If the myths of Parsi honesty and racial purity were effective strategies by which the Parsis gained leverage during colonialism, they have to be discarded because they are an impediment to the community’s growth in independent India. However, Mistry does not suggest the necessity for new myths; rather, the solution that he offers in the novel is that individuals need to maintain “a fine balance” between their desires and the expectations of the community that have become increasingly ineffective and even more dangerous.

The phrase “a fine balance” refers to the title of Mistry’s earlier novel that deals with the Emergency of 1975 when Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, suspended the civil rights of citizens and used it as an excuse to consolidate her power. During this period, Indira Gandhi’s political detractors were thrown into prison, slums were destroyed in the name of progress, and the poor were forcibly sterilized in order to curb the population. The novel deals with four marginalized characters: Dina, a lower-middle-class Parsi woman, Maneck, her paying guest, and Ishvar and Om, two Dalit (of the “Untouchable” caste) tailors employed by Dina. In a society that is being brutalized, these four characters are able to maintain their dignity by depending upon one another, and the barriers that divide them—class, religion, and gender—are gradually broken.

Towards the end of the novel, Dina, Om, and Ishvar make ethical choices and suffer as a consequence; Dina is reduced to the status of a servant in her brother’s house, and Om and Ishvar are forced to become beggars. Despite their suffering, Dina maintains contact with Om and Ishvar and looks after them whenever her brother is not at home. Maneck, by contrast, chooses to work abroad in order to become economically successful, and returns nine years later to discover that Dina, Om, and Ishvar are living in poverty.
Realizing that he has betrayed his friends, he commits suicide; he fails to maintain that fine balance between his ethical principles and a successful career.

*Family Matters* twice refers to *A Fine Balance*. Mr. Vakeel feels that the cause for Nariman’s attraction towards Lucy is “[t]oo many books. Modern ideas have filled [Nariman’s] head. He never learned to preserve that *fine balance* between tradition and modernity” (15, emphasis added). These lines turn out to be ironic because Nariman, in acquiescing to the pressure of his parents, deserts Lucy and marries a Parsi woman. In doing so, he fails to maintain that fine balance between the culture and traditions of the Parsi community and the changing ideals of a modern world. Vilas refers to *A Fine Balance* indirectly. When he isn’t working, he volunteers as a letter writer for illiterate migrant laborers. Trying to make sense of the suffering that he reads of in the letters, Vilas refers to *A Fine Balance*: “A while back, I read a book about the Emergency. A big book, full of horrors, real as life. But also full of life, and the laughter and dignity of ordinary people. One hundred percent honest—made me laugh and cry as I read it” (181). Vilas therefore represents the authorial figure of Mistry in the novel, who seems to be suggesting that in a world where the old myths of community are no longer relevant, the individual must maintain a fine balance between tradition and modernity and remain ethical despite the violence and the corruption, in order to live with a sense of purpose and dignity.

If Vilas, who remains distant from much of the action, is the authorial persona in *Family Matters*, Jehangir becomes its conscience. The novel traces the development of Jehangir’s character over the period that Nariman comes to live with them. As a nine-
year old boy, apart from desiring to live out his fantasies of an English middle-class lifestyle, Jehangir is engrossed with his picture puzzles, whose pieces he puts together to create the perfect idyllic scene. Witnessing the emotional and economic problems of his family, Jehangir wishes he could solve them as he does his puzzles, in order to create the happy harmonious middle-class family (249–250). However, by the end of the novel he becomes aware that despite his desire to inhabit Enid Blyton’s novels and his puzzles, they don’t help him address the problems that he sees around him. The epilogue of the novel, written from Jehangir’s perspective, takes place five years later, and becomes key to comprehending Mistry’s exploration of the problems within the extended Parsi family (the Vakeel-Contractor-Chenoy family). At the age of fourteen Jehangir has matured, and in the process of giving away his Enid Blyton books and his picture puzzles, he realizes that “[t]here is only one puzzle worth struggling with now” (426). In the immediate context, this statement refers to the information he has recently learned about the love triangle between Yasmine, Lucy, and Nariman. He realizes that there is no absolute truth to the tragic event of Yasmine’s and Lucy’s death: “the picture is still not complete. Like some strange jigsaw puzzle of indefinite size. Each time I think it’s done, I find a few more pieces. And its form changes again, ever so slightly” (426). However, given the larger problem in the epilogue—the quarrels between a religious Yezad and a secular Murad, as well as Roxana’s inability to realize the problem with her perspective—the puzzle refers to Jehangir’s desire to maintain a balance between these warring perspectives.
“The puzzle” becomes the dominant metaphor for navigating life that is now morally ambiguous; it replaces “myth” which asserted a confidence in the secularized norms of the Parsi community that helped it navigate the past. At the same time, an identity that is community based is displaced in favor of the secular individual. I have pointed out above that Mistry recognizes the importance of community, but he argues that community identity needs to be tempered by the individual who must be vigilant of the dangers of religion-as-ideology and religion-as-faith.

At the same time, Mistry cautions against the confidence of the secular individual. At the end of the novel Murad seems to be the opposite of Yezad; he is liberal, dates a Hindu girl, wears his hair short, and is critical of Yezad’s narrow interpretation of Zoroastrianism. Yet this difference between them is only apparent because Murad’s antagonism towards religion is equally “fanatical” and absolute: he compares Yezad to Hitler, intentionally offends him by disobeying the purity rules at home, and mocks his father, as opposed to trying to reason with him (418–420, 428–429). Each becomes intolerant of the values of the other. Ironically, Murad is an extreme version of a younger Yezad, who wore his hair long in college (which was considered rebellious) and was dismissive of religion. The novel therefore raises an important question: Could Murad, just like Yezad, turn to religion and become a fanatic if his irreligious perspective fails to sustain him through a crisis? Do Nariman and Jehangir, who participate willingly in the rituals of Zoroastrianism while always maintaining a critical perspective of it, be the alternative that balances religious and individual identities?
In contrast to Yezad’s religiosity and Murad’s liberal attitude, Jehangir attempts to achieve a balance. While Jehangir is saddened that his “real father is gone, [and has been] replaced by this non-stop-praying stranger” (434), he still respects his father, remains obedient to his parents, and carries out the rituals and the traditions that are considered important by them. Mistry’s larger point here is that one must constantly acknowledge and engage one’s religious identity in order to realize its strength and weakness. The book therefore emphasizes the perspective of the “secular” individual, for in the contemporary world where the “myths” of community are no longer adequate, the solution is not to retain old myths—like honesty and racial purity—or to create new ones—like an Indian Enid Blyton—but rather to prioritize the perspective of the individual, who must view life as a “puzzle” in order to carefully engage with the complexities and contradictions between the desires of the individual and the claims of community.

Conclusion

Mistry’s argument for a fine balance between the secularized narrative of the Parsi community and the individual’s desires is nuanced. It offers a solution to an important dilemma in Postcolonial Studies, one that wishes to affirm the rights of minority communities, while protecting the individual from being imposed upon by the community. *Family Matters* reveals the dangers of the secularization of religion championed by Charles Taylor, who assumes that with the creation of a public sphere the abstract individual can choose to participate in a range of political, social, and cultural organizations, one of them being the religious community. Instead, Mistry sides with the
postcolonial critic David Scott, who argues that as secularism in South Asia was mediated (and imposed) through colonialism, secularized religious communities began to claim their superiority over other groups, and in the contemporary moment these secularized identities have created and continue to perpetuate conflicts by highlighting their uniqueness and difference. Like Scott, Mistry calls for the discrediting of these secularized narratives. *Family Matters* demonstrates that the values of Parsi honesty and racial purity, which the community successfully incorporated during colonial rule, impinge on their development in an independent India. Mistry is not critiquing honesty per se, but demonstrating that Parsis depended upon this stereotype to intentionally distinguish themselves from other Indians. This might have been a valid means to define Parsi identity in colonial India when the community collaborated with the British. However, in the contemporary context, Parsi honesty intentionally perpetuates a sense of superiority, but ultimately, alienation from other Indians. Furthermore, it also reinforces the idea of racial purity and helps legitimize the opposition to inter-religious marriages. Mistry suggests that one way to think through this crisis of a secularized identity is to conceive of these norms as myths or narratives that are not absolute truths, but that did have the power to perpetuate certain models of behavior. Now that they are inadequate to resolve the problems that the Parsis face, it is necessary that these myths be discarded.

However, despite Mistry’s criticism of secularized identities, he disagrees with Scott, who suggests that communal rights provide an alternative. Communal rights, as *Family Matters* demonstrates, would allow powerful and extreme factions within communities to dictate what would or would not constitute a religious value or belief.
Apart from not allowing inter-religious marriages, the more extreme sections within the Parsi Orthodox faction would impose harsher rules on women. Mistry’s criticism here coincides with those of a number of critics, especially feminists, who point out that communities can be highly patriarchal, and in the name of communal rights, women are expected to bear a greater burden than men.9

If Mistry is critical of secularized religious identities and communal rights, his solution to the conundrum is to emphasize the importance of the secular individual, who is key to balancing the demands of both entities. He seems to be closely aligned to Taylor when making this argument as he puts the burden of responsibility on the individual. However, he differs from Taylor in his recognition that religious or ethnic identities have a deep impact on individuals and so cannot be easily discarded. Therefore, individuals must acknowledge the importance of religion and directly engage with it, and by doing so they can be aware of its strengths and its pitfalls. In this context, the puzzle becomes the ruling metaphor to comprehend the complexities of a world in which society is in flux: the myths that sustained the Parsi community and, by extension, a secular India, have either turned into or been displaced by religious extremism in the public and the private spheres.

While Mistry is aware of the current debate over identity within the Parsi community and he suggests a nuanced solution to this conundrum, his understanding of secularism in the public sphere is limited. Though he correctly demonstrates that

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9 See “Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies” by Kumkum Sangari and In the Name of the Secular by Rustom Bharucha, among others.
constitutional secularism promoted by middle-class characters, like Mr. Kapur, has failed to create religious harmony, he is unaware that contemporary theorists of secularism, like Bharucha, have argued that secularism is most effective when it is “democratized.” Bharucha examines how religious tolerance evolves through interaction and dialogue between those social groups that are most vulnerable to religious violence. I have briefly described his example of the mohalla committees in Bombay formed by working-class Hindus and Muslims to prevent inter-religious riots. Mistry is not able to present this position, partially because he lives in Canada but also because he belongs to a cosmopolitan community, one that has difficulty engaging with a politics other than its own.

