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# Unearthing Subaltern Agency: The Representation of Marginalized Populations in Contemporary Indian Literature

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**Abstract**

This dissertation studies fictionalized diasporic subalternity, how it is represented by the authors (of the same social status or a cosmopolitan writer), and how different types of agency layered onto the characters influence each other. The choice of texts includes Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011), Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and four Gujarati short stories – "Jāt, "Safe Distance", "Bāp nū Bārmū" and "Swapna Samudra" – from the anthology *Vanboti Vartao* (2001). The dissertation addresses the importance of assigning agency to subaltern characters, treating them as subjects of their own history instead of mere victims. Some of these techniques designed to ascribe agency include Ghosh's use of hybrid languages like pidgin and creole, use of dialect, flashback and interior monologues by Gujarati Dalit writers, as well as the depiction of itinerant migration and personal choice in Kiran Desai's novel.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, diaspora, migrant, agency, pidgin, creole, Indian, Gujarati, Dalit

## Table of Contents

## Introduction

Historically, we are living in a time of mass global migration that is impossible to ignore,[1] as is apparent in the fiction our age is producing (and, as I imagine, will continue to produce as more migrants land on the shores of Europe in the coming years). I am mostly interested in the question of agency: immigration to a new country is a search for opportunity, a new life, for increased agency than what the home country offers. I examine modern subaltern migration through a varied set of works across English and Gujarati to examine how authors depict subaltern agency in light of migration. How does a cosmopolitan writer like Amitav Ghosh represent linguistic agency amongst nineteenth century indentured workers? Does a Dalit author's literary agenda translate into agency for fictional Dalit characters who view the cityscape as a liberated space free from caste prejudice? What about destitute illegal aliens in New York, like Kiran Desai's Biju: do they experience economic agency through movement unauthorized by international laws?

These questions have answers that are incomplete until seen in the light of other texts. My argument in this dissertation is that contemporary authors such as Ghosh, Desai, and the selected Dalit authors - Maheshwari, Parmar, Pateliya and Parmar - layer their characters with agency that makes them the subjects rather than objects in the narrative of the texts. They lace their narratives with particular attributes that allow their characters more control over their own fates. While these techniques are successful in some ways, my research also looks at dissonance in how agency is represented, and whether it results in lacunae in the narrative. The final purpose of

[1] According to the European Union, around seven hundred thousand migrants made their way onto the shores of Europe in 2015. The estimated numbers projected are going to swell to three million by the end of 2016. This wave is the single largest world migratory movement since the Second World War. This dissertation has been written at a time when various crises (American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Arab Spring, the Syrian war, the threat of ISIS spreading in the Middle East, migrants flooding in from African nations into Greece and Europe) have sparked off a global migration from the south to the north.

the dissertation is to study fictionalized diasporic subalternity, how it is represented by the authors (of the same social status or a cosmopolitan writer), and how different types of agency layered onto the characters influence each other. All the texts offer a rich spectrum of diaspora and migration within which one can study the play of agency. Ghosh uses hybrid languages such as creole and pidgin to enable his indentured characters through their travels across Mauritius and China. Acknowledging and respecting the legitimacy of these languages allows them a special edge over other characters in accessing information systems across these countries. The question of Dalit authors assigning agency to their characters is less clear. Some of the texts hinge on the moment of realization by protagonists that their lifelong struggle to liberate themselves does not result in a corresponding social agency. For other texts, the cityscape does deliver its promise of being progressive and allowing space for development, inspire of its own pitfalls. Biju, on the other hand, in Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* discovers that economic agency was perhaps not the right goal to look for in the first place, and he devises his own means of enabling himself in severely straitened circumstances as an illegal alien in North America. This dissertation looks to complicate the incessantly expanding idea of diaspora with an analysis of internal urban migration, using Safran's six points of differentiation and definition that might partially apply to Dalit migration: Dalit populations disperse from rural to urban centers in order to escape persecution or to pursue education and they do retain a collective memory of their "original homeland", which can comprise a complex mix of nostalgia and fear.

### ***Definition of Operative Terms: Agency, Subaltern, and Diaspora***

Central to the arguments in the dissertation are the terms "agency", "diaspora" and "subaltern" for which I offer preliminary definitions here. The idea of agency is a challenging

concept to pin down, so I only attempt here to clarify my own terminology. In this dissertation, I have attempted to connect three different types of agency: linguistic, economic and social. By agency I refer to empowerment or advancement gained by a character in one of these categories. In the context of this work, "agency" describes the human ability to control one's surroundings and use them to one's advantage.[2] I attempt to locate the specific moments and techniques by which the protagonists of the texts attempt to gain agency over their lives. Some, such as Ghosh's characters in *River of Smoke* attempt to gain agency over their social and economic status, while others, such as Biju in chapter four attempts to gain financial agency and self-reliance. Failing at this, he attempts to at least exercise some agency over his random ricocheting path across the U.S as an illegal alien. In the chapter on Dalit migrants, I attempt to extricate the ways in which Dalit authors allow their protagonists financial and social agency, if only to take it away from them to show the deplorable state of social conditions within the Indian caste system.

The point of this dissertation is not to prove that the protagonists of the texts *have*, or eventually acquire, agency. It seeks to examine how one type of agency may or may not affect others. Do these plots portray that having individual agency will eventually lead to a change in social status or economic agency? These connections, or their absence, tie in to the perceived larger purpose of writing these works: while Ghosh attempts to excavate subaltern voices from the past, Desai attempts to distinguish one lost voice amongst the chaos of illegal immigrants living in the U.S. Dalit authors, on the other hand, use short fiction as a means of representing the plight of Dalit characters - the fiction often stands in place of real experience, with only the

[2] Bruno Latour might strongly disagree here; he maintains that considering the complexity of one's surroundings, humans barely display any agency, and when it does manifest it may have to be analyzed through the lens of the actor network.

names and places changed, or it highlights an insight, a moment of realization, the moment a character feels his or her caste most keenly. My research attempts to look at the lacunae, the dissonant spaces between the different agencies where a progress in one kind does not naturally translate into an improvement in the other. Further, attempts at discovering these voices sometimes end up distorting them (as in the case of Kalua, grossly stereotyped by Ghosh, an issue I discuss in greater detail in chapter three). While this maybe unintentional, Dalit authors seem especially keen on highlighting this dissonance: their protagonists remain in the same social space, though their linguistic and economic status changes repeatedly. If social change has to occur, economic agency is not the means of achieving it.

The term "subaltern" derives its definition from that accepted by the Subaltern Studies group. Writing in the preface to *Subaltern Studies I*, Ranajit Guha qualifies the Gramscian usage of the word where "subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up" (Gramsci 207). Guha attempts to look at the ruling group as a mere binary necessary for the existence of the category of the subaltern rather than giving it any elite privilege. Moreover, the way Guha uses the term marks out "a general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (vii). The protagonists that feature in this dissertation are subordinated under the weight of caste, class, race and gender, thus lending themselves to this definition for analysis.

I use some aspects of the term "diaspora" as proposed by William Safran in his seminal essay "Diasporas in Modern Societies," alongside some caveats posited by Khachig Tölölyan. Safran defines diaspora as "expatriate minority communities" that have six specific characteristics, including "dispersal" from a geographic center, collective memory of their homeland, alienation

from their host nation, and finally relate to, support and eventually wish to return to their homelands (83). Both Safran and Tölölyan share some anxiety that the traditional domain of diaspora is increasingly being shared with other categories such as "migrants," "refugees," "expatriate" or "overseas community" (Tölölyan 4). This dissertation, too, includes the idea of the urban migrant in conjunction with that of diaspora. I differentiate the characteristics of diaspora from that of Dalit migrants, while highlighting commonalities, because I feel an analysis of contemporary diaspora needs a comparison with other parallel forms of dispersal.

Dalit solidarity is thus a detraction from this - unlike Safran's diaspora, this "ethnocommunal consciousness" is not necessarily rooted in that specific geography owing to a diversity of villages and castes from which these urban migrants have come. Interestingly, in the context of Indian diasporas, Safran himself notes that there may be exceptions to his six conditions: "The homeland myth is not particularly operative where the Indian diaspora is in a majority (as in Fiji), or where it constitutes a large, well-established and sometimes dominant minority (as in Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Sri Lanka)" (89). Further, speaking of the Parsi community originating from Iran, he admits that "The weakness of the Parsis' 'homeland' consciousness can be attributed in part to the caste system of India and the relatively tolerant attitudes of Hinduism, both of which made for a greater acceptance of social and ethnocultural segmentation and made Parsis feel less 'exceptional'" (89). These exceptions are mentioned only to point out the shifting and amorphous nature of the term "diaspora" which could be eventually complicated, especially considering the mass migrations that we are seeing today - both, international as well as intranational. Moreover, both diasporas and migrants share in common the troubled relationship to the "homeland" which treats them with suspicion because they have been "enticed by the

fleshpots of capitalism" (93). Safran mentions that "this is among the reasons why homelands do not necessarily want to welcome their diasporas from abroad.

### *The Relevance of Studying Subaltern Diaspora*

Based on the definitions above, "subaltern diaspora" might then be said to include subordinate and marginalized migrants who move in search of opportunity and to empower themselves. Studying subaltern migrants is important because it explores a less analyzed intersection of diaspora and subaltern studies. I look at this intersection specifically through the depicted experiences of indentured migrants, illegal aliens and urban Dalit migrants. Diaspora studies have previously looked at forced migrations, especially the work of E San Juan Jr. and Pheng Cheah, who look at choice in Filipino/ Filipina migration and at the problematic nature of hybridity, respectively. My work is different in that it examines the ways in which these migrants are represented in contemporary Anglophone and Gujarati Indian fiction. While I take advantage of anthropological and sociological work that has been done in diaspora studies, my work looks specifically at literary texts that feature members of subaltern diaspora as their protagonists, and focus on whether the author invests any agency within these protagonists.

My focus rests on literary texts because literature allows for the expression of marginalized voices alongside dominant ones. Fields such as anthropology, sociology and history have their limitations in that there are few ways to explore the voice of the marginalized from the inside. While literature also suffers from this problem, it offers other avenues to allay its severity. So subaltern communities like select Dalit castes can represent themselves in the form of memoirs, biographies, poetry and fiction. Further, literature simultaneously offers the creative option of literary representation of the subaltern (as in the case of cosmopolitan authors like Ghosh and

Desai), while deconstructing the workings of this type of appropriation of voice to see where it may or may not be successful. The original text is laid bare for interpretation, in comparison to ethnographic attempts at representation in other fields. Bernabé and Chamoiseau, for example, also stress the importance of using poetic language and fiction as a means to work around colonial narratives about the Caribbean that are governed by Western Enlightenment values. This is also one of the reasons this dissertation uses fiction as a fictional truth set in historical circumstances in order to consider the representations of subaltern figures. According to Bernabé and Chamoiseau literary language conveys insights that may not be acknowledged or comprehended by traditional and dominant historical narratives:

> Sceneries, said Glissant, are the only things to convey, in their own nonanthropomorphic way, some of our tragedy, some of our will to exist. So that our history (or our histories) is not totally accessible to historians. […] Only poetic knowledge, fictional knowledge, literary knowledge, in short, artistic knowledge can discover us, understand us and bring us, evanescent, back to the resuscitation of consciousness. (Bernabé and Chamoiseau 896)

Bernabé and Chamoiseau highlight a claim that plays a major role in this dissertation: that literature has more access to minority histories than history itself, because it studies informal sources of knowledge instead of official (and dominant) narratives. These unofficial sources include folk and artistic knowledge across literary genres.

My work links this elusive quality of Creole culture with that of South Asian subaltern culture as well. Both communities are marginalized, and under centuries of hegemony they built a unique form of expression which empowers their cultures. It is this form of self-expression and

identity that links Mauritian creoles with Dalits and undocumented migrants in my work. For its theoretical framework, I follow the work started by the Subaltern Studies Group in the 1980's, including the work by Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee who reclaimed the voice of the subaltern from history and sought to empower them.[3] Subaltern agency has been a subject of much discussion in social sciences like history, anthropology and feminism.

Further, my work is particularly relevant at this moment in history because it brings together regional and global Anglophone texts into the same conversation. I believe the future of world literature lies in cross-linguistic conversations, since they reveal very different facets of the same issues and break down the Babel-esque relationship of literatures in different languages. Because of the hegemony of the English language over Indian reading patterns, vernacular languages are either sequestered into their own fields or are ignored by analysts in English departments who tend to focus on Anglophone texts entirely. Within regional languages also, as Sudipta Kaviraj points out, lie "not only feelings of identity, but also of enmity" (128). The linguistic politics of a region thus shape its identity but also mark it separate from neighboring regions with differing dialects or languages. Added to this is the "internal" divide, where everyone doesn't "have" (132) a

[3] Although Partha Chatterjee, in his latest book *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (2011) notes that the lifestyle of the Indian peasant has changed significantly since the Subaltern Studies Group's ruminations a quarter century ago. The reasons he lists for this new lifestyle are many: better reach of governmental aid and infrastructure in village interiors, peasants having acquired more skills, 1950s agrarian reforms that granted peasants the land they worked on and which meant there was not an exploitative class within the village itself. Most importantly, he mentions that urban migration has become voluntary, no longer a "function of pauperization"(210), as peasants perceive better opportunities in urban and industrial centers. He also argues that village peasants (a large number of Dalits included) living with caste as well as class discrimination in rural regions, choose to brave the hardships and uncertainties of urban centers and have a desire to not continue living their current lives, especially having glimpsed new possibilities via the media. While this dissertation is based on the work of the original Subaltern Studies group (especially in defining the Indian subaltern and trying to rediscover their voices), it has also accounted for the changes that Chatterjee outlines, primarily on account of having picked contemporary primary works that include the changes in peasant life that he has mentioned (in the Dalit stories and *Inheritance of Loss*, for instance).

language in the same way – Kaviraj astutely observes that linguistic divisions correlate with caste and class also, thus making for much more complex politics of language than a mere English-Indian regional language divide.

Kaviraj's observation of how linguistic divisions work also ties in to the way in which Dalit literature uses dialect as status or class markers to differentiate between characters. Both Ghosh and Desai write with differing world audiences in mind, in contrast with Dalit writers. The latter too are cosmopolitan too, but in a different way - their arguments share commonalities with world protest literature, especially that of African American political and literary rhetoric[4]. One of the primary reasons Dalit writers' influence remains limited is because of the purview of language. Unless translated prolifically, their readership remains limited to their fellow language-speakers. Yet, they engage with some of the same larger issues as more overtly cosmopolitan writers like Ghosh and Desai: caste discrimination, poverty, subaltern migration and multiple linguistic registers. Putting each side-by-side to look at the different ways in which they communicate these issues allows us to gain a broader and more balanced outlook rather a biased perspective from an only-Anglophone analysis.

## ***Methodology***

The methodology I use for literary analysis is to close read the chosen texts for linguistic peculiarities, moments of empowerment and self-awareness, and how the chosen protagonists attempt to enable themselves in seemingly predestined life paths. In addition, I have used ethnographic material as well, having conducted a few interviews with the editor of the

[4] See Dharwadkar, "Dalit Poetry in Marathi" for a comparison between ideas in Namdeo Dhasal's poetry and African American writing.

anthology of Dalit short stories to debate dialects, metaphors as well as choice of texts. I analyze my work using a critical archive that includes the work of theorists such as Édouard Glissant, Pheng Cheah, Laura Brueck, and Arjun Appadurai upon whose work I base my own research. Through its study of literature in English and Gujarati, this dissertation seeks to explore why the subaltern has become such an attractive subject for cosmopolitan Anglophone Indian writers, and how and why this representation may differ significantly from those of vernacular writers.

I also use translation as a part of my research methods. What initially started off as an appendix for my dissertation readers turned into a deep close reading of the original Gujarati texts. There is no deeper understanding one can get of a primary text than when you must translate it word-for-word into another language, considering the connotations of each word in its original context and then attempting to convey a similar meaning in the translated version. The translation process helped me analyze the Dalit Gujarati fiction more closely because it made me consider all the linguistic choices the authors were making and their interaction with the larger context of Dalit literature as a subset of protest literature. As for the actual process of translation, I used my parents' knowledge of various Gujarati dialect and Dalpat Chauhan's clarifications of complex phrases. I have also attempted to step away from the text and include the context in the form of numerous footnotes. These footnotes offer a constant narrative that frames the cultural context for unacquainted readers. Another translation technique that I discovered in readings suggested by Dr. Brueck has been leaving in certain words in the text that would sound stilted when translated. In Lawrence Venuti's words, I attempt to "foreignize" the translation that would otherwise be an unbroken and seamless text for an English reader, in the hope that the reading of this translation would then need a "different critical approach with a different set of

assumptions" (29). Rather than lost the original essence of the Gujarati words by offering a mismatching English translation, I have left them in and explained their usage in footnotes.

### *A Note on the Choice of Texts: Ghosh and Desai*

The relevant archive to the kind of work I am doing in this dissertation is immense. I choose a few representative texts that help me map literary techniques that are being employed by authors to discover the voices of Indian subaltern migrant and diasporic characters[5]. I examine fiction that depicts subalterns in search of some form of agency, but whether or not they find it depends on the context of the work. I thus analyze the ways in which Ghosh depicts pidgin and creoles in the novel as a means by which the indentured migrants and convicts attempt to gain some control over their surroundings. In this purpose, he is not alone. Kiran Desai traces subaltern characters localized in India and those who migrate, and pits one against the other to see if migration might translate into an increase in agency. The selected Dalit texts also examine whether or not migrant Dalits find themselves empowered or if their situation remains the same across urban and rural spaces.

Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy is one of the few contemporary South Asian texts that takes a long, diachronic perspective on migration, and I use to look at whether linguistic fluency influences the characters' trajectories and how they use it to gain social agency.[6] It gives the dissertation the historical depth to contrast contemporary (and illegal) migration such as Biju's in *Inheritance of*

[5] I discuss Gujarati Dalit literature in a separate subsection below. It departs from the general thematics enough to warrant a justification of its own, and a separate section allows me to discuss each short story at some length.

[6] While creole and pidgin make their first appearance in this trilogy, Ghosh has always experimented with language and the fluid nature of postcolonial boundaries. His second novel, *Shadow Lines* (1988) looked at the unreal nature of colonial borders between India and Dhaka, as well as how different languages take precedence as characters migrate to London.

*Loss* or that of Dalit migrants in India. Looking at indentured servitude in Ghosh's work allows me to account for Cheah's contention that all migration is not voluntary, nor a means to gain any significant agency (I discuss this at length in Chapter 1 when reviewing the Bhabha/ Cheah debate). Ghosh's *River of Smoke* has many different and complex migrations - some voluntary, as in the cases of Deeti and Kalua (a persecuted woman who elopes with her Dalit lover and becomes an indentured laborer on a Mauritian plantation) and Neel (a regional king from Bengal who is being sent aboard the same ship as Deeti for convicted servitude on Mauritius, but who escapes to China during a storm). But analyzing Deeti's tryst with Mauritian creole, and the raja's fascination for pidgin allows us to chart out the trajectory of how subalterns navigate these upheavals in colonial India. In addition, Ghosh tries to unearth the ways in which these historical subjects used language to their advantage. Out of the three novels, I selected *River of Smoke* because it has the deepest association with language and its shifting shapes – it has conversations in Hindi, Gujarati, Bhojpuri, Urdu, Bengali, Farsi, Mauritian creole, Mandarin and Pidgin. Deeti and Neel use language effortlessly, and they are shown to be in the most linguistically empowered situation of all the migrants in the novel.

On the other hand, there is no institutional presence like that of the East India Company that coerces migration in Kiran Desai's novel *Inheritance of Loss*. Contrary to this, the novel is set in neo-imperial relationships between India and the U.S., allowing for a glimpse into an unauthorized migration. I have chosen this novel because it questions ideas of the homeland in the age of neo-imperialism. All the texts across the dissertation depict different hegemonic powers: the British empire, Hindu upper castes, and in this this case, the global market dominated by the U.S. *Inheritance of Loss* highlights the imagined nature of foreign as well as homelands. One of its protagonists is an illegal alien, and thus lives as a member of the diaspora

but without any of the social support or institutional resources that middle class diaspora typically have. Biju's life trajectory is interesting to analyze because his is an extraordinary journey. He belongs to the poorest class in both India and America, who is then stranded in America without resources. He nevertheless attempts to empower himself through a choice of workplace in America. Desai's novel traces the fictional perception of homelands - how Biju romanticizes the India he has left behind, how deeply the curmudgeonly judge Jethalal longs to belong to Britain, and how Anglo-Indians are treated in 1960's India. Desai's novel, without hypocrisy or shame, documents the pressing desperation for Indians of all classes to migrate to the USA in hopes of a better life. Whether or not that life is actually better is a question that Biju faces midway through the novel. *Inheritance of Loss* also forms a fine parallel to Dalit literature because both present migrations in search of better opportunities, with protagonists moving to large, urban, alien cities. Further, they also share a similar distortion of memory and eventual homecoming.

### *A Turn to Gujarati Dalit fiction*

A study of fictionalized South Asian subaltern characters would be incomplete if it were to omit the fictionalization of Dalit characters because Dalits remain subaltern not just within the caste hierarchy in India but also within literary representation. They are, even today, one of the most disadvantaged groups within the subcontinent, and decidedly fit the Gramscian notion of the disadvantaged group cast out of hegemonic rule. Dalit authors have long portrayed the mental as well as geographical search for emancipation in their literature. Dalit literatures have been studied in many Indian languages (especially with the field now gaining more popularity in academia), but my dissertation is different in that it studies Gujarati Dalit literature – less

analyzed than its compatriots – in context of the wider field of subaltern studies. While I had the option to study Anglophone fiction that depicted Dalit lives (although these were often written by Anglophone writers with world audiences like Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh), I find it more productive to do a comparative study of subaltern representation between Anglophone and Dalit texts. I am not attempting a reductive definition of Dalit literature as stories that are written only by Dalits, but I do find it important to study the fictionalization of this community from their own perspective. This is literature that is often used to promote the Dalit cause – to spread awareness and advocate social change. With the subaltern studies group advocating a shift in seeing the subaltern as a subject (as against an object), it seems critical to include subaltern voices that come directly from within the community.

Further, one of the most important aspects of Dalit literature is the larger community of all Dalit castes. Dalit autobiographies, manifestoes, poetry, songs and fiction are all written in the native language of each specific community (from where they have now been translated across a myriad of other Indian vernacular languages as well as in English). Modern Dalit activism traces one of its most important origins to Babasaheb Ambedkar's Dalit activism in the early twentieth century that continued through India's independence in 1947 (although there was a strong influence of saint-poets dating as far back as the eleventh century who were in favor of caste equality). Thereafter, it saw resurgence through the Dalit Panther movement, which was spearheaded by the Maharashtrian Dalit community and continued through the 1970s and 1980s. The title "panther" is not coincidental. Regional Dalit writers have for long been following and have been influenced by the African American literary revolution in the twentieth century. The name, chosen by dynamic young Marathi authors and poets, is a nod to the American Black Panther movement. Over the years, Dalit literature in Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, Hindi, and even

Bengali has gained recognition, leading to increased translations and higher awareness of Dalit exploitation. Dalit literature in Gujarati, while quite prolific, remains comparatively rooted in its regional status. While prolific editors like Ramnika Gupta have done an invaluable service in publishing Dalit stories and translations, Gujarati literature remains far behind in terms of the number of translations it has undergone, and in how much critical analysis has been performed on it. One major source of critical support has been Rita Kothari, whose work provides a rich overview of Gujarati Dalit short fiction. But besides these, I have found little in the way of critical analysis of Dalit literature,[7] a problem I will attempt to rectify with the third chapter of this dissertation. This chapter attempts to create a critical discourse on Gujarati Dalit short fiction that can then be put into conversation with Anglophone Indian fiction that represents subaltern characters.

But how are subaltern diaspora and Dalit migrants connected? Why has this chapter been included in the dissertation at all? As mentioned earlier, I use Safran's work to connect the endlessly expanding idea of diaspora with Dalit migration. Moreover, with the growing disparities between cities and rural villages in South Asia, the difference in landscape, culture, language, food, economics is now comparable to transnational discrepancies. In spite of their best attempts, Dalits can feel alienated in urban centers that are not entirely egalitarian and do not live up to expectations. Moreover, many Dalit people look to return for social reform in their own community, and they are as likely as diaspora to be committed to its "safety and prosperity".

[7] Laura Brueck points out this trend in the analysis of Dalit literature, one that tends to focus only on the thematics of the piece (primarily of autobiographical narratives). Brueck's book *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature* itself is an attempt to rectify this lack of critical attention to the "conscious formal decisions" being made by Dalit authors, such as the shape of their plots, the style of their characters' speech, and the language of their literary embellishments" (Brueck 7). This is the style of analysis my chapter also follows; I attempt to unravel the dialect, use of proverbs, and literary techniques used by the authors such as flashbacks into the past lives of the protagonists and other narrative techniques.

While village life is sometimes romanticized in their own minds, as we will see in some of the short fiction, the protagonists of most stories remain painfully aware of the caste discrimination in their "homeland". While many Dalits may not "regard their ancestral homeland as their true ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return" (Safran 39), the motif of the returning prodigal plays out dramatically in Hindi and Gujarati short fiction. Returnees, particularly from host countries that may be more advanced than the homeland, might unsettle its political, social and economic equilibrium" (94). The feeling of being an unwanted outsider - perhaps too well-educated, too vocal about social concerns, too revolutionary - remains a common trope in vernacular Dalit literature, prompting us to see how fraught with complications and yet how similar urban migrants can be to diaspora.

The primary argument of this dissertation is not to expand the definition of diaspora to include urban Dalit migrants, but to trace how they are represented in fiction to have agency and control over their fate. The argument above serves merely as a reminder that the more modern process of urban migration certainly complicates the idea of diaspora as we know it. Perhaps it is time to prove Safran's fears right and expand the idea of diaspora to include broader sub-categories like these. The additional subject of the subaltern necessitates the study of Dalit fiction, expanding the idea of studying literary texts and hopefully setting a precedent for an interlingual platform for literary analysis.

## *Interventions in Context: Diaspora Studies, Global Anglophone Literature and Indian Literature*

My work explores the intersection between diaspora and subaltern studies, through the lens of Indian literature. It also intersects with studies of urban migration. Rather than analyze general

middle class diaspora experience, it looks at the way in which protagonists in the specific texts use resources such as language, social activism, and migration in order to adapt to their new environments and to enable themselves. It extends diaspora studies to contemporary Indian literature, tracing migration across time and space and across languages, to unearth ways in which protagonists in these texts attempt to control their own narratives. As Sukanya Bannerjee warns us in *New Routes for Diaspora Studies*, it is important in these times of "disembodied practices, electronic flows and virtual worlds" that we need to invoke "'real' labour and actual laborers" (7). Most of the texts document the ways in which migrants cope with a lack of resources, alienated in their labor and disconnected from modern global communications.

This dissertation also makes a contribution to studies of global Anglophone as well as Indian literature by bringing together different registers of language into the same conversation. By looking at creolization and pidginization in *River of Smoke* and by examining dialect and metaphor in the Gujarati short fiction, this dissertation expands on the idea of global literature to bring in local languages, without which the study of world texts would be skewed. Moreover, it uses Indian literature for this purpose, hoping to cut into the linguistic segregation of English and Indian languages. As Paul Jay argues in *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*, "economic and cultural systems have become so intertwined that it makes little sense to advocate for a strictly materialist or a strictly culturalist model or studying the effects of globalization" (8). My research carries forward this need for a syncretic model of economic as well as cultural analysis by looking at two different overlapping forms of agency - economic as well as social agency, and how one might affect the other. Further, it pushes the boundaries of Jay's argument by applying this not only to effects of globalization but on intra-national mobility

such as that of the urban Dalit who may have transcended financial insecurity but finds herself struggling to reach a parallel social or cultural freedom.

Aamir Mufti's analysis of twentieth century trend of nationalization of language results in the observation that ancient methods of reading were now broken down into nationalities - as against, Mufti clarifies, older geographies where there were few linguistic barriers and intelligentsia was more likely to encounter texts in their own languages. An example he gives is that up until a hundred years ago, scholars ranging from the east Balkans, through Anatolia, Persia, central Asia as well as Afghanistan could have read works in Persian, Arabic or Ottoman Turkish. Today, Indians, Iranians, Pakistanis and Turkish people are most likely to read Turkish literature through its English translation and vice versa (foregrounding what Mufti calls "metropolitan authentication" (231)). Further, the Indian language translations of this Turkish text would also likely be based on the English translation. A similar problem occurs in regional Indian literature where literatures from various states communicate through their English (and sometimes Hindi) translations. The Indian linguistic situation is also similar to Yasmin Yildiz's observation of the way modern multicultural societies use a "monolingual paradigm" in modern life. This paradigm posits that individuals and collectives have "one true language", and this links those language speakers to an "exclusive, and clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture and nation" (2). While this paradigm may not work successfully in nations comprising migrant populations, Indian communities are mostly based on this monolingual paradigm, because the speakers come from a culture rooted in that language. In such a mélange of disparate languages, English becomes not just a global, but a national and accepted medium. This is why it is essential today to try and bring regional languages and global Anglophone literature into the same conversation, to work against the perception of Indian vernaculars as the "other". This

unification of the two types of analyses – Anglophone Indian literature versus regional literature – that are currently shelved into different departments and fields of study, is my primary contribution to the field of Indian literature.

