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## Conflicting Communities: The Global Imaginary in the South Asian Anglophone Novel

Sushmita Sircar, Gettysburg College, USA, [ssircar@gettysburg.edu](mailto:ssircar@gettysburg.edu)

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The novel, the nation, and the family, arising in the age of colonisation, are structures deeply imbricated in each other, providing the imaginaries that sustain each other. The contemporary emergence of world literature therefore requires a model different from the family. This essay argues that the contemporary South Asian novel centres new modes of affiliation and kinship that are enabled by global institutions—the multinational finance company and the university—in order to provide an alternative to the site of the family, the imagined basis for the nation's community. By looking at three novels written by authors of Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi origins respectively—Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014), and Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* (2014)—I indicate that rather than a unified 'global imaginary' that replaces a previous national one, the characters in these novels find themselves imbricated in conflicting contracts of affiliation. It is the allure of class-based solidarity and the political community enabled by the university that the contemporary South Asian Anglophone novel proffers as models of imagining the world through various acts of affiliation.

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Over the last two decades ‘global fiction’ or ‘world literature’ has increasingly eclipsed national and postcolonial frameworks for understanding global Anglophone literary production. Debjani Ganguly defines the ‘contemporary global novel’ as a novel that arises in response to the post-cold war shifts in global power after 1989 (2016: 1–5). The Warwick Research Collective, situating world literature over a time period from the late-eighteenth century onwards, emphasises the unified-yet-uneven world created under conditions of capitalism. They define world literature as ‘a literature that variously registers this combined unevenness in both its form and its content,’ seeing the novel as its paradigmatic form (Warwick Research Collective 2015: 49). Pheng Cheah in *What is a World?* pushes back against this frequent characterisation of literature as merely registering the formation of this uniform world, since such theories are often ‘reactive responses to the world-system and globalization’ (2016: 193). In contrast, Cheah suggests that literature be conceived of as having ‘an active power in the making of worlds, that is, both a site of processes of worlding and an agent that participates and intervenes in these processes’ (2016: 2). Like Ganguly and the Warwick Research Collective, Cheah also proceeds to use novels as instances where such a theory of world literature plays out.

This repeated attention to the novel within debates on world literature is perhaps unsurprising given that the novel and the nation are structures deeply imbricated in each other, providing the imaginaries that sustain each other.<sup>1</sup> For Benedict Anderson, the novel provided the ‘technical means for re-presenting the kind of imagined community that is the nation,’ a formulation that notably leaves open the possibility of novels representing other analogous communities (2006: 25). Asking ‘what the emergent fictions of the global might be,’ Rita Barnard notes the need to rethink the features of the novel which link it to the nation. Barnard singles out three features: a shared chronotope signifying a shared social space, a point of view that goes beyond a single individual, and a reader who recognises in the novel’s community one in which they are also imbricated (2009: 208). I would add to this list a fourth feature, that of the family, whose iconography and affective powers shape the novelistic invocations of the postcolonial nation. The centring of the nation in readings of Anglophone novels from South Asia was founded on the metaphors of bloodlines and familial belonging—of infants exchanged at birth (Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981)), families

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<sup>1</sup> Priyamvada Gopal emphasises the centrality of the national dimension in understanding the anglophone novel in India: ‘the narration of nation gave the anglophone novel in India its earliest and most persistent thematic occupation, indeed, its *raison d’être*, as it attempted to carve out a legitimate space for itself’ (2009: 7). Similarly, Neelam Srivastava’s study of some canonical anglophone novels, including *Midnight’s Children*, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*, and Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* argues that ‘they all present an allegoresis of the Indian nation by recuperating different versions of the national past: in the sense that they present different configurations, or emplotments, of specific historical events in India’s colonial and postcolonial history’ (2007: 2).

sundered by new borders (Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* (1988)), and marriage as the all-encompassing preoccupation against events unfolding in the new nation (Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993)). The preoccupation with the familial as a mode of understanding national belonging illustrates Anne McClintock's statement that 'the family as a metaphor offered a single genesis narrative for national history, while, at the same time, the family as an *institution* became voided of history' (1995: 63). McClintock analyses the 'domestic genealogy' that informs the idea of the nation. She draws a distinction between 'family as metaphor' that provides the narrative for the historical development of the nation, and 'the family as an institution' that is simultaneously figured as ahistorical and outside the time-space of the nation. By extension, one might ask: what alternative conceptions of communities mediate how protagonists of the contemporary novel understand their ties to the world?