Furthermore, his exploration of cosmopolitanism is marked by a sense of ambivalence. Thus, while a cosmopolitan culture is celebrated in the private sphere, Mistry suggests that this culture, with its Western referents, has no organic correlation to the lived reality of the English-speaking middle class in India. Towards the end of the novel, Mistry seems to be critiquing cosmopolitan values as Jehangir gets rid of his Enid Blyton books and picture puzzles, acknowledging that these fantasies have nothing to do with his daily experiences. Yet the anglicized values that Jehangir was inculcated with as a child still remain; at the very end of the novel, he and Jal attend the Bombay Symphony Orchestra (415–416). The point that needs to be underscored here is that just as Mistry demonstrates the necessity of paying attention to one’s religious identity as one cannot easily escape it, it is equally important not to summarily dismiss one’s class identity but
inhabit it, to acknowledge one’s ambivalence about it, and to remain aware of its limitations.
Dalit literature refers to the writings of the Dalit community, the lowest ranking group within the caste structure in South Asia. Traditionally known as Ati-Sudras, they have also been called “untouchables” in English, and are legally recognized as the scheduled castes by the Indian Government. “Dalit” is the word they use to describe themselves. The word is derived from “dal” which in Marathi means of the soil, or ground down. By extension the word Dalit means those who have been broken by caste exploitation. A dominant theme in Dalit writing is a protest against those social and government institutions, as well as those communities that have subjugated Dalits. In addition, Dalit writing explores their economic and social marginalization, the delimitating effects this has on their psyche, as well as their resistance to these various forms of oppression. However, it has also been enriched by diverse voices within the community, such as those of Dalit women who are doubly oppressed because of their caste and their gender. Dalit literature first received national recognition as a literary movement with the formation of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra in 1972, but developed more slowly as a body of literature in other parts of India. It was only in the late 1980s that Dalit literature in Tamil began to emerge as a literary field, and *Karukku*, the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in Tamil, was published in 1992.
Karukku examines the life of its author, Bama, and the Paraya community—the Dalit sub caste she belongs to—in relation to the Roman Catholic Church. While the community had converted to Catholicism because they were promised free education, and so by extension an opportunity to escape economic and social marginalization, the autobiography reveals that the Church in India, specifically in Tamil Nadu, practices caste discrimination, and uses religion to exploit and suppress the Paraya community. It also captures how the narrator takes advantage of the educational opportunities that Catholic institutions provide her, despite the discrimination she faces in these schools because of her caste. She decides to become a nun in order to serve the children of her community, but leaves the convent after she is continuously prevented from helping Dalit children and the poor. When Karukku was published in 1992, it offended the upper caste, middle class sensibilities of the Tamil literary establishment since Bama wrote in the colloquial language of the Paraya community. Furthermore, its harsh critique of the caste practices within the Catholic Church also upset the respective religious authorities.

Though it initially upset the Paraya community of her village because she exposed their life to the public eye, it became extremely popular within the Tamil Dalit community, especially since her writing coincided with the growing political and social consciousness of Dalits in Tamil Nadu.

Bama’s second novel Sangati (1994) is rooted in the perspectives of Dalit women who are doubly discriminated against because of their lower caste status, and by both upper caste and Dalit patriarchy. Like Karukku, it is written in the dialect of the Paraya community, but is considered a more radical work because the rhetoric is more powerful,
and it breaks down any notion of a plot. While Bama’s autobiography is non-linear with each chapter exploring a specific aspect of the life of the community and that of the narrator, such as work, recreation, religious festivals, and so on, there is still a semblance of an overarching story of the narrator from a child who becomes aware of caste discrimination, to an adult who is socially and mentally vulnerable after she is disillusioned by life in the convent. In *Sangati* there is no semblance of a plot; chapters are grouped around individual issues that concern Dalit women, though on occasions they do overlap and intersect. Each chapter consists of a number of stories that Dalit women tell each other, which are then discussed by the narrator and her mother or grandmother, and the narrator then provides lengthy commentaries on these conversations and stories. While the two texts are structurally different and conceive of different solutions to the problems posed, both use rationality to interrogate the structures of caste, patriarchy, and religious authority.

A Note on Translation

The growing political consciousness of Dalits and the development of Dalit literature in the 1980s and 1990s, has coincided with two important social and cultural movements in India and in the metropole. Since the 1980s there has been an increasing demand within India for Indian literature being translated into English, and various publication houses, such as Macmillan, Katha, Oxford University Press, and Penguin India, to name a few, have begun systematically translating Indian literature into
An important distinction needs to be made between the way publishing houses in India and academics, especially those in the metropole, perceive the problems with translating contemporary literary texts from Indian languages into English. While the former are interested in producing translations of high quality, they also take into consideration the marketability of a translated text. Academics by contrast, are sensitive to the dangers that literature translated into English in the metropole will be reduced to “Indian literature” or “Third world literature” in the metropole. In her essay “The Politics of Translation,” Gayatri Spivak distinguishes between a “reasonable” translation of the text and a translation that captures the “rhetorical” aspect of the original. For Spivak a reasonable translation emphasizes the grammatical aspects of the text, one that is preoccupied with a literal translation of words and sentences, and so makes it readable for

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2 However, academics in India have also made this argument. Meenakshi Mukherjee, professor emeritus at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, has criticized English translation of Indian texts as presenting a homogenous Indian culture. Kamala, N. “Gateway of India: Representing the Nation in English Translation.” *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era*. Eds. Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre. Ontario: University of Ottawa Press, 2000. 245-260.
an audience. By contrast, a good translation attempts to reproduce the rhetorical aspect of a text, or its “spirit,” so to speak, something which cannot be literally translated, and in doing so resists being easily consumed by readers. Writing within the metropole, Spivak is sensitive to the danger that literature written in different parts of the third world, if translated in a mediocre manner, will be in danger of being reduced to variations of one another; or as “Third World texts” that lack the originality or complexity of those written in the metropole.

In *Translating India: the cultural politics of English*, Ritu Kothari points out that while different publishing houses cater to different audiences, including international readers, they primarily market their publications towards a domestic audience (45). Therefore, even while publishers and editors in India state that they are concerned about the quality of their translations, they do not share the anxiety about the politics of translation that academics have in the metropole. Two recent interviews in *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India* (2008), between academics teaching at universities in the metropole, and publication houses and editors that have spearheaded the most recent explosion of Indian literature translated into English, reveal a clear discrepancy between what English comes to represent to both sides. In Bonnie Zair’s interview with Katha, the publication team pointed out that English translations reach a larger audience within India, and that English is the medium through which texts can then be translated into other Indian languages. When pressed by Zair to address the problem of “the global reach of anglophone dominance” the press felt it was inappropriate to view English as an “Anglophone” language, since this assumed that English was still a colonial
language. The team preferred to view English as an Indian language that provided a link between Indian people (121-122). Mini Krishnan, who as an editor at Macmillan was responsible for the publication of Karukku in English, and while working at Oxford University Press, oversaw the publication of the English translation of Sangati, provides a rather blunt response. When asked by Nalini Iyer how she ensures that Dalit literature is not “appropriated” through the translation in English, she responds by suggesting that the only other alternative is obscurity. Furthermore, she points that her role as an editor is to make sure that the author (assuming s/he does read English) is satisfied with the final product (127-128).

Writing within India, Kothari provides a nuanced understanding of the relationship between Indian literature and English translations. She suggests that the celebratory approach towards English translations in India avoids considering how it masks the cultural and political concerns of the urban English speaking middle-class, the class most interested in reading translated texts. However, to view English exclusively as a hegemonic language ignores how it has been appropriated by the middle class, and can no longer be considered a colonial language (34). I would argue that by extension, English cannot be considered to be exclusively the language of the metropole, and therefore it would be inappropriate to critique translations for not taking into consideration the concerns in the metropole. However, this is precisely what Anushiya Sivanarayanan criticizes the English translation of Karukku for doing.

In “Translation and Globalization,” Sivanarayanan critiques the English translation of Karukku for missing the nuances in the autobiography and so allowing for a
“singular reading” that focuses on “Dalit liberation”. This is partly due to the difficulty of translating the oral dialect of Tamil that the Parayas use into Standard English. For instance, in the Tamil version, there are lengthy passages in Chapters 2 and elsewhere where Bama’s personal suffering merges with the collective suffering of the Dalit community. The slippage between the “I” and the “We” in these passages “comes about at moments of extremely psychological stress when the normal machinery of communication seems to have broken down” (149). However, because English is unable to capture the nuances of an oral Tamil dialect, the passages break down into Bama’s individual voice of pain, and the stock choral voice of Dalit liberation rhetoric, which simply repeats “rationally stated claims for justice and pity” (149).

Sivanarayanan also argues that the translation intentionally imposes the framework of Dalit liberation at the expense of those ideas that would undermine this narrative. In the English translation the author’s preface foregrounds Bama’s claim to be a voice that speaks for the oppressed Dalits, whereas the Tamil version suppresses this idea, and emphasizes a “personal narrative of false starts, digressions, and circular arguments” (139). Furthermore, the contradictions that disrupt a clear narrative of Dalit liberation in the Tamil version are not contextualized in the translation. For instance, Chapter 1 mentions the Nallathangaal temple and the myth associated with it. However, the English translation fails to make apparent that this temple is space where non-Brahmin upper castes and Dalits worship together (149-150). Likewise, given the background of the discrimination against the Dalits by the upper-castes, the translation records the caste riot, but fails to mention that this is a fight between two Dalit groups.
While a Tamil audience would be aware of the background to both stories, an English speaking audience would interpret both stories as reinforcing the singular narrative of Dalit liberation, while not being aware that these stories undermine the clear division between (non-Brahmin) upper castes and Dalits.

However, Sivanarayanan is also critical of the Tamil version of *Karukku*, and she argues that it would be unfair not to give it “the same kind of literary respect that one might give to an autobiography by a non-Dalit writer …” (139). Thus, she also critiques Bama for being pre-disposed to examine the autobiography within the terms of her Dalit identity, and not interrogating or further exploring those moments in the text that question this narrative (148). Sivanarayanan also criticizes Bama for not delving into the personal reasons as to why she decided to remain single, leave the convent, and to live outside her village. Rather, Bama “presents these decisions as foregone conclusions rather than as the result of certain forms of critical thought” (142). Critical thought, according to Sivanarayanan, a concept she derives from Foucault, creates the possibility of allowing one to step back and, in this case, interrogate the only mode that Bama espouses, that of a Dalit woman (143).

There are two larger arguments that “Globalization and Translation” is grounded in. First, the danger that English translations of literature written by Dalits will be lumped together as “Dalit literature,” and the complexity and individuality of each text will be ignored. The second argument is that literatures written across different cultures and in different languages are open to the same methods of criticism. The second argument is prescriptive, as Sivanarayanan assumes that all literature, whether Dalit or non-Dalit, first
world or third world, must be evaluated according to the same literary and ideological standards, and for her, this happens to be those prescribed in the metropole. While Sivanarayanan does not refer to the metropole, she does refer to the phenomenon of globalization, which she describes as the “rapid dissemination of goods and labor in the international arena” (137). Furthermore, Sivanarayanan very consciously uses postructuralism (specifically Derrida and Foucault), a theoretical field that is currently popular among academics in the metropole, to critique Karukku for fixating on the politics of caste, but not interrogating moments that undermine this narrative. It is also prescriptive to assume that the tension between Bama’s individual narrative and her “agenda” with regard to caste politics, must consequentially lead to an interrogation of identity. Is it possible to read this tension in Karukku as an end in itself? Sivanarayanan similarly critiques Sangati for refusing even the ambivalence in Karukku and demanding that the reader examine this as a “Dalit” text, even though this is contradicted by the diverse stories of Dalit women (139-140).