The Anglophone authors I have studied in this dissertation have already received much critical attention. Ghosh's books remain among the most critiqued works of South Asian Anglophone literature, and Kiran Desai, in spite of her (as-yet) short list of works, has generated significant critical work analyzing her unique brand of postcolonial writing. For the former, notable analyses in the past decade include John Su's critique of Ghosh's work in *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel,* Rituparna Roy's examination of Ghosh in the context of the Indian Partition and Rajesh Rai and Marion Pinkney's study of the girmityas' international journey in Ghosh's Sea of Poppies (the latter belongs to a volume with excellent essays on Ghosh's work edited by Chitra Sankaran: *History, Narrative and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*). Rai and Pinkney study Ghosh's fictionalized account of the girmityas in *Sea of Poppies* in context of its portrayal in government and historical accounts. They focus especially on Ghosh's depiction of the feminine exile and on his focus on Deeti's perspective and the minority women girmityas. Their analysis sketches out how these indentured diasporas maintain a sense of self through retaining their customs and idealizing their homeland. My own work, in response, takes a deeper look at how these migrants build their identity, and I examine this process primarily through a linguistic lens.

Desai's second novel has also undergone rigorous analysis from postcolonial critics. Sara-Duana Meyer's essay in *Postliberalization Indian Novels* splits its focus between Desai's debut novel *Hullaballoo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) and *Inheritance of Loss* (2006). She foregrounds the ways in which Desai juxtaposes colonialism and local borders, overlapping

experiences of Indian immigrants in North America and Nepali diaspora in India, and on the commodification of cheap labor like Biju who are not left with any option but to live as exploited illegal aliens if they choose to improve their financial situations. Ruvani Ranasinha's chapter on Desai in her excellent analytical work *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Women's Fiction*: *Gender, Narration and Globalization* looks at a similar disjuncture between how various classes experience globalization. Ranasinha claims the underprivileged experience globalization as painful cultural displacement" (64), although its magnitude depends on the class. She also presents an insightful interpretation of the subterranean spaces Biju occupies in America - cramped living quarters, storage rooms, hot bakery kitchens, underground kitchens in posh restaurants - as an interrogation of "the complex hierarchies of race and class in contemporary constructed urban spaces" (78). My examination of Biju's trajectory is similar to this in that I study the ways in which class and race intersects in the novel to splinter Indian diasporas abroad. Further, my contribution is a nuanced examination of whether Biju, in his cramped and exploited world in the U.S., is demonstrating a refined consciousness in his struggle to empower himself. He shows a clear ability to analyze ways in which the system is keeping him at the lowest rung of the class hierarchy, and is well aware that his own growth and happiness have plateaued, if not plummeted, since coming to the U.S. Further, his decision to return, while motivated by an anxiety about his father's safety, I argue, is not as bleak as Ranasinha would interpret. It is by no standards a proud return, but the decision to abandon and reverse his lifelong dream to migrate, no matter how disillusioning it turned out to be, shows a fine ability to prioritize his own personal desires over hopes for eventual financial gain, as many of the members of his class would have done. Personal attachments, desires and an agenda are luxuries seldom attributed to subaltern characters in literature or even history.

### *Chapter Outline*

This dissertation has been divided into four inter-related chapters. This introductory chapter comprises my rationale for this dissertation, a quick context of the usage of field-specific terminology, the context behind the choice of texts and theme and my intervention in the multiple yet related fields of diaspora studies, subaltern studies, and Indian and global literature. The next chapter looks at the ways in which Amitav Ghosh represents agency in *River of Smoke*, his second book in the Ibis trilogy. The chapter focuses on the ways in which characters use language to empower themselves on a seemingly hopeless journey determined by the British colonial traders in power. I look closely at the characters of Deeti and Neel. Both characters allow a deeper insight into Mauritian creole and pidgin respectively, and I read how each language affects the speaker and their status in the social milieu to where they migrate. I conclude that an understanding of the language helps them adapt and survive in the host nation, and consequently these attributes are the primary means by which Ghosh ascribes agency – whether social or economic - to their characters, thus using a literary technique to empower the voice of a subaltern. Alternatively, I also find lacunae in how Ghosh depicts the subaltern Dalit – as in the case of Kalua, and contrast this stereotypical portrayal with significantly more human and complex portrayals by Dalit authors.

Chapter Three starts off with a contrast of how Dalit characters are sketched by Dalit authors versus Ghosh's animalistic portrayal of the Dalit character Kalua in *Sea of Poppies*. I have selected four texts featuring Dalit migrants in urban centers, and my analysis is centered around how one type of agency among these protagonists may or may not translate into another kind. A story like "Safe Distance" features a realization that no matter how economically

empowered they are, Dalits will always remain social pariahs. "Jāt"("Caste") talks about caste solidarity that can only be cemented by a migrant who has a broader perspective on caste hierarchies, while "Swapna Samudra" ("Sea of Dreams") and "Bāp nū Bārmū"("Father's Twelfth Day of Mourning") address social activism (or characters who attempt to raise their thinking into an activist mode of thought). These stories are woven together in the ways in which Dalit protagonists try to search for control over their own life trajectory, to empower themselves with education and jobs and to search for a dignified lifestyle in the city. Whether or not they really achieve this is what I analyze in the chapter.

Chapter Four ends the dissertation with a look at how illegal immigrants in North America attempt to empower themselves on a journey that doesn't allow them choices. It uses Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* to analyze how Desai portrays Biju, an illegal Indian immigrant in New York hoping to make a living as a cook. Biju remains at the mercy of the exploitative management of the culinary industry but attempts to pave his way by choosing his workplace. He must also confront compatriots from other countries who he traditionally bore a prejudice against. I look at the ways in which being part of a subaltern diaspora deprives him of resources afforded to middle class or upper class diasporas, and how his perception of both his home and host countries takes on sophistication and depth.

This dissertation aims to close read texts in order to examine in what ways contemporary Indian authors are exploring the idea of agency in their texts. Putting Dalit and Anglophone literature beside each other brings into conversation the different methods each employs to the same ends, while writing for very different audiences. In some cases, characters do not end up empowered, despite the authors' best efforts. In others, the cityscape is realized into the redemptive space the character dreams of. My dissertation looks at these areas of success and

dissonance, where the strategies employed by the authors to retrieve a

subaltern voices either works or fails. Examining these details across two languages has been both challenging and satisfying – to find that authors across different socio-cultural backgrounds are employing characterization techniques that are at once similar and vastly different was a surprise – and it is this coupling that enriches my work.

## Chapter 1: Representation of Agency: Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

In this chapter, I start with a definition of the terms "creole", "pidgin" and "agency", which are central to appreciating Ghosh's use language and politics in *River of Smoke.* I then pinpoint my theoretical orientation using Homi Bhabha and Pheng Cheah's counterarguments on hybridity and migration, because it is important to offer the disclaimer that my argument is not that migration automatically grants agency to the subaltern. In Ghosh's work, it is important to examine the role hybrid languages play in the text because they serve a much larger purpose than simply enabling slave/plantation owner communications or facilitating trade. Ghosh's greatest contribution lies in how he depicts the reciprocal relationship between colonizer and the colonized, between functional languages and how they are reappropriated by subalterns to suit their own needs.[8]

Contemporary historians like Marina Carter are making a similar attempt to re-invest agency into Indian indentured migrants sent to Mauritius. Her work attempts to reclaim agency on behalf of these nineteenth century migrants who made informed decisions based on other migrants who wrote or visited India again after their time in Mauritius. There were also other informal avenues of information which may either have distorted the facts (pamphlets, exploitative agents, plantation owners) or given a reasonably relevant account of what life was like in Mauritius (ex-girmityas, shipmen, honest supercargoes)[9]. Thus these migrants, a majority of whom may even have been uneducated, had balanced information and performed at least a basic risk-assessment before heading out to Mauritius.

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[8] Ghosh has undertaken a similar project of exploring linguistic fluidity in other demographics as well. His novel, *The Glass Palace* (2000), was spun around the exile of the King and Queen of Burma in 1885, and detailed how languages circulated between India and Burma.

[9] A representative of the owners of merchant ships who are responsible for overseeing the cargo and its sales process

Few readers have earlier thought of Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy in terms of its diverse accounts of pidgins and creole.[10] This trilogy, comprising *Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* traces the triangulation of trade among India, Britain and China around the time of the First Opium War (1839-1842). While the other two books comprise a riveting mix of fictional characters who migrate far and wide, *River of Smoke* is an important work for analysis because it contains a very strong argument for the power of pidgin and creole in transnational relations between a colony and the colonizer. Using Édouard Glissant's creolization theory, this chapter explores Ghosh's representation of contact languages such as pidgins and creoles. The specific series of linguistic agency layered onto the subaltern characters allow them to consciously devise their trajectories through multiple contact zones, but in ways that often disrupt previous prejudices of Western linguists against China Coast Pidgin and Mauritian creole for not belonging to a "pure" language family. Further, using Marina Carter's historical research on the agency of Indian migrants in Mauritius, I examine how Ghosh runs at odds with conventional British historical narratives (as well as post-independence nationalist Indian narratives) which tend to characterize indentured workers as helpless subalterns with no say in their future. It is important to examine how Ghosh provides a counter-narrative to traditional perspectives because it changes the perception of the subaltern from an object to a subject, acknowledging their individual identity and attempts at self-empowerment.

Ghosh's work has already been the focus of intense critical attention, making him one of the most popular twentieth-century postcolonial South Asian authors to be included in university canons and written about. John Su and Rituparna Roy tackle another important question in

[10] Examples include Vedita Cowaloosur's article in *English Studies in Africa* (vol. 58, 2015) and Christopher Rollason's piece in *International Journal on Multicultural Literature* (vol. 2, no. 1, Jan 2012).

Ghosh's writing: fictionalizing history and the implications of doing so.

Commenting on Ghosh's 1988 novel *Shadow Lines,* Roy observes that the novel "seems more concerned with historiography than history" (113), attempting to dig out events and perspectives that are lost in dominant historical narratives. In this case, the lost event is a riot in 1964 that kills the narrator's cousin. As an adult, he finds it is a mere historical blip, an event that changed his life but hasn't even garnered a mention in the news or historical records. Su continues this argument in context of *The Glass Palace* (2000) - Su observes that Ghosh doesn't deny that fictionalizing life in Myanmar risks "simplifying" or "sentimentalizing" political dissent (134). But "communicating fragmentary experiences", especially in those that might be lost in history, or through political censorship needs fictionalization. Hence, Su maintains, "[Glass Palace] takes a surprisingly optimistic attitude towards the capacity of imagining to reconstruct the experiences of others even while acknowledging the impossibility of identifying with the people who had those initial experiences" (143). I approach fictionalization of history through an examination of Ghosh's work as well as that of Dalit literature: both intend to represent subaltern interiority, but while the former is solidly grounded in history, the latter often deliberately ignores postcolonial history as an attempt to show the detachment of Dalit characters from national timelines (an issue I address further with the help of Laura Brueck and Toral Gajarawala's work).

Su's observation ties into one of the central concerns of my work: literary representation of a subaltern through fiction, and whether it is possible to fully capture this depiction. As a cosmopolitan writer, Ghosh is an outsider in time and class, depicting underprivileged indentured migrants from another century on their journey to another continent. My work claims that literary depiction, specifically linguistic analysis in the case of Ghosh, has more capability to unearth and represent subaltern voices than ethnography or history because it has more flexibility

to examine the interiority of its subjects than historical records that may be limited to cataloging or exploring larger narratives. I look at fiction to see how each author grants this interiority to his or her characters, and whether this empowers them (as in Dalit literature) or disenfranchises them while revealing the workings of the imperialist or neocolonial powers that are antagonizing their entire class (as in Desai's work).

### *Definitions: Pidgins and Creole*

There are different definitions of creole, but for the purposes of this study I use those outlined by linguists Pieter Muysken and Norval Smith. They offer a tentative description of pidgin with the caveat that linguists have not yet found a clear definition or pattern in their evolution. A pidgin generally has no native speakers, and comes into evolution more gradually than creole languages. Most importantly, it arises in situations of language contact, such as colonization, trade or exploration, and can appear and disappear as contact ceases to exist (Muysken 31). While some theories view pidgin as a sort of baby-talk, a fossilized stage in the process of language, Muysken and Smith argue for its legitimacy as a structured language: "A definition of pidgin should include that it has to be learnt, that it has structural norms and therefore that people can speak a pidgin more or less well" (26). To Muysken and Smith, pidgins appear and vanish depending on the context of their usage and requirement, and some, like the China Coast Pidgin (CCP – the particular pidgin in question here), can be spoken over centuries.

Creoles, on the other hand, have different origins. Muysken defines creole as "a language that has come into existence at a point in time that can be established fairly precisely" (5). It includes native speakers, as children from mixed marriages then start to

speak the new language of their parents. Moreover, creole languages tend to be born of "violence", both linguistic and social, so that they come from an abrupt break in the course of their historical development" (Muysken 1).

### *Migration versus Enforced Displacement*

The hybrid nature of both creoles and CCP brings us to the possible correlation between hybridity that accompanies migration and individual empowerment. My argument in this chapter takes its orientation from Pheng Cheah's perspective on migration (specifically drawing on his seminal essay "Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitical Freedom in Transnationalism"), although it does draw certain points from Homi Bhabha's work. I then establish my argument using Glissant's perspective on creole cultures.

In *The Location of Culture,* Bhabha remains fascinated with the liminality of migrant experience, and appears to argue that it is in these untranslatable interstices that the true experience of hybridity, unencumbered by "nativism" lie:

> Living in the interstices of Lucretius and Ovid, caught in-between a 'nativist', even nationalist, atavism and a postcolonial metropolitan assimilation, the subject of cultural difference becomes a problem that Walter Benjamin has described as the irresolution, or liminality of 'translation' […] The migrant culture of the "in-between", the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture's *untranslatability* [.] (224)

This "untranslatability" of culture leads to the formation of a hybrid identity that exists between the "nationalist atavism" and "postcolonial metropolitan assimilation" (224). According to

Bhabha, the migrant's life is particularly interesting because it rejects a reductive understanding of culture that is rooted in nationalist or mainstream problems. Migration is a peculiar trend that runs parallel to postcolonial problems within national boundaries, and which results in the formation of a hybrid identity. I argue that to some extent this hybrid identity is emancipatory because it allows linguistic and cultural freedom, even in the case of subaltern migrants – such as that of Deeti, Kalua and other indentured workers on Mauritius. While Bhabha recognizes that migration may be forced in many cases, he continues to see it as a freedom from national culture.

But it is exactly this theory of hybridity that poses a problem for Pheng Cheah. In his critique of Bhabha's hybridity theory, he argues that Bhabha views "the nation as an empirical sociological category" because "organic theories define national identity in totalizing ways". Bhabha thus recommends reading postcoloniality as a "narrative process ridden with contestation" (167); he makes us more alert to possibilities of national ambiguity that may lead to undermining it. Cheah finds hybridity to be "closet idealism", a "theory of resistance that reduces the complex givennness of material reality to its symbolic dimension and underplays the material institution of neocolonial oppression at a global-systemic level" (173). Attempting to downplay materiality also results in an unmooring of the superstructure from the base, leading to an unrealistic and limited means of exploring hybridity (as is the case in all of the texts under study here: most of the migrants and diaspora have moved in search of better work conditions, and are usually leaving behind dire circumstances). Bhabha's theory then, according to Cheah, "cannot be translated, reinscribed, and read anew in ways suggested by theories of hybridity" (173).

Cheah's argument hinges on the idea that globalization and neo imperialism comprise

many more forces than linguistic agency and cultural flux. According to him,

to ignore the material aspect of globalization in favor of the symbolic (or, as we can extrapolate here, the linguistic) means ignoring the constraints and boundaries that define the emancipatory scope of that culture:

> Over and above identification with a naturalized cultural unity or linguistic interpellation into a national ideal, the formation and deformation of a group identity also involves political-organizational and economic factors, such as law enforcement the provision of welfare and other services by the state, and the establishment of a framework for the distribution and regulation of economic resources and capabilities to satisfy human needs […] (169)

According to Cheah, then, to be "materially effective", "emancipatory consciousness" needs more than symbolic or linguistic agency (169). National and state forces, what Althusser calls "repressive state apparatus" can be an important reason for migration both from and to a country. To ignore this apparatus can lead to what Cheah calls a "dematerialized" view of migration, which remains at an ideational level. That Ghosh chooses to foreground linguistic or symbolic agency over the reasons for his characters' migration to Mauritius makes it a problematic and skewed perspective on migration. The reason Deeti and Kalua migrate to Mauritius is to escape an honor killing in a stringently enforced caste system, a plot point that Ghosh encapsulates within a spectacular elopement scene. The price she must pay for this is to leave her daughter Kabutri behind. A physical escape from these state apparatuses via the sea results in an "emancipatory" formation of a matriarchal colony run by Deeti. The problems of caste and gender inequality seem to dissolve in the "purity" of the slave barracks on the Colver

plantation, perversely replaced by a throne-bearing version of Deeti who is the matriarch as well as the preserver of cultural memories in Mauritius. This assumption that unity and harmony will result from a migration from the conservative homeland is perhaps what leads to a romanticized portrayal of their life in the plantation (this falls in line with Glissant's idea of distance from ideological systems among hybrid cultures, which I discuss in further detail below). While Ghosh astutely captures the linguistic adaptability and the consequent expression of agency on part of the migrants, he is perhaps too keen to discover this agency and, like Bhabha, discounts the force of the material systems that define this cultural change in the first place. This tendency is something he rectifies when portraying the character of Barry Moddi – Moddi's character is constantly assaulted by the British forces around him, and not for a moment, in the entire trajectory of the novel, does he lose sight of the material pressures and barriers that press in on his consciousness. The plantation laborers, on the other hand, in the full force of their symbolic agency, appear unaffected by the plantation system, its owners, union matters or other material concerns as they remain too busy making romantic cultural discoveries on the island.

Further, this symbolic agency that is a mix of Bhojpuri-creole allows Deeti to carve out a specific matriarchal identity for herself in Mauritius. It allows her the agency to start a clan of her own, including family members from other plantations (we can compare this to the alienated and lonely journey that Biju undertakes in neoimperialist U.S. in the twentieth century that we discuss in chapter four). Moreover, it lets her communicate with the plantation owners as well as make provisions for the yearly festival that opens *River of Smoke*. As Glissant mentions while discussing Caribbean creole, its slippery nature and unpredictable linguistic mix (in comparison to "pure" language families) is indicative of strength, not a failing:

> In other words, ambiguity, discontinuity, traces and remembering, creolization, with its unpredictable results, are not signs of weakness. They contribute to this unprecedented conception of identity that I have been discussing. They counter the massive assertions of the thinking associated with Conquest. (87)

Creolization, according to this argument, displays a perpendicularity to the dominant ideological systems that produced it. And while it maintains a distance from these systems, critics like Bernabé do not claim it as an ideology of its own: "It also frees us of aniticolonialist literary militantism so that we will not examine ourselves in order to find a singular ideology, an apodictic truth, or the ten commandments of a table of laws […] but rather because we want to know ourselves, bare in our flaws, in our barks and pulps" (897). They hold creolization, and, by extension, creole language as a tool of reconstruction and introspection which is rich in imagination and which serves to reveal their true identity rather than spend their energy in working against the systems which produced it. Bernabé and Chamoiseau also stress the importance of using poetic language and fiction as a means to work around colonial narratives about the Caribbean that are governed by Western Enlightenment values. Literary language thus conveys insights that may not be acknowledged or comprehended by traditional and dominant historical narratives. This is also one of the reasons this dissertation uses fiction set in historical circumstances in order to consider the representations of subaltern figures:

> Sceneries, said Glissant, are the only things to convey, in their own nonanthropomorphic way, some of our tragedy, some of our will to exist. […] Only poetic knowledge, fictional knowledge, literary knowledge, in short, artistic

> knowledge can discover us, understand us and bring us,
>
> evanescent, back to the resuscitation of consciousness. (896)

Glissant too, attempts to distance culture from systematic thought. To argue for the ambiguity of creole and the linguistic richness its hybridity entails, he makes the assertion that "imagining and recreating from traces of memory removes a person far away from systems, far away not only from ideological thinking but even more from the thought of any imperative system" (87). Here, I assume "ideological thinking" or "imperative system" points towards a rigidly structured system – linguistic, economic, imperial (the last comes from his subsequent contrasting of creole with the Spanish Conquest) or colonial. While creole's ambiguity and symbolic structure does provide it with an imagination and rhizomic structure which European languages may lack, to claim that it allows one to distance oneself from ideological thinking completely seems contradictory to the conditions under which creole was born. Glissant's argument that "ambiguity, discontinuity, traces and remembering" (87) result in an unprecedented process of identity formation among creoles is a strong one without having to make the claim that this identity then can be divorced from imperative systems. While they may run perpendicular to, say, linear systems of thinking that have evolved from colonial/ imperialist ideologies, it is important to admit that the symbolism of creole always exists simultaneously with imperative systems. As Cheah reminds us, without admitting that the material binds and constrains the cultural, it is impossible to expand hybridity, cosmopolitanism and linguistic theory into a meaningful larger critique of globalization. Glissant's theory about ambiguity as a strength of creole rather than a weakening factor is a very valid claim, but it is difficult to use this theory much further if it isolates and elevates the linguistic agency of creole without

admitting its close relationship to ideological thinking. While Glissant claims that creole is disconnected from ideological systems because it enables forgetting and remembering, Ghosh's text clearly shows a deep connection to the socio-economic systems that engendered linguistic agency.

My argument takes its base from the Bhabha/ Cheah debate. Working off of Cheah's criticism, I have attempted to balance my analysis of linguistic agency by linking how it is affected by (and affects) economic and social agency so as to marry the base and superstructure once more. My argument follows Bhabha, in that it views migrant transnational trajectories (specifically that of subaltern migrants) as sites of agency and choice. To leave behind the current national problematic and choose a new life at the risk of death is a choice in itself, which indicates the momentary existence of (although never the constant presence of) agency in a human being. It is important, as Bhabha notes, to look at diaspora identity in addition to national identity, because the ambivalence and the conflict that shapes national identity arises often from its diasporic counterpart. Even more important is to look at subaltern migrants through the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries: they shape the formation of national identity through Appadurai's "technoscape",[11] change labor relations between the colony and the metropole, exist outside of the public eye that acknowledges only diaspora of a certain class. In fiction as well as in criticism, these populations had, until recently, been assigned the role of the victim – the helpless object pushed around between world systems. The Subaltern Studies group brought out this irony with Ranajit Guha's example of how the peasant rebels were divorced from any

[11] Arjun Appadurai coined the term "technoscape" in *Modernity at Large* (1996), and defines it as "the global configuration, also ever fluid, of technology, and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries" (34). He goes on to highlight "money flows", "political possibilities" and the availability of "un- and highly skilled labour" as factors that influence the technoscape. Money flows, political and religious beliefs, and cultural ties of diaspora thus often change and shape transnational relations as well as the power structures within the homeland.

responsibility in their own rebellions in the colonial British media. The colonial peasant was made into an object rather than a subject of his own making. The subaltern studies theorists attempted to ascribe historical agency back to the subaltern.

### *Linguistic Agency*

Ghosh's *River of Smoke* emphasizes the linguistic agency of its diaspora subaltern and disadvantaged characters, challenging nationalistic readings of South Asian history that portray colonial subalterns as helpless puppets at the hands of a larger imperialist/ capitalist ideological system. In the framework of these traditional readings, it may seem counterintuitive when Deeti and Kalua – the intercaste, runaway couple from Nayanpur – voluntarily take on the role of indentured labor. Neel, the raja of the city of Rashakhali, finds himself convicted of a forgery and winds up doing the job of a munshi (finance and communication manager) on the southern coast of Guangdong. Each character appears to be heading towards a future predestined by the imperial map and its intricate connectivity between its colonies and trade partners. Yet each ends up in spaces and countries that have been actively chosen by them. For a large part, Ghosh attempts to equip each character with a host of languages and the adaptive ability to thrive in new, unexplored lands.

*River of Smoke* follows subaltern figures that wield multiple languages across several contact zones, disrupting colonial readings of subaltern characters that assume a lack of agency in their trajectory of migration[12] This second part of the *Ibis* trilogy is set across Mauritius and

[12] Examples of British historians who have presented a Euro-centric detailing of immigrants to Mauritius and Trinidad include Hugh Tinker (1974) and K.O Lawrence (1994). The latter's work attributes the increasing improvement in the social status of indentured workers to the actions of sugar plantations owners rather than to the workers themselves. David Walker's review of Lawrence's book *A Question of Labour: Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guayana* (1994) points out that

Guangdong, continuing the adventures of the people aboard the ship *Ibis*

which is tossed around in a storm in its climactic moments in *Sea of Poppies*. It sets its fiction within the framework of the heightened tension of Anglo-Chinese relations on the brink of the first Opium War (1839-42). These historical moments are inextricably mingled with a fictional plot in which several varied languages are woven together. We are shown the linguistic process of China Coast Pidgin wherein the power dynamics between Chinese, Indian and British traders as well as the Chinese lay people are very noticeable within the artificial environment of "Fanqui-Town" (the cantonment area outside of Guangdong set up for Western traders). In this contact zone,[13] all institutional hegemony, all business and even all intimacy has to be conducted between people who don't speak a common tongue. According to Suresh Canagarajah in *Translingual Practices*, new codes and languages have to be designed in such situations for analyzing these meshed languages (38). The Ibis carries a motley crew of captains and lascars, a group of indentured workers and convicts destined for Mauritius. In the storm the convicts make their escape and travel past the Malay islands, finally reaching Guangdong where they work aboard Behram Modi's opium trading ship, the *Anahita*.

It is in Guangdong that readers are first acquainted with China Coast Pidgin, while a mélange of Bhojpuri-Mauritian creole makes its appearance when we fast-forward a few years ahead into the future of the indentured workers on the island. In both cases, these languages are manipulated by the strongest of characters – strong because they successfully survive the vicissitudes of many different cultural landscapes to make their own traditions and find their families. These

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while chronicling colonial communications to give an account of migrants to these countries, Lawrence does not look at "the complex web of social and economic relationships that tied indentured Indians to their kin and community as well as to sugar or cocoa plantations" (614). Carter attempts to correct this skewed British historiography that "dehumanizes" these migrants to British island plantations by looking at how Indian labour migrants in many cases made effective use of local inter-ethnic and transnational intra-ethnic networks to further their settlement project"(54).

characters successfully survive the tribulations of migrating to unknown regions. They are the zamindār-turned-convict Neel Rashakhali and Deeti, the matriarch of the indentured workers in Mauritius who has made a conscious decision to migrate to the island.