I propose that various contemporary South Asian Anglophone novels reveal how individual protagonists negotiate the institutions of globalisation. These novels suggest that globalisation can be most acutely felt in the everyday institutions of corporations and universities that become sites where conflicting demands are placed on the protagonists. Edward Said distinguishes between filiation and affiliation in the nineteenth century. Drawing on Lukacs, he argues that the alienation of men from the products of their labour, including reproductive labour, led to an alienation from biological ties as the anchor of social continuity. Thus capitalist production leads to the need for 'new and different ways of conceiving human relationships' (Said 1983: 17). In the face of the failure of biological reproduction, '[t]he only other alternative seemed to be provided by institutions, associations and communities whose social existence was not in fact guaranteed by biology, but by affiliation' (Said 1983: 17). Drawing on this formulation, I contend that characters in these novels demonstrate a contingent seeking of new modes of relating to others against the backdrop of the 'world'. Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* (2014), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014) are structured, at least in part, as (auto)biographies of protagonists hailing from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, respectively, and are rooted in specific historical events that take place within their national borders. The twin sites of the multinational corporation which embodies the spectre of global finance, and the university, purportedly the purveyor of a liberal education, are the recurrent global sites that structure these novels. As these novels show, these institutions function simultaneously as the site of investment in the transnational ideologies of either neoliberalism or socialism.

I focus on these novels since they share the features that lead Anderson to identify the novel with the nation: parallel narratives that situate the simultaneous existence

of people within a shared chronotope, the proliferation of institutions and locations as emblematic of a social landscape, and protagonists whose coming-of-age charts the development of the nation (2006: 25–32, 205). However, they also register the effects of globalisation and a post-national world through protagonists who must navigate personal ties given a shared disinvestment in the site of the family. In place of a shared national community, these novels dwell on the fractured realities of class-based identities, identities produced through sites of conscription (the university and the corporation) and the ruptures of revolutionary attachments (to a party, a political ideal) as significant interruptions to the narrative of national identity.<sup>2</sup>

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the most well-known of these works. Hamid's novels, including *How To Get Filthy Rich in Asia* (2013) and *Exit, West* (2017), show how the Anglophone novel might respond to the staple problematics of global discourse (such as the investment in the neoliberal individual and the refugee crisis). *In the Light of What We Know* was Rahman's first novel. It is often read as at least partly autobiographical given the details of Bangladeshi origin, an education at Cambridge, and a foray into the finance industry that both the author and the protagonist Zafar share. Published in 2014, it can be seen as treading similar ground as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as both unfold in the terrain of the global finance industry and against the spectre of terrorism and the US war on terror. The third novel, Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others*, seems at first to operate within a very different set of concerns and boundaries. Set during the Maoist-inspired Naxalite movement of 1967 to 1971, the novel veers between the perspectives of middle-class family life on the one hand, and the son, Supratik, who decides to join the Naxalites in rural West Bengal on the other. I include this novel as a corrective to the first two, whose spectres of corporate globalisation/terrorism signify as the only imaginable forms of a post-national world. Instead, the internationalist imaginary of the Naxalite movement allows Mukherjee's novel to dramatise the split perspectives of a middle-class student who becomes a Naxalite, and the host of middle-class concerns and subjectivities of his family, concerned more with everyday life in a bourgeois household. Understanding the world of the contemporary Anglophone novel

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<sup>2</sup> These novels only begin to illuminate the nature of this conflict between personal communities demarcated by the family, marriage and romantic attachments, and public/political ones such as those of the political party, universities, the army, and corporations. Other contemporary novels that illustrate this thematic in South Asian and diasporic Anglophone fiction include Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2014), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Madhuri Vijay's *The Far Field* (2019), Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017), and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). The persistence of this conflict indicates a renewed concern with forms of political community in the face of an overbearing postcolonial state that makes national belonging less a form of radical resistance, and more a hegemonic form of global organisation. Following the choices of female protagonists (in *Home Fire* and *The Lowland* for instance) would help to chart the difference in revolutionary attachments resulting from gendered difference. Such a comparison would be especially insightful given the stereotypically-masculine character of the 'terrorist' or the 'Naxalite'.

requires a reconceptualisation of the communities and affiliative structures to which its characters are bound.