Sivanarayanan's first argument is far more complicated. If Bama wishes to highlight the Dalitiness of her politics in the Tamil version, then it is appropriate that the translation emphasize this. Furthermore, as discussed above, the English audience in the metropole is not the target audience of the translation, so one should not expect it to prioritize the concerns of the metropole. Yet an examination of the criticism of Bama’s novels within the discipline of literary studies in English in India and the metropole validates Sivanarayanan’s concern. Two important full length essays on Karukku—Pramod K. Nayar’s “Bama’s Karukku; Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio” and M. S. S.
Pandian’s “On a Dalit Woman’s Testimonio”—provide an inadequate analysis of
Karukku. Nayar demonstrates that the autobiography is a “witness” to the suffering of the
Dalit community, and suggests that it needs to be understood within the conventions of
“testaments” that are used by the oppressed people in different parts of the world.
Similarly, Pandian’s article highlights the non-linear structure of the autobiography, and
claims that it has an anti-bourgeois perspective because it puts an emphasis on the
community’s suffering as opposed to the individual’s story. Sivanarayanan holds Nayar’s
essay as an example of the way the English translation of Karukku lends itself to be read
as a “Dalit” novel, ignoring the complexities involved in the Tamil (137-138); the same
argument could be made about Pandian’s text. As the title of Tanveer Likhari's essay,
“Dalit Feminism: A Perspective on Bama’s Sangati,” suggests, it too interprets Sangati
with the broad strokes as a Dalit woman's perspective. All three essays can also be
criticized for not interrogating Bama's works more carefully and for simply pointing to
what is apparent in the text and so claim that Bama writes from a Dalit or a Dalit
woman's perspective.³

As English translations of Karukku and Sangati cannot capture the rhetoric of the
oral dialect which Bama uses in the Tamil version, perhaps one way to avoid reading
Bama’s works simply as “Dalit” literature, while not succumbing to the proclivity for

³ It is ironic that Sivanarayanan, Pandian, and Nayar apply the conventions of
postmodern and poststructural thought to Karukku, and yet come to very different
conclusions in their analysis of the novel. Whereas Sivanarayanan uses this critical mode
to point to the limits in Bama’s interrogation of caste, Nayar and Pandian deploy this
mode to argue that Karukku emphasizes the importance of the suffering of the Dalit
community and not the individual.
modes of analysis popular in the metropole, is to explore the larger cultural and political debates within which Bama’s novels are taking place. Considering the emphasis that Sivanarayanan places on the need for the translation to explicate what might be apparent in the local context, it is odd that she refuses to recognize the intellectual and political context that Bama’s work participates in. For instance, in her introduction to the autobiography, Holmstrom points to the tradition of Dalit liberation theology that Bama participates in. Siyanarayanan does not address this issue in her work even though it is apparent in the novel, nor does she address how rationality is deployed as a formal convention, and instead reduces it to an effect of the translation’s inability to capture the way Bama merges her personal pain with the suffering of the larger Dalit community.

This chapter therefore examines Bama’s texts within the larger context of the social and political debates taking place in Tamil Nadu, Dalit politics, and Christianity. Bama’s deployment of rationality in *Karukku* and *Sangati* is reminiscent of the way Periyar, an important social and political activist in South India, used reason to challenge caste oppression and the discrimination against women. In *Sangati*, the series of chapters explore the suppression, the resistance, and the celebration of Dalit women and a rational critique is deployed throughout to question patriarchy. However, the text provides no clear cut resolution to the problems that face Dalit women, but simply presents temporary moments of solidarity. By contrast, in *Karukku*, Bama uses reason to challenge the forms of religious oppression, but merges this with a reinterpretation of religion that reveals the influence of Dalit liberation theology, which in turn has been inspired by Latin American liberation theology. This argument therefore begins with a brief discussion of Periyar’s
use of reason to challenge oppressive structures, and then explores how Bama creatively uses reason in very distinct and unique ways to interrogate the different means through which the Dalit community has been exploited.

Periyar, the Self-Respect Movement, and a Rational Critique of Religion

The growth of Dalit consciousness and Dalit literature in Tamil Nadu must be seen as a continuation of the anti-caste struggles in the Tamil country that coalesced around Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement between the 1920s to the 1940s. E. V. Ramasami (1879-1973), better known as Periyar (which means “the great leader”), belonged to an upper-caste family in the Tamil country; in 1919 he joined the Indian National Congress, enthusiastically participating in Gandhi’s campaign to reform Indian society, and improve the condition of Dalits (then referred to as untouchables). However, in 1925 he left the Congress, disillusioned by the bias towards the Brahmins within the party. By 1927 he became a vociferous critic of Gandhi when the latter acknowledged his faith in varnashrama dharma. Periyar had founded the Self-Respect Movement in the early 1920s hoping to create an egalitarian society in India where caste would be abolished, and where men and women would have equal rights. Therefore Periyar could not accept Gandhi’s support for the caste system, even if the latter claimed that the caste system was simply a division of labor, and not a social hierarchy. Through articles in

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4 Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement were active during colonial rule and in independent India. In British India the region in which they carried out their activities was known as the Madras Presidency. After independence this region was divided into states along linguistic lines, and the state of Tamil Nadu was created. The phrase, “Tamil Country,” that I have taken from “A View of the South,” by Paula Richman and V. Geetha, is a convenient short hand to describe this region.
newspapers and public meetings, the Self-Respect Movement criticized the national movement on the grounds that while it claimed to represent all Indians, in reality it represented the interests of the Brahmins, and wished to impose a North Indian Aryan culture upon a South Indian Dravidian people. Within the popular imagination in the Tamil country, the Aryans from North India were responsible for introducing caste into an egalitarian Dravidian culture. Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement harkened back to this imagined Dravidian past, and wished to create an egalitarian community among Indians, where caste would be abolished, where there would be economic equality, and where men and women would be treated as equals. According to V. Geetha and V. Rajadurai, the Self-Respect movement believed that:

[i]n place of affective bonds of kinship and a shared faith and community, new kinds of bonds of horizontal nature, implying comradeship in the widest sense of the term, were sought to be woven; such that men and women in their workaday roles and functions may interact on the basis of mutuality and self-respect.

(*Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium* 303)

With the desire to reform Indian society, the Self-Respect Movement advocated and carried out inter-caste marriages and widow remarriages, demanded that women be given the same rights and privileges as men, and also agitated for the rights of the lower-castes (Shudras and Dalits). In propagating this radical agenda, Periyar and the Self-Respecters attacked religion, specifically Hinduism, as being responsible for deceiving people into accepting the caste system and the inferiority of women. To a lesser degree the Movement also critiqued Christianity and Islam; it criticized the practice of polygamy in
Islam, and Periyar fought for the Dalit Catholics when they were exploited by the Church.

The Self-Respect Movement used rationality to reveal how different aspects of religion—rituals, superstition, and fear—effectively perpetuated unequal relations between people. Paula Richman and V. Geetha elaborate on Periyar’s use of rationalism, described as “paguttarivu,” or “intelligence born out of discernment,” that he effectively deployed to judge whether cultural practices promoted or undermined social equality.

According to them

[paguttarivu … emerges out of experience, yet a person can use paguttarivu to stand back from one’s own context and examine it critically. Thus, although in any given moment the claims of reason are far superior to those of religious thought, that moment would necessarily be superseded by another, which would give rise to a stronger and more confident reason. … Paguttarivu represents an active rather than a reflective intelligence and one which trusts only those claims for which evidence can be produced, either empirically or logically. As [Periyar] often pointed out, to discern does not mean to accept the claims of the rational but to practice rationality by deploying one’s powers of reason in the interest of knowing. (emphasis mine, “A View from the South” 71)

Periyar made use of paguttarivu in tracts against caste, the oppression of women, and in the promotion of atheism that he wrote for popular consumption. In a collection of pamphlets attacking religion entitled Religion and Society: Selections from Periyar’s Speeches and Writings, he uses empiricism and logic based on evidence to make claims
about the way religion is used to exploit people. In “Religious Fanaticism” he suggests that though “religious” people emphasize the spirituality of a particular religion, it is ultimately a social phenomenon. He makes this assertion by asking a rhetorical question: “If religion comes from God why do those who propagate it feel that if they do nothing, the religion will die?” (10). Rather, Periyar demonstrates that religion is only legitimized through propaganda and money. He continues to argue that rituals, and not the principles behind these rituals, become the criteria through which people define religion. However, rituals affect ordinary people adversely. On the one hand, rituals require a special group of people—a priestly class—to mediate between the people and God, and that therefore has the power to intentionally obfuscate religious practices to its advantage. On the other hand, “[ritual] makes people cowards. Because it discourages independent thought, people are not able to judge what is right and what is wrong in worldly affairs. It enables some cunning people to benefit by the labour of others” (15). In “Can’t People live without Religion” he states that the money that the wealthy spend on ostentatious rituals to atone for their sins could be invested in civic structures, like workshops and factories, that would reduce unemployment, improve their quality of life, and so benefit society as a whole (7-8).

According to Periyar, religion is a social phenomenon that structures hierarchal relationships between people, and so has material—social and economic—consequences in the way people interact. Yet, because religion is seen as “God given” it obfuscates these unequal relationships. In “Religion is the cause of injustices in the World,” Periyar emphasizes the necessity of embarking on an atheistic “humanising project and
evolve[ing] principles which people can easily practice” so that men and women can
develop their basic human qualities and create an egalitarian community (22). Ritual,
that undermines the clarity of thought, must be replaced by a set of practical moral
principles which speak to the current needs of people, and therefore are flexible and open
to change.

The Importance of Christianity in *Karukku*

To comprehend the sophistication of *Karukku*, it is necessary to make note of two
seemingly contradictory influences on Bama’s work. While I have introduced Periyar and
the Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu above, and paid specific attention to their use
of rationalism and atheism to challenge rituals and superstitions that are found in religion,
I will point to their specific influence on *Karukku* a little later. The second important
influence on *Karukku* is Dalit liberation theology in India, which was heavily influenced
by Latin American liberation theology; both draw upon the experiences of the oppressed
to construct their reinterpretation of Christianity. Though Holmstrom in her
“Introduction” to the English edition of *Karukku* has suggested that the autobiography
has “‘to do with the arc of the narrator’s spiritual development both through the nurturing
of her belief as a Catholic, and her gradual realization of herself as a Dalit’” (viii), full
length studies of *Karukku* have only paid attention to the Dalit elements in the
autobiography, giving token representation to the different aspects of Christianity and the
use of reason. As discussed above, both Nayar and Pandian emphasize the formal
elements of Dalit literature in the autobiography, and so fail to recognize the significant
intervention that Bama makes by reinterpreting Christianity from a Dalit perspective.
Though Sivanarayanan critiques the translation and Bama for not interrogating those moments in the text that problematize an essential Dalit identity and politics, she fails to recognize Bama’s nuanced exploration and creative engagement with Christianity.

*Karukku* is equally invested in two narratives: the social institutions of caste and religion that exploit the Paraya community, and Bama’s individual story, one in which she challenges and overcomes the oppression that she faces from both these institutions. Furthermore, the narrative structure of the autobiography is non-linear, and is divided into nine chapters, each examining different aspects of community life, such as the village structure, work, recreation, inter-caste conflicts, religion, etc.; Bama’s story is interwoven into this framework. With regard to the narrative of the community, Chapter 1 describes the social topography of the village, how each caste lives in a designated section, and though the majority of Catholics are Dalits, the church and the (Catholic) school, along with the other important civic amenities, such as the post office and the bus stop, are located in the vicinity of the upper-castes. Chapter 3 is about inter-caste conflicts; the Chaaliyars provoke a fight with the Parayas over a dispute about community property, and bribe the police to support them. The Catholic priest informs the police about the Paraya men who have gone into hiding, even though he knows that they are being intentionally singled out for police brutality. Yet, when the Parayas win the case in court, the community gives thanks to “our Lady” (Mary, mother of Jesus), and St. Anthony (the most important Catholic saint in India). Chapter 5 deals with recreation; the games that the Paraya children play re-enact and reinforce how figures belonging to authoritative structures— the police and the Catholic clergy (nuns and priests)—
physically abuse and humiliate the Paraya community. In this chapter Bama criticizes the Paraya community for celebrating the Christian festivals of Easter, Christmas, and New Year’s without understanding the significance of these events, and the clergy’s lack of compassion for the Parayas. These chapters also reveal that the Parayas are aware that they are being exploited by the upper-castes and the Church, and there are moments when their hostility is apparent. During the inter-caste fight with the Chaaliyars, the Parayas are incensed that the priest has informed on them, and likewise, during festivals they are critical of the clergy for their lack of munificence towards the community, even though Parayas inconvenience themselves by giving gifts to the former as a mark of respect of their religious status.