### *The Creolization Process: Deeti's Journey from Nayanpur to Mauritius*

One of the important ways in which Ghosh represents agency for Deeti's character is to allow her to adapt her speech from Bhojpuri to Mauritian Creole in a short while after having migrated to Mauritius. She becomes the matriarch of the clan of Colver Indian migrants that works on the Colver plantation, and retains her authority also by forming a cultural repository via visual archives (in the form of paintings she has made in a cave),[14] documenting their migratory journey and, more generally, clan gods and goddesses) on the island. Her story runs parallel with that of the convicts who are being sent to Mauritius, as well to that of Baboo Nob Kissin, the supercargo of the *Ibis*, who makes an interesting counterpart to Deeti and Neel's characters. The convicts escape to Guangdong and wind up in the thick of the opium trade in China, while the indentured workers establish a community on Mauritius, only to meet decades later. The very first few pages of the novel demonstrate a combination of Bhojpuri with Mauritian Creole and the ways 'La Fami Colver' uses them. When describing the tumultuous finale of the previous novel - *Sea of Poppies,* in which Kalua and three other crew members of the Ibis escaped – in the opening pages of *River of Smoke,* Deeti shows a mastery of three different languages: "Bon-dyé! She would cry; are you a fol dogla or what? Don't be ridikil: the whole thing, from start to fini

[14] Madhubani painting is an art school originating in the Mithila region (current day Bihar and the Terai foothills of Nepal – Mithila was an ancient territory named after Sita, Lord Ram's wife). It features figures and events depicting mythological events, often from the Ramayana. The stylistic elements include large facial features, side profile in figures, and animal/ human figures and landscapes created with repeated motifs. As Krishna Chaitanya describes in his work *A History of Indian Painting: The Modern Period* (1976), it is typically drawn in particular spaces in the home: spaces of worship where the deity is kept, in the verandah, and in the innermost apartment that is also used as a nuptial chamber on the occasion of weddings.

took just a few minits, and all that time, it was nothing but jaldi-jaldi, a hopeless golmal, tus in dezord" (15). She is referring to the split second in which they took off with a lifeboat in the eye of a storm at sea. But in just this one scornful expression, she uses Mauritian-Bhojpuri creole, English and Hindi, showing her ability to pick up the language of the region and use it to access institutional networks such as the Colver plantation owners, to her advantage. "Jaldi-jaldi" is a Hindi/ Urdu word meaning "fast". Indian languages often use word repetition to emphasize ideas that cannot be conveyed in a single iteration of a word, and Deeti apparently fails to find a counterpart in creole or English that would match the double expression of speed. "Golmal" too, refers to a state of chaos and confusion in Hindi, sometimes implying deliberate orchestration of such a state. Her use of Hindi adjectives to describe the mood of the moment of escape might spring naturally from her native language, the descriptors for which might not be adequate in creole or English. Many of her other nouns are set in Mauritian creole: "ridikil", "fol dogla", "fini", the first two of which might have been used to mock her and which she has now internalized and started to use on her own clan members. Her exasperated exclamation of "Bon-dyé" also nods at her knowledge of and acceptance of the good god of Voodoo, even though she continues to follow her own Hindu traditions. Deeti discourse here imitates a range of sources that she has encountered on the island, and which allow her to assimilate into the life of an indentured worker abroad without compromising on her own identity.

This family, headed by Deeti, is a group of Indian indentured slaves from Bihar who have settled in Mauritius on the Colver plantation with their own peculiar blend of rituals and a hybrid set of descendants who now speak Bhojpuri-Creole. Much of the cultural memory of these Bhojpuri workers lies preserved in the natural rock formation of the Chowkey, where Deeti uses

her native Madhubani painting techniques to freeze onto the walls the manner in which she and her shipmates were brought to Mauritius and the adventures that befell them. When they left India, these workers could communicate only in Bhojpuri and some Urdu, but in Mauritius they rapidly incorporate the language of plantation owners as well as that of other immigrants.

The opening scene of the novel is a startling illustration of the adaptive techniques used by the Colver clan on Mauritius. Here, many different groups of indentured laborers converge under Deeti's established ritual – extensive food preparations by the clan members, then a long climb into the mountains to reach a cave Deeti has named the Chowkey, a ritualistic remembrance about the genesis of their lives on the island, and finally, the feast. Deeti's language has, at this point, evolved into what the narrator calls her "personal idiom of expression," her own "strange mixture" of Bhojpuri and creole that her descendants and other workers presumably find amusing. The narrative voice aligns itself with the perspective of these other members of the clan, discussing Deeti's intimidating presence in third person. Presumably, the second generation has by this time shifted over more to creole than Bhojpuri, though it retains words. The children of this generation are shown to remember many years later the taste of "daalpuris" and "ghee", long after Deeti's annual ritual has died out. Like the fading taste of these delicacies, their connection with "Back There" and Bhojpuri grows fainter as they adjust their identities to their host nation. The word used to link all these sub-clans together is "tribe," hinting at new relationships having formed after their departure from India – Deeti calls them her "jahaz-bhais" (41), or "ship brothers".

The novel also focuses on food and its surrounding rituals as a way of retaining identity. Rai and Pinkney have already pointed out Deeti's insistence at having a ritual fire in the

overcrowded hold of the *Ibis* to marry a couple among the workers is a way to retain identity. Sara-Duane Meyer, as discussed previously, has also stressed the importance of food as a "cultural commodity" that is used to sculpt cultural and national identities in *Inheritance of Loss* (179). The feast is detailed in epic convention – similar to the way Kanubhai describes the attire of the Dalit villagers before their attack. Each item is described in great detail, with a mélange of new and old words to signify a new culinary blend that is a reflection of their own process of straddling two separate worlds. I discuss the significance of food in further detail below.

The narrative voice aligns itself more and more with the language of the indentured workers. When tired, they stop "to exclaim over the manifik view of the jungle," complaining that their "heads are fatigé" or their heads are "gidigidi" (12). These pleas are not put in quotation marks, and the narrator loops the reader into the complaint (the original sentence is "To complain that *your* legs were fatigé or *your* head was gidigidi was no use; […]"(my italics, 12)). This absorption of speech patterns continues even after, as more and more creole words enter the narrative without any translation, sliding into a free indirect discourse that implicates the narrative voice in the events of the novel rather than maintaining itself in a dispassionate observer's role.

The Colver clan's speech patterns are important because they convey Ghosh's diachronic representation of the abrupt process of creolization of Bhojpuri.[15] Without being given the decades that it took the China Coast Pidgin (CCP) to evolve, the indentured workers have very little time to form a mélange of languages that will allow them to simultaneously maintain

[15] Mark Sebba marks an important characteristic of Mauritian Creole: it evolved through what he calls 'abrupt cre1olization' (142), compared to the more gradual evolution of pidginization. Creolization is a process born out of violence and displacement, which may account for its sudden rather than gradual development.

contact with two cultural worlds. It is this creolization of language that allows Deeti to negotiate with the plantation owners on part of the clan. Moreover, it allows her to negotiate between now and "Back There", their home in Bihar which they have permanently left behind. This allows her to build a hybrid identity that incorporates traits of her original homeland as well as that of her new home. We see her preserving memories of India while having adapted to and thrived successfully in Mauritius. To represent Bhojpuri-Creole, Ghosh replicates the abrupt shift in vocabulary, from pure Bhojpuri (and an alternate use of Urdu) to a Bhojpuri Mauritian creole that uses words from both languages, blending culinary adjectives in the language of the clan. We hear of 'daal-puris' and 'parathas' (6) - stuffed savory pancakes – being prepared for the festival feast in the opening pages of the novel. These remain within the erstwhile system of nomenclature since the migrants feel no need of coining new words for them. But the language also makes a jump into diaspora experience as we see that new taxonomies have been adopted by the clan members for the natural flora of Mauritius. Physically and linguistically, these new words and their signifieds are being transformed to be stuffed into familiar delicacies: we hear of "bajis of pipengay and chou-chou" and "ourougails of tomato and peanut" (6). Indeed, it forms their primary connection to 'Back There', from where their ancestors arrived after escaping doomed fates. It also helps them keep traditions alive through feasting and festivals. Commenting on this process of acquiring a new vocabulary and using it in conjunction with old linguistic practices, Sarita Boodhoo discusses this gradual creolization of language of the migrants as they settled in Mauritius:

> The first wave and second generations of Bhojpuri immigrants adopted a Bhojpuri language to suit their new surroundings, enriching it from local borrowings to

> denote new artifacts and material belongings which did not originally exist in their traditional home or village background way back in India. (37)

Using such moments of cultural and familial intimacy, Ghosh represents the Bhojpuri spoken by the migrants early on - in Nayanpur as well as on the *Ibis* - as strikingly different from the island's creolized Bhojpuri mix that Deeti and her clan have adopted in order to communicate with each other many years later.

More importantly, this new creole serves another important function, one that Glissant calls "the obligation to remake oneself every time on the basis of forgettings" (86). Creoles must eventually forget what cultural aspects the language is based on and eventually reinvent from the nostalgia of a lost culture. Further, Glissant points out that creole is not claimed to be an "authoritative edict" (86), remaking itself and layering its structure with African and European linguistic contributions. It has a structure, and yet is not "fixed in its terms"(Glissant 86), causing great difficulty to linguists who wish to study its development.

*River of Smoke* conforms to Glissant's ideas in many ways. We see a powerful surge of re-creating amongst the characters from the novel. Deeti and her clan blend Bhojpuri with Mauritian creole and yet retain their language by great effort, and this process makes their community strong enough to keep in contact across geographies. By then, they have drifted far from their original Bhojpuri cultural context, but they retain and recreate its uniqueness through their language, their cultural mélange and through the preservation of Madhubani art. This is noteworthy, especially considering Ghosh's narrative almost entirely does away with any mention of plantation owners as far as the events in Mauritius are concerned, eliminating the one

dominant ideology that has resulted in their displacement. We are shown instead a connection between East and East as Deeti's clan expands to include members from other Asian and African countries.

Glissant's theory of creolization is very useful to a reading of Ghosh because while *River of Smoke* works in conjunction with his theory, it is disruptive in some other aspects; this allows us to see an alternate representation of creolization and agency in this novel. The novel disrupts Glissant's theory about creolization in one important place. While he mentions that creolization keeps creoles away from ideologies, creating a sort of ideological distance between them and their colonizers, Ghosh shows the process of creolization interacting very differently with the British colonizers. Subaltern characters in the novel find themselves embedded in contact situations that are rife with struggle for ideological dominance. Glissant's evaluation of this process of re-creation assumes that the force of recreating and navigating vastly different cultural systems distances one from rigid authoritarian systems: "Imagining and recreating from traces of memory removes a person far away from systems, far away not only from ideological thinking but even more from the thought of any imperative system." (87) However, it might be worthwhile to question if this elimination means that Deeti and Neel are ever very far from imperative systems. Even with their agency, they circulate within ideological clashes between nations over which they ultimately have no control. They survive primarily because they have a outlook that includes many languages and an ability to adapt to new cultures. More importantly, they use Mauritian creole to negotiate with plantation owners, as a tool for their own social development. The language then becomes not just an imaginative contrast to imperialist systems and rationalism, but also a way of negotiating with these vastly different systems. This collective

ability to adapt makes a striking contrast to Biju's transient and lonely immigrant experience in the underbelly of twentieth century New York, as we see in chapter four.

The narrative voice of *River of Smoke* is an extension of the adaptability of the indentured workers. In parts, it also absorbs this creolization process, performing the role of an interpreter between the reader and the characters, at times abandoning it for participation in the proceedings of the Grand Vakans without translation. The omniscient narrator starts piling adjective upon unfamiliar adjective, clause upon clause, mimicking the overwhelming effect of a previously unheard language ceaselessly sounding in the reader's ears. We start off with a definition of the "pus-pus", the "part palki and part sedan chair" (1) that Deeti travels in, but we wind up with a sentence which presents us with the baffling array of ranks associating themselves with La Fami Colver which are on the move for the Gran Vakans: "The Fami would begin mobilizing in mid-December, and by the start of the holidays the whole clan would be on the march; accompanied by paltans of bonoys, belsers, bowjis, salas, sakubays and other in-laws, the Colver phalanxes would converge on the farm in a giant pincer movement" (1). We receive no definition for any of these secondary relationships, and the narrative assumption rests that the reader will then relate to one or more languages or start to consider these as background sound to get a general gist of creole, grasping at what she can comprehend out of the baffling variety of languages. It gives the readerly experience of being physically on the spot and watching the events unfold, as against having a linkister or translator to explain in detail the etymology of this creolized community.

Creolization in the language of La Fami is first noticeable in the imperatives and descriptions of things never seen before on the island, for which they would have had no adjectives previously. Deeti's control over the Colver Fami is also made apparent through her spoken

Creole. Conveying the informality and the respect that the aged command in traditional Indian families, she uses the imperative tense and familiar pronouns to rouse and command her clan members: 'Revey -te! E Banwari, e Mukhyapyari! Revey-te na! Hagle ba? [...] Leve te! We're not here to goggle at the zoli-vi and spend the day doing patati-patata. Paditu! Chal!'(6) The new familial relationships wrought out of wrongful treatment by slave masters and colonial traders extend even further. They bring together Paulette Lambert, who speaks French, Bengali and Urdu, Neel Rattan, a Bengal zamindār who speaks Bengali, Urdu, English and Pidgin.

The kinship structures in the book reflect the subaltern skill of bricolage that melds together languages and kinship structures. That the tradition of the Madhubani temple and the festival has taken root in a family that has been pieced together from several different plantations points us towards the first indication of agency in the subaltern migrant figure. That Deeti has communicated the intention to bring together this family, and organized a yearly outing led by her matriarchal self in a "pus-pus" demonstrates her ability to cope not just with members of her own immediate family to make cross racial connections. All the main characters of the novel, though their fates extend all over the world, pass at some point through Mauritius where Deeti encourages them to construct and preserve their memories through Madhubani art that continues to be her instrument of preserving their history on Mauritius. She calls them "jehaz bhai-behen" – "ship brothers and sisters". Early on, she displays a remarkable flair for strong negotiation with authority, below deck on the *Ibis* that ensures the safety of a pregnant woman on board. These strong negotiation skills, which until now were expressed solely in Bhojpuri (and some Urdu), come to their peak when she effortlessly blends her native language into a Mauritian creole. This creole comes into play both within her family and without, allowing her to communicate with the

authorities, which allows her the cultural space to run her dynasty. As Marina Carter points out, indentured laborers to Mauritius "in many cases made effective use of local inter-ethnic and transnational intra-ethnic networks to further their settlement projects" (54). Ghosh, an anthropologist by training and a sharp linguist, attempts to layer Deeti's speech with a mimetic image of Mauritian Bhojpuri-Creole, which works a similar pattern, allowing Deeti to spread through these networks and to cut through both internal linguistic and class divides. The fact that La Fami Colver has an archive of their arrival onto Mauritius, celebrates their own cultural festivals (which includes multiple plantation networks), makes informed decisions to take up the indenture contract, and most importantly, learns and adapts to a synergistic new language which is familiar and alien all at once may speak to their ability to be cosmopolitan world citizens. While cosmopolitanism is often associated with middle and upper class South Asian immigrants today, a closer look at the evolution of the idea may yield itself to ample application to the subaltern indentured workers of Mauritius.

Another peculiar example of the "citizen of the world" comes in the form of Baboo Nob Kissin, the *Ibis'*s supercargo and who also works as Burnham's gomusta and wields language with the deftness of a seasoned informant. Baboo Nob Kissin helps the subaltern characters in the novel, and is an intermediary agent socially located somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between the subaltern migrants and the colonial class. He functions as a disruptive progeny of the British attempt to create that "class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Sharpe 116). His English is a perfect blend of a clerical British English conjugated with Bengali grammar at times, and which is at others a stiff, textbookish English: "What is your good name please? I did not catch. Clarifications are required." And, in a masterful burst

mirroring Bengali grammar, yet staying within range of its English translation, he asks Neel: "What type-employments you are engaging in?" (546). While he starts out as this parodic figure of the "English-educated baboo" (547), Nob Kissin rapidly manifests himself as a clear antithesis of the second clause of Maucaulay's desired class of interpreters.[16] Far from being "English in tastes, in morals, and in intellect" Baboo Nob Kissin turns out to be a shrewd manager who uses his knowledge of the English language and English traders to help everyone aboard the ship. Like Neel, he too becomes one of the primary channels of information in Fanqui-Town. His English training makes him indispensable to traders who need efficient supercargoes to maintain their ships, and his continued association with them makes him adept in their customs, prejudices and perceptions. When questioned by an anxious Neel on whether Burnham might recognize the former despite his disguise, the Baboo laughingly reassures him: "As for Mr. Burnham, he cannot tell one native from another – unless you give yourself away he will not recognize you" (551). In recognizing that this cross-race effect coupled with Burnham's contempt for natives will make it easy for Neel to remain hidden, Baboo Nob Kissin displays an extraordinary perceptivity that characterizes his entire trajectory through the trilogy. He also becomes the primary means of communicating information regarding ship's crew after they are all blasted apart. Equipped with English, Hindi, Urdu and Bengali, he carries news of Paulette to Zachary Reid, of Neel Rattan's family to him in

[16] A British politician who served as the Secretary at War from 1839 to 1845. His notorious speech, "Minutes on Indian Education" (1835) in the British Parliament devalued Sanskritic Indian literature and stated his intention of changing the Indian education system. He wanted to create a class of Indians who thought like the British, to introduce English as a medium of education and to instill in them a sense of British values and morality. The idea was to produce a class of Indians who would mimic the British and help them maintain their colonial hegemony over the vast masses.

Guangdong. He also becomes a valuable source for Neel to understand the most recent events in the hongs.

But perhaps the most interesting subversion of the dominant colonial narrative comes from Baboo Nob Kissin's discovery of his inner female self. Inspired by the idea that a young black officer on board the *Ibis*, Zachary Reid, is an incarnation of Lord Krishna, the Baboo starts to feel like a *gopi*, a term given to Krishna's female friends. He readily accepts this change, growing out his locks, and allowing his body to take on a different shape from his present one: "At the far end of the kitchen-boat sat a statuesque form, draped in a shapeless gown: the matronly figure, the bulbous head and the long, flowing locks were so distinctive that there could be no doubt of who it was" (535). In what amounts to the one most significant turn of events in *River of Smoke,* he actively helps Neel and Ah Fatt to escape from the ship. The reason he gives for helping them, and later even following up with Neel's family after his escape, is that he feels as a mother does towards a child. In accepting the feelings and responsibilities of a gender other than the one he has been socialized into, Baboo Nob Kissin is showing a leaning that extends well beyond Indian or even English norms of the time. He crosses several boundaries in a journey parallel to Robin Chinnery's sexual self-discovery, fully accepting a new identity and stepping outside the social mores and conventions of his time

The Baboo is a character that has also adapted to a very refined degree the process of "transculturation". Originally coined by Fernando Ortiz and used after, amongst many other theorists, by Mary Louise Pratt, the term designates a process by which "members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent by materials transmitted by a dominant or a metropolitan culture" (Pratt 36). Ortiz initially put this term out into circulation to replace the

term *acculturation,* which implied the transmission of cultural traits was a linear process, from colonizer to colonized. Baboo Nob Kissin shows a clear synthesis of Bengali Hindu culture with English education and professionalization, and uses this complex blend to undermine Burnham's domination aboard the *Ibis*.

### ***Pidginization***

Neel Rattan Halder – the raja of Rashakhali – forms another complex lens to focus on how Ghosh represents subaltern networks and their relationship with hybridity and linguistic agency. The caveat remains that Neel is a rich zamindār in West Bengal; he does not qualify in any definition as a subaltern. Ghosh instead uses his character to show the reader glimpses of paths chosen by the poorest of migrants through his trajectory. Being convicted for forgery by the British government, Neel is thrown aboard the Ibis as a convict. He later makes an escape with another convict on board and heads to Guangdong province, where he eventually becomes a munshi (manager) aboard the Ibis, and a proofreader with an English press. He journeys through spaces like the Wordy Market Fanqui town in the role of a poor convict, scavenging for food and clothes until he eventually lands his job aboard the *Anahita*. Moreover, he collects information from various sources and mingles with the lower staff, representing to the reader the inner workings of the hongs in Fanqui-Town. What complicates the matter is that he also comes from a privileged background, having briefly edited a literary journal and learning languages in a formal school setting, thus differing significantly from Deeti and the group of Bhojpuri immigrants who pick up the oral traditions rather than interact with the literary word. Yet Neel remains an important lens to scrutinize how Ghosh differs from linguists in

his representation of subaltern agency because he is the central champion for the cause of pidgin. It is through him that we see the value of this language of trade. His perspective introduces us to the *Red-Haired-People's-Buying-and-Selling-Common-Ghost-Language* pamphlet and it is his idea of the chrestomathy (developed further in *Flood of Fire*)[17] that seeks to give legitimacy to this much-misunderstood dialect.

One of the reasons characters like Neel can gain agency through their ability to speak many languages is the space they land in. It is in this small trading port that different languages clash to conduct business, but Neel's ability to respect pidgin and Cantonese allows him to win the trust of the powerful business advisor of Guangdong's governor, Lin-Zexu. On the shores of Guangdong in China, we find one of the most heterogeneous spaces of the entire novel. "Fanqui-Town", a small trading region outside the city of Canton in the Guangdong district of Southern China, is an embodiment of the contemporary power relations between China, India, Britain and America. The constant flux and change of international diplomatic relations and trade agreements between these nations leads it to become a version of what Mary Louise Pratt calls the "contact zones" – "[S]ocial spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (34). Fanqui-Town thus becomes a contact zone between China and European nations, with Indian traders such as Behram Modi struggling for any possible power within the colonial system. Pratt's definition proves very useful in conceptualizing this space as a hotbed of seismic power-clashes, because

[17] *The Celestial Chrestomathy, Comprising A Complete Guide To And Glossary Of The Language Of Commerce In Southern China* is Neel's idea of translating pidgin to English and Hindustani, using phonetic words in other languages for approximating the sound of the word in pidgin, similar to the technique used by the *Red-Haired-People's-Buying-and-Selling-Common-Ghost-Language.*

Fanqui-Town is truly a space with "highly asymmetrical relations of power".

Based in historical veracity, this miniscule stretch of land outside the gates of Canton is constantly supervised by a Panopticon-like watchtower under service to the emperor, which oversees the entire area. Moreover, it is also governed by very specific edicts issued by the Chinese emperor: women are not allowed in Fanqui-Town (save for the illegitimate yet always-present hawkers and prostitutes). In this intersection of between language and the repressive state apparatus, foreign English-speaking traders are required to remain outside of the city walls. To further bolster this geographical sequestering, no local resident is allowed to teach the foreigners Mandarin under pain of death.

These constrictions perhaps reflect the perception of foreigners in the eyes of the Chinese – seen as pollutants of indigenous culture and as insensitive barbarians (Ansaldo 186),[18] the foreigners are barred, to the maximum extent, from any cultural inroads into China. This power balance in Fanqui-Town in favor of the Chinese is countered by the continuing efforts of European traders to form a 'Chamber of Commerce' that makes its own rules, a government in miniature that can - when challenged - absolve itself of any responsibility in the opium trade. So Fanqui town becomes an odd, partially-regulated contact zone, where cultures clash because business must be conducted in the most profitable way. In addition, it is obvious that since this

[18] Lydia Liu's book *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* presents an extensive study of how the word "barbarian" has dominated and influenced Sino-British relations. The Chinese sign "yi" may be associated with "barbarian", "non-Chinese", "stranger" or "foreigner" (31), but it has a complex reciprocal relationship with these English terms. The sign "yi" was first used in a legal document in the Anglo-Chinese treaty of Tianjin in 1858, leading to a disagreement over linguistic priority in international agreements. The British wanted the interpretation to defer automatically to the English in case of any confusion over the meaning of the document. Liu points out the English obsession with the word "barbarian", especially in context of "civilization". It is important to identify the "true barbarian" across civilizations, but "the stakes rise higher with the scandal of the word *yi* because its enunciation issues forth from the language of a non-European society which is regarded as less than civilized by the British" (34). Liu uses the "supersign" of the "*yi*/barbarian" to indicate a complex relationship between how each cultures perceives this concept of an outsider, and to indicate a possibility of "enchanted meanings" and "excesses of signification" (34).

'Man-Town' has been artificially created as a trading zone, every participant there is aware of his presence in a contact zone. Even Robin Chinnery, who arrives as an outsider (or is it *because* he is an outsider?) realizes that this space sees power dynamics that are slowly shifting in favor of the British, but that the region remains a buzzing hotbed of forced cultural contact. He notes in a letter to Paulette:

> I do believe there is no place like it on earth, so small yet so varied, where people from the far corners of the earth must live, elbow to elbow, for six months of the year. I tell you, Pugglisima mia, were you to stand in the Maidan and look at the flags of the factories, fluttering against the gray walls of Canton's citadel, I am certain you too would be overcome: it is as if you had arrived at the threshold of the last and greatest of the world's caravanserais. (174)

This comparison to a 'caravanserai' (roadside inns where travellers and traders could rest for the night) indicates the strongly heterogeneous nature of Fanqui town which adds to its exoticism and freedom that transforms Behram Modi into Barry Moddi and erotically charges his relationship with his mistress Chi-mei; it is this melee of languages and cultures that make Fanqui town into the culturally heterogeneous contact zone that it has been over the past hundred years in spite of the constraints imposed on it in terms of gender and trade. After the Opium Wars, Neel goes back to find the standardized urban British imprint in all its Chinese settlements. Gone is the mix of distant cultures; we find instead that it has become

> a typical 'White Town' of the kind the British made everywhere they went - it was cut off from the rest of the city, and very few Chinese were allowed inside,

> only servants. The streets were clean and leafy, and the
>
> buildings were as staid and dull as the people inside them. (516)

It is following the first Opium War, then, that Fanqui-town is transmuted into a standardized colonial trading port, with the British advantage weighing distinctly heavier than that of the Chinese. However, the prewar Fanqui town we see before us in most of the novel is still alive with interactions that leave plenty of room for interpretation, misinterpretation and non-verbal understandings. Some of the languages we can distinguish amongst the melee are English, Chinese, China Coast Pidgin (CCP), Gujarati, French and Persian. Words from most of these figure in the pidgin spoken in the port-town of Canton. A part of the vocabulary functions on this principle approximating the sound of foreign words - 'cumshaw' for commission, 'tuncaw' for tanqhua (an Urdu word for salary), and 'plopa' for proper. Umberto Ansaldo estimates that, during the time CCP was on the rise and in frequent use in South China, the British did not have trade advantage. Though the British merchants in the novel, shrouded in euro-centrism, rely heavily on translators and linkisters, scorning pidgin as a broken version of English, they were in reality central to its development. The heavily contradictory fact remains, that though they tried their best to portray it the other way around, it was Western traders who desperately needed the trade with China for silk, porcelain and horticultural innovation. Moreover, they were held in cultural disdain by the Chinese and needed to inculcate the opium trade to gain a stronghold in trade with China. Thus Ansaldo says, "considering that all Western traders, including the British, were held in a lower social position by the Chinese, and bearing in mind the sporadic and often furtive nature of the [trade] contacts in those early days of the Canton trade, Western agency in the formation of CCP must be assumed" (194). And yet, this language, partly created by a

capitalist power desperate to make inroads into a fortressed new culture,

benefits subaltern figures such as Ah Fatt and Neel when they make their way through the Malay Straits into Canton. Even other polyglots like Behram Modi can switch smoothly between pidgin and a host of other languages, bringing a more natural flow of trust and communication between their Chinese counterparts.

Ghosh often reasserts the legitimacy of Chinese pidgin - contrary to early nineteenth century popular beliefs in the West, it is not a crude, rudimentary and makeshift language created by a people who cannot cope with a foreign language like English. It forms, instead, a halfway compromise between two languages:

> Even though many Chinese spoke English with ease and fluency, they would not negotiate in it, believing it put them at a disadvantage in relation to Europeans. In pidgin they reposed far greater trust, for the grammar was the same as that of Cantonese, while the words were mainly English, Portuguese and Hindustani - and such being the case, everyone who spoke the jargon was at an equal disadvantage, which was considered a great benefit to all. It was, moreover, a simple tongue, not hard to master. (164)

On the one hand, pidgin acts as the democratic element, the leveler that keeps Fanqui-town from being another European trading port on its way to becoming a colony. Chinese traders recognize this power of language and decide to isolate everyone away from their comfort-zone to create an entirely new field where the stakes are equal for all players. In fact, locations where pidgin thrives - multi-lingual markets, ports, and coastal regions - signify that it is derived and

spoken as a balance between many languages (and consequently, as a precarious compromise between the cultural power each tongue represents).

One such space where multiple cultural codes thrive is the 'Wordy Market' that Neel and Ah Fatt visit after they have escaped from the ship to Singapore. It is worthwhile to close read the passage where Ghosh describes this unique market. "Wordy" appears to be a sharp pun Ghosh makes on "vardi" or regimental uniforms, and also on the multiple tongues used in the market. This space, like the docks, also specializes in illegitimate and unacknowledged commerce: one can come to this market to buy or barter anything "from Papuan penis sheaths to Sulu skirts" (109). What makes this market special is that it is a spontaneous development based solely on the needs of a region of irreconcilable inter-cultural blends. It does away even with the need of currency, allowing penniless convicts like Neel to barter for clothes. Like pidgin, it exists because economic structures demanded the existence of "this market, listed on no map and unknown to any municipality" (109). One can only hear about this pop-up market, as Neel does from a Kalinga boatsman. It, too, has no formal structure and perhaps proliferation and lack of restraint is what causes panic among the more "well-heeled visitors", who prefer to shop in more conventional European and Chinese stores.