Both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *In the Light of What We Know* explicitly situate themselves against the backdrop of international finance. The first-person narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* works for Underwood Samson & Company, 'a valuation firm [that] told their clients how much businesses were worth' (Hamid 2007: 5), in which capacity he is posted across the world, first in the Philippines, then in Chile. His travels thus outline a map of the global south, as navigated by a traveller always conscious that he is travelling 'first class' (170). The narrator of *In the Light of What We Know*, as well as Zafar, his friend, whose biography the book purportedly traces, has spent his life in finance, a business that requires 'a grasp of the broad picture in which wide patterns emerge' (5). In deciding which firm to work for, the narrator reflects that 'the most exciting names in finance were American, my firm, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, and the rest' (252). Global exchange rates and repercussions are viewed through the lens of investment decisions, which, the narrator concedes, is led by American private business interests. This global flow of capital persists despite its juxtaposition with the spectre of increasingly-visible boundaries and security forces in the post 9/11 world within which they are set.

Despite the assumption of a borderless world on which the narrator, Changez's firm operates in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, he must constantly face the literal borders that confront him. Early in the novel, when he travels to Greece after graduating from college, he notes of Europe that, '[i]ts cities were fortified, protected by ancient castles; they guarded against the Turks, much like the army and navy and air force of modern Greece, part of a wall against the East that still stands' (26). Post-9/11, these walls become more overt in the acceleration of security measures at the airport. Wendy Brown argues that walls create a narrative of sovereignty separate from the actual function they perform. She writes, 'walls have no intrinsic or persistent meaning or signification. ... Walls as such do not tell a story. They emerge from and figure in discourses, they can become discursive statements themselves, and they are crucial to the organization of power in and through space' (Brown 2010: 74). Changez's observations indicate how this narrative of unequal power is inscribed in the spaces through which he is able to move and that these boundaries have existed even before the pivotal act of terrorism that reinforces their visibility. Despite his ability to pass as a cosmopolitan subject in a postcolonial world because of his position as a financial analyst in a leading firm in Wall Street, he is faced with the realness of the borders that are the remnants of Orientalism and colonialism in the post-9/11 world. The tale he recounts derives its impact from analysing how the borders of the contemporary world, though less visible, are predicated on the legacies of empire.

At this time, Changez embarks on his relationship with Erica. Erica is, at one level, a symbol of the nation (Erica/America) unable to recover from an imagined past, and at another, by being intertwined with the narrator through a romantic relationship, a critique of the ways in which boundaries are constructed. Many analyses of the novel focus on the allegorical work performed by Erica, reading her as a metaphor for the nation caught up in an imagined past. For instance, Matthew Hart and Jim Hansen write that ‘Erica’s story therefore forms a loose allegory within Changez’s autobiography, her suicidal melancholia representing America’s collective retreat into “myths of [its] own difference”’ (Hamid 2007:168; Hart and Hansen 2008). In this reading, Erica represents the pitfalls of a nostalgic nationalism, serving as a warning even as Changez himself ‘journeys from a life of unipolar cosmopolitanism ... into a world of armed belligerents, fortified borders, and agonistic nationalisms’ (168). But this reading misses out on the nuanced ways in which Erica and Changez’s relationship critiques the nationalisms into which the individual characters find themselves retreating. Changez writes of his memories of her, ‘[s]uch journeys have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be ... I do not mean to say we are all *one* and indeed ... I am not opposed to the building of walls to shield oneself from harm’ (197). Not only then is Erica a symbol of the nation, but—as the use of ‘journeys,’ ‘boundaries,’ and ‘walls’ to talk about the intimacies of their relationship indicates—Changez’s relationship with her provides one lens through which to analyse the interlinked nature of world politics and individual attachments.