Though Chapters 2 and 6 explore the influence of the Church on the Paraya community, they highlight the role that caste plays in the Catholic educational institutions that Bama attends. Chapter 2 traces Bama’s life from the time when she became aware of her status as an untouchable, to the moment when she decides to leave the nunnery, as she realizes that her superiors will not allow her to work for the welfare of the Dalit children. As a student, a teacher, and a nun, Bama experiences and witnesses how upper-caste Catholics constantly humiliate Dalits and reinforce their sense of inferiority. She points out that it is their caste status that defines the way in which the authorities respond to Dalits. As a child she is shamed in front of the school assembly for accidentally breaking an unripe coconut: “‘You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya’” (16).

Chapter 6 is a more detailed exploration of Bama’s life in Catholic institutions; it develops themes that are touched upon in Chapter 2, and raises interesting contradictions
to the dominant narrative of caste oppression in the Church. For instance, it is an
education at a caste-ridden institute that gives her the confidence to challenge the nuns
who try to intimidate her and the resolve as an adult to fight for the rights of her
community. Furthermore, as a student within these institutions, Bama earns the respect of
her upper-caste classmates, her teachers, and the clergy because she comes first in class.
Also, when her parents want her to stop studying and to get married, it is a nun who
encourages her to pursue her studies. Despite her positive experience as an individual,
Bama being a Dalit, and witnessing the way that Dalits are abused, feels humiliated.

Chapters 7 and 8 reinterpret Christianity from a Dalit perspective with the aim of
allowing the Dalit community to become socially independent, and affirm their own
cultural identity, something that has been undermined by the upper-castes and the
Church. Chapter 7 focuses on both narratives: the meaningless rituals propagated by the
Catholic Church and the unreflective way in which the Paraya community participates in
rituals and festivals, and highlights Bama’s reinterpretation of Christianity from a Dalit
perspective. Chapter 8 extends Bama’s criticism by exploring how the nuns at the
convents where she worked humiliate Dalit children and refuse to let Bama help them.

Aesthetically, chapters 2 and 7 are also significant because they conclude with
rhetorically powerful invocations that demand justice. Chapter 2 concludes:

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the
injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have not
true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these
institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among
human beings there are none who are high or low. Those who have found their happiness by exploiting us are not going to let us go easily. It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal. (25)

Chapter 7 makes a similar claim, but one that is inflected by religion:

But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion. (94)

Coming at the very end of Chapter 7, these lines need to be understood as a powerful invocation for change, and they reflect the merging of the two social movements that influence Bama’s autobiography: the Self-Respect Movement and Dalit liberation theology. Chapter 7 is key to understanding Bama’s overall vision in the autobiography. It is almost twice as long as the next longest chapter in the text. Whereas other chapters, as mentioned above, point to individual examples of resistance and hostility, Chapter 7 suggests a blueprint for an alternative understanding of Christianity, one that will affirm the culture of the Dalit community, and allow Dalits to respect themselves and live with dignity. Later in the paper I examine the significance of this chapter to the autobiography as a whole; the point that I am making here is that a critical analysis of Karukku needs to engage Bama’s reinterpretation of Christianity.
Bama’s Rational Critique of Religion

The Self-Respect Movement and Periyar have influenced the social and political movements in Tamil Nadu that followed in their wake. Raj Gautaman, a Dalit writer and activist, who is incidentally Bama’s brother, has argued that Periyar’s rationalism, the Dravidian movement, and Marxist political and economic philosophy have played a significant role in shaping the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu. He suggests that the political consciousness apparent in Tamil Dalit literature must be understood within the larger context of the “anti-caste struggles, [the] agitation for reserved places in the interest of social justice and political protest for economic equality” (96).5 Furthermore, in her “Introduction” to Karukku, Holmstrom points out that Dalit writing constantly refers to the anti-caste and anti-religious speeches of Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement (ix-x). In an interview with The Hindu, Bama also acknowledges Periyar’s influence in her life. Reading his tracts on women’s rights, and his critique of the way social structures—the family, religion, and caste—subjugate women, convinced her that the only way she could maintain her freedom was if she did not marry.6

It is within this context that Bama’s criticism of the Catholic Church needs to be explored. Like Periyar, Bama focuses on the means through which religion obfuscates clarity of thought; it is by becoming dependent on the formal aspects of Catholicism,


such as the idea of sin and punishment, rituals, and the belief in relics, that Parayas become fearful, obedient, and turn to “blind devotion” to solve their problems. For instance, as a child, Bama steals flowers and receives a shock when she inserts them into an electric socket. Her immediate reaction is fear as she is convinced that she is being punished by God for committing a sin; however, looking at the episode in retrospect, Bama, the adult, describes herself as having “such a certainty of belief in those days” (79). Bama implicitly critiques “belief” because from a rational perspective these two events—stealing the flowers and getting shocked—are independent of each other. However, from a Catholic perspective, one that teaches that “sins” will be “punished,” and so enforces obedience through fear, an unsuspecting child arbitrarily connects these two incidents. Yet this narrative of sin and punishment is undermined when Bama empirically experiments with the rules made by the clergy. The nuns warn the Paraya children that if they eat the “blessed” host (bread that does not simply represent, but is Christ’s body), as opposed to swallowing it, they will bleed to death. Bama obeys even though she finds it difficult to swallow the host, until one day she bites it and discovers that she does not bleed or die. Ironically, though she realizes that the nuns have lied and used the fear of divine retribution, she cannot prove them wrong because she is scared of being physically punished.

In sections of Chapters 6 and 7, Bama, the adult, is critical of the Paraya community for focusing on the rituals associated with Christian festivals like Easter, Christmas, and Chinnamma (a local Catholic festival), but failing to comprehend the significance of these festivals, and how they can empower the community. On the one
hand, the community follows the rituals and pays its respects to the clergy, and on the other, the “secular” celebration becomes an excuse for entertainment: buying new clothes, playing music in celebration of film stars, and becoming intoxicated. In contrast to this public celebration, Bama turns towards “private” worship within the confines of her home, implying that contemplation is necessary to make important festivals meaningful to one’s life.

Bama is also critical of “blind devotion” which, like the “fear” of committing a sin, or the “duty” in carrying out a ritual that undermines one’s reasoning, makes one dependent on objects to solve one’s problems. However, devotion, unlike fear or duty, compels the participant to carry out the ritual through a sense of love. She criticizes the devotion invested in relics—objects that are considered to be endowed with spiritual powers because they happen to be associated with people who are considered holy. In Chapter 7 when she discovers that the relics to which she prayed were not the skeletal remains of a priest, but that of a lay person, she still resists throwing them away. Bama reveals that she “had placed such devotion on those teeth. [She] even had some fear that it might be a sin if [she] threw them out” (emphasis mine, 77). In retrospect she comes to realize that she had “been caught up in blind belief such as this, and come away from it” (emphasis mine, 78). Just as in the previous example, “blind belief,” or “blind devotion” refers to the arbitrary connection she makes between an object and its ability to protect her. Like Periyar, Bama suggests that devotion towards relics is a means by which people are manipulated into not thinking for themselves, and depend upon God to solve their problems. I want to emphasize here that she is not distinguishing between fake and
genuine relics. Logically, she should not be scared of throwing the teeth out because they are not genuine relics. However, her “fear” of committing a “sin” for throwing out something she has “devoted” herself to, points to an automated response that is a result of acculturation, and not whether something is genuine or fake. This immediate sense of “fear” is not simply irrational, but suggests that “blind belief” has little to do with what is right or wrong, but rather is a structure that is learned until it becomes a spontaneous response.

Christianity and Dalit Liberation Theology

Whereas Periyar turns to atheism to counteract the way religion prevents people from thinking of their problems rationally, Bama engages in a literal application of the Bible in order to empower the Dalit community. In Chapter 8 she asserts the need to explore the relationship between religious scriptures and every-day reality: “Why do people suffer, What is the state of this country, What did Lord Jesus actually do for people, Why did we become nuns, How can we undo these injustices …” (96). In relating the story of Christ in the Bible to the economic exploitation and psychological suffering of the Paraya community, Bama’s interpretation of the scriptures differs fundamentally from the conventional understanding of scriptures that the Roman Catholic Church preaches. In order to understand the implications of “suffering” that Bama emphasizes in interpreting the Christian scriptures, it is important to place her ideas within the Dalit Christian movements that first began to develop during the 1970s.

In “Visions, Illusions and Dilemmas of Dalit Christians in India,” Lancy Lobo has pointed out that 70 percent of Christians in India are Dalits but that they are under-
represented in the hierarchies of both Catholic and Protestant denominations. Only 3 percent of Catholic priests in Tamil Nadu are Dalits, and they generally do not hold positions of power. Likewise, twelve out of the fourteen bishops in Tamil Nadu belong to the upper-castes, and it was only in 1972 after much agitation by Dalit Catholics that a Dalit bishop was selected. The failure of Dalits to achieve positions of authority within the Church reveals the importance of caste consciousness within the Catholic community in India (246-247).

Since the 1970s Dalit Christians have begun to demand that the Churches treat them with respect, and they have felt the need to reinterpret Christianity with the aim of making it applicable to their experiences in a caste based society. Dalit theology, which arose out of the Protestant community, therefore began as a response to the dissatisfaction with the way Christianity was being understood and propagated in India. The “Western” model, influenced by the rise of secularism in Europe, that focused on the individual’s relationship to God in the private sphere, did not speak to or alleviate the condition of the Dalit Christians who faced caste discrimination in the public and the private spheres. Likewise, the Indian model of Christianity, created by upper-caste converts to Christianity, integrated the values and the cultures of the upper-caste Hindus, and so avoided recognizing the experiences, the traits, or the cultural values of the Dalits, the majority of the converts.

Unlike the traditional Christian theologies described above, Dalit theology emphasizes sociology as opposed to philosophy. According to A. P. Nirmal, these new forms of theology have moved away from an abstract philosophical engagement
influenced by the Greek Philosophers to Existentialism in Western Theology, and Hindu scriptures in Indian theology) to emphasize the “experience” of people who are oppressed. Dalit theologians are less interested in applying the logic of abstract principles, and more willing to accept the contradictions or inconsistencies in interpreting scripture from the perspective of experience. Sathianathan Clarke, in his book length study on Dalit liberation theology entitled, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, points out that “what gives [Dalit theology] validity is not the acceptability or the coherence of the culture and the discourse of marginalized communities but rather their experience, which, more often than not, gets jettisoned from the overall cultural-linguistic framework” (emphasis mine, 26). He defines Dalit theology as “the ongoing collective dialogical interaction of the community. ... Theology is neither the exposition of a religious thinker, nor the unreflective thoughts of the community. However, theology expands its parameters to reflect on the dialogical voices of the community in its entirety” (19).7 *Karukku* participates in this conversation by not only

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focusing on the experiences of Dalit Catholics, but by also suggesting an alternative model of Christianity.

Dalit liberation theology is part of a larger trend within Churches around the world that is making Christianity more applicable to those who have been economically and socially marginalized. While these trends have originated from dissatisfaction with the way Christianity has been applied to these regions, many of them, including Dalit liberation theology, have received an impetus from Latin American Liberation theology that challenged the official interpretations of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1968 the Latin American Catholic Bishops met at Medellin, Columbia to discuss how the Bible and Christianity could be made relevant to people living in Latin America, given that the majority lived in poverty. The bishops felt that Christianity espoused by the Roman Catholic Church, based in Rome, while claiming to be universal, answered the needs of an audience that was predominantly European. According to Peter Hebblethwaite, in “Liberation theology and the Roman Catholic Church,” Latin American Liberation theology argues that God’s truth (revealed through the scriptures) can only be discovered within the political and social world in which people exist. Liberation Theology is therefore a theology not simply “about” liberation “of” the poor, but a theology that is “for” the liberation “for” the poor (209-213). Thus, Christ is not simply a religious figure, but a revolutionary and subversive figure who challenges the established hierarchy. This interpretation of the scriptures undermined the official position of the Catholic Church, and created tension between the Bishops and Church in Rome. Trying to reconcile this conflict, Pope John Paul II, in an address to the Latin American bishops at
Puebla, Mexico (1979), pointed out that the starting point of theology cannot be the social situation of the people, since this proves to be restrictive, and that sources of theology must be the scriptures and traditions of the Catholic Church. While he acknowledged the importance of social justice, that material poverty needed to be eradicated, and that the dignity of human beings needed to be respected, he argued that these could only occur within “‘a transforming, peace-making, pardoning and reconciling love’” of Jesus Christ (213-214).