The description of Wordy Market is concatenate to Ghosh's description of pidgin. Both have a very loose but comprehensible structure, rooted in a huge, thriving, informal economy. Neither is well documented, with the language backed by a small pamphlet for vocabulary reference and the market functioning on word-of-mouth awareness. The market is in "the poorest quarters of a makeshift frontier town" (108), and appears and disappears, like pidgin, based on the needs of the petty tradespeople and boatsmen. It lacks the formality and the status hierarchy of the "European and Chinese stores around Commercial Square" (109) where the rich go to shop, and

it requires a linguistic and economic compromise from both buyers and sellers alike. We are told that "the first items that [Neel and Ah Fatt] bought were cloth bags, and these they proceeded to fill, going from one stall to another, haggling in a mixture of tongues" (110). Neel's purchases themselves are eclectic and mixed, ranging from a European coat to turbans, angarkhas, sirbands and bandhanas: a blend which later enables him to claim almost any identity across various classes and to pass undetected through Singapore and China.

Like pidgin, Wordy Market is also rooted in trade, and its ethics are also suspect. Affording economic agency to the subaltern - "where else could a man go, clothed in nothing but a loincloth, and walk away in a whalebone corset and slippers?"(109) – the Wordy Market also roots itself in an economic sensibility. While it has come up like pidgin in response to economic demand, the lack of structure and profusion of color hide a more sinister side of the origins of this trade. A nineteenth-century parallel of the modern American urban subterranean spaces where Biju dwells in *Inheritance of Loss,* the Wordy Market is held in the poorest part of town, in a small open field with no major roads leading to it, and is mostly approached through the waterway it bordered. Where are the clothes on display coming from? We hear adjectives like "robbed", "purloined", "pirated", and realize that the displayed clothes have seen some checkered pasts. One must examine them for "bloodstains, bullet holes, dagger punctures and other unsightly disfigurements" (109) before buying one's wares. A dubious anonymity shrouds the origin of these goods, the same way the sense of translingual confusion shrouds the rampant opium smuggling sponsored by the British in the novel. The caveat for pidgin focuses on a similar dilemma: that while it allows characters like Neel and Ah Fatt to freely communicate and roam through Singapore and Canton, it cannot be seen as a leveler that removes all inequalities since it is born out of trade.

In essence, both the Wordy Market and pidgin are parallels of what free trade was touted to be by 19th century colonial traders: a natural balance between market forces so that every party involved can adequately satisfy its needs.[19] The reality of free trade was quite different, however. Lisa Lowe, in her work *Intimacies of Four Continents* traces the transition from colonialism to ideas of "free trade" and notices that this idea allowed sovereign imperial rulers to combine "colonial slavery with *new* forms of migrant labor" and "monopoly *with* laissez-faire" (32). Colonial traders in India and China used modern concepts of rights, emancipation and free trade in ways that allowed Anglo-American rule to expand in these nations, by "accommodating existing forms of slavery, monopoly, and military occupation" (32). This historical analysis accounts for why traders such as Burnham and Dent advocate so vocally for free trade in the novel, desperate to keep in their control migrant laborers such as the ones aboard the *Ibis* and to keep the monopoly over their opium trade with China.

Both market and language are thus based on convenience: that all parties in a contact zone may most efficiently and productively complete the transaction. It is ironic that the same trade system that casts both Deeti and Neel into a foreign land is the source of communication systems that enable them to be cosmopolitan in their own right. If it was not for pidgin and Mauritian Creole, they would be little more than anonymous subalterns who eventually fall into the same path taken by countless indentured laborers and convicts before them.

[19] Pidgin has further similarities to free trade: like the latter, pidgin is spontaneously molded for material use, depending on which forces are at play. Patricia Nichols explains that pidgins arise spontaneously at contact zones, through the involvement of a large number of participants who may not be invested in learning "another one of the many languages spoken in the contact situation". (198)

Through Neel's obsession with the language, Ghosh appears to argue for the fact that though pidgin bubbles up to fill in gaps in communication - instead of being forged through centuries of evolution – this should not be a bar to its legitimacy. In spite of its glaring similarity to the idea of free trade so consistently advocated by British opium traders, it is surprising so few of the foreign traders in the novel take to it. One is reminded here of Foucault's twin ideas of "logophilia" and "logophobia". Foucault's assessment of Western civilization was that it was so dependent on discourse as to classify it as being logophilic, but behind this seeming attachment to discourse was a fear of the loss of control. "Logophobia" then, was the real reason for this clinging action: a fear of "everything that could possibly be violent, discontinuous, querulous, disordered even and perilous in [discourse], of the incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse" (228-29). Pidgin might be an epitome of this disorder that the foreigners fear - compounding an apprehension of an alien culture, pidgin brings in words from multiple languages, twists and turns as needed, and, much like the bazaars, allows everyone involved a reasonable liberty in interaction.

With pidgin shattering logophilia, we also see the signified shaken loose of the signifier, resulting in much linguistic and cultural confusion. Behram Modi, particularly, possessing multiple languages, often falls prey to paralingual signifieds and ambiguity. When told by a shipmate about Napoleon's comment "it is better that China remains asleep", Behram's reaction is detailed thus: "This mystified Behram, who said: 'What you are saying? This fellow thinks Chinese are sleeping too much, is it?'" He misses out on certain other English cultural metaphors as well. When Slade ambiguously calls Charles King a "Bulgarian" (believed, in contemporary linguistics, to be an uncorrupted semantic form of "bugger"), Behram first thinks of King as possessing a Bulgarian nationality, and then, thinking "bugger" was *anglice* for "bukra" - a goat

in Hindi - he assumes that Slade is making a reference to goats that Charles King possibly holds in his possession.

Traders like Burnham and Dent in the novel look upon pidgin and the Chinese in contempt and are constantly threatened by the language. They attempt to pretend they are not in a contact zone but in a space that is unpleasant to condescend to be in, while the actual financial requirement is on their part. They attempt to distance themselves from the "baby-talk" and insist on using linkisters for translation, while sneering at people like Compton when he suggests an official English-pidgin glossary.

Neel is the only character who, Ishmael-like, finds redemption in having an insight into the larger patterns of power in a chaotic world around him. *Moby Dick* finds Ishmael as the objective observer of the events that befall the Pequod, and Neel, similarly, outlasts the Opium Wars to see Fanqui-town rebuilt as a sterile, clean, miniature British settlement. He is also the only character who understands the legitimacy of Pidgin and the explosive potential of and the need for organized literature on it. He chances upon "The Red-Haired People's Buying and Selling Usual Ghost Language" at a public market, a pidgin-English guide that uses phonetics to allow quick recognition of and access to pidgin for Chinese traders:

> Neel was greatly taken by the ingenuity of this: instead of using phonetic symbols, Compton had suggested the pronunciation of the English word by using a character that sounded similar when pronounced in the Cantonese dialect. For longer and more complicated words, he had joined together two or more one-syllable Cantonese words: thus 'today' became 'to-teay' and so on. (252)

The title of the pamphlet clearly gives a clear indication of the functional nature of pidgin and its status as facilitator of trade. Set out in four sections, this short pamphlet is divided into areas like "numbers used in business", "common expressions referring to people and things", "everyday language" and "food and miscellaneous". It is not meant to be a deep exploration of cultural nuances, neither does it become an intrinsic means of communication within a community. It gives the quickest way to communicate with another community that speaks an entirely different language belonging to a separate language group.

Neel respects it enough to conceive of an English or Hindi to pidgin glossary, giving pidgin the dignified status of "the language of commerce in Southern China" (252). He is accurate in guessing at the magnitude and the historical significance of the language-blend he is at the center of. Surrounded by the proofs in Compton's small printery, he is the only character who shows awareness of the power of the information system that he has been thrown into. He is the only one who hears about the arrival of Lin Zexu before any of the other characters. Umberto Ansaldo, outlining the history of what is called China Coast Pidgin, tells us that

> CCP has been called the 'mother of all pidgins', for a number of reasons [...] In particular, it seems to have given the very name of *pidgin* to functionally restricted codes that arise in prevalently in bilingual communities, through a Chinese-influenced pronunciation of the word *business*. (184)

This observation produces an important observation: that CCP was a function of its location. The British merchants in the novel, while downplaying Chinese culture as heathenish and uncivilized fail to realize that the language which they refuse to condescend to speak is actually a

powerful blend of words from Hindi, Portuguese, Malay, French, Chinese and English, simmered for years because people from disparate linguistic backgrounds have come together in a port-town. While Neel glories in the multitude and diverse colors in which he can, much to his purpose, lose himself in a change of identity and anonymity, much of the Biblical language of the British traders and smugglers characterizes Canton as the 'city of sin' (326).

Being the only character who understands that he is in a contact zone, and who is consciously aware of the fact that he is learning new words every day, Neel forms the bridge between "Accha" Hindustanis, the British and the Chinese. It is his character that Ghosh invests with the widest linguistic range, and consequently the most power among the foreigners at Fanqui-town. Being a polyglot allows him to save Behram from the wrath of the new governor, Lin Zexu, because his respect for Chinese and pidgin earns him the trust of his editor and employer Compton. Unlike the British, he is not scornful of having to learn a new language - his respect for the language and its practitioners is reciprocated when his Chinese employer, the resourceful Compton, reveals to him that his mentor Chang Nan-shan is one of the intellectuals advising Lin Zexu on how to tackle opium trafficking, and both mentor and student have implicit faith in Neel's judgment of the traders. It is to the former that Neel exercises his power of representation on behalf of Behram. Between Chinese and English, he convinces Chang Nan-shan not by fabricating Behram's innocence, but by highlighting the colonial framework that brackets Behram's ambitions to be a successful trader. In addition to adding sympathy to Behram's position, he gets the chance to take revenge on Burnham, who has had him incarcerated in the previous novel. Using this unnoticed seat of power, which the parochial and evangelist Burnham cannot access, Neel confirms that he has many more chests of opium which he can surrender, in

comparison to the number officially listed by Burnham, thus cutting any margin of profit that Burnham could have had.

Behram rightly gives him the task of "khabardari", the art of keeping up with the latest news in Fanqui-town. He is able to stay ahead and influence many destinies because he knows Bengali, pidgin, English, Hindi, and a smattering of Chinese. Neel's position with Compton at his printery gives him access to current events and keeps him abreast of oncoming events that will affect the fates of the other characters in the novel. As before, Neel becomes the lens through which the narrator presents the means of communication and trade used by the subaltern characters of the novel. His final role in the novel appears to be bringing together various languages and, through this communicative prowess, characters closely associated with those languages. Through him, Ghosh demonstrates the relationship between language, power and access. His knowledge of pidgin and his respect of the language and its speakers allow him to protect himself as well as other characters he is close to.

### ***Conclusion: Language and Migratory Agency***

This chapter has argued that Ghosh's *River of Smoke* offers an example of a contemporary Anglophone novel that details how migrants and other subalterns use pidgin and creole to gain some agency over their migration trajectory. While their original path was devised by colonial traders and rulers, it is important to analyze efforts by postcolonial writers like Amitav Ghosh to unearth the ways in which the poor and marginalized adapted, invented and adjusted to their new lives and wrote their own destinies. Ghosh represents them in order to discover some measure of empowerment within these communities, and to reinterpret history that typically marks them out only as victims. His work is key to this effort at reinterpretation because it depicts the contact

zone as a space where colonialism works both ways - it affects the colonizer as much as it does the colonized, and to look only at the latter is to get a skewed view of colonial relations. While focusing on the plight of the colonized was the immediate nationalist response of most erstwhile colonies, it is important to rediscover how these colonial subalterns rediscovered agency within the framework of colonialism. Cheah's claim of forced migration undercutting any actual agency in the migrant still stands valid, but Ghosh is attempting to trace within this framework of forced migration how his characters reappropriate the language of colonizers and use it to negotiate their own fates. Just as Glissant claims that ambiguity and slippage strengthens creole, Ghosh's slippery combination of several languages in the text – untranslated for the reader, in many parts – makes it a strong postcolonial linguistic study. A similar reappropriation takes place in Dalit fiction, but the exploitative relationship is with that of higher castes. Reconfiguring their own status using resources of the upper castes, many Dalit protagonists return home to enable change in their own community. In some stories, however, the dissonance between expectations from the city and the reality of their existence there keeps characters from gaining any palpable empowerment. An interesting difference lies in the treatment of Dalit characters in this short fiction. While the motivation to change lies within the Dalit character itself, Ghosh's narrator does not allow any space for Kalua's character to evolve out of its stereotype of a lower-caste unskilled worker. The characters of the short stories discussed in the next chapter are much more vividly drawn, with ambitions and plans of self-empowerment that are sometimes fruitful, and lead to disappointing revelations in others.

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## Chapter 2: In Pursuit of the Displaced *Dalit Chétna:* Movement, Language, and Choice

In the previous chapter, I have examined subaltern subjectivity through English and hybrid languages. While Ghosh's text was dominated by English and chose to represent pidgin and creoles in part. I have argued that the Anglophone Indian novel chooses to portray previously marginalized voices that, in spite of their socio-economic disadvantage, share a sense of agency in their decisions.

This chapter looks at regional Dalit writing in the context of Indian Anglophone and world literature to critically analyze the ways in which subaltern consciousness is crystalized in fiction. I have already pointed out that one of the limitations of confining our readings to Anglophone texts is that it gives us a limited perspective of subaltern migrants: that of upper-class/ caste cosmopolitan authors whose work shows a clear awareness of the world audience they are writing for. Their representation of subaltern characters - while it may represent agency - is not based on experience, identification or activism but the imagination of the urban, displaced and (often) middle/ upper class who does not share the same awareness of their long and tortuous history other than what they hear/ read about second hand.[20] Reading Dalit literature alongside Anglophone Indian literature contrasts the latter's displaced perspective on subaltern representation and remedies the glaring mistake of only looking *at* subaltern representation instead of looking from *within* it. This analysis allows us to see how being empowered in one aspect does not necessarily translate

[20] This is remedied in part by self-reflexive cosmopolitan writing: a good example in modern fiction is Aatish Taseer's *Noon*, which self-reflexively places itself in an upper caste and class. From this explicit perspective his work builds a representation of the urban subaltern that surround him.

into another (for example, economic agency may not necessarily result in a higher social status).

It is imperative to study Dalit literature in context of global Anglophone Indian novels because cosmopolitan writers sometimes tend to misrepresent the subaltern as well. A case in point is Amitav Ghosh's portrayal of Kalua in *Sea of Poppies*, the first novel of his trilogy. Kalua is a dubious and lightly sketched stereotype of a Dalit.[21] He is shown to have little mental complexity, and his physical strength is only used to further the drama of the plot. While Deeti is endowed with polyglot capabilities that allow her to negotiate and navigate through her trajectory from Madhya Pradesh to Mauritius, Kalua is painted in an animalistic, bestial manner with only patience and great physical strength as his best attributes. And while this may be meant to depict how demeaningly the upper castes perceive Kalua (a lower caste chamār (tanner)), there is little justification for the manner in which the narrative voice itself speaks of him. Kalua is, according to the omniscient narrator, "a man of unusual height", whose "gigantic frame" has been nourished on "the meat of salvaged carcasses", and was left "to fend for himself in a cattle pen" by his family (36-38). He is called a "two-legged beast" by the zamindārs who humiliate him by forcing him to mate a horse since he is, according to them, incapable of procreating with a human being. Kalua does not walk, he "lumbers" (41), and the narrative voice half-believes the

[21] Mrinalini Chakravorty, in her book *In* Stereotype, observes that South Asian stereotypes that circulate globally "articulate the manifest material differences" between the global South/ North division (32). Knowing the difference between what she calls "consuming and producing cultures, ownership and labor" (32) may paint Kalua's stereotypical description as a recognizable one. Creating this stereotype thus might be a function of Ghosh's awareness of his world audience. In order to create a Dalit character that would be universally recognizable, Ghosh eschews a more realistic portrayal for a stereotype whose only distinguishable quality is misery. This makes his ultimate victory in the dramatic escape scene all the more vindicative - the poor and downtrodden winning against the upper caste and the British colonials, infusing a brief "feel-good" moment into the reader's veins. This could easily have been substituted by a sustained examination of Dalit life and migration, but the tradeoff would perhaps have made Kalua's character less recognizable to Western, or even urban Indian, audiences.

rumors supporting his animalistic description, rumors that say Kalua is mentally challenged, and that his body "had gained at the expense of his mind" (37). Even in the drama of the climactic vindictive scene where Kalua kills the upper-caste Subedar (constable) Bhyro Singh – snapping his neck with his own whip – Kalua is hardly allowed any lines of his own. Having pleaded with the Subedar, his final act of redemption aboard the ship is violent, shocking, and animalistic in the rhythm of its execution.

There is little justification for Ghosh to portray Kalua as an uncommunicative, animal-like figure. Rather than depicting point-of-view prejudice, it appears as though the narrative voice has absorbed – like it absorbs creole from the characters – the caste prejudices of the upper-castes in the novel. We are placed in the shoes of the upper caste zamindārs in the novel, forced to see Kalua as they do. Moreover, the narrative uses Kalua as a sensational character who suddenly expresses himself in dramatic circumstances, such as rescuing Deeti from the funeral pyre of her husband, or killing the Subedar aboard the ship. His wretchedness makes the drama more spectacular but it does nothing to suggest that he is anything more than a stock lower-caste character who serves as the catalyst for Deeti and Kalua's elopement (since an intercaste affair between them would result in a death penalty). In spite of their wretched conditions in the historical period in which Ghosh sets his trilogy, surely the inner world of Dalits was no less complex on that account. Losing out on an opportunity to show us Kalua's rich inner world, Ghosh instead sidesteps complexity for a sketchy description of how Kalua is perceived by the upper castes, and how they make him suffer. An alternate route would have been to show us his inner tumult and motivation, as we see in Deeti, or in the work of these contemporary Dalit writers.

Gujarati Dalit authors, on the other hand, showcase the inner worlds of their characters far more than Ghosh in this instance. Of course, Spivak's question of whether subalterns can really represent themselves remains as legitimate today as before. She states that the problem is that "the subject's itinerary has not been traced so far as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual" (25). Rita Kothari converges on the same issue when she delineates (as I discuss further below) the several sub-communities within Dalits who remain literarily undocumented because they have no access to resources, not even enough for anyone to make them the subject of their fiction. Treating "Dalit literature" as subaltern literature thus remains fraught with problems because even Dalit authors are mostly representing larger and more privileged communities, such as the Vankars in the Gujarati community.

And yet, regional Dalit literature goes largely unnoticed outside of its small local readership. Indian literature broadly encompasses Anglophone works as well as texts in diverse regional languages,[22] each with a unique narrative style. Texts in the latter group have not been given the amount of systematic analysis they deserve.[23] In spite of a majority percentage of Indians being able to speak anywhere between three to five languages with ease, trans-linguistic studies are rarely performed even in India. Dalit literature can be best understood through a cross-linguistic comparison, to highlight how

[22] In 2013, the People's Linguistic Survey of India, conducted by the Bhasha Research and Publication Center (a nonprofit affiliated with the central Indian government) counted 860 languages currently spoken in India, a number far greater than the official number of 122. The survey also suspected the existence of another 100 which they could not actively track, with many languages dying out as their native speakers passed away without their children being able to speak their languages. The country is currently publishing and actively consuming literature in several of these languages (the languages tracked by the survey are mother tongues and include exclusive speech), though they are often subordinated to literature in English, which is prized owing to a higher class status assigned to it.

[20] This demand for closer attention to regional literatures has been made by several critics along the years – Mahasweta Devi, Gayatri Spivak, Aijaz Ahmad and Arun Kolatkar among others.

Dalit writers depict socio-economic agency in their own community, in contrast to how South Asian Anglophone cosmopolitan writers describe it. Regional Dalit literature acutely bears the brunt of the negative consequences of the privileged monolingual model. It is doubly marginalized – for being regional, as well as Dalit – in a literary critical world that privileges the Anglophone, since Dalit literature is typically not written in English[24] (though it is being increasingly translated today).[25] It is for these reasons that I consider a study of Dalit literature imperative to any discussion of subaltern literature.

The readership of Gujarati Dalit literature until recently was still limited primarily to their own community. This is changing, however, as academic interest in Dalit literature is increasing in India - it has suddenly become a popular topic of study, one that any self-respecting (and left-leaning) academician should at least have studied a small sampling of. The challenge with "discovering" Dalit literature is that it differs vastly with regions, and the interpreter must be familiar with the language or work with translations. Translations, though they are more widely available now than earlier, offer a limited range of texts to work with. Translingual studies between a vernacular language and English are not strongly encouraged, and even if the student passes that challenge, they would have to work hard to master the original language to understand the nuances of dialects used in texts. A combination of these factors slows down the discovery of Dalit literature in its

[24] Though some writers have started to write in English, such as Dalit activist and writer/ poet Meena Kandasamy, whose poetry collections *Touch* (2006) and *Militancy* (2010) were both published in English.

[25] Editors like Ramnika Gupta have published translations of Dalit fiction from several states across India. Ironically, Dalit literature is being "rediscovered" by readers of Anglophone literature in India as translations have been recently published by local and international scholars alike. These scholars include Mini Krishnan, Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Laura Brueck and Rita Kothari.

original languages. Further, Gujarati literature has not been extensively translated, which makes it inaccessible to readerships dominated strongly by Anglophone texts.

Studying Dalit short fiction in Gujarati has also revealed a set of personal limitations in my own language fluency. My parents migrated to an urban metropolis in India soon after their wedding, and my sister and I have since grown up in metropolitan cities where, though a state language may have many speakers, no one particular language dominates the scene. As adults, we found our language to be more functional, lacking the figurative richness of our parents' generation. When they speak amidst themselves, they still use many metaphors and proverbs to illustrate their arguments. Our Gujarati is characterized by the functionality that perhaps comes from speaking a standardized modern English most of the time. We no longer speak in proverbs, and do not often use metaphors. Rich vernacular languages have their own manner of conveying a humorous situation, as I see in my mother's words – and have the complexity of form that I have rediscovered through many of these Dalit stories. In order to remedy this challenge, I have interviewed the editor of *Vanboti Vartao* as well as the author of "Jāt" to clarify meanings of unidentifiable dialect words and regionally specific proverbs that elude my ken. I discuss at length my conversations with the editor of the anthology, Dalpat Chauhan, below.

## ***Context***

There are two hundred million members of the Scheduled Castes in India, according to the 2011 Indian census. This number does not include Christian and Muslim lower castes. Out of these, Gujarat has a comparatively lesser proportion of Dalits, between five and ten million – out of a total population close to sixty million people.

Perhaps this might account for the later start in Dalit political consciousness.

The push towards expression came from Maharashtrian Dalits whose political activism started as early as the 1920s. Further, since the Dalit Panther movement started in the 1970's there has been a prolific increase in Dalit fiction spearheaded by Marathi Dalit literature, poetry and autobiography across multiple Indian regional languages. Many new literary journals were set up with a view to giving space to Dalit literary voices.[26] While Dalit literature in Marathi, Hindi and Kannada has seen many varieties of genre and has been extensively translated, literature in Gujarati remains comparatively less prolific and little-analyzed. One possible reason for this relative lack could be that it bloomed later than Marathi Dalit literature that was already well established before the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, also a massive influence in Maharashtra, had already made several efforts pre-Indian independence to raise awareness among the Dalits of their own condition and encourage education and expression. Modern Gujarati Dalit literature gained impetus later, arising as a response to a series of attacks by the upper castes on the reservation (affirmative action) policy put into place in India in 1981 (Kothari 4308), making forays with poetry and then publishing short fiction and novels from the late 1980's. While some Gujarati Dalit fiction has been translated, it still remains largely outside of the sphere of critical analysis. Rita Kothari has done some important and interesting groundwork on Gujarati Dalit short fiction as well as translations of books like Joseph MacWan's *Aangaliyat* (*The Step Child*).[27] Atul Parmar has also

[26] Examples include *Bahishkrit Bharat* (edited by Babasaheb Ambedkar in the 1920's), and *Asmitadarsh* (edited by Gangadhar Pantawane in the1960's) in Marathi. In Gujarati, *Samaj Mitra*, *Hayati*, *Kalo Suraj* and *Sarvanam* were some prominent journals.

[27] Rita Kothari's essay on Gujarati Dalit short fiction brings out some important issues, such as the difficulty of representing multiple communities within Dalits (Vankars are the majority and are better

published work detailing the history of Gujarati Dalit literature, and Amarnath Prasad and MB Gaijan have co-edited *Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration* that includes essays on Gujarati Dalit fiction and poetry.

Dalit characters from these fictional works as well as their authors belong to lower castes in the Hindu hierarchy, who are today classed under general constitutional categories such as "Scheduled Castes" and "Other Backward Class."[28] I prefer the term "Dalit" to the official bureaucratic nomenclatures. Eleanor Zelliott's extensive work on the Dalit Panthers features a genealogy of the term; it was chosen by the Panthers themselves, and comes from Marathi, implying "those who have been broken, ground down, by those above them in an active and deliberate way" (76).[29] While the term "Dalit" gained a strong foothold with the Panthers, Ramnarayan Rawat traces its use as far back as the 1910s in Hindi literary journals like *Saraswati, Pratap* and *Chand.*[30]

Framing Dalit literature under the larger framework of South Asian subaltern diaspora remains a challenge, however. The agendas of nationalist and subaltern literature can be antithetical to each other, as Toral Gajarawala points out in her essay, "Some Time Between Revisionist and Revolutionary: Unreading History in Dalit Literature":

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educated and mobile compared to other castes considered lower such as tooris, vaghris, chamārs etc. She also observes that these stories are defined by "absences": missing communities too backward to be considered in fiction, an absence of women writers, as well as a lack of historicity and individual characterization that would pin the reader to a place or time. Instead, male Gujarati Dalit writers choose to generalize their plots, setting them in unidentifiable village settings so that the extent of exploitation cannot be perceived as localized.

[28] "Scheduled Castes" is a modern government label for Dalits, and is used to legally replace the term "untouchable". "Other Backward Class" is defined by Article 15(4) in the Indian constitution to generally refer to "socially and educationally backward classes of citizens".

[29] Eleanor Zelliott observes in her essay that while the term "dalit" may be replaced by "downtrodden" in its English translation, "'downtrodden Panters' and 'downtrodden literature' seem ridiculous in English and carry none of the dignity and pride of the Marathi word" (77).

[30] Rawat's essay primarily clarifies the evolution of Hindi nomenclatures for Dalit groups, from "asprishya", "antayaja jaati" or "niche" jaati" for "untouchables" to the contradictory connotations of "achhut" in popular parlance versus the *Nirguna* Bhakti tradition.

> The most striking fact, perhaps, for the Western reader is that Dalit literature is a regional Indian literature with little or no national aspiration; it is therefore indifferent to "postcolonial studies," a field that has become synonymous in the United States with the study of Indian literature […] One might expect [Dalit literature in Hindi] to be quintessentially subaltern, but it levels a strident critique at traditional leftist and Marxist approaches and their putative conflation of caste and class. (576)

While this dissertation constantly revisits and redefines the term subaltern, in relationship with Dalit literature, "subaltern" refers to a diverse variety of lower castes. As for Gajarawala's astute observation that Dalit literature is often, ideologically and formally, perpendicular to the limited perspective of postcolonial literature as Western (and Indian Anglophone) readers know it – this is undeniable, a base note which will be heard behind every argument in this chapter. Moreover, until now Western critics have been inclined to play off national and postcolonial literatures against imperial culture as a point of reference, smothering marginal voices of dissent that lie within the nation.[31] Employing what Gajarawala calls the "dalitisation of narrative time" (578), Dalit authors often present a "nonhistoricist" (578) account of Dalit life, a much longer history that can reach to pre-colonial times to critique the stringent caste system in the days of local rulers. As Gajarawala points out, even if the narrative is set during the British rule, such as in Mohandas Naimishray's memoir *Apne-Apne Pinjare*, the Partition of India in 1947 is only

[31] Works like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, tended to be pancolonial and nationalist narratives that catered to British audiences and did not address internal dissent. *Untouchable*, though problematic in many ways, did atleast attempt to address this disconnect with the colonial regime and ways in which Dalit dissatisfaction manifested itself under the British.

mentioned obliquely through "key dates" and the occasional "hints of violence" in cities (580).

A possible method to bypass this contradiction is to acknowledge at the start, as Gajarawala does, that Dalit literature needs different patterns of evaluation and reading. Western literary criticism has a history of revision and evolution of new schools that advocate newer methods of evaluation to ask the right questions of new literatures and new times. While this chapter does not purport to introduce a new school of criticism, it seeks – following theorists who have already undertaken this task - to read Dalit short fiction not from a postcolonial perspective but from one that is critically shaped specifically for this literature.