However, romantic love quickly cedes to equally compelling professional alliances that the post 9/11 world brokers. Against the impersonal framing of global business, the protagonists of both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *In the Light of What We Know* repeatedly read social interactions to gauge the basis of the networks of kinship that bind them to others. These moments bring to the fore the difficulty of knowing where one’s primary affiliations lie. This is apparent at the moment of their initiation into the firms, at their interviews for their jobs. In both novels, they are asked what sets them apart from their competitors. The former is asked if ‘your friends here know that your family couldn’t afford to send you to Princeton without a scholarship’ (Hamid 2007: 9). The interviewer then admits that he too had been a first generation student, and hires the narrator. This moment of affiliation between a Pakistani and an American suggests that the structural inequalities between the US and the postcolonial nation from which the narrator originates are bridged over by an admission of class inequality. Class is yet again the frame in which the narrator articulates his annoyance with his



Princeton classmates' 'self-righteousness in dealing with those whom they had paid for a service.' He muses that he 'found [himself] wondering by what quirk of human history [his] companions ... were in a position to conduct themselves in the world as though they were its ruling class' (24). If the history referred to is that of colonialism, then the narrator insists on reading its postcolonial remnant in interactions as the equivalent of class difference. In contrast, in a rewriting of the interview in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Zafar in *In the Light of What We Know* jokes that his answer as to whether he could do the job was:

I've come a long way, from a mud hut in the rainy season in a part of the world you only know as a basket case of misery. I spent a year of childhood in the basement of a derelict house in two rooms and an outside lavatory, and when I try to remember the kitchen, I can only picture the half that didn't have rats. I've grown up in some of the worst projects in London. (Rahman 2014: 253–4)

He notes that in actuality they had merely discussed the details of finance. The irony here is that this response revolves around actual class difference, whether located in a 'mud hut' in a country of the global south, or the 'projects' at the heart of the West. But the response evokes not a sense of kinship from his interlocutor, the narrator, but 'a strange feeling of envy' because there was 'nothing heroic in [his] own story' (254). If Zafar fails to identify with a college friend of Pakistani descent, he equally feels precluded from a sense of being British, as when he reminisces that, in response to a comment about servants in South Asian households, he reflects: 'I didn't get a single knowing look from anyone around the table, a glance to say that I was British, too. But there was another presumption that was harder to bear, one of class... For wherever in the world we had lived...[m]y family were the staff' (29). Zafar's class origins more centrally inform his relationships even within the fissured inequalities of elite universities and postcolonial friendships between men of Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent. He therefore resists the perhaps easier narrative of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where inequality at the global level can compensate for the continuing inequalities along class lines within the nation.

Zafar's refusal to yield these class differences to cultural similarities or to the homogenising structures of global finance echoes Aijaz Ahmad's commitment to a Marxist framework in evaluating global structures. In *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literature*, Ahmad argues against the tendency in postcolonial criticism that focuses on 'the rhetoric of migrancy' for it elides the fact that 'the migrant in question comes from a nation which is subordinated in the imperialist system of intra- state relationships

but, simultaneously, from the class, more often than not, which is the dominant class within that nation' (1992: 12–13). These two novels offer then the stakes of arguing for class as an axis of affiliation when postcolonial migration and global finance seem to emerge as two sides of the same coin. Indeed, Ahmad notes that '[a]n obvious consequence of repudiating Marxism was that one now sought to make sense of the world of colonies and empires much less in terms of classes, much more in terms of nations and countries and races' (1992: 41). If *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is conscious of class, it nevertheless assumes that global disparities in wealth can be mapped on to class difference. The narrator, who compares his family in Lahore to a fading European aristocracy, is nevertheless recognised as being in a position analogous to his working-class interviewer. In contrast, Zafar's sense of alienation throughout the novel stems from his sense of class as an essential aspect of his identity, despite all contrary indications and assumptions of where his affiliations lie.

For Ahmad, class is elided within postcolonial discourse at the very moment when capital consolidates itself through 'fully globalized circuits of production and circulation' that are no longer interrupted by colonial divisions, producing an 'international division of labor' which manifests in an 'imperialist military machine' and a 'globalized corporate economy' (1992: 20). Clearly these two novels function as a critique of such a 'globalized corporate economy.' And while Ahmad might be referring to actual military strength and acts of war, the phrase 'military machine' eerily echoes the thematics of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where the narrator explicitly makes the case for the 'fundamentalist' of its title to refer to the work of the finance companies, rather than Islamic militarism post 9/11. Indeed, as he starts his training at Samson Underwood, he observes of all the new hires that 'shorn of hair and dressed in battle fatigues, we would have been virtually indistinguishable' (Hamid 2007: 43). The remark presciently foreshadows the discussion of the janissaries of empire, following which the narrator chooses to resign from his position at the firm. 'The janissaries were always taken in childhood', one of the firm's clients tells him in Santiago, in reference to the Christian boys 'captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army' (172). The military imagery is much more pronounced and literal in *In the Light of What We Know*, which unfolds in part in a highly-militarised Kabul, at the headquarters of a UN funded aid agency, in a city overrun with international security forces. And Zafar himself is revealed to be the result of one of the thousands of pregnancies resulting from the rape of women by Pakistani soldiers at the time of Bangladesh's secession in 1971 (Rahman 2014: 36).