The Dalitization of Christianity

Bama’s interpretation of Christianity must be understood within this larger debate; like the Latin American and Dalit liberation theologians, Bama’s analysis of the scriptures takes into account the social and political context of the oppressed Dalits. In Chapter 7 she reinterprets the Bible from a Dalit perspective, emphasizing God’s justice instead of focusing on the reconciliation of Christ with humanity:

Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenances inequality. There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness. (emphasis mine, 90)

In the conventional understanding of Christianity God is perfect, and so cannot accept a world that is sinful. It is Christ, God's son, who is also perfect, who sacrifices his own life and so bears the burden of the world’s sins. Therefore, Christ becomes the mediator
between God and humans, and it is through belief in him that humans can be forgiven, and therefore saved. It is those qualities that Christ epitomizes: “sacrifice,” “selfless love,” and “forgiveness” for a sinful world, as well as “obedience” to his Father, that the Catholic Church and the traditional Protestant Churches view as virtues for Christians to practice.

These virtues may be applicable in “the West” but are counterproductive in other contexts, like Latin America and India. As a nun, Bama discovers that the clergy, who have studied in Europe and America, impose these “Christian” values upon those who wish to think independently. Thus, Bama’s superiors in the convent keep transferring her to Catholic schools that cater to the wealthy whenever she asserts her desire to work with the poor and the Dalits, on the grounds that she must be “obedient and humble”.

Critiquing the clergy, Bama points out:

If we could not fit within the framework that they had devised [which they have learnt in Europe and North America], then they concluded that it was doubtful whether we truly had a vocation. We had to change. In the final analysis, we could not be ourselves. They wanted you to be destroyed utterly and remade in a new form. Where else can you find such madness. (99)

In the Indian context, Catholic theology becomes a sophisticated and subtle means through which a caste hierarchy is maintained; like the crude rituals, the idea of sin and punishment, and the faith in relics that Bama accepted as a child, the virtues of humility and obedience undermine Bama’s ability to think for herself and to be independent. Because of the material comfort and the lack of autonomy within the convent, when she
does leave it in disgust at the hypocrisy she witnesses, she becomes fearful and weak-willed. However, unlike Periyar who turns to atheism as an alternative to religion, Bama reinterprets Christianity in order to empower the Dalit community. By emphasizing the “suffering” of the Dalit community as a starting point of a Dalit theology, she demonstrates the need to focus on God’s justice in interpreting the scriptures, as opposed to Christ’s love. She therefore reinterprets scripture, one source of theology for the Catholic Church, and condemns aspects of the other source, Catholic tradition:

How long will they deceive us, as if we were innocent children, with their *Pusai* [or mass] and their *Holy Communion*, their rosary and their *novena*? Children, growing up, will no longer listen to everything they are told, open mouthed and nodding their heads. Dalits have begun to realize the truth. (emphasis mine, 94)

She directly accuses the nuns and the priests of being like the Pharisees and Sadducees (religious figures within the ancient Jewish community) that Jesus condemned for being corrupt, and exploiting the people in the name of religion (93). Bama reinterprets the narrative of Christianity from her social context, for while the narrative remains the same—Christ defending the poor against the rich and powerful—it has been contextualized within the Indian system to point to the fact that the poor are Dalits, and that the powerful are the upper-castes and Church authorities.

If the question of suffering of the Dalit community becomes the basis on which a Dalit theology needs to be grounded, then Bama’s emphasis on Jesus’s righteousness, anger, and opposition to inequality, is one step through which she moves towards a Dalitization of Christianity. Another step towards a Dalitization of Christianity occurs at
a metatextual level. In the “Author’s Preface” Bama explains that the word “karukku” refers to Palmyra leaves that are serrated on both edges; she recollects that as a child she used to be scratched by these leaves while gathering them for firewood. These double edged serrated leaves remind her of the “word of God” that is represented as a double edged sword in the Bible. Chapter 4 verse 10 of the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament of the Bible reads: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (“Introduction” vii). For Bama, Dalits who have been socially and economically deprived must function as God’s word, fighting for their rights in an unjust world, and revealing the ways in which they have been oppressed (“Author’s Preface” xiii). The autobiography is also double-edged, because it explores the kinds of physical and psychic violence that Bama and the Paraya community experience at the hands of the upper-castes and the Church, as well as their ability to challenge these oppressive structures. At the same time, Lakshmi Holstrom has pointed out that the word “karu” that is embedded in “karukku” means embryo or seed, which symbolizes freshness or newness (“Introduction” vii). By extension, the autobiography conveys a sense of hope for the Paraya community that has been exploited, and that has been gradually asserting its voice to articulate its identity. By fusing the Palmyra leaf, something that is an ordinary though significant part of the cultural life of the Paraya community, with “God’s word,” the autobiography affirms the culture of the Dalit community.
A third step towards the dalitization of Christianity, is the emphasis that Bama puts on “true devotion” as opposed to the “false beliefs” perpetuated by ritual. Chapter 7 concludes on this note:

But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion. (emphasis mine, 94)

There are two important issues that are discussed here. The idea that human beings are created in the image of God is not simply a reference to the humanity of the Dalits, but a direct reference to the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The community of Christians is often reminded of the special nature of “humanity” because unlike the rest of creation (animals and plants), God has made humans in his own image. By reminding the Dalit community that they are made in God’s image, Bama reveals how the idea has become a cliché within institutional Christianity. Catholics who practice rituals can say by rote that all humans are made in the image of God, and simultaneously accept the idea of caste hierarchy. The idea that Dalits are made in the image of God is a cornerstone, and one of the most quoted Biblical passages in Dalit theology. The second important issue that this passage emphasizes is “true devotion”. Within the immediate context, true devotion is a belief that Dalits are called to discard their sense of social and psychological inferiority, to reclaim their humanity, and respect and love other people as their equals.
However, seen within the autobiography as a whole, “true devotion” must be juxtaposed to the mindless practice of rituals that Bama describes as “blind faith”. Within this framework, true devotion expects Dalits to constantly use “reason” and not to depend upon “belief” to solve their problems. Therefore, it is in this particular passage, that true devotion becomes a “religious” reinterpretation of Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement’s desire for an atheistic humanizing project, an egalitarian society based on reason. Furthermore, like the Self-Respecters who argued for living according to a set of moral principles that were flexible enough to be reworked according to the social context, Bama and the Dalit liberation theologians also emphasize the experience of the local context to make sense of Christian scriptures.

The Tension between Rationality and Religion

Nayar and Pandian rightly emphasize that Karukku is an autobiography about the Paraya community, and that Bama’s individual story is subsumed within this larger narrative. I wish to extend and complicate this argument by suggesting that Bama’s primary intention in the autobiography is to explore a possible solution to the problems of the community. What is particularly intriguing about Karukku, but that Nayar and Pandian do not emphasize, is that Bama’s life story and her community’s are contrasted with one another. Bama’s story is that of the individual who faces insurmountable odds—caste and religion—to become economically and socially successful. She excels in her studies, becomes a teacher and then a nun, but chooses to leave the convent on her volition in order to stand in solidarity with her people who are oppressed. It is Bama’s education which gives her a sense of personal confidence that allows her to challenge the
upper-castes and the Church. While Bama underscores the importance of the hard work, she continuously undermines this narrative by pointing out that Dalits fail to alleviate their condition because the upper-castes and the Church continuously reinforce their sense of inferiority.

If Bama is the exception, the autobiography gestures towards the necessity of an ideological shift in thinking within the Dalit community, as one important step towards its own emancipation. The Dalitization of Christianity, which acknowledges the suffering of the Dalits at the hands of the Church and the upper-castes, affirms their own unique culture, and recognizes their values as human beings, is that ideological step toward empowerment. This is why Chapter 7 becomes crucial to understanding Bama’s larger agenda in Karukku. This reinterpretation of Christianity is supplemented by a critique that deploys a form of rationality popularized by Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement. However, unlike Periyar who used rationality to debunk religious beliefs, Karukku uses rationality selectively to demonstrate how rituals and blind belief undermine an individual, as well as a community’s ability to think independently. At the same time the autobiography also demonstrates how religion can inspire the oppressed by providing a positive model, one which gives them a sense of dignity and affirms their identity. Therefore, Karukku successfully fuses Dalit liberation theology and the rationalism of Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement, in the hope of creating an egalitarian society.

The Rationalization of Gender in Sangati

Like Karukku, Sangati has a specific focus, which is to foreground the individual and collective experiences of Dalit women, and like the autobiography, Sangati does not
have a conventional plot, with each chapter exploring an issue that affects Dalit women, such as domestic violence, possession by peys (spirits), child labor, divorce and remarriage, etc. However, unlike *Karukku* which explores the tension between the narrator's life and that of the larger Paraya\(^8\) community, *Sangati* does not have a single protagonist from whose perspective the reader comes to understand the experiences of Dalit women. Rather, the novel has a single unnamed narrator who at the beginning is a little girl, and towards the last few chapters she is an adult woman. The narrator spends a limited amount of time describing her personal life, and is more invested in exploring the cultural practices of Paraya women and episodes that highlight their gendered experiences. Furthermore, the novel's didactic purpose, which is to call attention to the way Dalit women are oppressed by social structures like patriarchy and caste, is complemented by a positive agenda, which reveals “their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, … the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversaries by laughing and ridiculing them…” (ix). However, what is most distinctive about *Sangati*, is the rational critique that Bama deploys to interrogate and undermine the way the caste system and the structure of patriarchy work to oppress Dalit women. She does this by exploring the stories and episodes through three “rhetorical modes,” which are a “dramatized audience” of Dalit women, "dialogue" between the narrator and her mother, or her grandmother, and

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\(^8\) While the English translation of *Karukku* uses the spelling “Paraya,” the English translation of *Sangati* spells the word “Paraiya”. For the sake of consistency in this chapter I have used the former spelling, and have only maintained the latter if it is used in a quotation.
"commentary" by the narrator. These modes reveal how Dalit women can simultaneously participate and challenge oppressive structures, as well as the way women are divided against and united with each other. All three modes combine reason and rhetoric, and are reminiscent of paguttarivu that Periyar had used to challenge religion and patriarchy. However, because reason is inflected by different modes, Bama is able to use reason in innovative ways, with each mode highlighting different aspects of the problems that Dalit women must face. The novel, therefore, paradoxically explores a diversity of voices, opinions, and arguments related to Dalit women, even while it makes general claims about caste and gender oppression.