With stellar work having been done already on sociology and the politics of Dalit art, I want to emphasize literary form through a comparison of Dalit texts because there is a danger of reifying this complex art as a bundle of anti-establishment slogans. While Sharmila Rege argues that "literariness" is not as important in a Dalit text as the act of "communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment, and struggle" (13),[32] I disagree with this statement in context of creative Dalit works. While the thematic political component of the text is extremely important, language and form communicate on a parallel level. Like Gajarawala and Brueck, I relate the use of language to attempts by the authors to characterize Dalit characters as human, non-stereotypical figures who face a variety of socio-economic problems that are not easily remediable, or even recognizable, by national development programs.

[32] Rege's argument is in the context of a *testimonio*, a "narrative or book in pamphlet form, told in the first person, by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the witness he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience" (Beverley 30)

In the chapter, I read four works of short fiction by Dalit authors to argue that these authors also represent their characters as having economic agency over their decisions, and yet this agency does not often result in a significantly improved social status. I chose these stories because they foreground the problems of urban migrants who have chosen to leave behind their communities in search of economic opportunity. These protagonists remain in search of social agency, though they remain financially stable and are clearly successful at having gained economic agency. Discussing Ajay Navaria's characters in his Hindi short fiction, Laura Brueck outlines a similar category of urban Dalits who are alienated and yet in search of a better life: "Navaria's stories alert us to personal challenges that arise, almost like a side effect, from embracing the opportunities for betterment, including education, political awareness, and material consumption" (153). This chapter closely examines the dynamics between those "side effects" and the "opportunities for betterment." Somewhere within this ratio lies agency that helps the protagonists decide and manage their life trajectory.

### ***Choice of Texts***

I read regional Dalit literature as offering unique insights into a mode of writing that uses linguistic and paralinguistic literary features to fight against the appropriation of marginalized voices. My reading builds on critical work by Toral Jatin Gajarawala and Laura Brueck through a focus on narrative form. As Brueck reminds us in *Writing Resistance*, existing scholarly critical works "tend to comment cautiously on their [Dalit creative writing's] thematic content, ignoring the formal structures and linguistic elements of these and other fictional and poetic genres" (7). I will use linguistic analysis, along with

crucial work by Arjun Appadurai on caste in South India, to read four Gujarati short stories – Dashrath Parmar's "Jāt" ("Caste"), Mavji Maheshwari's "Safe Distance", V.S Parmar's "Bāp nū Bārmū" ("The Twelfth Day of Mourning for Father" and Dr. Silas Pateliya's "Swapna Samudra"("Sea of Dreams") published in an anthology titled *Vanboti Vartao* (2000). My intervention lies in bringing a critical analysis of Gujarati Dalit fiction into a discussion of the representation of subaltern characters in Indian fiction. Gujarati Dalit fiction has not undergone rigorous critical analyses, save for Rita Kothari's work that discusses its major features and history, as well as MB Gaijan's survey of Gujarati Dalit fiction. My methodology of reading these particular stories offers an insight into the way Dalit authors discuss displacement and migration, and how characters adapt to geographical movement within the caste/class double bind. This double bind constitutes an inability to move up in the class hierarchy, or to access institutional resources because of their low caste. Many Dalit communities continue to remain poor because they are Dalit and so on, in spite of government efforts at affirmative action. Higher castes continue to protest these attempts by claiming merit and accusing the government of preferential treatment to Dalits, thus keeping the double bind in place. To analyze some of the works that share thematic elements with Anglophone novels and compare the treatment of subaltern characters in these novels helps bring a common lens to analyze two different styles of writing – Anglophone and regional – that are just two perspectives on the same subaltern demographic and discuss similar themes from multiple viewpoints.

I foreground short fiction in order to illustrate a larger range of characters and the different ways in which they wield agency. There is also the added reason that there are many short story anthologies and collections in Gujarati Dalit literature, encouraged

through the publication of several literary Dalit magazines (There is no shortage of novels with strong protagonists).[33] In focusing on short fiction, I look at productive ways in which representation by Dalit writers via identification or personal experience differs in representing agency from imagined representation of subaltern characters by members of a higher class. Instead of reading for a response from the Dalit community to postcolonial India, this chapter looks to how Dalit short fiction represents Dalit migrant characters. It is particularly important to study the question of "agency" in Dalit fiction because, while it plays a major role in the mainstream Anglophone literature, in Dalit art writers are preoccupied by what they call "Dalit *chētna",* an awareness/ form of consciousness that defines the self awareness and critical thinking of the Dalit. As Brueck clarifies through a reading of the Hindi Dalit poet Rajni Tilak, the term "Dalit" should be regarded not as "a mere replacement for untouchable, ex-untouchable, *harijan,* or scheduled caste;" rather, for her, the term names "a subject of these wider categories who are politically aware, motivated, and participant in the Dalit struggle, and who actively identify themselves with the counter-public" (42).[34] Central to my analysis is, then, is a set of questions that can best be answered through a consideration of the agential language and form in which the Dalit *chétna* is signified. What does the representation of agency on the part of a Dalit author or character, as in "Jāt" and "Swapna Samudra" mean for the community? The protagonist of "Bāp nu Bārmū" often seems like he is on the brink of collective awareness about the problems of Dalit communities, but is unable to act upon

[33] Examples include Joseph Macwan's *Angaliyat* and *Mari Paranetar*

[34] The term *harijan* literally means people of god ("hari" being one of the god Vishnu's names, and "jan" means people/s). The exact origin of the term is unclear, but the word was used in a song written by Narsingh Mehta, a prominent transcendentalist poet and reformer in the fifteenth century. Mahatma Gandhi later used this term to refer to Dalits in the early twentieth century, but it was rejected by Dalit activists, starting with Dr. Ambedkar, who felt it only replaced the term "asprishya" (another derogatory term meaning "that which was not to be touched") (Moon 501-02)

it; this raises the question of whether individual agency is enough for promoting revolutionary thought or action. Arjun Appadurai discusses the power of the imagination as fuel for collective action, but does this translate into representation in fiction and how that would affect the reader? In a caste system so deeply rooted in specific spaces and geographies, can this representation of displaced agency be meaningful to other members of the community or to consumers of this literature?

My goal in choosing Gujarati Dalit short fiction is to look at a sub-category of Dalit fiction that has largely gone unnoticed outside of its regional readership. While Ramnika Gupta has undertaken a translation of Gujarati Dalit stories into Hindi, the particular volume I examine - *Vanboti Vartao* (2000) (*Untouched Tales)* - has not been translated or analyzed. Many of the stories in this collection depict urban migration. Short stories, as a genre, are very common in Dalit literature, since the new Dalit literary protest movement made itself felt first through numerous literary magazines. I chose Dalit short stories to showcase the diversity of issues against which Dalits are attempting to empower themselves, and the various types of agency that their authors ascribe them. I also feel obliged to have a bit of diversity in my representation process: I wanted to showcase different settings and classes that complicate the Dalit experience, which is otherwise in danger of being homogenized. A novel would not have sufficed in showcasing this range.

I also chose this collection because a significant set of the stories feature migrants and cityscapes. While Dalit fiction in Gujarati is often set in a precolonial or colonial world, these stories featured modern settings that resonated thematically with the other Anglophone texts in this dissertation. All feature subaltern migrants that attempt to resettle in a new space, and depict the struggles faced by them and their attempts to empower

themselves. One major difference, though, lies in the fact that the Dalit fiction is written by Dalit authors themselves, authors who may have faced societal prejudice first hand, while the other texts are written by cosmopolitan writers who are aware that they are writing for a world audience. The themes are similar, but the sources from where these narratives spring are vastly different in demographic terms.

Each of these stories has been written in varying Gujarati dialects. A conversation with the editor of the book, Dalpat Chauhan, clarified – to my relief – that many of the words that I could not identify originated from a region of Gujarat my parents were not from. Translation has hence been a struggle, as has the deciphering of proverbs that add an additional layer of meaning to the text. The parts of the stories set in rural landscapes use proverbs to convey a shared feeling. They remind the characters that someone else has devised these folk sayings, having experienced a similar situation before, and that their predicament fits in with the cycle of history. Using figurative language thus places them within a socio-historical framework where they can explain their own problems or emotions using traditional images and rhymes, which in itself alleviates the sense of alienation that the migrant protagonists feel. Moreover, in stories like Dashrath Parmar's "Jāt", the language of the protagonist changes as he enters the social space of the village and starts to use proverbs to convince his elders as well as to fit in better into the cultural norms of the village.

The collection's title, *Vanboti Vartao* can have multiple meanings. "Bot", in some dialects of Gujarati and in Marathi, means "finger" (and by extension – in this context – could mean "touch"), and "van" means "without". By combining these terms, "vanboti" could be interpreted as "untouched." One titular meaning could thus be that this is a set of "untouched stories" about characters that are often treated as "untouchable." The play on

words also indicates the uncorrupted nature of the stories – they are presented to the reader untainted and fresh. Rita Kothari, in her article on Gujarati Dalit short stories, describes this collection as one that "offers no attempts at creating definitions and frameworks, and exhibits confidence, range and energy hitherto unnoticed" (4308). The volume's editor Dalpat Chauhan reiterates this in the Gujarati introduction, clarifying that these stories have been picked from a Dalit literary journal named "Samāj Mitra" ("Friend of Society") without any attempt at thematic unity. Colleen Lye, discussing recent Asian American critical anthologies, notes that the anthological format is a "fitting vehicle" for expression the Asian American's "current default additive status", which is to say it only exists as the "sum of various ethnic parts" (94). A comparative analogy may be made to anthologies of Gujarati short fiction. Many are derivatives of stories published in journals, and rarely do we find an entire collection of Gujarati short stories by any one author. The status of Gujarati Dalit fiction is similarly appended to the field of vernacular Indian literature, which is itself dwarfed by Anglophone Indian literature.

Chauhan does, however, use the definition of Dalit literature offered by Dr. Mohan Parmar, that a good Dalit work of art should have a "Dalit parivēsh", a Dalit context. Further, it should elaborate on Dalit problems and feature caste issues and exploitation. By this standard, Chauhan claims that the Dalit stories will not disappoint. I would like to add one more measure by which these stories should be judged: the use of literary devices and dialogue. The stories are steeped in dialect and often use flashbacks and dream imagery; a closer look at these will yield a richer analysis of Dalit literature beyond its purpose of spreading awareness of Dalit issues.

While the stories are very different in their plots, they are bound together in that they

involve a move from rural spaces to the cityscape in search of better opportunities (whether they find these or not). "Jāt" deals with the homecoming of a Dalit urban migrant whose belief in the solidarity of lower castes enables him to conceive putting up a united front for the upper caste zamindārs, even though he has been branded as an outsider by his own caste members. "Safe Distance", on the other hand, features a protagonist who has made the decision to move to the city, faced a decade of dread and insecurity, and who is sorely disappointed at the reappearance of caste prejudice just as he relaxes his guard. The other two stories, "Bāp nu Bārmū" and "Swapna Samudra" contrast similarly as the first is an onerous commentary on the life of an urban Dalit migrant who finds himself swamped in expensive rituals and traditions which continue to haunt the Dalit communities. The latter work depicts a strong opposition to this traditionalism when the protagonist becomes a Dalit social activist, liberated after having moved to the city.

An interesting commonality between this story and the others discussed in this chapter is that caste differences show themselves on specific occasions – mostly on festivals, and religious ceremonies. These events mark time differently from the time of everyday life, time that appears to be more "secular", or a time that at least doesn't foreground caste differences in urban communities to where Dalits have migrated. The recurring problems faced by Kanubhai (the protagonist of "Jāt") with the upper-caste darbārs, surface first during the festival of Dussehra and at the time his mother's bādhā must be fulfilled. The characters from "Safe Distance" and "Bāp Nu Bārmū" face explicit caste-related pressures on the occasion of a daughter and sister's weddings respectively. Kanubhai's memory marks the major developments of his childhood through religious dates when the village would hold fairs that the lower castes were left out of. The advent of

a religious occasion or a festival serves to push the implicit caste divide into the open since many of the unspoken boundaries loom into view at these times. In "Jāt", this takes the form of dominance over a temple that has been constructed by and for the lower castes. Moreover, the temple itself was created out of frustration at being excluded from festivities on every religious occasion.

With regard to "Jāt" and "Safe Distance", it would be useful to keep a few caveats in mind before examining this short fiction. First, so far in this dissertation, the term "Indian diaspora" has been used for displaced populations outside of India's current geographical borders. This chapter branches out a different type of displacement, and looks at the urban Indian migrant. It looks at the migration trend of different castes within the Dalit category as they move from villages to cities. These people are internally displaced, often driven from their homes by rampant caste discrimination. Many Dalits move in order to pursue better jobs and education. Moreover, this idea of the urban migrant intersects with the original connotation of the term diaspora, linking it to exile. Nico Israel defines the older idea of "exile" with its multiple connotations, offering "leaping out" as a possible meaning owing to its Latin roots, making it into what Israel calls "a matter of will" (1). The urban migrant, while he/she leaves for a variety of reasons, also exerts an agency in making a decision to seek out better resources and an improved standard of living, but s/he is also exiling himself/ herself from the support of their Dalit castes.

The selected Dalit authors from *Vanboti Vartao* tend to choose mental imagery and interior monologue over racy plotlines. In marked contrast to Ghosh's work, nothing much happens in most of the stories – wedding feasts and associated events are planned, a flag is to be hoisted at the village temple, a young boy moves from the village to the city. Perhaps

these authors are looking for the changing colors of the mind in everyday events, to examine how little issues become, in perspective, gigantic to one who constantly fears the worst. They do this through a fine display of literary form, using various dialects of Gujarati to root their protagonists in distinctly separate regions.

Another issue that arose out of the conversation with editor Dalpat Chauhan was my choice of texts. Mr. Chauhan was keen on my picking another set of stories because he felt they were "more representative" of Gujarati Dalit fiction, and hence more worthy of analysis. Not counting problems in accessing Gujarati Dalit fiction, I was keen to pick these stories because they featured interesting reactions to urban migrations within India. However, it brought up the issue of what a "good" text to study was. Why would these be rated as less worthy of critical review? While admitting that standards of fiction often tend to be subjective, Mr. Chauhan perhaps felt these stories lacked the complexity that would represent "true" literature. However, as Suresh Canagarajah points out in *Translingual Practices*, critics tend to prefer artifacts, writing with significant complexity and "literary" language to analyze. These texts, however, attracted me because they came directly from Dalit contributors and were published in the Dalit literary journal "Samāj Mitra" ("Friend of Society") before being compiled into a book. Moreover, their "ungrammatical" or dialect Gujarati complicates the idea of standardized Gujarati as spoken by state officials. More so, dialects are often caste and class markers, as conversations in the stories show, hence they cannot be ignored. If the plots are neither long-winded nor profound, they do illustrate moments of realization on the part of Dalit migrants. I picked them for these moments of insight into whether or not they have acquired socio-cultural agency as a function of economic agency. Some of these texts put forth protagonists who do, and some who hoped to but fail to gain one type of agency while gaining another.

### *"Jāt" ("Caste") and Memory*

One can establish no clear conclusions as to whether the protagonists definitively improve their standing in community or exhibit any agency over their own fate in the four texts, owing to the ambiguous endings of the stories. Yet, it is possible to analyze the way these texts choose to represent their characters – linguistically and socio-culturally. For instance, the protagonist of Dashrath Parmar's short story "Jāt" ("Caste") is Kanubhai, an urban migrant who hasn't returned home in fifteen years. This work of fiction is particularly rich for analysis since it marks out the distorted memory of the migrant; Parmar explores the contradictory nature of the homebound narrator's memories. On the one hand, these memories mark out the village as a space of innocence relatively untouched by caste politics among the lower castes (and by a staunch belief in their united stance). On the other hand, he remembers his village as a site of a deadly clash between the upper and lower castes over the festival of Dussehra. Within this duality lies the grey area that constitutes the caste consciousness of the migrant subaltern. The story starts out with Kanubhai's mother calling him back to their village, so she can fulfill her *bādhā* - her religious vow that she took at his birth, in order to repay the God Rama for giving her a son. This vow will culminate when she personally ties a flag atop the Rama temple in their village, which has been specially constructed by the chamār caste and the protagonist's own unnamed (lower) caste,[35] since they would not be allowed access to the village temples built by the upper castes. The savarna (upper caste) darbārs, have, over time, appropriated this temple, insist on performing a ceremony at the temple on the same day –

[35] The chamār caste are traditionally tanners. They skin dead animals and tan their hides, while also performing other scavenger duties. For this profession, they are vilified as being unhygienic, while simultaneously being denied resources to improve their safety or quality of life.

*before* Kanubhai's mother - thus symbolically dominating the temple constructed by the lower castes for their own religious freedom. At his mother's insistence, Kanubhai reluctantly accompanies a village elder, Ramankaka, to the chamār vās (the tanner community) in order to persuade them to unite and fight against the darbārs. He bears in mind the memory of a night from many years ago when they had fought together in a similar religious strife against the darbārs. The chamārs, initially reluctant, finally relent and help them, strengthening once more his faith in the solidarity of the lower castes.

Perhaps sketching out such a protagonist - a character who is a part of his village cohort, an army of urban migrants who have left their community and never turned back – puts Parmar in the position to start the story off with the question of agency. Kanubhai's economic agency plays a big role in his successful migration to the city, where the divide between the savarna or upper castes and the lower castes is not as explicit as in the village (although, as we will see in V.S. Parmar's "Bāp nū Bārmū", caste discrimination does not end with the boundaries of the village). He has a wife and child in the city who are reluctant to join him in a visit to his village and thus remain veiled from the reader. From the outset, he appears to be a disinterested party who has returned for a personal journey. And yet this complete sequestration of his past and present life begins to fall apart the moment he disembarks from the bus in Kampa. The coolness of a disinterested son that is implied by his mother's initial imploring letter disintegrates as the reader begins to follow the landscape through his eyes:

Otra-chītaranā tāp sāv salekdā jevā thai gayelā vagdāu jhād nīche modhe

sūnmūn ubhā hatā. Bhādarvānī dhīme-dhīme olvāti jati sānjhmā bājrīnā chūtachavāyā khetar, bharjawānī mā rāndeli strīni māfak, kashāk ādhārni āshāmā talvaltā hatā. Bay ashādh nē shrāvan sāv korādhākor gayā. Nē have bhādarvoy bhānkhodiyabhēr tanava māndyo hato, pan…[…] Dōdh dayka pachi pehli vār ahin pug mēlū chū nē badhūy jāloni jēm valgi padē che. (16).

The shredded trees that had become like thin sticks on the periphery of the village were standing with their faces low, subdued. In the slowly extinguishing October evening, the fields of pearl millet, like a woman prostituted at the height of her youth, were writhing in hope of some support. Three seasons had gone by dry as dust. And now this October was also being dragged forth on its knees. I'm stepping here for the first time in a decade and a half, and yet everything is clinging to me like cobwebs.

This passage, stemming from a section of free indirect discourse at the start of the narrative introduces Kanubhai's thoughts to the reader, and foreshadows an interesting dichotomy within him. While the story is primarily narrated in first person by Kanubhai, there are some portions of the text where we freely access his thoughts in free indirect discourse. Through Kanubhai's narration, we have an outsider's perspective on the caste conflict in Kampa. And yet, while he claims a distance from the conflicted village community where he grew up, this simile equating gently undulating fields to a prostitute waiting for hope reveals a strange cynicism in interpreting a pastoral landscape. The imagery of gently undulating fields is often used in popular Indian literature and cinema as

a symbol of a lost romantic era of innocence and peace that eludes the exhausted urban city resident. Within this context this reading of the landscape foreshadows the renewal of a connection that has made the protagonist bitter enough to cut through his fifteen-year-long attempt to dissociate himself from his past. The withered trees and scorching heat, a realistic portrayal of many Indian villages, also become shadowy heralds of the past Kanubhai is stepping into.

Kanubhai's language also marks him out as an outsider, an urban migrant who no longer uses the dialect of his community but has assimilated to an unmarked city accent (a similar exclusion takes place with Biju in *Inheritance of Loss,* when his marked Indian accent and his Indian "smell" are used to ostracize him from both American and Indian upper classes). Kanubhai's free indirect discourse as well as his narration are in urban, unmarked and unaccented Gujarati. Laura Brueck marks the importance of this alienation of the urban Dalit in her analysis of Ajay Navaria's short stories: "Navaria's questioning of the efficacy of modern life for urban, middle class Dalits – in other words, whether modernity has delivered its promise of freedom from oppressive caste hierarchies – is an important innovation in Dalit literary discourse" (129). Like Navaria, Parmar here also uses certain techniques to communicate alienation from his community and himself: flashbacks, marked dialects and the use of proverbs, and a vivid setting for the past. Kanubhai's unaccented Gujarati stands out in stark contrast to the dialect of Gujarati spoken by his mother, Ramankaka and Amthobha, a tanner, [36] which elides pronouns, changes the pronunciations of specific words, and has a significantly different vocabulary.

[36] Incidentally, Amthobha belongs to the same tanner caste as Kalua from *Sea of Poppies*, and yet their portrayals differ wildly. Contrasted with Kalua's shallow stereotype of an "untouchable", Amthobha's complex character struggles with mixed loyalties, a drinking problem, caste disputes and the need to maintain solidarity with other Dalit castes.

Much of Dalit Gujarati prose is written in this style, often to set the narrative in the village that forms the epicenter of the caste system. As Laura Brueck points out, "in the introduction to her translation of Joseph Macwan's autobiography, *The Stepchild* (*Aangaliyat)*, Rita Kothari suggests that in a move towards greater 'authenticity' in their texts, Gujarati Dalit writers have increasingly employed dialects" (81).

This move towards "authenticity" also employs another important mechanism to convey village dialects: the use of proverbs. Parmar's text is rich in proverbs each time any of Kanubhai's family or caste elders are given a voice. Their arguments are peppered with folk sayings and proverbs used to lend force to their perspective. While venting his anger and frustration at Amthobha's refusal to help them against the darbars, Ramankaka bitterly says "Tamē aju ā chamār jātan nathi ōlakhta, bhai! Dagō karter var na kara. Ghaida kai ēmnēm nahi ke jya ke bhāmbhini bhayaāi na tarakni hīyari na karvi!" (21) ("You don't yet understand this chamār caste, brother! They won't take a moment to betray you. We haven't just grown old that that we don't know not to make tanner friends or Muslim partners"). This idiom refers back to an old Indian association of old age and wisdom – Raman kaka is harking back to his age and experience, insisting that his experience of life brings with it sound wisdom and common sense – in this case, common sense that dictates against befriending certain castes and communities based on their historical relations. Laden with old – and, by modern standards, politically incorrect – idioms such as these, Ramankaka's language almost constantly invokes a larger linguistic and social community that perhaps prevent him from seeing the possibility of regenerating relationships between the chamār and their own caste. Kanubhai's language, by contrast, is a more functional and urban in style and has lost most of its figurative qualities (though it remains rich in

similes). Interestingly, by the end of the story, when he is attempting to convince Ramankaka to have faith in the chamār community because the lower castes need to believe in each other to end the hierarchy, he too starts to employ proverbs to enrich his argument. After having unsuccessfully visited the chamār vās for help, he still tries to convince Ramankaka to have faith in them, that they may yet change their minds and decide to help them. His language imitates that of both Amthobha and Ramankaka, using rich Gujarati metaphors and drawing on religious imagery to make the argument that Dalits need to stand with each other: "Antē toh gamme tēm toye jāt toh āpdi ēk aj nē, kākā! Ā toh karmōnā kārane bhhēd padyā hashe ētlūj. Bāki pēli kē'vatmā nathi kidhu kē Rāmapīrnē malyā ē badhā ēvā nē ēvā?" ("In the end, it may be so, but our caste is one and the same, uncle! It must be because of our deeds that these differences must've come up. Else haven't they said in that saying, that 'those who meet at the [temple of] Rāmapīr are always the same?'") (21). The saying that Kanubhai refers to is designed to highlight the comradeship and support of castes that meet at the temple of Rama. Even the way that the temple is referred to in the folk saying and in their own language – "Rāmapīr" - is specific to a particular set of communities, and hence the utterance itself would immediately indicate to another if they belonged to the same community.

Moreover, this struggle to remain unaffected by his past that he has left behind begins to fragment as he approaches the village and his similes turn from cynicism to paternalistic images. He compares the spire of the Rāmapīr temple – constructed especially by and for the use of various Dalit castes, and which symbolizes a revolutionary move towards religious rights – to the sullied turban of a father. The temple bells send chills down his spine and banish any idea of being disconnected from his past: "Rāmapirnā

mandirmā ghantno rankār ākhā deh mā – lohi nā kanēkanma fari vale che"
("The sound of the bell from Rāmapīr is permeating my whole body – traveling down every particle of my blood")(16). This paternalistic simile combined with the primal connection to the sound of the bell primes the reader to prepare for a renewed connection with his village, with the additional insight of having lived outside of the (explicit) manifestation of the caste hierarchy, in the anonymity in the city.

This renewed connection begins the moment when Parmar overlays Kanubhai's character with a migrant's memory. Frozen in time, he remembers only the solidarity on the night of Dussehra, many years ago, between the *chamārs* and Kanubhai's caste members. While the current situation is quite different – a high wall has been built between the community quarters owing to their differences – he cannot accept this change in their relationship, constantly thinking back to the night of their camaraderie. This incident was a rebellion on the night of Dussehra, when the Dalits were expected to build the celebratory chariot, but not partake in its perambulations before the temple ceremony on the anniversary of Rām killing Rāvan in Hindu mythology. Others enjoy the procession as they themselves hang back and watch. The particular year he remembers that the youth of their vās decided to stop this unfair practice. They refuse to chop the wood, and this leads to a caste conflict, resulting in the upper castes cutting off their food and water supply. Eventually, the darbārs end up in Kanubhai's vās with violent intent, but all of the chamār vās shows up to help them fight the darbārs. Specifically, Amthobha and Kanubhai's father thrash a few of the attackers. After this conflict, a buffalo dies in one of the upper caste homes. With none of the chamārs cooperating in removing the carcass, the darbārs come back to apologize and request their cooperation in disposing of the body.

Kanubhai's tone as he describes the incident is not self-congratulatory, but rather one of admiration. But the question to ask here is whether agency matters in this context: Kanubhai's economic agency has not made him a reformer, nor does his homecoming signify any revolutionary intent, and similarly in the past he has not been the one to encourage this relationship with the chamārs. The credit is given to a band of local youths who decide to put a stop to this prejudice, and Kanubhai's lovingly reminiscent tone describes the caste-clashes with great pride.

> Bēye vās māthi mota bhāg nā loko nokri-dhandhā mate sheher mā jai vaselā. Amārā vāsnā javāniyāonē lāgyu kē have pachīnī pēdhinā māthā par ā vēth nathi thokvi. Ēno chhēdo laavyēj chhutko! Ē vāt par bēye vās sehmat […] Pehli vār vās mā lākdu kapānu nahi […] Pan ē dādathi bēye vāsna anāj-pāni bandh! Modi rate darbāroē vās par dhekhāliyu karyu, badha pāndadani pēthē dhrūjē. Tyān toh ākhoy chamārvās amārā āngane (20).

> A majority of people from both areas had migrated to the cities for employment. The youth of our area felt that this problem shouldn't be imposed on the next generation. Let's have an end to it! On this, both communities agreed […] For the first time, no wood [for the ceremonial chariot] was cut in our area […] But from that day, all food and water for both communities were cut off! Late one night, the darbārs attacked our area, everyone shook like a leaf. There, suddenly, all of the *chamār* community landed up at our doorstep (20).

In spite of being separated by a decade and a half from this single night of strife, Kanubhai's narration of it takes on the tone of an epic narrative. He describes it in vivid language, using small technical details to take the reader back into the moment of revolt. His sentences decrease in length even as he builds the anticipation of an inter-caste clash: "Pehli vār lākdū kapanū nahi. Rath nikalyō nahi. Sanjhe gām bhēgu thayu. Darbāro to vadho-kapo ni vetaranma. Kanbioae varela " ("For the first time the wood was not cut. The chariot did not make the rounds. The village gathered in the evening. The darbars were violent in their anger. Even the kanbis were restricted"). Parmar uses exclamations to convey the adrenaline of the moment. Kanubhai describes in detail the great fear faced by his community, and their surprise and joy when the *chamār* community suddenly lands up at their doorstep to help them. He takes an epic tone to convey Kanubhai's continuing sense of wonder and awe as he details the weapons the chamārs have devised out of farming implements to fight the darbārs: "Tyān to ākho chamār vās amāra ānganē. Amthobha agēvān. Badhayena hath mā dhōr tānvāni adiyone chariyo. Māthe tasla undhā vali rumal vitelā" ("Suddenly, the whole village was at our doorstep. Amthobha at the forefront. In everyone's hands were sticks and sickles. On their heads, they's worn grass threshing mats and wrapped handkerchiefs around these" (20)).