David Scott's evocative phrase 'conscripts of modernity' aligns usefully here with the discussion of the Pakistani army in Bangladesh's creation, the military activity of



American agencies in Afghanistan, and, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the modern-day janissaries recruited for the work of empire. Reading Toussaint Louverture's encounter with works of the French Enlightenment and the influence of these works on his revolutionary attempt to overthrow slavery in Haiti, Scott observes that he 'was constrained to imagine and make the revolution ... within the conceptual and institutional terrain of modernity' (2004: 129). This made Louverture not a volunteer, but a conscript, a word which 'does not suggest merely the recruits' initial attitude, but also the nature of the army and the war it had been fighting' (Asad, quoted in Scott 2004: 130). The site of conscription is 'conceptual and institutional' and determines the parameters within which action and revolution can be conceived. If working for American firms is seen in these novels as the contemporary equivalent to working for the armies of empire, then elite educational institutions emerge as the site at which conscription takes place. The comparison is made between going to America for college, and being recruited by the same imperial power. The narrator notes early on that 'Princeton made everything possible for me' (Hamid 2007: 16), and later, 'I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee', declaring allegiance to an educational institution and multinational business rather than a nation (38). In *In the Light of What We Know* similarly indicates the superiority of affiliation to a university rather than a nation when the narrator opens his story with 'I was born in 1969 in the town of Princeton, New Jersey' (Rahman 2014: 93). If affiliation is a matter of birth, the narrator states his own origins not in terms of the nation state, but in terms of the very specific locale of a university town and academic community into which he was born. Zafar, too, is able to escape the poverty to which his family confines him by winning a scholarship to Oxford. He refers cuttingly at one point to men 'educated at an American university' as 'that buffer class of native informants' (375). If for Louverture the encounter with the texts of the Enlightenment mark his entry into a modern consciousness that shapes his choices, then these novels indicate that the modern university becomes the place where global affiliations are staked under the guise of a liberal education.

Nor is this site of encounter limited to the educational institutions of the US or England. In *In the Light of What We Know*, regarding the diversity of the Indian army that intervened in Bangladesh, the narrator's father observes, '[t]hey were all really the same, Hindu, Jew, Sikh, Zoroastrian. They were all educated in the same military college founded by the British, you know?' (200). If Leela Gandhi in *Common Cause* remarks on the 'formative encounter with cultural difference' (2014: 98) engendered by the conscription of Indian soldiers into the British army during World War I, then *In the Light of What We Know* indicates that the ideal of a diverse Indian state,

represented by its military forces, is one that is inculcated first within colleges and an educational system instituted by the British. Moreover, once the narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* decides to return to Pakistan, he takes up a post as a university lecturer (aptly teaching courses on finance), and, he states, ‘I made it my mission on campus to advocate a disengagement from your country by mine’ (202). Later, it is the protests organised by one of his students that causes American authorities to look into his political activities. He notes that his students were ‘bright, idealistic scholars’, and that they addressed each other as ‘comrades’, thereby indicating that a sense of kinship and affiliation is fostered through the university (205). This association of a university space with anti-imperial intent is emblematic of the way in which universities in South Asia have frequently been the site of political activity, and often political activity aimed against the establishments with which institutions like Princeton and Oxford seem to be complicit in these novels.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of the university as the site of political affiliation is understated, but its constant recurrence in these contemporary novels points to the integral structural impact it has. These universities are seen as the locus of recruitment for either a global ruling class, predicated on global finance capital, or, as in the case of Mukherjee’s *The Lives of Others*, a grassroots communist revolution among the peasants of West Bengal that draws its leaders from the student population of some of the best colleges in Calcutta. In either case, the rhetoric of recruitment comes to define these centres of liberal education. *The Lives of Others* offers the most explicit discussion of the university as political training ground. Supratik, a student from a middle-class family in Calcutta, writes in unsent letters that he ‘was a communist activist from [his] very first year in Presidency College’ (Mukherjee 2014: 34). He details his activities early on in his account of his work among the peasants: ‘as a student in Presidency College, I was “doing politics,” as the slightly shaming, slightly dirty expression would have it. I was, briefly, a member of the Students’ Federation, the student wing of the CPI(M). ... I cut my teeth doing the usual. If posters had to be put up, if slogans had to be put on walls, I provided copy. ... I decided who among us was going to work in which segment of the college or the city, I worked out the most favorable time to do it.’ (35).