Dramatized Audience

In “Dalit Transformations: Narrative, and Verbal Art in the Tamil Novels of Bama,” Paula Richman pays attention to some of the rhetorical strategies that Bama uses in Sangati, one of which is the “dramatized audience”. According to Richman a dramatized audience “portrays the circumstances under which the story was first told, thereby contextualizing the story and also reporting on the responses of listeners to the story” (147-148), and she examines those incidents where Dalit women subvert the gender and caste hierarchies (149). For example, Richman points to the occasion in Chapter 5 where Raakamma successfully resists being physically abused by her husband, Paakiaraj, in front of an audience of Paraya women, by her vulgar language and behavior:

‘Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman’s farts! Instead of drinking toddy everyday, why don’t you drink your son’s urine? Why don’t you drink my
monthly blood?’ And she lifted up her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there. (61)

Richman astutely points out that Raakamma deploys two aspects that legitimize the inferior position of women within the caste structure—her body and menstrual blood (that is associated with pollution)—to publicly embarrass her husband. What is equally important, but something that Richman simply acknowledges, is the audience of women who are equally disgusted by her behavior. They accuse Raakamma of being a “[s]hameless donkey! Children from the school are coming and going along the streets. What an uncontrollable shrew she is!” (62). Raakamma retaliates arguing that this is the only means at her disposal to avoid being beaten. The point of the dramatized audience here is to show how a group of women, while shocked at domestic abuse, tend to reinforce the logic of caste and patriarchy by finding Raakamma’s language and actions offensive. Therefore, the dramatized audience is a complex rhetorical mode; while revealing individual examples of resistance in the novel, it also explores the complex relationship between Paraya women, and caste and patriarchy, specifically their marginalization, participation, and resistance to both, especially the latter. It also becomes a space of empowerment for women.

The most significant use of the “dramatized audience” is in Chapters 2 and 4, where Paraya women respond to the unfair treatment that the narrator’s cousin, Mariamma, receives at the expense of both, upper caste and Paraya men. In Chapter 2 Mariamma is almost sexually molested by Kumarasami Ayya, the upper caste landlord. Though she escapes, the other Paraya women warn her not to complain because she will
be branded a “whore”. Meanwhile the landlord, fearing that he might lose his reputation if the incident is reported, complains to the Paraya headman that he has seen Mariamma and Manikkam, a young Paraya man, behaving promiscuously. A Paraya caste meeting is held to decide how Mariamma and Manikkam should be punished for their inappropriate behavior. Bama then skillfully interweaves the debates within the caste meeting, in which only the men are allowed to participate, with the discussion among a group of women who witness it from the side.

The dramatized audience functions in a number of ways here. Apart from demonstrating gender inequality, it explores the diverse voices among the women. The women seem to agree that while Paraya men fear the upper-castes, they demonstrate arrogance towards the Paraya women, and dismiss their claim that the landlord is lying. However, Muthamma suggests that Mariamma deserves to be reprimanded, because like her father, who has a mistress, “[s]he could be a bit of a slut herself” (24). Here, Muthamma seems to be treating the genders on par, suggesting that both father and daughter are promiscuous. However, other women criticize this reasoning because Mariamma’s father is never punished for his behavior. The logic is made apparent in these terms: “They say he’s a man: if he sees mud he’ll step in it; if he sees water, he’ll wash himself. It’s one justice for men and quite another for women” (24). The maxim that helps normalize the superiority of men over women is undermined by the second sentence that assumes that men and women are equal. This form of argumentation within a dramatized audience is evocative of pagguttaruvi, because it uses common sense (the idea that men and women are equal) to provide a rational critique of a maxim that
legitimizes the unequal way in which the genders (Mariamma and her father) are treated for being promiscuous.

Immediately after this exchange between the women, the conversation is disrupted by the men who are upset with the women for disturbing them. This disruption leads to an inconsistency in the logic of the argument made so far because the women do not examine why Manikkam, (the man that Mariamma allegedly misbehaved with) is also punished, though not as severely as Mariamma, and Mariamma’s father’s mistress, a woman, is not. The dramatized audience does not directly engage this inconsistency, but does so implicitly by exploring the second dimension of the case: the intersection of gender and caste in the next conversation between the women. This exchange begins when one woman suggests that the men should investigate whether the landlord is the culprit, as Mariamma reveals. Other women respond to this comment by pointing out that though upper caste men can exploit Paraya women, the Paraya community cannot retaliate because of the economic, political, and social power that the upper castes have. If the upper castes refuse to hire Parayas as agricultural laborers, the community will lose its main source of income. Furthermore, if the Parayas do not punish the couple it would imply that the landlord was lying, and cast suspicion on his own conduct, which would in turn lead to the upper caste community feeling humiliated. This in turn could lead to a caste riot, which the Parayas would lose because the state, specifically the police, is more closely aligned with the upper-castes.

Undergirding this inconsistency between the way the younger couple (Mariamma and Mannikkam) and the older couple (Mariamma’s father and his mistress) are treated,
is the inter-relationship between patriarchy and caste, also referred to as “Brahminical Patriarchy.” Feminists like Uma Chakravarti and Sharmila Rege have pointed out that in the Indian context caste and patriarchy mutually depend upon one another. One of the means through which patriarchy subordinates women to men, is through controlling women’s sexuality, in order to guarantee that men can pass on their title and property to their “legitimate” sons. Similarly, the caste system, which is a hierarchical social structure, depends upon endogamous relations within each caste to legitimize social differences. Therefore, the interests of patriarchy and caste can only be guaranteed through the control of women’s sexuality. On the one hand, this allows for multiple patriarchies among the different castes, as each caste maintains its own patriarchal structure. On the other hand, because economic, political, and social authority is invested in the upper castes, lower castes, aspiring to reach a more powerful status, emulate them. The former is described as “discrete patriarchy” and the latter as “brahminical patriarchy”.  

Brahminical patriarchy is made apparent when the naattamai demands that Mariamma and Manikkam be punished, because according to him “[i]n a village where there are many caste-communities, if someone of our caste behaves disgracefully, then it brings shame on all of us. As it is we paraiyas are treated with contempt” (21). The Praya men are less concerned with the act of promiscuity, but are worried because the act has been witnessed in public, and that it has become an issue that affects the “reputation” of

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the Paraya caste. Thus, Parayas have to emulate upper-caste norms when an “indiscretion” is reported in the public sphere, and perhaps this becomes easier to impose, because Mariamma and Manikkam are still under their parents’ authority. However, Mariamma’s father and his mistress are not held to the same critique. Paradoxically then, brahminical patriarchy must be vigilantly pursued if a case is made in the public sphere, but can be ignored if it does not become an issue between the upper-castes and the Parayas.

Therefore the dramatized audience explores an issue from multiple perspectives and the reader needs to think through the contradictions raised allowing for a more nuanced and complicated understanding of the relationship between caste and sexuality. For instance, it is important to point out that though the Parayas need to bear the burden of responsibility, the fake incident becomes an issue because the landlord is worried that Mariamma will accuse him of trying to molest her. This implies that there is always the potential that the incident could play out in the reverse way, where the landlord is held accountable and the respect he enjoys of being an upper-caste man will be vulnerable to critique by the Paraya community. Another significant complexity with regard to this incident occurs with a dramatized audience in Chapter 4. Though the women at the meeting in Chapter 2 were sympathetic to Mariamma’s position, by Chapter 4 the narrator points out that Mariamma is unable to find a suitable man to marry because she has been accused of being promiscuous at the caste meeting. For instance, Maikkuuzh Kizhavi, an old lady, points out that Mariamma, “[t]he whore was caught red-handed and was accused and shamed in front of the whole village” (38). Though she is reprimanded
by a couple of other women, her remarks are a reflection of what the community, including the women, feel about Mariamma. It is because of this reason that Mariamma’s father and Paatti make Mariamma marry Manikkam, something the former is extremely reluctant to do, because the latter is a wastrel. The relationship turns physically abusive once she does marry him.

The dramatized audience also has a positive function. In Chapter 12 the cattle shed, the house, and the well are places where Paraya women interact with one another, feel empowered as a group, and affirm their sense of self respect. While these conversations explore a range of issues, including acts of resistance, a common theme running through them is the freedom and strength that Dalit women have in comparison to upper-caste women. For instance, at the shed the women realize that though they lack the amenities available to upper caste women, there are less restrictions imposed on them. Likewise, the conversations between women at home turns into a debate as to whether the “darker” skinned Parayas are more attractive than the “fairer” skinned upper castes, and whether upper-caste women can work as hard as Parayas. This comparison between the two is continued when the women bath together in the well. They highlight their mobility, and their sense of being physically free and uninhibited, as opposed to upper caste women who are cleaner because they bathe more regularly, but are required to remain at home and be physically restrained to maintain their sense of dignity to maintain their caste status. Therefore, the significance of these episodes—conversing in the cattle shed, at home, and while swimming in the well—taken together, reveals temporary
places that are non-patriarchal, where Paraya women can enjoy themselves, and be in solidarity with one another.

Dialogue

Dialogue is another mode that Bama uses in Sangati to explore how Paraya women engage patriarchy; this occurs between the narrator and paattti, or her mother, and occasionally turns into a conversation as another woman joins them. Dialogue serves a number of purposes. Structurally, dialogue facilitates the author’s commentary on the different cultural aspects of the Paraya community. Thus, Chapter 7 begins with the narrator and Paatti picking up cow dung, and discussing how the Paraya community conducted marriages at the time India achieved independence. This in turns leads the narrator to a lengthy description of the way the Parayas currently celebrate marriages. Dialogue, however, serves a more important function in the novel. Like the dramatized audience, dialogue is an interrogative mode that explores the complex relationship between Paraya women and patriarchy, and exposes and challenges the unequal gender relations that are seen as normative, even by women. However, because the narrator is an active participant, dialogue clearly demonstrates the narrator’s perspective on an issue and simultaneously explores the powerful intimacy between women.

In Chapter 1 the three sets of exchanges between the narrator, who is a young girl in the first few chapters, and Paatti develop the overall theme of vulnerability of Paraya women to discrete and Brahmin patriarchy. The first two exchanges are expository, as Paatti tells the narrator that Paraya women are exploited in the public and domestic sphere. While they work as hard as the Paraya men in the fields, they are also responsible
for the risking their lives while giving birth (given that there are no medical facilities) and for raising children. Also, because they work outside the home, they are vulnerable to being sexually exploited by upper-caste men and criminals.

The third dialogue is significant because it introduces domestic violence and examines the way exploitation in the public sphere facilitates domestic abuse. Whereas the narrator’s father wants the narrator to continue her studies so that she, unlike her parents, can be more successful in life, Paatti wants the narrator to be married as soon as she achieves puberty. Informing Paatti’s decision are the conventions of the community that she is schooled in, as well as her anxiety that the family will lose the respect of the community for not arranging a marriage for a daughter who has achieved puberty. In response to the narrator’s questions, Paatti reveals that she “gave …away” Perimma (the narrator’s mother’s elder sister) as soon as she achieved puberty. She goes on to state that Perimma’s husband physically abused her as she refused to have sex with him because she was exhausted after laboring at work and at home. Paatti laments that she “reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat. Your Periappan [Perimma’s husband] actually beat her to death. … He killed her so outrageously, the bastard” (10). When the narrator criticizes Paatti for not preventing the violence, the latter states that she was helpless because she was a woman, and that Perimma did not have a male relative to protect her (10-11).

The third exchange between two Paraya females, an adult and a child, also explores the complex relationship between women and discrete patriarchy. Though Paatti, through these three exchanges, is aware of the sexual, economic, and physical
vulnerability of Paraya women, yet she simultaneously participates in the Paraya patriarchal structure at the expense of women in her own family. The child narrator simply asks Paatti a series of questions that highlight the juxtaposition between Paatti’s anger at her daughter’s husband for killing her, and her own inability to recognize that she has acted irresponsibly in having her daughter married. Rather, Paatti puts the onus on the man because he was persistent, and she felt pressured by the community’s expectations that sexually mature girls need to get married. Ironically enough, Paatti now wants the narrator to get married, even though she knows through past experience that there is the potential for girls being abused if they are married in haste. This is what happens later in Chapter 4 to Mariamma, when Paatti and Periappan marry her to Manikkam, who is abusive. Paatti’s rationale in Chapter 4 replicates her reasoning to have her own daughter married: she accepts the convention that girls who have achieved puberty should be married, and fears the family’s reputation at the hands of the community.