His perspective of this attack, however, does not indicate agency on his part. The text gives us no clear indication that he was a participant in the rebellion (instead, one can read the hyperbolic re-reading of that night as an indicator not just of migrant memory, but also that of a child's) – it is possible that he was a minor at the time of the attack and hence remained as a witness rather than a participant. It is also quite likely that his memory has, over time, embellished the details of the event to turn a caste clash into a fight of epic

proportions. Living in the city, he has no contact with the realities of the caste system in his village. When he returns from the city, he mentions that "mane toh hatū kē jāt jāt vacchenō ā bhēd fakt shehermā-societymā ne kehevata buddhijīviyomā j fulyo-falyo hashē, pan ēni havā chhēk māra antariyāl gāmnēye lāgi hashe eni to kalpana suddha nhoti mane"("I thought these differences between (the lower) castes had thrived only in cities and so-called academics, but that these winds had touched my village in the interiors was something I had never even imagined")(21). That he feels that the lower castes still stood united in rural India shows an imagined nostalgia built on memories from before the time he migrated to the city (this is a common motif in literary texts involving some form of displacement; Biju too romanticizes India into green fields and innocent villages while he lives in the US. He forgets the very reason he had left – dire poverty, in his case – as does Kanubhai who has clearly left in search of better opportunity and freedom from discrimination. I discuss Biju's parallel diasporic memory in greater depth in chapter four). Further, it also demonstrates a lack of awareness of change in his community, suggesting that he has not participated in any activism and lost track of the current relationships among the Dalit sub-castes of his village.

And even though this is a weakness in his perception– that Kanubhai stands far away from the realities of the caste problems of his village – it is perhaps here that Parmar allows the most power to his protagonist. Kanubhai bypasses the alcoholism that plagues the chamār community, the wall that is a physical manifestation of the differences between Dalits in his village, and the fact that his own community that fought together that night now bears no faith in the members of the chamār vās. These traversals are possible only because he does not live in the everyday of the community. His intervention is – at first –

hesitant, tentative. He is accused by his village elders of meddling in matters that now concern him very little, seeing as he's migrated permanently to the city. He remains very aware of his intrusion on the delicate caste boundaries of his village, over time and after constant reminiscing about the Dussehra night his voice gains the power of persuasion. He becomes a confident member of his own caste who feels bold enough to appeal for solidarity in spite of just having witnessed conflict between the two castes.

In layering his protagonist with a depth that allows for both the optimism of a migrant and the cynicism of a Dalit who has grown up in the shadow of exploitative upper castes, Parmar perhaps accords him the ability to rethink the caste hierarchy and imagine a solidarity where currently none exists. Parmar's representation of agency lies not in material agency but in Kanubhai's ability to *imagine* his homeland in a particular way. Arjun Appadurai takes this thought further, pointing out that imagination (as contrasted with fantasy) can be agential in its power:

> The imagination, on the other hand, has a projective sense about it, the sense of being a prelude to some sort of expression, whether aesthetic or otherwise. Fantasy can dissipate (because its logic is so often autotelic), but the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action. (Appadurai 7)

The power of this migratory imagination is the strongest agency that Parmar accords his protagonist, which intensifies the only other example of caste solidarity that he remembers. As Appadurai notes, the power of the imagination can manifest itself in collective action because it is through imagined categories that we perceive spaces around

us: “it is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects” (7). The persuasiveness of this imagination does lead to action in “Jāt”. In a moment foreshadowed by Kanubhai’s memory of the night of Dussehra, the chamār community – acknowledging his personal memory as a collective one - shows up as he and his community members gear up to defend themselves against the darbārs, who are competing for access to the temple.

While the power of this imagination is immense, Parmar’s story ends before the moment of crisis, let alone its resolution. While the story demonstrates the ability of a diasporic imagination to rouse communities to unite, it lays no claims about the sustainability of such an invention. Kanubhai is neither a revolutionary nor a social worker; he has faith in the potential power of the lower castes when they are united, but the entire lead up to the moment of crisis is inherently ephemeral. Parmar does not indicate that the wall between the caste neighborhoods will be broken down, nor that Kanubhai’s caste members will now trust the chamārs, who they consider too addicted to alcohol for any real capability. Moreover, the narrator’s status as a temporary-migrant is preserved, which implies only a temporary return to the homeland. The story lays no claim to any wider issue. It does not work as a morality tale or a critique of savarna (non-Dalit) society, rather it chooses to focus on one incident in which a Dalit migrant finds himself transformed by his ability to imagine a solidarity and a resistance which his compatriots living in the everyday of the caste system cannot. The question is not of sustained activism but of a subaltern diaspora which can provide resistance to the caste system based on their imagination of a different world and create rhetoric persuasive enough to influence others

in his village and create a collective, no matter how temporary.

### *Double Speak in "Safe Distance"*

Unlike "Jāt", in Mavji Maheshwari's "Safe Distance,"[37] the caste tension created by the protagonist's daughter's wedding is almost invisible through the story. The story is set in the landscape of an unnamed city, with Ravjibhai debating the several pitfalls of moving to the city from outside of the safety of the "nāt" or caste members. It takes the form of a flashback as Ravjibhai stands on the brink of successfully completing his daughter's wedding ceremonies. His neighbor, Vyasbhai has proven to be a constant support the two decades he has lived here, and has been a monumental help at every step in the wedding. Shifting between third person narrative and free indirect discourse, Ravjibhai – elated and exhausted – thinks back to his initial fears about moving to the city and apprehension about living outside of their caste boundaries. This train of thought is dominated by a grateful account – past and present – of all that Vyasbhai has done for him and how his presence has alleviated his earlier ungrounded fears. This entire narrative chain is constantly interrupted by his son Vinod's voice – again, in the past as well as the present – who keeps signaling that Vyasbhai, while being a close friend, is still maintaining a caste-based "safe distance" from them. Indicating a time when Vyasbhai had come over to discuss an issue with the society sewer, Vinod swears he politely refused a glass of water the latter offered him. As the flashback ends, Ravjibhai, still standing in the middle of the chaos of his daughter's wedding, angrily concludes that Vinod is speaking without

[37] This is the original title of the story. English words are transliterated into Gujarati for the title, presumably to show a second-generation urban Dalit child comfortable with using English words to express a social gap that he still senses between his neighbours and his own family.

thinking. When he returns after having left the entire wedding feast to Vyasbhai's management, he finds that everything was managed perfectly. Yet on pressing a reluctant Vinod, Ravjibhai discovers that, though the feast was thrown successfully, Vyasbhai and his family did not partake in it. The last image of the story is Ravjibhai's shocked face, aghast, as his niggling doubts started by Vinod's hints are finally proven true.

"Safe Distance" shares a few major commonalities with "Jāt." Both stories propound the idea that members of Dalit castes need to stand in solidarity with one another. In both stories it is assumed that one is safest in the presence of one's own (and other) Dalit sub-castes. An important difference lies in their perspective: one features the homecoming of the lost son while the other tells the story of an urban migrant who is planning to settle outside of his caste space. Each experiences anxiety on both counts, coming home as well as leaving on self-imposed exile.

Maheshwari's story focuses on one of the specific moments of public life when caste divides manifest themselves most openly: the wedding feast. While his narrative spins back and forth in time to span Ravjibhai's decade-long life in the city, the central moment of conflict lies in the feast. His abrupt introduction of the moment itself indicates its significance and foreshadows the crisis to follow: "Thodā kalāk pachi Ārtine vāli didhā pachi kashoj bhār rehvāno na hato Ravjibhai par. Ām to have badhu pati gayu hatu. Jamanvār sivay" ("A few hours later, after having given away Aarti, no burden would be left on Ravjibhai. As such, everything was now over. Except the feast" (9)). Oddly enough, the first-person narrative elides the actual event, since Ravjibhai hands over the responsibility of the feast to Vyasbhai. The only observer of the manifestation of the "safe

distance" is Ravjibhai's son, Vinod. The third person narrative that takes over when Ravjibhai leaves the wedding venue to talk to his extended family gives no indication of anything odd in the feast. Vyasbhai manages it as though it is a feast in his own daughter's honor. We hear that "Badhā Vyāsbhai ne ahobhāv thi joi rahya hatā. Jonār nē thatu hatu ke Ravjibhai ketla nasībvāla che kē ēmnē Vyāsbhai jēvā pādoshi malyā chē." (Everyone was looking at Vyasbhai with [amazement]. The onlookers thought of how lucky Ravjibhai is that he has Vyasbhai for a neighbor" (14). The shock value thus compounds when Ravjibhai returns from a conversation with his son-in-law and his family and hears about the problem from a reluctant Vinod.

Vyasbhai adopts an interesting boundary between the various roles he plays with respect to Ravjibhai. Maintaining a secular attitude in the kinship structure he enters into as Ravjibhai's neighbor, he abides by every duty of a "good" neighbor, surpassing each expectation and laying to rest any anxiety Ravjibhai may have had. Though his perspective is rarely directly represented in the story, the few times we do hear him his tone is self-assured, friendly and intimate. When Ravjibhai is seen to worry about the absence of his own caste members during his daughter's wedding, Vyasbhai distinctly draws the line between neighborliness and caste relations. While most of his rhetoric is about the importance of neighbors in times of need, an underlying parallel argument fights for the importance of caste. A conservative Brahmin himself, Vyasbhai doesn't deny the importance of one's own caste members, but also points out that other structures of kinship may partly compensate. His repetition of the importance of one's own caste members and the use of a proverb to illustrate this point foreshadows his ability to adhere to caste structures while settling into a seemingly secular role which he must play in a big city:

Tamēy yār! Gavab māṇas cho. Varsothi bājuma raho cho ne amē kashūj nahi samajhta hoiye! Jokē tamāri vāt sāchi che. Māṇas nātē mare anē nātē tarē. Chhataēye beejanu kaam aava prasange j pade. Tāmāri natnā ā society mā koi nathi to shu tame ekle ghar rahi jasho em![38] Tamē dikri parnavsho anē amē tamnē parnatna gani ne door betha joi toh nahi rahiye nē. Hoon tamārā manni vāt samjhi saku chu. Nātila khare taane kām aave. Chhatā āpni ā be linena solesol gharmāthi koinoye prasang e aapna sauno prasang che. Tame chinta amara par melo. Badhu thai rehshe.

"You, man! You're a wonder. You've been living next to us for years, wouldn't we understand? You're right, though. A man dies amongst his caste members and survives (swims) with their help. Still, one needs others on just such occasions. Just because there's no one from your caste in this society, you'll be left alone is it? You'll marry off your daughter and we, ostracizing you for not being of our caste, are not going to just sit and watch right? I understand what's in your heart. One's caste members help when one is in need. And yet, of all the sixteen houses in these two rows, one's happy occasion belongs to everyone. Leave the worrying to us. Everything will work out" (14).

There are several important nuances in the language of this conversation. First, Vyasbhai's tone asserts an intimacy through a high density of rhetorical questions and

[38] "Society" here is being used as a reference to their living complex in the city. The common appellation for gated apartment complexes in India is "co-operative housing society", which is usually shortened to "society".

exclamations that appear to attempt to silence Ravjibhai's doubts but also silence his voice. Further, Vyasbhai treats Ravjibhai with the utmost politeness, constantly using the respectful version of the second-person pronoun "you"("tamē"). This is an address marked out especially to indicate respect owing to age or status, but one that might, conversely, create a gap and indicate a lack of intimacy. Second, while he insists on a secular affiliation with Ravjibhai, his speech stresses the importance of caste multiple times. For outsiders, he uses the term "other,"("bīja") indicating that while they may have a role to play in the absence of one's caste members, it is by the latter's help that they "float" or "die," using a proverb ("māṇas nātē mare anē nātē tare") which plays on the fact that the Gujarati words for "swim" (tarē) and "die" (marē) rhyme.

Vyasbhai's attitude, no doubt, is remarkably different from most other upper-caste literary figures who are delineated as villainous characters who explicitly exploit the various Dalit castes in the village/ city setting. While depicting open discrimination is a very realistic rendition of the problems faced by Dalits, Maheshwari is here sketching out a thin boundary between secular kinship and caste structures. Vyasbhai is an urbane, more secular character who is able to see beyond the boundaries of caste to see Ravjibhai as a panic-struck, displaced human being who needs community support, which Vyasbhai is very willing to offer. For Vyasbhai, the idea of a "society" and its support is paramount. This "societal" kinship, comprising the two rows of sixteen houses, is one that supersedes caste boundaries and overt caste discrimination.

And yet, his form of caste differentiation is the one that shocks Ravjibhai the most. If the latter had encountered, as he imagined, whispered murmurs or fingers pointed at him because of his outsider caste status, he would be prepared. But instead, Vyasbhai

discriminates in one of the most intricately crafted rituals in Hindu society: the wedding feast. The South-Asian wedding feast is a carefully choreographed event which can assign status and hierarchy based on who is served what type of food and when so. As Appadurai discusses at length in his essay, "Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia," foods are associated with certain qualities capable of affecting the consumer, with people considered as "aggregates" of "biomoral substance" (15). They are thus a part of a carefully coordinated sharing system that indicates which rank or kinship structure the eaters are associated with:

> In a cultural universe that sets considerable store by a host of heterogeneous persons, groups, forces and powers, food (whether "hot" or "cold", raw or cooked, sacred or sullied) always raises the possibility of homogenizing the actors linked by it, whether they are husband or wife, servant or master, worshipper or deity. (15)

Appadurai's proposal of the linkage between food, humans and "biomoral" qualities that can transmit themselves through the shared consumption of food gives us a few insights into the implications of rejecting food at a close friend's wedding. Vyasbhai's and his family's abstinence from the feast may mark a willingness to mingle at the level of neighborliness (which allows for the possibility of avoiding bodily contact/ food sharing) and a parallel reluctance to be "homogenized" into Ravjibhai's own caste. It is a refusal not just of generosity of the bride's family, but a rejection of a decade-long friendship that should have been cemented with food (coming from an association of "breaking bread" together – South Asians put great stock in food as an occasion for bonding). Thus food, meant typically to homogenize and cement relationships amongst those of the same caste,

becomes a divisive motif that marks the boundaries between neighborliness and caste. As Appadurai mentions, "the elaborate rules that surround food in virtually every South Asian context are, in my view, culturally organized efforts to compensate for this biophysical propensity of food to homogenize the human beings who transact through it" (15). Interestingly, Vyasbhai appears to adhere to the belief that this "biomoral/ biophysical" contamination would only take place through culinary (and potentially bodily) contact, not through any sharing of ideology or cultural association. He thus draws the boundaries between cultural and caste kinship, navigating it successfully to the point that his drawing back is undetectable to Ravjibhai.

It says much about his faith in the latter that Ravjibhai remains blind to this distance that is maintained by Vyasbhai through the decade of their association. So intent is he on believing the other to be an unconditional friend that we see the narrative, led mostly in first person, constantly attempt to silence Vinod's angry, rebellious voice. This voice is barely given any coherent space in the narrative. He speaks in sentence fragments, mostly quoting Vyasbhai or reporting his behavior in order to convince his father: "Pappa, amnē badhi khabar padē. Aje sanjhē kaka gatarna kāgaliya dēvā avēla tyare me pani aapēlu te na pidhu. Tēmne tarat kai didhēlu – na betā, me hamnāj pidhu che […] pan papa…" ("Father, we understand everything. When uncle came today evening to hand over the papers for the society gutter, he didn't drink the water I gave him. He said immediately – no son, I've just had some water […] but father…") (13). His incomplete insinuations foreshadow the moment of the feast, when Vyasbhai openly abstains from eating at Ravjibhai's daughter's wedding. Feeble and incomplete as Vinod's voice is at the start, it repeatedly raises a doubt in Ravjibhai's mind, to the point that even his interior monologue becomes an attempt to

remind himself of all the good things that Vyasbhai has done for them, and to constantly convince himself that he is a lucky man to have a friend like him. His recollection of Vyasbhai's good deeds takes on a defensive stance, always circling back to berate Vinod's suspicious nature and to dismiss his young yet obviously self-aware and astute voice.

Vinod's mixed tone of hesitation and the conviction of being wronged extends into adulthood, where he has now unraveled with more certainty the full nature of caste discrimination. When Ravjibhai asks him in amazement that he must not have asked or solicited Vyasbhai to sit at the feast, he replies "Pappa, javā do ne e vāt. Gusso āve chē. Tame to jano cho ke e brahman che. Badhi reete bhale, pan khavapeevama e loko…Vinode chidthi vākya adhūru muki didhū" ("Father, let it go. It makes me angry. You know he's a brahman. They'll socialize with us in other ways, but in the ways of food…Vinod angrily left the sentence incomplete) (15). His sentence fragments that continue into adulthood seem to indicate a contradictory mix of the eagerness to point this out to his father, yet the reluctance to admit the fact that Vyasbhai - for all his friendly outlook towards them - is essentially practicing one of the most basic rituals of untouchability with them.

Vinod's voice remains representative of a dissenting murmur of the younger Dalit generation. While Ravjibhai remains simultaneously in fear and denial about the possibility of caste distance even in his new urban home, Vinod is more attuned to hints of discrimination. Younger characters like Amrut in "Bāp Nū Bārmū" remain suspended in a paralysis similar to Ravjibhai regarding caste relations, while those like Raghu in "Swapna Samudra" take Vinod's dissent and turn it into activism.

## *Social Activism in "Bāp Nū Bārmū" ("Father's Twelfth Day of Mourning") and "Swapna Samudra" ("Sea of Dreams)*

While "Jāt" and "Safe Distance" view the city as an emancipatory space, "Bāp nū Bārmū" and "Swapna Samudra", are short stories that can be seen as completely contradictory imaginations of the cityscape. The city is often depicted in regional Dalit literature as a place of anonymity, of unlimited space where a Dalit immigrant can understand him/herself and come to terms with their identity. This works to the advantage of the protagonist of "Swapna Samudra," and the metropolis becomes a space where he gains awareness of his community and discovers both professional and personal agency. However, for Amrut – the protagonist of "Bāp nū Bārmū" – the anonymity of the city shrouds an insidious discrimination that leaves him chronically unemployed. While there are moments in the text where he seems primed to reach a more emancipatory mode of thinking, cutting through his personal problems to realize these issues plague his entire community, this self-realization proves to be a slippery slope. He always ends back crushed under personal financial and social obstacles. Unable to defy them, he attempts to merely move himself and his family past them. The author, V.S. Parmar, pushes Amrut almost to the point of reaching a thought that could set him on the path to activism – and consequently towards some hope of self-agency – but shows him slipping back repeatedly under social pressure.

"Bāp nū Bārmū" starts with the disastrous wedding ceremony of Amrut and Rajni. Amrut's father and his relatives are drunk, and despite his best attempts he cannot keep the wedding costs from escalating. After the ceremony, Amrut starts looking for a job again,

unsuccessfully. While both his wife and he are bright and have passed their master's degrees successfully, they suspect they are being discriminated against because they fall under the category of "B.C".[39] Eventually his mother joins a factory and his wife gets a low-paying part-time job in a laboratory, but Amrut remains unemployed. Moreover, this entire process is constantly interrupted by social obligations that drain their already-precarious financial resources. The first is their own wedding, then an aunt's funeral, and finally a wedding-related ritual called "māmerū" that involves a display of the jewels and sarees given to the bride to take to her in-laws' house. The story ends with Amrut at his brother-in-law's wedding, finding himself at another māmerū and reminiscing on how taxing social obligations are, when he hears someone behind mumble that he (Amrut) hasn't even completed rituals associated with his father's funeral.

Interestingly, social obligations are perceived differently at different points in the story. While Amrut and his wife are progressive on many counts, they seem to perceive these obligations as mandatory, and while his awareness rises to the point where he begins to perceive them as problematic, he still chooses to fulfill each obligation in spite of being on the brink of penury. While we do hear a commentary on the futility and wastefulness of certain customs, this statement comes from the narrative voice rather than Amrut himself: "Samājik vyavhārōnu āyōjan sāmanyamā  sāmanya mānas dhyān ma rākhi ne nischint karāyu hoye athvā poshata vyavhāro rakhāya hot toh loko honsh thi prasang ujwat" ("Had social customs been designed keeping the most ordinary of people in mind, or had they been more financially affordable, people would have celebrated them with enthusiasm")

[39] Backward Caste, a government-assigned bureaucratic term which lumps together

(205). This observation is insightful in that it highlights the plight of Dalits who are forced into customs similar to and as rigid as that of the savarnas. While they do not have the means to afford health care or employment, they tend to be forced into borrowing for weddings/ funerals under social pressure. More pertinently, the māmerū is a ceremony of spectacle that displays jewelry and clothes given to the bride to take to her in-laws as a part of her financial support structure. While the term māmerū refers to the clothes and other accessories (typically provided by the *mama*, or the girl's maternal uncle), the custom of display that has arisen around it requires an elaborate setup which is clearly beyond the means of the lower castes. It has been given the status of an event by itself, a rite of consumerism that has evolved from a financial safety net provided by the uncle for the bride to a means of displaying a family's socio-economic status. Often, this display is a façade since it only involves more debt for the family who must keep up appearances. Dalits are thus stuck with the social rituals without the resources to fulfill them, and while the narrative voice comments on this, Amrut at no point doubts the necessity of these social obligations. He continues to perform and attend them, involved in them rather than critiquing them

And yet the stress of performing his sister's māmerū does increase his empathy for his community. While his role may not be agential by the end of the narrative, he certainly begins to see the effort the "BCs" ("backward castes") have to put in order to maintain this outer façade among their own. In the final few moments of the story, a tray of jewels is being passed among the admirers at another family māmerū that Amrut is attending. As Amrut accepts this tray to perform the customary admiration at the "family riches" that he knows have been acquired purely for the purposes of pomp and show, he feels anxious and

dizzy. He feels he might drop the jewels any moment. At this final moment of empathy in the story, he transcends his personal plight to identify with the hardships that other men and women must have had to make in order to pull this māmerū together – how many loans and how many pieces of personal jewelry pawned to raise money for the occasion, just like in his own case.

"Bāp nū Bārmū" is steeped in this style of onerous social commentary on Parmar's part, which is perhaps why the protagonist cannot reach any sense of freedom or agency through the entire story. The narrative voice explicitly expounds on social propaganda at many points in the text, and while Amrut is held up as a helpless victim of a strongly traditional society he cannot break away from, the agency and commentary is transferred instead to the narrative voice which preaches about the problems of Dalit society which seem to have imbibed the rigidity of the savarna instead of liberating themselves from the stranglehold of tradition that has created the caste hierarchy in the first place. The third-person omniscient narrative voice also impinges on the character descriptions, and they remain subject not only to the system they live in but also to the narrator's descriptions. It appears to paint them in the light of virtue, perhaps to enhance the evils of the system they live in, and how they do not deserve to be discriminated against. We hear that "Rajni toh amrutkumbh hati. Samarth nāri no umdā purāvō hati. Jīvan jīvvani kalā tenē hastagat kari hati" ("Rajni herself was a vessel of divine nectar. She was the most ideal of all womankind. She had taught herself the skill with which to live life") (201). This labored, gendered description of Rajni as a faultless, perfect woman who is born in a lower caste reveals two ideas: first, it demonstrates Parmar's agenda to convey that society is unfair to discriminate against a woman so perfect and well-educated, in spite of her having been

born a Dalit. The narrative seems to idealize her in an attempt to discover virtue in the Dalit community, to fight against the stereotype of Dalits as unattractive and outcastes. Where this becomes problematic is that this idealization shows a lack of discrimination between the male and female Dalit experience, lumping them together into a mass of general Dalit plight. The precarious situation seems to be held together by perfect Rajni and her goodness and attractiveness. We see no indication of how she is treated at the laboratory she works at, whether she faces sexual harassment that Dalit women - in a sexualized extension of caste violence - often do. We only see her cast in a self-sacrificing, glowing role, the glue that holds the family together.

Moreover, Rajni's character is also problematic in other ways. Carefully balancing progressive modernity[40] with traditional femininity, Parmar often dawdles on which approach her character will consider. While she insists she would not have married Amrut had he not been well-educated, she shares Amrut's social awareness or communal consciousness. In spite of appearing to be "modern," in the sense of being a working woman in the sciences, she does not dispute any of the rituals they must necessarily go through in spite of not being able to afford them. She actively enables the family's desperate attempts to fulfill these rituals by selling off her own gold jewelry given to her in her wedding. But this role of the "ideal" wife and daughter-in-law that Parmar saddles her with seems to bury her under a mound of responsibilities that she cannot escape. While she is aware of the injustices committed against the backward castes, she remains stuck trying

[40] Using this term in itself demonstrates the complexities Rajni has to deal with: Dilip Gaonkar, discussing the concept of modernity, observes that it is not a singular occurrence but that there are "multiple modernities" to be found "under the contingencies of history and politics" (4). The idea of modernity that Dalit men and women must contend with is very different from the idea of modernity that stares Biju in the face when he comes to the U.S.

to fulfill the traditional responsibilities that are most relevant in demonstrating a woman's virtues. It is in Rajni's character that Parmar's story reveals the weakest point of the narrative, in terms of political import – she is subsumed to societal norms of how the "ideal" woman should behave, leaving very little space for Dalit activism or the generation of community awareness. This would require some measure of aggression and would almost certainly conflict with the social responsibilities she must shoulder, and hence she remains suppressed under the double bind of being a Dalit woman – suppressed, ironically, by the narrative voice of the story as much as she is by the rest of society.

The narrative voice of "Swapna Samudra", by contrast, takes on the tone of an idealist. An activist named Kishanbhai rescues Raghu from penury and the responsibility of his widowed mother and extended family by convincing him to further educate himself and become an activist and lawyer rather than die under the drudgery and exploitation inflicted by the upper castes in the village. Idealism pervades the entire narrative – Kishanbhai, Raghu, the narrator, everyone is full of hope for the Dalit community. This hope comes in the form of education and activism, both of which can be achieved by a shift from the village to the cityscape. The city, while depicted in its contradictory forms of poverty and luxury, becomes the space where the characters' idealism gets equipped with material resources. It gives them the building blocks to access a social agency – the best kind, in the context of the story – and allows them to reach a potential that they would not have discovered otherwise.

The cityscape painted in "Swapna Samudra" (which literally translates into "Sea of Dreams") is much more supportive than the brutal landscape of "Bāp nū Bārmū", the latter

continuing to be mired in social customs that continue to plague urban migrants. This might be in part because the plot thrusts Raghu into the midst of social activism right from the start – we see no other aspect of the city except the bits that must be "improved"; the entire city, in other words, is a continuing project to be worked upon, one that is in need of rehabilitation from which Raghu and Kishanbhai derive their purpose and agency. They perceive those on the edges of the city – prostitutes, the poor, the uneducated, slum dwellers – as extensions of the original Dalit community they started out to help. It is a skewed perspective, in part because of Raghu's social standing: he is an unattached man, not yet under the pressure of parenthood, and has been "rescued" from his responsibilities by Kishanbhai and his mother. That he moves physically from the village to the city results in his being unshackled from his responsibilities temporarily, while he pursues education and immerses himself in the world of activism. The city, in that it is a disparate space with opportunities for higher education, becomes an emancipatory space for Raghu. Unlike Amrut, he is not searching for better economic opportunities (a search that may have disappointed him nevertheless, and robbed him of agency). Moreover, he has a fierce Dalit mentor who starts him off in the direction of activism combined with law.

Raghu feels empowered from the beginning of the story because he has a male role model who hails from his community and has undergone a similar combination of legal education and activism to achieve good social standing in the city. This constant identification with Kishanbhai is not unidirectional: the two are constantly twinned together in each other's perception. This twinning of characters occurs repeatedly throughout the narrative until Raghu becomes a close manifestation of Kishan.

While rescuing a desperate Raghu from the throes of penury, he suddenly sees himself in the former's place:

> Ēmnē thayu ke Raghu Raghu nathi ā kshan ē Kishan aj che – hūn khud chū ahiyān valopāt mā, a dishāvihīnta ma, ā niradhārta ma, ane ā aniyarā sahastra prashnō na pahādo maa…dhīre dhīre emnē anubhavyu ke Raghu ma Kishan, Kishan ma Raghu, ane Raghu-Kishanma ā ākhō mohallo che. Ākho aa upēkshit, dukh ma sabadto mānavsamudāy che (214).
>
> He thought that Raghu isn't Raghu in this moment, he's Kishan himself – it is me stuck in this confusion, in this directionlessness, this helplessness, stuck inside this mountain of pointless questions…Slowly he felt that Raghu was melting into Kishan, Kishan into Raghu, and in this Raghu-Kishan the entire neighborhood is contained. This entire neglected humanity sobbing in grief is contained here (214).