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<sup>3</sup> In the late nineteenth century, dissatisfaction with the colonial system in the nascent anti-colonial movement led to initiatives by indigenous elites to set up alternative institutions such as the Deccan Education Society in Poona, the Ganganath Vidyalaya by Sri Aurobindo at Baroda, Shantiniketan and Vishwavidyalaya by Tagore, Hindu College and Benares Hindu University in Benares (See Basu 1989: 174–6). In the postcolonial era, the extent of student involvement in politics is visible both in student agitations for their own rights as students (reservations, hostels, the raising of fees) as well as in alliance with wider social movements such as the anti-CAA movement, the Naxalite movement at an earlier stage, anti-caste politics, and in solidarity with international movements such as the anti-Vietnam war protests and the Rhodes must fall movement more recently.

The university as training ground for politics is here evident, and not merely as an informal, after-hours convergence of political interests as in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, but as an organised machinery of political parties—the Students' Federation, the CPI(M)— and a roster of tasks through which one works one's way up—the usual tasks that a new recruit is assigned. Nevertheless, Supratik explains his dissatisfaction with being confined to the ineffective realm of student politics, which ultimately involved being a 'part of government, of the established order of things, on the side of institutions, those very ones we thought we were taking a giant wrecking ball to', wanting eventually to move beyond it to active political organising (Mukherjee 2014: 37). His objective among the peasants, then, is to recruit them for armed rebellion. As he explains, '[o]ur aim was to educate them in class dynamics, arouse hatred in them against their class enemies, explain the events of Naxalbari and Telangana to let them know that they were not alone, that class uprisings were happening throughout the country, peasants were snatching their land and crops back from landowners' (174). Finding the education at Presidency College inadequate, he nevertheless believes in education in class dynamics as the first step towards political revolution.

In so aligning himself with the landless peasants, Supratik reveals also the cartography of alliances within which the Naxalite movement positions itself. Although a movement premised on class, he wants nevertheless to convey news of events 'happening throughout the country', offering Naxalbari and Telangana as exemplary incidents to follow. If Anderson sees the newspaper, with its fictive connections between disparate events, as founded on the shared assumption of a common community, the framework of events through which Supratik and his comrades choose to educate the peasants equally points to a different imaginary of the nation fractured along class lines that they seek to convey (2006: 25). Although in many ways *The Lives of Others* turns its focus away from the global arena, charting not a movement from the postcolonial city to the cosmopolitan one, but rather, a trajectory from the cities of the postcolony to the rural fields of West Bengal, it does so through a redefining of international cartographic alliances. The peasant revolution that Supratik is involved in draws ideological sustenance from Mao's *Little Red Book*, a heavily-underlined copy of which the comrades carry around and quote from often (281, 362). In this it echoes Ahmad's argument for the need to turn attention from the rhetoric of exile and immigration, which quite often continues to hide the internal inequalities of class within a global framework, to the 'actuality of the struggle for socialism,' in examining the rise of Communist parties and revolutions in the various postcolonies (1992: 15). The global imaginary within which it partakes as a result of this turn might not be one shared by *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *In the Light of*