Another layer of complexity exists if we examine the narrator’s view of Paatti, and the relationship between the grandmother and the granddaughter that develops through the dialogue. Though the child narrator interrogates Paatti’s acceptance of patriarchal norms, and points to examples that reveal how her grandmother favors her grandsons over her granddaughters, the narrator’s admiration of Paatti’s strength is apparent. She describes Paatti as physically strong and dignified despite her age, and that Paatti is respected in the Paraya community as a midwife. The affection that comes through the dialogue between grandmother and granddaughter, as well as the stories
Paatti tells the narrator, the advice she gives her, and the activities they carry out together, like grooming hair or gathering firewood, suggests a deep emotional bond between the two. While the dramatized audience does reveal temporary places that are non-patriarchal, it lacks the sense of intimacy between female characters that is effectively captured through dialogue.

The third dialogue paradoxically allows for counter claims, even while the dominant narrative within the conversation critiques discrete patriarchy. A fragment of the conversation reveals that the narrator’s father, in this particular instance, is less patriarchal than Paatti, in that he wants his daughter to be educated, and is (apparently) less concerned with the Paraya community’s disapproval. It is also important to note that even though the narrator’s mother was married a few months after achieving puberty, the narrator does not explore or comment on domestic violence within her own family. This might be a personal choice that the narrator makes not to reveal this violence, but it could also suggest that there is more gender parity within her own family, as compared to others. The argument that is presented here is not in defense of Paraya men, or to contradict the narrator’s argument, but to suggest that dialogue introduces succinctly an array of probable relationships within the community, even while the primary intention is to focus on the caste and gender discrimination that Paraya women experience.

Perhaps the most effective use of this mode occurs in Chapter 9 between the narrator, who is now an adult, and her mother as they debate the implications for Paraya women after the community converted to Catholicism. It begins after the narrator meets a
friend belonging to the Chaaliyar community, who has had a child from her second
marriage, after divorcing her first husband for mistreating her.

The first exchange begins with a discussion between the narrator and her mother
as to whether women benefit from the opportunity to divorce their husbands. Whereas the
narrator’s mother argues that it is women who suffer after divorce, because men are more
willing to end their marriages, the narrator suggests that this is a far better solution than
being forced to be in an abusive relationship. Furthermore, since the community (unlike
upper-castes) respects women who live independently of their husbands and widows who
choose to remarry, divorce should be accepted. While the mother agrees with this
argument, she counters this claim by evoking the dictate of the Catholic Church that
states that marriage is sanctioned by God, and cannot be dissolved by social institutions.

Very much in the spirit of the critique against institutional religion in *Karukku*, the
narrator in *Sangati* points out that the clergy use religion and God to manipulate people
into not thinking for themselves. Rather, she suggests an alternative understanding of
religion: “But God created us so that we can be happy and free. I am sure that God
doesn’t want us to be living like slaves to the day we die, without any rights or status, just
because of a cord around the neck. Don’t you agree?” (95).

The shift in the rationale of the mother’s defense against divorce raises questions
about her motivations against divorce. Is it constituted on the grounds of what is best for
women, or what is best according to Catholicism? Does her faith in religion inform her
argument that women are worse off from divorce? The narrator does not seem to be
interested in exploring the motivations of her mother; rather she examines a more
fundamental issue which is the relationship between religion and humanity. Unlike her mother who assumes that humanity must follow the dictates of religion, the narrator redefines the relationship through the use of reason, which assumes that God has the interests of human beings in mind, and in this case dignity, independence, and happiness in “secular time” as opposed to happiness in a life after death.

This exchange leads to tension between mother and daughter, until Occchakkannu Chinnamma, the narrator’s aunt, enters the conversation and informs them about an upper-caste couple who have been socially humiliated after their daughter left her husband when she discovered he had a mistress. The narrator’s mother responds by suggesting “if you marry a pey, what can you do except to climb the tamarind tree where the pey lives” (96). Just as in the case of the dramatized dialogue, here a maxim that legitimizes unequal gender relationships is critiqued through a sharp response by the narrator:

Oh yes, a man can be a pey. He can be a fire-eating pisaasu. But a woman must still look after his needs, protect and support him, change herself because of his pey-nature, and keep him happy always. For how long must she degrade herself and go about carrying him by his arse? (96)

While the narrator provides a rational critique here, one that depends upon the assumption that men and women should be recognized as equals, the strength of the critique is carried through by the rhetoric of the response—the anger in the narrator’s voice, the coarse language she uses (“arse”), and the sarcasm she deploys in ridiculing the maximim by carrying it to its logical end which highlights the inequality of what each
gender is expected to put into the relationship. Though the exchange begins with comments about the culture of the upper-castes, the narrator and her mother universalize the unequal relations between the two genders. Occhakkannu confirms this by pointing out that women belonging to the Paraya community are forced by the community to live with their husbands even if they do not wish to. By the end of the conversation the mother moves completely in the other direction, suggesting that it was a mistake to convert to Hinduism.

Chapter 9 examines the importance of divorce for women across castes and religions; in this instance, women belonging to Dalit Hindu communities are more liberated than their Catholic counterparts, who in turn are more liberated than upper-caste Hindu women. Bama uses dialogue to explore and challenge the arguments that are deployed by institutionalized religion, and maxims that legitimize patriarchy. The effective use of reason and rhetoric is certainly a shift from the first chapter, where the narrator as a young girl can only question her grandmother about gender inequality and her complicit role, and where the reader is expected to deduce the implications of the argument. As an adult, the narrator provides an articulate critique of the problems that Dalit women experience.

Commentary

While commentary about social issues that affect Dalit women is scattered throughout the chapters, it plays a pivotal role when the narrator wants to explore a subject in detail. In Chapter 6 commentary takes up half the chapter. The first half of this chapter consists of two examples of women who resist domestic abuse, one of which is
the incident involving Rakamma and her husband which has been discussed under “Dramatized Audience”. The second half of the chapter—four pages of an eight page chapter—is a lengthy commentary that evaluates the position of Dalit women. The commentary begins with theorizing domestic violence within the Paraya community as a result of the intersection of caste exploitation and discrete patriarchal norms; it concludes with a realization that the quarrels between women are a consequence of this intersection and an internalization of discrete patriarchy. Commenting on the reasons for domestic abuse, the narrator suggests that:

[e]ven though they are male, because they are Dalits, they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home on their wives and children. But then, is it the fate of our women to be tormented both outside their houses and within? (65)

The narrator implies that caste and patriarchy are closely related to one another here. From her perspective, Dalit masculinity, which is a consequence of discrete patriarchal norms, and is consolidated in the domestic sphere, is undermined in the work place through the physical exploitation and psychological humiliation imposed by the hierarchy of the caste structure. However, while the narrator sympathizes with the Dalit men and rationalizes the violence they inflict on the women, she does not justify this behavior. Towards the end of the commentary, the narrator explores how caste and gender oppression affects women. Whereas the narrator initially thought that women quarreled with each other in the evening and morning because they were busy working during the
day, she “gradually … came to understand the real reason” (67). She views the women as triply oppressed. Like the men, they are physically exploited and socially humiliated in the work place, but are also solely responsible for labor within the domestic sphere, and are also sexually and physically abused by their husbands. Not being able to rest at home or at work, and being physically and sexually abused in both spheres, they take out their frustration on each other. However, here too, the language that the women use legitimizes discrete patriarchy. For instance, she points out that though women will “raise hell” if their husbands have mistresses, when they quarrel with one another they often describe each other as “my husband’s whore”. For the narrator, this subordination of women by women, especially in sexual terms, legitimizes patriarchal norms. She states that "we too have accepted what they want us to believe—that this is actually the right way, that our happiness lies in being enslaved to men. But if only we were to realize that we too have our self-worth, honour, and self-respect, we could manage our own lives in our own way” (68). Therefore, the narrator rationalizes this violence as a means for women to release their frustration at the economic, social, and physical exploitation that they suffer, at the hands of the upper castes, and the men of the community.

Between these two moments in the commentary, the narrator explores the marginalization of Paraya women by two other oppressed groups, Paraya men and upper caste women, even while she celebrates their strength. However, the emphasis in this section is placed on undermining the normative assumptions of discrete patriarchy. She does this by taking a series of proverbs and either revising or extending their implications through the use of reason. This fusion of rhetoric (in this context, proverbs) and reason
helps to effectively undermine the claims of patriarchy. For instance, she compares Paraya women to scared dogs who are exploited by Paraya men because they appear to be terrified. However, she continues, “if we stand up for ourselves without caring whether we die or survive, they'll creep away with their tails between their legs” (66).

The narrator takes a proverb and reverses the imagery, for if women, who are treated like dogs, assert their rights, and so become human beings, the men in turn will become dogs, as they will not dare exploit women. The reapplication of the logic of the proverb, while being humorous and cheeky, becomes a powerful means to dismantle the normative assumptions of patriarchy. After deploying these proverbs, the narrator makes a claim to human dignity that is reminiscent of Karukku. She states: “It is we who must uphold our rights. We must stand up for ourselves and declare that we too are human beings like everyone else” (66).

In this section, the narrator therefore effectively combines emotion and rhetoric with reason; at times there is anger in her tone when she reports the oppression Dalit women face at the hands of upper caste women and Dalit men; at other moments she speaks of the pain that women experience; and there are instances when she celebrates the strength and the tenacity of women in challenging the norms of gender and caste. Coming between sections that rationalize the suffering Dalit women experience at the hands of their husbands and between themselves, respectively, this section functions as a positive example of the means through which women can construct a narrative that gives them a sense of self respect. However, the main function of commentary in the novel is to expose the means through which women are marginalized by caste and patriarchy. This is
most effectively demonstrated when the narrator uses rationality to demystify the most extreme form of violence that women suffer from: the possession by peys.

According to Dalit folklore, peys are spirits of those who died unnaturally, and while they return to haunt the living, they are especially successful in possessing Dalit women. Chapter Five explores the stories of two Paraya women who are possessed by peys and the brutal treatment they undergo at the hands of the (male) kodangi (soothsayer) in order to be exorcised. The narrator notes that it is only Dalit women who are possessed, and that upper caste women and Dalit men are not vulnerable. The possession of Dalit women and their exorcism are public spectacles that reconfirm patriarchal notions, as it is only men who play a variety of roles to undo the possession of women. In a dialogue between the narrator and her mother, the latter defends this oddity by pointing out that Dalit women can be easily possessed because they move about in the public sphere by themselves, and more vulnerable when they are menstruating or when they are scared. However, upper-caste women are never alone, and “‘men don’t carry the same fear in their hearts. And they won’t catch women either, if they dare to walk past without fear’” (58). Then the narrator begins a lengthy commentary pointing out:

I wondered why peys were frightened of men. I asked myself whether in that case, any and every creature was afraid of men, too? ….

Once a girl comes of age she has no more freedom. They tell us all stories, take away our freedom, and control our movements. And we too become frightened ….