Clearly the identification between the characters extends to the Dalit community as well. Raghu lies at the bottom of the spectrum of social progress and Kishan, in the clearly polarized ideals of the story, is at the top. Kishan senses this distance between them that he himself has bridged, and knows that this encapsulates the entire neighborhood and the exploited castes and the slightly dramatic "sobbing humanity" that is mentioned. The narrator clearly has a social agenda in mind, which interrupts the flow of the story and character development to use hyperbolized epithets for aggrieved Dalits.

The power of rhetoric plays a heavy hand in “Swapna Samudra”. The names Raghu and Kishan spring from the parallel mythologies of Ramayana and Mahabharat, and are generally closely associated with avatars of the meta-god Vishnu. Kishan, specifically, is another name for the God Krishna. The Mahabharat features an extended philosophical speech by the God Krishna to his disciple and friend, Arjun, in order to free him from the dilemma of whether or not to act in battle. This speech and its multitude of ethical, spiritual and philosophical lessons comprise the *Gita,* one of Hinduism’s primary religious texts. Kishanbhai’s narrative is framed similar to that of his doppelganger’s – it is idealistic and persuasive, and additionally, on account of his suffering owing to caste discrimination, aggressively confident. The Krishna-Arjun relationship of teacher and disciple is replicated here – Raghu thinks of Kishanbhai as his savior, mentor and teacher. He also associates Kishanbhai and his rhetoric with light, a traditional association with the God Krishna. From Raghu’s perspective, Kishanbhai’s words hold extraordinary power. The narrative constantly uses metaphors of light and weightlessness when describing his rhetoric. Raghu feels as though these words “enī j chhāti na petālmāthi prakatta hoye”, “as though they were lifting up from the innards of his own chest” (213). This is contrasted with the image of caste prejudice crushing down on the impoverished Dalit community. In comparison, Kishanbhai’s rhetoric is seen as dazzling and weightless, invoking hope for an entire collective. In this, Kishanbhai is closer to Deeti than other members of his own caste like Kanubhai – he has qualities of leadership and can build a collective that fights for its own rights. Perhaps as a consequence of being a Dalit lawyer, Kishanbhai spends much time patiently convincing Raghu to move, spreads the revolutionary message to the Dalit community and advocates

higher formal education as a means to counter the ills of the caste system.

His voice seems to invoke in Raghu what Freud describes in *Civilization and its Discontents* as an "oceanic" feeling – a sensation of "eternity", "limitlessness" that is "unbounded" (11). This is very deeply implied in the title of the story as well, that invokes the image of an overflowing, boundless sea of dreams that lie in wait of realization. The original context of this Freudian description was religious sentiments – what feelings religion evoked amongst believers. This applies very closely to Raghu's own sensations at Kishanbhai's rhetoric – a belief and faith so strong it resembles religious feelings. Raghu thus follows Kishan in his career path. Kishan discovers him as an old self wasting away and reclaims him as his new self, allowing him the same social agency that he has provided for himself. In an elaborate dream sequence where he imagines the entire Dalit community in the form of a wasteland covered with predatory birds and a cragged mountain, he hears the voice of Kishanbhai (who potentially embodies his own awakening conscience) who then turns into Raghu himself as he appears in person.

Kishanbhai's rhetoric is very explicitly the enabling factor for Raghu to gain control over his circumstances, and its power is expressed through an extended metaphor of light. At the start of the narrative, Raghu recalls his conversation with Kishanbhai, thus starting off the flashback that comprises the rest of the story. Raghu, standing in the balcony of a small colony in the city calls the sun an "ujās tapu" or island of light (213). Immediately thereafter we enter a passage of free indirect discourse where he recounts his first meeting with Kishanbhai. This indirect association of Kishanbhai with light encompasses any hope of agency that Raghu receives. Kishanbhai's and his own mother's words fill his heart with light, so that the darkness and despair of Dalit life is dispelled: "Shabdō kai kai tej pātharta

eni charēbāju phelāi gayā hatā […] Raghu nā hridayma pan mā ni vāni thi ajwālu ajwālu thayi gayu" (214-15). ([Kishanbhai's] words, spreading some light, dispersed around him […] Raghu's heart filled with light at his mother's words). The author, Silas Pateliya, clearly takes pains to mark out the discrepancy between Dalit life and life as an empowered activist by using contrasting spatial and visual metaphors: darkness versus light, claustrophobia verses weightlessness and space. The earlier half of the text dealing with Raghu's misery is regularly punctuated with the word "rūndhaman", meaning suffocation, while it is later replaced by images of weightlessness and light. The use of spatial and visual imagery in the text appears to break down the individual miseries of Dalit life, independent problems that build up to an emotional breakdown. By contrast, moving to the city and accessing good education invokes the imagery of vastness and weightlessness, a figurative parallel of feeling unshackled from the economic and social debt of being a Dalit.

Raghu's move to the city and his consequent empowerment is more nuanced than the title "Sea of Dreams" would suggest. The city and the village in this story remained twinned images, both with different facets that can be inviting or alienating and depressing. His first images of the city are those of the slums: overworked women wasting away young in their lives, shanties with corrugated roof tops, kites circling overhead, long, noisy roads. From here the flashback continues seamlessly into scenes from his village. While the reader here would expect the nostalgic pastoral of lost innocence in the village, Pateliya overturns the stereotype shortly into the description. We move from the small streets and earthen walls made of fragrant mud to the filth and poverty of the village. Houses are abandoned because everyone has migrated to the cities, the elderly and sick are

in despair because of a lack of healthcare. The sudden shift from what appears to be a nostalgic recollection of his village to a realistic reminder of the reason he left marks a unique power of dual perception in the Dalit protagonist. All the stories in this chapter are characterized by this acknowledgement of duality, of the different and complex realities of the city and the village. The protagonist of "Jāt" romanticizes his village into having caste solidarity among the Dalit castes, but finds that the village is a complex web of relationships that he cannot entirely understand. The protagonist of "Safe Distance" sees the city as a space that will protect him but that betrays him at his most vulnerable. Perhaps it is the social position of the Dalit that makes him or her perceptive and suspicious enough to realize that no space can be defined in a binary classification of "good" or "bad". The city merely affords more resources and anonymity (in most cases) and hence is a preferable space in which to live.

## Conclusion: Narrative Bridges

A close analysis of these stories reveals a range of elaborate narrative techniques – dream imagery, flashbacks, visual and spatial metaphors, interior monologues – in order to convey to the reader life from the perspective of urban Dalit migrants. The stories are sophisticated in the ways in which they judge the agency of their protagonists – they might be financially secure, as in Kanubhai and Vyasbhai, yet the memories of previous exploitation or the expectation of further exploitation continues to haunt them. The one character for whom the city represents an unambiguously emancipatory space is Raghu in "Swapna Samudra." To attempt to guess if the author meant for the narrative to serve as an inspiration to the Dalit community would be a fallacy. Yet – judging solely by the

narrative – it is distinctly inspirational rather than descriptive or revelatory of exploitation, as the others are. Raghu has a guide, a mentor who shows him the ropes of the city, and who is a Dalit activist himself. Unlike Amrut, Raghu learns the advantages of collective action, even in the anonymity of the city. Individual agency or revolutionary thought does not seem enough, from this collection, to generate change or collective agency. The stories expand well into Dr. Parmar's definition of Dalit literature as one that details the various problems that plague the community, but "Safe Distance" and "Bāp nū Bārmū" center primarily around the moments of crisis and revelation that force their protagonists to realize that in spite of their best efforts, neither other Dalits nor the savarna castes have yet fully accepted them.

My attempt at reading these texts is to translate a small cross-section of the diverse texts produced by Gujarati Dalit writers, and to put them on the same platform of conversation as Anglophone texts written by cosmopolitan writers like Amitav Ghosh and Kiran Desai. Reading these texts together allows for a multi-faceted analysis of fictionalized subalternity, and to see how Dalit authors themselves depict dissonance when only one type of agency does not enable their protagonists. Desai's protagonist in *The Inheritance of Loss* – Biju - for example, also seeks change and agency via migration, but a new city does not necessarily grant him one. The anonymity of a new city that offers Dalits the chance to access resources becomes alienating for Biju, who is unable to change his prospects despite his best efforts at migrating to America. The same landscape that seems to be a redemptive setting in some of the Dalit texts becomes a desolate and bleak backdrop to his life as an illegal alien in the United States.

## Chapter 3. Fractured Subalternities and the Performance of Labur:

## Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* explores the fault lines along which South Asian diasporas tend to fragment. Going beyond the often-examined division of nationality, it traces splintering across the boundaries of class, gender, ethnicity and religion. Each of these fault lines forms their own communities, and members that belong to more than one category sometimes lack the consciousness that they have compatriots undergoing a similar experience, what William Safran calls an "ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity" (84). Between these fault lines lies the protagonist of Desai's novel, Biju. He attempts to empower himself through illegal immigration to the United States, and his trajectory for a place within the American-Indian diasporic community. His journey is as unpredictable as that of characters from other texts, like Kanubhai, Neel, Raghu and Deeti. Like the other authors, Desai colors the correlation between migration and agency in shades of grey, with some characters succeeding and others rearranging their expectations.

In order to tackle Biju's illegal migration to another country, an understanding of some of the attributes of members of diasporas can be gained from Safran's essay "Diasporas in Modern Societies," in which he points out their relationship with their home nation as well as to other diasporic members around them:

> (Members of the diaspora) believe that they are not — and perhaps cannot be — fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it [...] 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or

> another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (83-84)

The very conceptualization of alienation from the homeland is fickle in *Inheritance of Loss*. Much of the homeland is imagined, as in Biju's case, whose diasporic memory transforms the broken, poor India he hails from into a nostalgic, romanticized, welcoming land full of people who look like him. Judge Jemubhai Patel, at whose home Biju's father works as a cook, studied in London before he returned to India. He belongs by race to India, but looks to Britain as his personal homeland. He remains stuck in India while he longs to be accepted among the British white upper class, clearly having internalized colonial prejudice and using it against people of his own race. Most of the other characters in Desai's novel also straddle multiple social identities and seem unable to balance them. The sisters Noni and Lola distance themselves from lower classes of Indians, attempting to distinguish themselves from the lower classes with their polished English and preference for international cuisine. When the Gorkha revolution erupts, they pay the price for this class difference when they are reminded they are no better than other Indians. The elite Indians standing in the queue for an American visa also deny their Indian identity in favor of their class, hoping to become elite diaspora rather than to continue being locals.

### ***At the Juncture of Subaltern and Diaspora***

The character of Biju, who belongs to one of the poorest demographics in his poor village, belongs to many categories: that of a subaltern, a member of the Indian diaspora, a man within an exclusively all-male work environment in the United States. This masculine

environment is a twentieth-century reflection of the almost exclusively male environment of Fanqui Town. I look at the novel using Biju's character as a lens because he is a unique representative of the intersection between subaltern and diaspora identities originating in contemporary India. This chapter argues that owing to a lack of community consciousness, Biju finds it difficult to empower himself in his host country. He thus floats awkwardly in transnational and theoretical space, falling both between the cracks in critical theory and between nations and their governments. His relationship with his labour is alienated, and he remains at the bottom of consumerist hierarchies that isolate him even from other classes of the same nationality as his. I use Ranajit Guha's work to frame Biju as a subaltern, and Aihwa Ong's work on citizenship and "unified moralism" to look at Biju's trajectory through America. James Clifford's theory of "roots" and "routes" also proves very useful as a metaphor to analyze Biju's long and drawn out attempt to leave behind his roots for international routes, moving from Kalimpong to New York's underbelly.

Desai's novel explores a set of themes constellated around South Asian postcolonialism. Set in 1986 during the movement for Gorkhaland,[41] it explores postcolonial anxiety through the mind of the Europeanized judge Jethalal Patel and his granddaughter Sai who live in Kalimpong (a town that lies close to the border of India and Nepal). Parallel to this, we see the discomfort and feeling of injured merit of the Nepali diasporas in India through Sai's tutor Gyan, who gets subsequently embroiled in the Gorkhaland movement. Through the Bengali sisters Noni and Lola, Desai focuses on the reversal of class differences that segregated the Hindu and Nepali

[41] Gorkhaland is a state proposed by Gorkhas, a majority ethnicity in the northern region of West Bengal, India. Living in the foothils of the Dooars plains and the hills of Darjeeling, this community wants to be allotted a space of their own where they are not seen as an aberration (typically because mainstream India has little or no contact with these communities) and can preserve their culture and language. Their struggle continues even today.

communities in the North-East post-Partition. And finally, it traces the plight of illegal Indian immigrants through the journey of Biju, the son of the judge's cook, through the sculleries of ethnic restaurants in New York.

The novel's conceptualization of race is inextricably woven in with nationality, and is brought to the fore by the consciousness of racial difference amongst the characters. By juxtaposing the GNLF movement with the plot of the novel, Desai's portrayal of unrest among Nepali Gorkhas in India becomes a constant backdrop against which personal stories unravel. Gorkhas such as Gyaan who reside in India feel shortchanged on account of their racial difference. A similar race consciousness is evoked when Biju moves to the United States and is exposed to South Asians from Pakistan and Bangladesh. He becomes friends with a Tanzanian Muslim colleague, Saeed Saeed, who eventually transforms into a role model for Biju. Having been taught to hate South Asian Muslims, Biju is baffled when he must form racial and class solidarity with those he hates on the basis of religion. His broken attempts to scramble the categories he has grown up with demonstrate a profound confusion of race and religion: "Saeed was kind and he was not Paki. Therefore he was OK?...Therefore he liked Muslims and hated only Pakis?...Therefore he hated all black people but liked Saeed?" (83-84).

Biju is a member of one of the lower rungs of the subaltern classes who eventually gains the courage and hindsight to review the validity of his initial decision to migrate. The son of a desperately impoverished cook, he migrates with great difficulty from Kalimpong to New York as an illegal immigrant. Moving from one restaurant scullery to another, he finds himself questioning the reasons he chose to displace his entire life to a faraway continent. We find finally that the reasons: money, comfort, resources, appliances and clean streets, the American Dream –

everything which his life in small-town 1980s India lacked – fall short of his expectations. These fade into meaninglessness as he realizes he has reached an existential crisis. Suspended in isolation, separated from family, friends, cultural practices and members of his own race, he realizes his life has reached a dull plateau which is stunting his ability to perceive the world meaningfully. This realization is finally crystallized by his worry about his father whom he is unable to contact because of the eruption of the Gorkha Revolution in Kalimpong and its neighboring regions. Realizing that he is adrift, Biju decides that the more he lives in America, the more static his life will become:

> Biju walked back to the Gandhi Café, thinking he was emptying out. Year by year, his life wasn't amounting to anything at all; in a space that should have included family, friends, he was the only one displacing the air. And yet, another part of him had expanded: his self-consciousness, his self-pity—oh the tediousness of it. Clumsy in America, a giant-sized midget, a bigfat-sized helping of small. . . . Shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance, to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his own destiny and perhaps be subtracted from its determination altogether? He might even experience that greatest luxury of not noticing himself at all. (275)

Ironically, it is in recognizing this plateau that his character grows more complex. India's allure suddenly deepens, especially as his diasporic memory is glossing over the dire poverty that formed the reason for his migration. As Amitav Ghosh points out, the connections between India and its citizens abroad are not necessarily physical: "We tend to take for granted that there is, and should be, a relationship between India and the 'Indians'. But in fact the relationship is a genuine historical anomaly [...] the links between India and her diaspora are lived within the imagination"

(247). Interestingly, it is this imaginary relationship that pulls Biju back to his country. He makes a choice - choosing to go back to being a subaltern in India - and acts on his desire to return to his homeland in spite of every economic, communal and social challenge he has faced there.

### *Diaspora and Class*

Though Biju does not belong to a religious minority like his Nepali counterpart Gyan, he comes from economically straitened circumstances. His experience of the underbelly of the American Dream points towards the splintering of diasporas along lines more than just those of nationalism.[42] It shows clear fault lines along gender, race, class and religion. The underworld of New York restaurants is represented as exclusively male, populated by illegal immigrants who are given a place to sleep and work well below minimum wage. The only women in his life are Malini, the restaurant-owner's wife, and the girls to whom he makes food deliveries. This diasporic community is fractured along religion as well; Biju meets Muslims from Zanzibar, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Indonesians and workers of various ethnicities. These encounters throw him in a new loop of thinking as he struggles to separate old national and religious hostilities between Hindus, Muslims, Indians and Pakistanis.

But mostly, it is economic necessity and dreams of moving upward in the class hierarchy that unites all of Biju's unlikely peers. They bring from their home country the idea that life in America will be more financially stable - luxurious, even - while the lifestyle that they actually

[42] James Truslow Adams defines this idea of the "American Dream" in his 1931 book, *The Epic of America.* He calls it "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement […] a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized for others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth and position" (31).

lead in pursuit of this elusive dream marks a sad contrast to their ambition for a green card. In postcolonial India, any member of the diaspora is speciously believed to be upper-middle class. If they had access to a foreign land through what Aihwa Ong calls "flexible citizenship",[43] it is assumed they have access to money and luxury. But diaspora does not necessarily belong to a privileged class - subalterns, when they have the choice to change their nation of residence, also become members of diaspora. They are subjected to even more scrutiny than upper-middle class diasporic subjects. Members of upper middle class diaspora in Western nations are expected by their kin within national boundaries to come back with appliances, exotic candy and snacks, foreign currency, and a magical experience of what it was like to live in a first world nation with every available material facility. While subaltern class members in the home country view them as migrants who have gone 'abroad' and who will ultimately strike gold and choose to reside there, subalterns often do not have the financial trappings which typically ornament the success stories of middle class diasporas who had some initial resources to migrate with. As Biju resentfully observes, the more affluent non-resident Indians (or "NRI"s) returning to India can afford to stand complacently with their foreign passports as the poor struggle to claim fees for delayed baggage from Air France. These NRIs "had more money, and because they had more money they would get more money. It was easy for them to stand in line, and they stood patiently, displaying how they didn't have to fight anymore" (298). He remains acutely aware of class differences through the entire novel, witnessing it also through the colonial/ postcolonial divide between the glitz and its shadow in New York's cuisine world. When he works at Le Colonial, we hear the restaurant is "on top, rich colonial, and down below, poor

[43] According to Ong, "Flexible citizenships refer to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (6).

native. Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian" (21). The names of the restaurants Biju works at play on how the food industry evokes ideologies and national identities in the mind of the consumer: "colonial", for old world charm, for instance. Others include the "Baby Bistro" and the "Stars and Stripes Diner" ("All American Flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below" (28)). Desai uses the names to comment on the irony of desperately poor third-world cooks cooking "authentic" American and European food while being judged negatively for their own nationalities.

Biju's complex character therefore partly conforms to and sometimes slips through many of the definitions proposed by theorists. Subaltern diasporas are different from middle class diasporas in that they lack the resources or institutional and social support their middle class compatriots may have. Diaspora theorists typically assume middle class diasporic subjects rather than subalterns, and this focus results in oversights such as assuming a stable community consciousness, or the ability to recreate one's culture in a new setting. This oversight matters because subaltern migrants, due to their illegitimate presence, cannot afford resources or the time to build social support, and thus must find other ways to attempt to empower themselves. In order to bridge this gap and analyze Biju, we can look to diaspora theorists and from there on extrapolate to the subaltern status to which he belongs. James Clifford mentions the delicate balance between roots and routes that diasporas must strike to make sense of living in a world outside of their home nation while still engaging in its national ideology:

> [Diaspora] involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home [...] Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots *and* routes to construct [...] alternate public spheres, forms of community

> consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications
>
> outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference. (251)

Clifford's quote outlines a clear set of characteristics that help us take a close look at how Biju adheres to and then slips through understandings of the term “diaspora”. For illegal immigrants like Biju who are always hoping to be naturalized, roots always remain subservient to routes. He travels back to India in the cheapest flight he can get, which, with seven layovers, is like a "failing bus laboring in the sky” (294). He never feels rooted in his diasporic community in America, especially not with Indian diasporas. Working his inhuman, below-minimum-wage hours, Biju never gets the time to form what Clifford calls the "community" of Indians away from home. His companions and equals are subalterns from the world over - Zanzibar, Greece, Italy, Pakistan, Bangladesh. Paul Jay details the way in which Biju is overwhelmed by this global immigrant community he must work with, and to finally confront his prejudices. His affection for Saeed Saeed forces him to reconsider his mistrust of black people, and to find what Jay calls a “new logic” which allows him little islands of people he likes amidst entire ethnic groups he despises. Moreover, Jay points out that for Biju these new non-national immigrant connections “circumscribe rather than expand the possibilities for imagining a new subjectivity free from old ethnic divisions” (122)

If from India, all the other immigrant workers are necessarily from Biju’s class, and they are never together for long, always thrown apart by the shifting subterranean needs of capitalist New York. By the time the Queen of Tarts bakery – one of his several temporary employers in New York – closes down after a mouse gets baked into a loaf of bread, Biju has already learned

this lesson:

> Biju knew he probably wouldn't see [Saeed Saeed] again. This was what happened, he had learned by now. You lived intensely with others, only to have them disappear overnight, since the shadow class was condemned to movement. The men left for other jobs, got deported, returned home, changed names. Sometimes someone came popping around a corner again, or on the subway, then they vanished again. Addresses, phone numbers did not hold. (102)

Biju's appropriately titled "shadow class" does not hold fast with technology. He does not have access to what Appadurai calls the "technoscape": the proliferation of informational and mechanical technology across "previously impervious boundaries" (34). This technoscape helps diasporas keep in touch and engage with the national sphere of their homelands, but remains a luxury available for upper and middle class immigrants. Living in the '80s as a poor illegal alien, Biju has recourse to neither cellphones, nor internet, nor even a landline. The only way he can make contact with his father is by buying a calling card number off of a drunk who memorizes them by standing outside a phone booth. The line is disturbed, disconnects easily. In these circumstances, Biju only focuses on his physical surroundings, negating the idea of virtual communication, although the thought of his father and news of unrest in Kalimpong continue to haunt him.

When he does attempt to try and form any manner of community consciousness, it is undermined by upper-middle class Indians such as Harish-Harry who discourage intermingling between classes and exploit their own countrymen (those below their social status) without scruple. Harish-Harry's name marks a duality that distinguishes many diasporic Indians who

own their establishments and have tried their best to change themselves according to the vast cultural discrepancies till they fragment into irreconcilable pieces of their personalities. “Harish” is, in his own eyes, a good god-fearing Hindu who donates to cow shelters outside Edison to ensure good karma, a competitive business owner who wants to achieve material success for the least price. This is the Harish Biju is introduced to, attempting to cajole a customer into talking in Gujarati, staunchly denying the presence of meat on the premises, attempting later to comfort Biju by showing he has his real interests at heart. “Harry” is the American-accented capitalist taskmaster whose attempts to deliver the “generic Indian” cuisine which shows up everywhere in his restaurant: in Gandhi’s favorite songs playing on the speaker systems, the “krishna and gopis” cloth motif on the walls, the “plastic roses on the table with synthetic dewdrops” (144). Harry studies the demand-supply graph and plugs himself in, secretly smuggling out nonvegetarian meals to the travel agent next door. He is the other, alien version of the Harish who grew up in India and America, a part of the “‘*haalf ‘n’ haf’*” (148) crowd, whose accents slip on and off, and which resorts to Hindi as a form of false camaraderie to show they aren’t turning their backs on what Desai ironically dubs the “greatest culture the world has seen” (155).

The one time that Harish/Harry’s split selves show any conflict is when his daughter rebels against him. A close reading of this section reveals his discomfort lies with her terminology, not the content of her tirade against him. Prior to her outburst, Harish-Harry and Malini try a good-cop-bad-cop style parenting routine that violently sways between Indian and American parenting cultures. Exclaiming that her daughter needs “two tight slaps” to deal with the “nonsense” (157), she follows her own advice (a “tight slap” is a sharp, chastising slap on the check, perhaps a translation what Hindi describes as a “pulled slap”; this is a quintessentially

Indian threat). When the slaps don't work, we are told that Harish-Harry, presumably tapping into the "Harry" side of himself, attempts to encourage his daughter with "you GO, gurl!!!" (157). The confused daughter, expressing her rebellion through army-style clothes and angry tirades, is deeply tuned into the exploitative labor practices of her parents: "You had me for your own selfish reasons, wanted a servant, didn't you? But in this country, Dad, nobody's going to wipe your ass for free" (156).

It is interesting to see what finally breaks Harish-Harry down. It's not the fact that his daughter sees through his lack of ethics as much as the tone and words she addresses in him that shock him. Desai informs us that Harish-Harry can't believe his own ears when he realizes his daughter has said the word "ass" to him, and that her entire outburst would have perhaps been tolerable if she had instead said "wipe your bottom, *Papaji"* (156). Adding "ji" to a noun is a sign of respect in many Indian languages, and Harish-Harry demands that linguistic respect over any substantial expression of respect from his daughter. In one short sentence, one that perhaps contains a superb pun, Desai summarizes his disgust at how American his daughter has become and how bad things have got: "Dad and ass." (157) As though to justify the latter adjective, Harish-Harry stages an extended Bollywood movie-style scene of drunk camaraderie with Biju to console himself that life as a nonresident Indian is worth his while.

It is during this scene of drunk camaraderie that Harish-Harry and Biju demonstrate the extent to which they mimic those at the top of the neocolonial pyramid. Attempting to justify his stay in the U.S., Harish-Harry quotes a series of quotes closely related to the American work ethic: "Another day another dollar, penny saved is penny earned, no pain no gain, business is business, gotta do what ya gotta do" (156). Carefully set in American slang to mark out his own position in the American-Indian diaspora, Harish-Harry's words belie a curious love-hate

relationship with Americans. While he aspires to the riches promised by the American Dream, he shows a simultaneous loathing of his own obsequiousness towards Americans. The American accent becomes a proxy for the American Dream – and by wielding it, Harish-Harry is not only attempting to mimic Americans for more effective communication, but clinging to a world-renowned symbol for the promise of the First World. An American accent becomes a symbol of privilege that Harish-Harry is not afraid of showing off. His mimicry does not end there: in service of capitalistic endeavor, his quotes are carefully picked from American popular culture, demonstrating a lament used by many white and blue collar American workers. The words in these axioms foreground money – and more interestingly, American money. Add in the flavor of the American "ya" instead of "you", and an everyday platitude is transformed into an irresistibly exotic call to the American Dream.

Biju, too, falls prey to this call to try his luck in this capitalist economy. As Harish-Harry mimics an American worker, Biju emulates Harish-Harry. He parrots his words and adds his own, attempting to connect with Harish-Harry in what he mistakes to be a moment of bonding: "have to make a living, what can you do?" (156) The difference between their words, however, highlights a vast class discrepancy: Harish-Harry's American axioms point at increasing one's wealth and striving to be successful, while Biju's words, "to make a living" are literal. He is struggling to make a living for himself, and has the "privilege" of actually being the lower class. Oddly, Harish-Harry mimics American workers on the one hand, and attempts to distance himself from his own upper class to mark himself out as a lower class Indian by imitating Biju's class. Both characters imitate each other in an attempt to position themselves in the other's class. Harish-Harry's narrative of self-pity is reminiscent of similar scenes in Hindi cinema, where the usually-sober hero laments his life and the world in general, on a sympathetic shoulder and in a

drunk stupor. Harish-Harry places himself as the hero of this scene, and Biju automatically responds to his plea "See, Biju, see what this world is" (155) and positions himself into the supporting role without realizing the scene will end and he will find himself thrown out of the movie. This epiphany follows later, in a moment when Biju realizes that the "prasad" or sacred sweets that Harish-Harry has got him after his work-related injury is just that – sweets: "It was a decoy, an old Indian trick of master to servant the benevolent patriarch garnering the loyalty of staff; offering slave wages, but now and then a box of sweets, a lavish gift. . . ."(196). There is no bonding, no compensation, nothing more to these gestures than a paternalistic condescension and an attempt to cajole more work out of him.

Interestingly, Harish-Harry's wife Malini who functions as a pseudo-mother-figure in the Gandhi Café kinship structure is not given the same duality. Even though she leaves India as a shy bride setting off metal detectors with the gold filigree in her saree, she has now evolved into a bob-cut, thick-skinned businesswoman, just as likely as Harish-Harry to cut corners, if not more so. It is she who thinks of the plan to keep the underpaid employees of the Gandhi Cafe "family" under constant surveillance: "By offering a reprieve from NYC rents, they could cut the pay to a quarter of the minimum wage, reclaim the tips for the establishment, keep an eye on the workers, and drive them to work fifteen-, sixteen-, seventeen-hours donkey days" (146). Her femininity comes into play in this all-male power dynamic. Harish-Harry remains powerless against his wife and daughter, and as way of compensation attempts a sort of bonding with Biju and the rest of the working men. Like the other girls to whom Biju delivers food, she finds a balance which allows her equal shares in the capitalist system of the US as well as traditional Indian roles.