*What We Know*, but it does go beyond national boundaries, taking up an international alliance of peasant movements as its legitimising horizon.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, such political training and ideological choices made at the university leave open the question of how far one is free to choose one's own affiliations. Even as Supratik foregoes the comfort of a middle-class existence, he finds himself unable to feel as if he belongs among the peasants with whom he stays, acknowledging the gap between activism stemming from books and ideological commitment, and that resulting from the lived experience of being a peasant. He attempts, during his stay, to think his way into such a lived experience by trying to, he says, 'imagine [any one of the peasant's] life in as much detail and minuteness as I can. Sometimes I arrange it on a time-axis. ... [Other times] I concentrate on one probable experience in [this peasant's] life and try to become him and live that experience in every single sensation and feeling' (Mukherjee 2014: 177). He acknowledges though that he is 'failing to become one of them. A distance still separates us' (177). Supratik's meditations on the impossibility of 'becom[ing]' and therefore belonging to a class and life he was not born into are countered by Zafar's realisation while waiting for a train to Sylhet, where his family came from. He says, '[s]uddenly I felt the first stirrings of what I would later come to recognize as kinship, a feeling that alarmed me, a sense that I was a piece with a group of people for the most basic reasons, simple to the senses and irrational. They all looked like me' (Rahman 2014: 53). The two reflections juxtapose 'imagination' and 'feeling' as the basis of kinship. Supratik does not belong amongst the peasants despite his ideological desire to do so, and Zafar, despite being too young to articulate such kinship through notions of a community imagined through history or the nation, does.

Supratik is aware that it is certain modes of thought and linguistic registers that mark him as an outsider and attempts consciously to erase them. The social affiliations of language are what bother Supratik as he notes one of his comrade's fondness for Tagore's poetry, the height of cloistered middle-class taste for him. He tells Samir that he knows that he has been scribbling poetry on pieces of paper hidden inside Mao's *The Little Red Book*, and notes 'I couldn't fathom the acuteness or depth of his discomfort.

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams explains how the expansion of the capitalist process to a global scale extends the English idealisation of the binary between 'country' and 'city' to a range of unfamiliar contexts. The 'country' and 'city' provide seemingly static categories that index a changing process of resource extraction and labour conditions. The global repercussions of this order become visible in the rural communities depicted in 'the Kenya of James Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*, or in the Malaya of Han Suyin's *And the Rain my Drink ...* in Nkem Nwankwo's *Danda*, in George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin*' (Williams 1982: 286–88). To this one might add depictions of the Naxalbari movement as an organisation of rural, peasant communities affected by capitalist and colonialist processes of extraction which continue, crucially, under the postcolonial state. See Majumder (2021) for an illuminating account of the movement's internationalist dimensions which align it with struggles in China, Vietnam, US, and Latin America (Williams 1973).

He had been caught writing poetry surreptitiously, not doing something unspeakable' (Mukherjee 2014: 127). The students conclude that '[a]ll this writing business ... among people who are almost without exception, illiterate' is unseemly. Quoting Mao on the importance of being 'like the fish with the fish in the sea' (128), they imply that writing itself marks them as a class apart, the very act signifying class affiliations and privileges to which they should not have access. But although he seems to have no compunctions about continuing to write, he draws the line at poetry. Cutting short his appreciation of the transformation of the landscape with the monsoon season, he recounts, 'Two weeks later Samir was still quoting lines from Beautiful Bengal ... I quoted Mao— "[The soul] is for the 'concrete analysis of concrete conditions', the very soul of Marxism according to Lenin. Not for empty and superficial aesthetic pleasures. This beautiful green in front of you is an instrument for the oppression of the masses." That shut him up' (218). The episode summarises the disjuncture that Supratik cannot reconcile between the need to reduce every aspect of his life, including the structures of feeling and the way he apportions the minutes of his days, to that of the peasant class he is trying to become a part of, and the remainders of other thought-worlds and aesthetic and cultural educations that continue to structure how his comrades respond to the world around them.

Kinship and affiliation lead to different understandings of community for both Supratik and Zafar. This leads them both to reflect on the work of narrative in shaping communities. Supratik admits his failure to assimilate with the peasants when he is unable to imagine that a peasant might have a narrative sense of 'the story of his life, not only of the past and the present, but also of what was to come' (178). This echoes Zafar's observation in his diary about 'the narratives we impose on our lives,' which the narrator interprets as license to impose his own patterns in relating Zafar's story (40). The work of narrative in determining how one fits into a larger morass of details and events echoes Anderson's work on the role of narrative in enabling the nation. In his ending section on 'The Biography of Nations', Anderson links the narrative work performed by biographies and autobiographies for the identity of a person with the work performed by history in making up the narrative of the nation (2009: 204–6). These narratives, for Anderson, bridge the chasm between the past and the present, which would otherwise appear as disparate objects. Scott notes the more explicit connection between the two genres, writing in relation to C. L. R. James' book on *Louverture* as a way of writing Haitian history that 'biography and history were interconnected modes of inquiry; indeed, biography was understood to be a privileged form of historical discourse' (2004: 71). The structuring of these novels as (auto)biographies, at least in part, should be read therefore as a rethinking of the kinds of connections and