And when I examined the lives of our women, I understood the reason.
From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. … Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all of this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don’t have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys. (58-59)

At the thematic level, the discussion of peys echoes the earlier discussion of the violence that women face. Both forms of behavior are rationalized as a release from the sexual, physical and social exploitation that they daily experience; possession becomes an extreme form of the abusive and vulgar behavior the narrator sees Dalit women participating in. However, I wish to contrast the way the narrator's mother and the narrator rationalize the reasons for Dalit women becoming possessed. The narrator's mother rationalizes possession as a result of "fear" that Dalit women have, but does not further explore the reasons as to why Dalit women are fearful. However, the narrator interrogates the very idea of fear. As touched upon in the lengthy quotation above, she argues that fear is a result of the process through which women are “socialized” into the caste community. Here, women conform to the ideology of patriarchy by uncritically accepting social narratives that inform them of their vulnerability. This is further reinforced by the social structures of caste and gender which impose upon women the burden of physical and sexual exploitation in the public and domestic spheres. This has been already discussed thoroughly above. According to the narrator possession is a result of both ideological and social elements of patriarchy and caste. She therefore abstracts
and homogenizes the human being (be they Dalits or upper castes, men or women), and so rationalizes the fear as a consequence of social structures. The narrator critiques a Dalit belief system that assumes a “difference” based on caste (upper-caste women are not affected) and gender (Dalit men are not affected) that legitimizes and perpetuates social inequality. The passage (just quoted above) and the chapter concludes with the narrator stating that “we must not fool ourselves that we are possessed by peys. We must be strong. We must show by our own lives that we believe ardently in our independence” (59). This passage echoes the empowering rhetoric of Karukku. However, before the narrator works at the level of emotion she strips the mystique of possession by rationalizing fear as a consequence of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse that Dalit women constantly are exposed to.

Conclusion

This chapter has explicated a reading of Bama’s work by contextualizing it within the larger cultural and political debates within and without Tamil Nadu. The fundamental mode of analysis undergirding Karukku and Sangati is the use of reason to interrogate those social structures—religious institutions, the caste system, and patriarchy—that have oppressed Dalits. This particular form of reasoning that Bama deploys in her novels has been influenced by Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement that had a deep influence on caste and gender politics in South India. Whereas Karukku fuses a rational critique of the Catholic Church with a positive reinterpretation of Christian scriptures, influenced by Dalit liberation theology, to suggest a means through which the Paraya community can affirm their own identity, in Sangati, the use of reason to critique gender discrimination,
especially within the Paraya community, offers only temporary spaces that affirms Paraya women’s sense of dignity.

By analyzing the literature within its social context, this chapter avoids the kind of criticism currently produced in South Asian literary studies in English that reduces literature written by Dalits to “Dalit literature,” and so escapes rigorous analysis. At the same time, this critique also avoids succumbing to simply employing postructuralist and postmodern approaches to literature and identity that have common parlance in the metropole, and that are used by scholars of South Asian and Postcolonial literature. While it would be unwise to reject the contributions of postructuralism, academics who simply critique Bama’s work for not working within these norms, avoid engaging the local conversation that Bama’s work is participating in. While this reading might be far from perfect because it examines primary and secondary texts in translation, it is also an invitation for scholars of South Asian literary studies writing within the metropole to engage local political, cultural, and literary referents of Dalit literature before falling back on the more familiar forms of critical analysis.
CONCLUSION

My project began as a response to the broader debate over the relevance of secularism after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992. Beginning my research in 2005, I discovered that while political science, philosophy, sociology, and even cultural studies, have produced a wealth of material on the relationship between secularism, minorities, and the state, there was almost a complete absence of critical writing within South Asian literary studies on secularism as a political doctrine and a cultural project. The absence was surprising given that literary studies had developed important scholarly work that has criticized Indian nationalism and Hindu fundamentalism, especially from the perspective of women, and ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. However, this relationship between the nation or the state and minorities in literary studies is primarily mediated through the lens of hybridity and the subaltern, associated with Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, respectively. When secularism is evoked, it is simply reduced to an adjective to describe the state. Beyond being a short hand to describe the impersonal bureaucracy or a national culture that promotes the upper-caste Hindu as the norm, the term “the secular state” is devoid of any meaning. Though the third most influential postcolonial critic, Edward Said, has deployed secular criticism as a mode of critical practice, his use of the word “secular” is catachrestic, and South Asian scholars, with the exception of Aamir Mufti, have not applied this method of analysis to literary texts.
As I struggled to discover a conversation within South Asian literary studies that seriously engaged the concept of secularism, I also found the discussion of secularism in other disciplines to be inadequately developed for literary analysis. These disciplines are primarily concerned with whether secularism as a political doctrine and a cultural project was relevant in a post-Babri Masjid India. While I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of this debate, it remains fundamentally incompatible with literary criticism. To simply analyze fiction for the purpose of discovering whether it promotes or criticizes secularism runs the risk of mechanically evaluating the content of a text without engaging its aesthetics. Though we need to understand a text’s politics and whether it offers alternative models of community or citizenship, we also need to pay attention to how its form and rhetorical structure engage secularism.

In order to examine how literary analysis might effectively explore secularism, I explored other aspects of the phenomenon—secular time and secularized religious identities—that the Indian debate only hinted at. Charles Taylor’s and David Scott’s theorizations of secularism in Europe and Sri Lanka, respectively, have been most helpful to understand these other facets. By examining how secularism is theorized in these different contexts, my dissertation has explored its diverse aspects: as a political doctrine, a cultural project, a mode of criticism, and most importantly, an ideological framework (the secularization of identities and secular time) that played an instrumental role in the creation of modern subjectivities. I therefore critically analyzed how literary texts engaged these various aspects of secularism directly and/or were informed by them, not only at the level of content, but also in their formal structure.
While I was developing this methodology to examine minority literature, two important works on secularism in South Asian writing were published—*Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (2007) by Aamir Mufti and *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence* (2008) by Priya Kumar. Both critics began their discussion of secularism with the assumption that the destruction of the Babri Masjid underscored the inadequacy of secular nationalism to resolve the majority/minority problem in India. They therefore examine fiction (with an emphasis on minority writing) to conceptualize alternative frameworks for coexistence. I have argued that their work is limited because, like the political theorists and cultural activists, they only conceive secularism to be a political doctrine and a cultural project. This is most evident in Kumar’s analysis, though it is also apparent in Mufti’s nuanced work on the subject. While he recognizes that any critique we make can only be within modernity (of which secularism is an important aspect), his entire project examines Muslim writers who were skeptical of nationalism (including secular nationalism).

My dissertation, *The Contours of Secularism in South Asian Minority Writing*, has acknowledged the majority/minority framework created as a result of nationalism and has recognized the political and cultural aspects of secularism. However, I also pay attention to the way in which minority writing responds to and is shaped by secularized identities and secular time. The first four chapters explored the relationship between minority communities and nationalism, but secularism is not restricted only to a political doctrine or a cultural project. Chapter one compared the strategies deployed by Burgher writers to resist secular time and secularized identities that legitimized Sinhala-Buddhist
nationalism. The next chapter examined how Muslim writers foregrounded the rights of
the individual citizen. They promoted a secular culture that was similar to secular
nationalism, but remained distinct from it. Chapter 3 on Anglo-Indians returned to the
conundrum of the place of minorities in the secular time of the nation state. While
reacting to the Community’s position vis-à-vis the Indian nation, Anglo-Indian writers
also responded to the secular time of colonial rule. The fourth chapter examined Parsi
writing that criticized a secularized Parsi identity that was constituted during colonial
rule, but has had tragic consequences for the Community in postcolonial India. The last
chapter explored Dalit writing which operates completely outside the majority/minority
binary. I examined how secularism was deployed as a rational critique to expose how
caste, religion, and patriarchy functioned at the local, and not the regional or national
levels.

The most apparent intervention that my dissertation makes in South Asian literary
studies is to reconceptualize the critical framework used to discuss secularism. I have
explored how different aspects of secularism such as, secularized religious identities and
secularism as a mode of criticism, are directly addressed or inform the same text. For
instance, Bama deploys paggutarivu—reason based on discernment—to expose how the
Roman Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu has exploited Dalit Catholics. The alternative is
not to dismiss religion, but secularize it from a Dalit perspective. Rituals and the faith in
God and Church are replaced by a personal devotion grounded in reason in order to
perpetuate “good” on Earth.
By paying attention to the different aspects of secularism in texts written by minority groups, I have also attempted to dislodge the majority/minority binary that has defined how minority literature is engaged in South Asian literary studies. While this relationship can never be completely dispelled as the very word “minority” assumes a “majority,” I have explored minority identity outside the realm of nationalism: in relationship to colonialism and in competition with each other. For instance, Sealy (Anglo-Indians), and Mistry (Parsis) explore communities that were favored during colonialism, but are relatively marginalized in the present. I have argued that both writers recognize that the contemporary problems within the Communities stem partially from their secularization during colonial rule when they modeled themselves on the British. This occurred before the national movement was consolidated in the 1850s (when it existed as a cultural phenomenon). Sealy deploys literary strategies to explore a more fluid identity prior to the secularization of the Anglo-Indian community, and Mistry attempts to undo the secularized identity of the Parsi community in the present context by fashioning alternative narratives. Minority identity and writing then is not simply determined by or a response to nationalism.

My dissertation also reveals that minorities, like Anglo-Indians and Muslims, can be hostile to each other and claim to be superior by aligning themselves with the majority community. Thus, Anthony contrasts “progressive” Anglo-Indians to a “backward” Muslim community to demonstrate how the former can enter the secular time of the Indian nation. Similarly, Manto reveals that Muslims and the national movement could both stereotype Anglo-Indian women as sexually promiscuous in comparison to the
“good” Hindu or Muslim woman. But this raises a more significant question about the relationship between nationalism and the Muslim minority. Is the Muslim middle class co-opted by the national (Hindu) culture? In other words, in this instance, does the national movement influence the cultural attitudes of the Muslim middle class? Or, are both the Hindu and the Muslim middle classes responding to a larger political, cultural, and social division—one which depends upon the colonial/indigenous binary? It is here that I am critical of Mufti, who only considers Muslim minority writing to be a response to nationalism, and not colonialism. I merely raise this question and cannot answer it because more research needs to be done on the construction of a modern Islamic identity during colonial rule. In addition, both examples demonstrate that South Asian literary criticism also needs to pay attention to the conflicts between minority communities, something that is ignored because this criticism focuses exclusively on national frameworks.

Ultimately, my dissertation participates in a cross-disciplinary debate over the evaluation of modernity, especially secularism, in Postcolonial studies. In response to atavistic longings for a pre-modern past that is so typical of national movements, Mufti recognizes that we can only critique modernity by acknowledging that we exist within it. Thus, even as he is critical of secularism, he does not deny its relevance. The same cannot be said for other theorists of secularism. Though Aditya Nigam, Partha Chatterjee, and Gauri Vishwanathan are also aware that we cannot exist outside modernity, they are hostile to secularism, even as they affirm other aspects of modernity—rationalism, democracy, and “modern” science. Their criticism is most problematic when they strive
to argue that Amedkar and the Dalit movement were opposed to secularism. My conclusion is not the place to examine how their dependence on postructuralism hinders their ability to recognize that Ambedkar embraced secularism, even while he was critical of it. While my dissertation does not directly address this issue, my theoretical exploration of secularism and the application of it to South Asian literature is a response to this problematic evaluation of secularism.

Through an exploration of the relationship between secularism and South Asian minority writing, my dissertation intervenes in three important conversations in South Asian studies. By examining how the different facets of secularism are either addressed by or inscribed in South Asian minority writing, I have demonstrated that the majority/minority binary does not adequately address the complexity of minority literature. Furthermore, I have argued that the critical framework we use to explore secularism in literature cannot only focus on its political and cultural aspects. By redefining how minority writing and secularism are conceptualized and how they engage each other, I am, finally, also responding to the broader debate within Postcolonial Studies to argue that any discussion of modernity in South Asia must acknowledge the relevance of secularism.
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VITA

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The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

__________________      ____________________________________
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