communities to which they wish to draw attention. This is most evident in *In the Light of What We Know*, where the narrator reflects early on that ‘Zafar is not the natural figure of biography’ (Rahman 2014: 30), and reflects in detailed footnotes on the verification of various facts, pointing to the narrative choices necessary in assembling the life story of even one’s closest friends. These novels share the assumption that narratives are discursive frameworks imposed on lives, but rework such patterns towards a more communal global imaginary.

My readings in this paper have favoured the male protagonists of these novels. Both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *In the Light of What We Know* are homosocial narratives, featuring primarily conversations between male protagonists. This involves a deliberate writing out of the women from their narratives. *The Lives of Others* provides insight into several female characters in the family, but my readings here focus on Supratik’s letters, and thus his first-person voice. This is in part because women are associated with the realm of the family, romance, and, metaphorically, the nation, within these novels. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the reliance on Erica as a symbolic figure falls back on the tropes of women as metaphors of the nation, thus effectively writing her out as a person in her own right for much of the narrative. Similarly, Hannah Harris Green’s article ‘What Female Characters?’ (2014) shows how a similar move takes place in *In the Light of What We Know*. Emily, Zafar’s love interest, is seen merely as a figure through which England and its upper classes are represented, not capable of entering into the conversations between men. Supratik’s relationship with his widowed sister-in-law is seen as yet another attachment that prevents him from fully dedicating himself to the revolution—even as his unsent letters are addressed to her, so that she is the imagined pretext for his letters. Part of the open-endedness of these two novels results from not fully being able to account for gendered difference within this new imagined community. That is, the women remain outside its narrative frame, even if their presence is the enabling condition for the narrative to unfold. The imagined communities of these novels might look very different were women an actual part of their social worlds.

Between them, these novels provide a glimpse of the decisive shift in South Asian Anglophone writing from the postcolonial canon of an earlier generation. These novels differ from the national and regional imaginaries inhabited by earlier seminal works like Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and Amitav Ghosh’s *In An Antique Land* (1992). The former was hailed as ‘a subcontinent finding its voice’, while the latter became a founding text in Indian Ocean studies. Significantly, the regional imaginary that these novels work with is also charted through the framework of biography, linking events in personal lives to historical events. Rushdie charts the events of the nation



of India through the life of Salem Sinai, born at the stroke of midnight: ‘I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country’, in a literalisation of the intersecting tropes of biography and history (1981: 1). Ghosh traces the biography of a subaltern slave of MS H.6, ending his life story with the distinct cartographic imagination of the Indian Ocean world that he would have had in his time. Both these works are historical in outlook—they look to the past to draw a connection with the present, with biography as the lens through which history is told—and in the process, situate themselves within different regional imaginaries.

Structurally, then, it is suggestive that, in contrast to these canonical texts, these three contemporary novels end with a gesture towards the future, which leaves events in the novel unresolved. We do not know what transpires between the narrator and the American official in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, we are not told what Zafar’s next steps are after he leaves the narrator’s house, and, despite Supratik’s death, *The Lives of Others* ends with an epilogue referencing the continued political activities of the Naxalites. Cheah suggests that world literature ‘attempt[s] to remake the world against capitalist globalization’, and that such literature works to ‘generate alternative cartographies that enable a postcolonial people or a collective group to foster relations of solidarity and build a shared world in which self-determination is achieved’ (2016: 2, 17–18). Starting from the confines of the capitalist world order of global finance and nationalist geographies, these protagonists move towards atomised forms of existence as they fall out of the affective order of the worlds that contain them. By orienting themselves towards the future, these novels leave the stories and narratives that the characters tell themselves undirected towards a teleological self or nation. Even as they suggest the templates of class-based solidarity and conscription through institutions of education as alternative sites of affective belonging, they leave open the space for these alternative communities to emerge.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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