Malini appears to aspire to a status and self-righteousness which other younger girls,

"English-speaking, upper-educated" (50) who have immigrated to America early on, already possess. Short haired and able to don a sari as well as shorts for aerobics, these young women have a desire running parallel to Harish-Harry's to appear to empathize with a members of a lower class:

> "*Dhanyawad. Shukria*. Thank you. Extra tip. You should buy topi-muffler-gloves to be ready for the winter."
>
> The shiny-eyed girl said it many ways so that the meaning might be conveyed from every angle – that he might comprehend their friendliness completely in this meeting between Indians abroad of different classes and languages, rich and poor, north and south, top caste bottom caste. (50)

Malini as well as these Indian girls, who are the only examples of freshly-washed-hair and Indian femininity for Biju, exemplify a deeper and more insidious form of cultural capitalism. Malini (and Harish-Harry, under her), exercises her femininity and maternal role to rope in the working men at Gandhi café as a "family" to ultimately drive them to what amounts to slave labour, not showing a shadow of a doubt about her policies. Perhaps this is the reason she is not accorded a duality by the narrative voice: she continues to claim one name, exercise this one ideology – that of saving on as many costs as possible – throughout her role in the novel.

The girls, similarly, display no doubts or confusion that is accorded to the " *haalf 'n' haf*" crowd in the novel. Comfortable in both traditional and western capitalist modes, they blend the two together in a special form of self-righteousness. Often, this self-righteous outlook is mistaken for confidence in the west, where Indian women are commonly perceived as

mistreated. And yet, in spite of their absence of visible scruples, these girls feel the need to communicate in Hindi, Urdu, and English and to tip Biju more, perhaps in order to exercise a maternal protectiveness. What makes them reach out to Biju to convey a "friendliness" between "top caste bottom caste"? Perhaps Biju has now become a mere symbol of subalternity at this point, where the girls see a poor and cold figure who makes them more pleasantly aware of their own material comforts. This feeling might be what they mistake for a maternal instinct, pouring out in the form of an attempted, fleeting connection across castes and class, a glorying in the sense of one's own progressive and westernized nature that rises above such petty distinctions. Marjorie Garber, in her essay on compassion, provides a very useful distinction between the qualities of "compassion" and "sympathy". The evolution of compassion from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, Garber argues, meant that it was not felt "between equals, but from a distance – in effect, from high to low", and falls "somewhere between charity and condescension" (20). Sympathy, on the other hand, remains "historically a condition of equality and affinity"(23). This paternalistic – or in this case, maternalistic – compassion is what the girls use in order to define themselves. Biju becomes the subaltern other for Indian girls, as Saeed does later for white girls in America, one against whom they define themselves as compassionate and understanding, but from a distance, while being firmly rooted in their own class.

Biju, far from being able to fight this prejudice, is barely able to sense it initially because he has neither the time nor the resources to form a collective of his own kind. With the aim of saving and sending home as much money as possible, little disposable income is left over. The most common form of male bonding between Biju and other subaltern laborers is when they go to visit prostitutes, and Biju cannot participate because he is squeamish. The Gandhi Cafe

management keeps them under constant surveillance, ensuring that they will have no time or energy to form a sense of collective consciousness based on memories of the India they left behind. The restaurant's name evokes Gandhian values – honesty, integrity, socialism, communal peace, caring for the poor, selfless love. However, the only actual common characteristic with Gandhi is utilitarian, more right-wing Hindu than Gandhian: serving vegetarian food and generating funds for the protection of cows. Harish-Harry and Malini only want to get the most out of the workers. The latter's tie to their homeland becomes their workplace - Gandhi Café becomes a perverse substitute for their diasporic remembrances of India.

Another reason for a lack of communal consciousness is the regional divide that exists between Indian subalterns in America. Biju meets no Bengali speakers, and is an unmarried male immigrant. Much of immigrant memories are encapsulated in a replication of culture, cuisine and monuments in the host country. Biju neither has the means nor the time to visit a temple, or the access to a Bengali community to celebrate a festival of his culture. The years pass by unmarked by any cultural landmarks, and he feels even more isolated because he cannot mark the passage of time with any relatable milestone (across various Indian communities, festivals and rituals mark stages of life, and they mark sites of communion as well as conflict, as we have previously seen in some of the Gujarati Dalit short stories). Relative to Deeti's journey in *River of Smoke,* Biju finds no cultural footholds to preserve memories or continue his cultural traditions. While Deeti's adaptation to Mauritius can be accorded, to a large part, to her ability to preserve memories through Madhubani art and her eventually heading a clan of her own countrymen, Biju

remains suspended and alienated in twentieth century America with not enough resources to access modern global communication or older cultural ties.

Clifford's sense of "collective solidarity" would be present if there was a way in which he could connect with Indian Bengali food, celebrated Durga Pooja, or speak in Bengali with other immigrants of his region. Instead, there is only the drudgery of cooking for people he does not care about for little money. Makarand Paranjape's observation on how writers deal with Bengali *Bhadrasamaj* (the newly-emergent Bengali bourgeoisie under British colonial rule) can also be extended to the Bengali subaltern: "The crisis of the *bhadrasamaj* is left behind.[44] Or, to put it another way, transposed to the diaspora, it becomes a collective of individual crises, not of individuals who form a collective" (370). Biju is alone in his barren loneliness, he cannot commiserate with any member of his ethnic or national diasporic community. His problem, even though it is experienced by his entire "shadow class" is not articulated as such, since it is constantly suppressed by the owners of the culinary scene in New York and shrouded under the constant claim that they should be "grateful" for what they have got.

Meanwhile Saeed Saeed constantly subverts this idea of subalternity like his namesake from Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North,* turning the Western perspective of the "Orient" on its head. Rapidly marketing his exoticism to America, he is only too willing to perform the role of the impoverished Oriental other to get his way, namely to woo girls and get a green card. He recognizes and uses the patronizing compassion of white women in America, knowing fully well the inequality of the relationship between the compassionate and the

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[44] Noting that the term literally translates as "genteel society", Paranjape defines "bhadrasamaaj" to mean "the Bengali bourgeoisie newly emergent under colonialism. This amorphous and diverse 'middle class' was not only constituted by colonialism but also went on to resist it to help forge the nation that became India" (358).

suffering, especially when it comes to perceptions of his race. Saeed Saeed weaves colourful, romantic narratives of his homeland Zanzibar to court American girls who are desperate to embrace his otherness in order to satisfy their need for compassion:

> When pretty girls came to pick out their cinnamon buns with mine shafts of jewelled brown sugar and spice, Saeed described the beauty and the poverty of Zanzibar, and the girls' compassion rose like leavened loaf - how they wanted to save him, to take him home and lull him with good plumbing and TV; how they wanted to be seen down the road with a tall handsome man with dreadlocks. (78)

When deported back to Zanzibar upon being found as an illegal immigrant, Saeed once more mines his newfound status as a successful and coveted member of North American diaspora to court girls in his hometown and receive favors from their fathers. He dons the subterranean version of what Ong identifies as new-age travellers who choose to have multiple passports and travel extensively for business purposes (10). Saeed forges his passport, changes his name to Rasheed Zulfikar, and is back again within the borders of America - a mere two months after his deportation. He engages with the country as though it is a "mutual love affair" (80), treating it like a challenge to his resourcefulness. Ironically, the reason he gives for his ability to sneak back into the United States is that the same officer cannot recognize having sent him in the first place: "Thank God, to them we all of us look the same!" (79).

### *Biju's Attempts at Empowerment*

It is because of these several slippages and instabilities that one could say that globalization may be a limited paradigm by which to map out Biju's journey. His journey and his

perception in America are also predicated on India's erstwhile colonial history and American imperialism. The image of 20th-century North America is communicated through brands, advertisements, TV shows and Hollywood movies - building what Arjun Appadurai calls a "mediascape."[45] From these images, audiences far away from metropolitan areas construct "imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic and even fantastic objects" (35). America is constructed as a nation that can afford the best technology, government services (no power-outages, for one), plenty to eat, and money to be earned with reasonable hard work. Oana Sabo, writing in "Disjunctures and Diaspora in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*" discusses the role of American imperialism in generating Indian diasporas:

> Desai contends that mobility is a dream that is unavailable to labour diasporas, who may easily cross geographical borders, but not socio-economic ones. The novel thus debunks the myth of the USA as a land of opportunity for postcolonial immigrants who undergo not only racial discrimination, but also economic exploitation within their own diasporic communities [...] the novel stresses an underemphasized view of the postcolonial USA as deeply implicated in the workings of transnational capitalism. (14-15)

One of the ways in which Biju attempts to defy his entrapment in this transnational capitalism is his refusal to work in any restaurant that serves beef. Stuck in the underbelly of America as an illegal immigrant and an unskilled laborer, Biju barely finds work. Yet, in a counter-intuitive act of self-empowerment, he begins to question restaurateurs on what type of meat they serve, and

[45] According to Appadurai, "mediascapes" refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate electronic information […] and to the images of the world created by this media (35).

makes a choice of employer based on the answer. The moment he leaves his current job because they cook beef, he begins to feel like he is allowed to make decisions instead of skimming on the whims and greed of others:

> Biju left as a new person, a man full to the brim with a wish to live within a narrow purity. "Do you cook with beef?" he asked a prospective employer. "We have a Philly steak sandwich". "Sorry. I can't work here." "They worship the cow", he heard the owner of the establishment tell someone in the kitchen, and he felt tribal and astonishing. (136)

In embracing his ethnic identity as a positive facet instead of a shameful secret that seeps out as color, Biju is beginning his adjustment as a diasporic subject in America. He ceases to be a strange-smelling poor cook and becomes the “tribal and astonishing” cow-worshipping Indian who swaggers out if the scullery job is not on his terms. In his own way, he has chosen to establish his ethnic identity amidst the rapaciously exploitative hierarchy of the hospitality industry. The word “tribal” also brings to mind an ethnic throwback, of Biju wanting to appear an ancestor of himself who has a clearly demarcated and respected ethnic identity rather than how he is currently perceived: as a crushed and poor subject, unremarkable and stuck between modernity and tradition, capitalism and socialism. Many restaurateurs question why Biju would make such a seemingly illogical decision, considering he has moved to America in order to get a job. However, while reading agency into his choices, we must acknowledge the caveat that subaltern diasporic subjects do not always exercise choices that are free. Epifanio San Juan points out the fallacy of always assuming free choice in diasporic migration:

> Unlike peoples who have been conquered, annexed, enslaved or coerced in some other way, diasporas are voluntary movements of people from place to place, although such migrations may also betray symptoms of compulsion if analyzed within a global political economy of labor and inter-state political rivalries. (5)

Thus in spite of the fact that dire financial straits effected his move to America, Biju is attempting to carve some space for personal decisions in a world which is entirely governed by the whims of those who pay him. His unique solution to his problem - a want of dignity and free choice - stems from things that he most closely knows: food and a Hindu lifestyle. By blending these two categories, he hones his edge over other migrants. Even though this would cost him a job, each restaurateur he rejects will remember him for having made a choice in a seemingly close-ended situation.

Ranajit Guha mentions that the peasant/ subaltern insurgency under the British rule was undermined in its importance by the British, "the sense of history converted into an element of administrative concern [...] In other words, the peasant was denied recognition as a subject of history in his own right even for a project that was all his own" (3). Biju also perhaps feels that his voice is being suppressed under the dominant narrative of global capitalism, and this resort to religious purity marks his private rebellion. He shows a clear knowledge of the larger picture that consists of NYC restaurants running on the work of immigrants who continue to remain exploited. After breaking his leg in Harish-Harry's restaurant, he says to him:

> It happened here. Your responsibility [...] Without us living like pigs," said Biju, "what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us

> nothing because you know we can't do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal. Why don't you sponsor us for our green cards? (188)

And yet Harish-Harry tries once again to subvert the subaltern when he replies "Know how easily I can replace you? *Know how lucky you are!!!*'" And later, as he tries another trick of paying him a paltry sum and getting him *prasad* from the temple, Biju realizes his whole argument has already been sidelined. "It was a decoy, an old Indian trick of master to servant, the benevolent patriarch garnering the loyalty of the staff; offering slave wages, but now and then a box of sweets, a lavish gift...." (190). Most of the previous restaurateurs have already tried to take away the legitimacy of Biju's private rebellion by deeming him a simpleton who doesn't know what's good for him, and by declaring that "it could not be so hard or there would not be so many of you here" (189).

However, his newly-discovered awareness should not necessarily lead the reader to assume that Biju is fighting a righteous war against capitalism. Ong offers a caveat against using the language of "unified moralism" which critics insist on foisting onto disadvantaged diasporas as though they were the subaltern, and which positions them as anticapitalists: "The unified moralism attached to subaltern subjects now also clings to diasporic ones, who are invariably assumed to be members of oppressed classes and therefore constitutionally opposed to capitalism and state power" (13). Though he has chosen a path of self-empowerment, Biju is not necessarily fighting the capitalist system. He is simply trying to make his way in it, alone, with dignity. Given that his goals are inextricably tied with material necessities, the language of unified moralism would not justify his actions or his motivation.

## *Conclusion: Making Choices*

Middle and upper class diasporas in North America and Europe are often deeply enmeshed with capitalism. It forms a reason for their migration - better facilities, better opportunities, developed technology and the chance to earn and save in foreign currency. Fredric Jameson explains the allure of this "third stage of capital", in that it represents an ambition to move up in a power structure: "The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating [...] because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control" (38). Since the middle class can afford to have some of this technology, the narrative of anti-capitalism is transferred to the subaltern. The diasporic subaltern however, not only does not have the means to access a community, but is trapped in the capitalist cycle which refuses him access to the economic hierarchy. In thus making a decision seemingly based on religion, Biju begins to exercise control over the capitalist system that is keeping him from fulfilling his subaltern immigrant's dream of appliances and plentiful food. The final decision of returning to his impoverished, riot-torn home in the North-East also shows him escaping the shadow of capitalism. When he returns, even the last vestiges of capitalism he bears with him - an 'I Love New York' T-shirt, sun glasses, a VCR, perfumes, digital clocks, a radio and cassette player, waterproof watched, calculators, an electric razor, warm clothes, a "Japanese-made" heater (270), chocolates, amongst other things - are stolen from him and he returns without even the clothing on his back, wearing a woman's nightgown his tormentors have laughingly flung at him.

Biju epitomizes the subaltern figure who is constantly making choices and attempting to pick a way from the mesh of Western capitalism to which he had so hopefully turned. Lacking a

supportive community structure means he cannot strike roots in America,

and this realization is what draws him back to India to his father. He leaves behind all the aspirations of a diasporic subject, unlike Saeed Saeed who stays behind and manages to wield the system to his own advantage. It is these decisions - refusing to cook in a restaurant which serves beef, refusing to submit to an abusive employer's policies, and deciding to finally migrate back home in spite of all economic challenges - which finally empower him and show that he is not merely starry-eyed with the prospects of being a diasporic member, but a subaltern capable of judging which situation is best suited to his needs.

## Conclusion

This dissertation had multiple intentions: to understand the ways in which agency and empowerment of Indian subaltern diaspora and migrants is depicted in contemporary fiction, as well as to bring in an added dimension of regional Dalit fiction into the discussion. The purpose wasn't just to unearth ways in which characters were empowered, but to see if having agency in one area – economic, social or linguistic – can confer the ability to enable themselves in other areas. The reason for pursuing this line of reasoning is to see ways in which subaltern diaspora and migrants in fiction are making their own decisions, charting life trajectories and attempting to take control of their own life. It is important that authors try to depict this struggle rather than see the subaltern as an object hopelessly flung from one space to another without a clear line of reasoning. The damage that portrayal can do to the image of a subaltern is significant; this is what makes Ghosh's depiction of Kalua so problematic – that the latter is incapable of organized thought and mental complexity. However, the narrative is redeemed through the portrayal of Deeti and Neel, whose linguistic agency – their ability to learn and adapt to new languages – helps them navigate their paths across Mauritius and China. Deeti becomes the matriarch of the entire Colver clan, and while it can be argued that being an indentured slave is a very far-fetched example of agency or empowerment, Ghosh uses Mauritian creole as a means for Deeti to exert agency over her life. As a result of her ability to adapt, she can preserve her cultural traditions, negotiate with plantation owners, and exert control over the narrative because of her linguistic agency. Marina Carter's historical research into records of Bhojpuri migrants in Mauritius reveals that they had informal systems that allowed them to

make informed decisions about choosing to go into indentured servitude. It is important that Ghosh links this to linguistic agency as well, because it is their ability to become polyglots (a quality common to South Asians) that allows them to survive – both in history and in literature. My intervention in this argument is to show the way in which Ghosh links linguistics to agency and to analyze how he ultimately gives these languages a legitimacy that has been denied to them historically.

With Gujarati Dalit literature, it is harder to distinguish when economic agency results in social agency. In spite of being financially (and emotionally) secure, Ravjibhai finds that his neighbor is secretly treating him like an untouchable. Financial agency doesn't necessarily translate into social status, as "Safe Distance" and even "Jāt" prove. Kanubhai, the protagonist of "Jāt" is empowered more by his status as a migrant than by economic agency, as is Raghu from "Swapna Samudra". These two stories seem to lean towards the idea that social agency can only arise out of activism and protest coming from the community rather than personal attempts at self-empowerment. "Safe Distance" and "Bāp nū Bārmū" thus serve as a foil to these texts because the latter mostly feature protagonists whose attempts focus on personal redemption. In "Bāp nū Bārmū", Amrut's moments of revelation where he realizes the entire "BC" community is suffering from the same problems as he are quickly drowned out by the pressing urgency of finding a solution to those problems. Unfortunately, they prove to be circular and no matter how much he attempts to please his community he cannot meet their expectations.

In Desai's novel, the return of the prodigal son is no more empowering than his departure was. Biju returns having navigated America with as much agency as he could muster, in his social framework. He chooses a workplace that suits him, in a difficult

economy, yet discovers that diaspora from his own country (with whom he thought he shared values) betrays him. His return is to an imaginary India, a nostalgic image of his green and serene hometown that is immediately belied by his being robbed by GNLF goons on landing in Darjeeling. What is important is how Desai documents the hypocrisy of immigration in the upper classes, and how she weaves Biju's sincere attempts at navigating between Indian and American poverty into this narrative. The narrative does not focus on how Biju's attempt at immigration fails so miserably, but how his mind struggles to understand the shifting facets of being a subaltern diaspora, an illegal alien who is not wanted in America. His perceptivity and insight develops and expands over his migratory journey, and he learns to identify his own prejudices and hypocrisy in other Indian immigrants. His migration does not empower him materially, as it was meant to. It enriches his mind, and while that's little consolation as far as economic agency goes, the narrative focuses on the final image of Biju – wearing a woman's dress mockingly handed to him by his robbers – hugging his father at the gate of his home. The focus lies on the way migration has changed him and his relationship with his father rather than on material gain.

By analyzing the linguistic nuances and literary techniques used by each of these texts, I have tried to demonstrate that contemporary Indian fiction written by cosmopolitan as well as regional Dalit writers is attempting once again to unearth the voice of the subaltern. In comparison with Guha and the Subaltern Studies Group, these writers are exploring the voice of the subaltern through imagined and fictionalized experience, conceiving a "positive visualization" of subaltern agency based in historical empowerment. It depicts the subaltern in control, attempting to change his or her destiny.

Fiction here is an alternate tool to imagine agency because it is not limited by archives of historical information that might be governed by hegemonic powers. Instead, the authors can imagine a trajectory loosely extrapolated from history or the contemporary socio-economic system, but which allows these characters to explore paths that may not be conventional. This results in a reimagining of the possibilities of the subaltern's scope. This exploratory mode is more flexible and allows for a range of possibilities; characters may enable themselves or they may attempt to do so but fail, or perhaps may discover that they attained their goals of self-sufficiency but still remain hegemonized.

That these authors are doing this in context of globalization and international relations, including the history of colonial British trade, neoimperialist relations with USA, or with urban migrations within the country speaks to the time that we live in. While writing about the poor and downtrodden is not a new literary theme (Mulk Raj Anand did this with great complexity even at the beginning of the twentieth century with *Untouchable*), contemporary authors are now attempting to layer these characters with complexity never seen before. The literary devices they use are staggeringly diverse: hybrid languages in the speech of characters without translation, dialects, linguistic markers for caste and class, dream imagery and flashbacks. In order to convey the social worlds of these characters, the authors wield language at the risk of alienating readers unfamiliar with the language. Yet this bold experimentation, along with the aplomb and gumption their characters show, demonstrates a new trend of respect rather than pity for the subaltern diaspora and migrants who choose to displace themselves in order to brave a new world.

## Appendix A: Translations of Gujarati Dalit Fiction

# "Jāt"

Original Gujarati story by Dashrath Parmar
Translated into English by Tanushree Vachharajani

As I got off the bus at the Kampā stand, the day had already set. Leaving behind a swirl of dust, the bus dropped my lonely self and roared away to the next village. The wind had dropped completely. In the excruciating heat, the trees on the periphery of the village, wilted into dry sticks under the withering heat of the sun, were standing desolate with their faces low, subdued. In the slowly extinguishing October evening, vast fields of pearl millet, like a woman prostituted at the peak of her youth, were writhing and swaying in the anticipation of hope. Two Ashādh and Shrāvan months had gone by bone dry. And now, the Bhādarvō too,[46] crawling on its knees, had started to drag on.

I'm stepping here after a decade and a half and everything clings to me again like cobwebs. Mother's letter, the one she had had Ramankaka write, is sitting in my pocket.

Bhai,[47] this Bhādarvō then I really must hoist the flag. It's not good to live on credit from god's house. If your wife and son cannot make it, it's alright, but you - even if it's on the go - take a day off and pass by here…"

[46] The Bhadarvo is the eleventh month of the Vikram Samvat, the calendar era used in Hindu calendars. Lunar months and a solar sidereal year (calculating the movement of the earth around the sun with respect to fixed stars) are used to calibrate the calendar. Ashaadh and Shraavan are the ninth and tenth months of the Vikrama year.

[47] Kanubhai's mother is using "bhai" here (literally meaning "brother") to indicate a respect for him as an adult man. Typically, this is a common usage amongst adult men and women, indicating respect.

From when I was in the cradle, mother had taken a vow to hoist a flag at Ramapīr. Now, vacillating between yes and no, I had reached forty. Now the fear crept into my heart that if mother passed away when I wasn't around, then what would become of her incomplete wish?

The gong from the Ramapīr temple resonates through my entire body - it passes over every molecule of my blood. Squinting, I look at the temple, and, like my father's soiled turban, the temple seems to have increased in height. The flag on the spire is torn, and the ribboned shreds are now hanging down, loose. Tomorrow both vās[48] will together hoist our new flag and then…

Earlier, there was just a small alley here. I remember. Time and again the village flourished with fairs. The public would wear brand new clothes and mill around and we'd stand back and watch them, feeling obliged. Finally the heads from both the quarters got together and decided to build a huge temple. Each house had paid five hundred rupees, and after the temple was ready when they unfurled a flag that spanned fifty-two gaj,[49] then the public was left with their fingers stuck in their mouths. After that, every bhadarvi a new flag was hoisted. On dasham,[50] there was a fair and we'd enjoy our fair to our heart's content.

Amthobha joined me at the mouth of the chamār vās.[51]

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[48] A quarter or neighbourhood comprising members of a particular caste. These quarters would be located on the outskirts of the village, farther out from the higher castes.

[49] Roughly a yard

[50] The tenth day of the lunar fortnight

[51] The chamārs are the tanner community in India. Relegated to one of the lower rungs of the group of Dalit castes owing to their profession, they face severe economic and social challenges.

When I asked him news of himself he squinted and continued to gaze at me.

Then he said, “Who, Kanubhai, is it? Oh ho ho, you’ve forgotten your way and strayed here after many years, brother! As it is, you’re barely recognizable…!”

“Is there any option but for me to come, Bha? Tomorrow…”

“Fine, fine, brother…” Saying this he turned into the road for Kampa. There was a strong gust of wind. The smell of tanned leather pierced my lungs. I took in a deep breath and turned towards the vās. I cut through the whole vās and reached my courtyard and didn’t see anyone till then. Around more than half the houses in the vās were shut. From within three or four houses the glow of diyas,[52] the color of turmeric, was reaching out into the courtyards and fighting off the darkness.

My head hit the beam the moment I stepped through the door. Mother left her work and came running: “Brother, you aren’t hurt, what? Ba…” Saying this, she started rubbing her right hand over my head. I took her wrinkled hand - like the dry branch of the bawal - [53] in mine. The light from the flame in the stove and the eternal flame of the diya in the hollow of Rampīr had combined and spread to the rest of the house. I stared - walls were eaten through in some places – rafters that had gone hollow - the central beam that had bent in the middle - the bright new nine-yard flag sitting in the corner opposite. And the dried ripple patterns of cowdung and mud

[52] Oil lamps

[53] The babul tree that heavily populates large areas of Gujarat. It has spiny branches with dry leaves and can weather extreme climates.

that would shine even in the dim moonlight of beej-treej[54] were smiling sweetly.

Mother spread out a jute quilt. Instead of sitting on that I squatted on the leepan[55]. Mother put tea to boil in an aluminum vessel and came to sit by me: "I've been waiting for you for so long. Wife and kids: everyone well?"

I nodded my head as a yes. Then gazed for a while at mother. Time, flowing rapidly, had left countless marks on her face.

I went behind to wash my hands in the courtyard behind. Our house was the last in the vās. Behind it lay the chamār vās. I looked out of the courtyard as I washed my face. Didn't comprehend anything. I thought it might be owing to the darkness, so I straightened up, looked again and saw there was a wall, head-high, surrounding the entire vās, and I realized because of this wall both neighborhoods had split into two halves.

Just as I reentered the house, my eyes colored with astonishment. Ramankaka came in, and I said "Ram Ram" to him and sat down. Mother poured tea into two saucers and sat down to make rotlā[56]. I had only taken a sip before I had to ask: "what's the wall behind for, kaka?"

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[54] The second and third days of the lunar fortnight, when the moonlight is dim.

[55] The plastering on the floor, made of wet earth and cowdung that is then applied in wave-like patterns and left to dry

[56] Thick, dry flat breads made of millet, an essential part of rural Gujarati diet because the coarse millet is cheaper and requires no fat to be added (unlike its more refined cousin, the wheat chapati that has an element of fat added).

"That's for security, bhai". Kaka gulped down the tea in a single sip. "These bloody chamārs were becoming unmanageable. Every other day on some pretext or the other they used to pick fights. Just because we didn't have anyone left to tell them off, they started coming all the way into our quarters with their flocks of sheep. Save us, O God, from this chamār caste! After I wrote letter upon letter to the government this wall was erected. We've now been put at peace, scoundrels!

I felt like a pain shooting up in my chest. The tea wound itself around my throat. I couldn't comprehend what kaka was saying.

"Here, haindo,[57] eat, bhai!" In a kaansa taansla[58], Mother served me a shaak[59] with potato and onions, and in a chhābdi[60] made out of wheat stalks she served two hot, steaming bajri rotla. Then, so I wouldn't be left in the dark, she took the lamp near the stove and put it next to me.

As I got up after gobbling down the food in huge bits, Mother said, "Ramanbhai! Why don't you and bhai both go to meet the darbars? And if possible, if someone from those quarters could also come…"

"From those quarters? Say Ram Ram, bhabhi! If those rascals could understand all this then would we have seen this day?"

[57] "Come on".
[58] Shallow bowl made of bell metal
[59] Dish of vegetables
[60] Shallow basket

"Still, bhai! If two men are together then it makes a difference. I know about others, all right. But old man Amtho, no matter, was still a friend of this place".

"Was it anything special, Ma?" I couldn't resist asking.

"Well, as work goes, brother," Kaka said: "It's about the flag we need to hoist tomorrow. We'll have to take permission from mōta darbār, won't we?"

"But what do we need the darbār's permission for this for?"

"As such, they've become the masters of the temple! First their flag gets hoisted, then that of our vās…"

"And people of that vās are not coming?"

"Oh, to them what's a flag, what's this whole issue? The darbārs will serve them one glass and no one will be in their senses. They're just going to be lying around the vādā[61]…and the darbārs …"

A strong gust of wind came in from outside. The lamp, set on the floor, went out. It felt like everything had gone dark for a second, but no - the lamp in the nook was still burning. Mother rushed to it and protected its flame. Then, lighting a wooden stick from it, she lit the second lamp.

"Let the darbārs hoist it first. We can do it after," I said.

"No, bhai!" Mother put her hands together in front of the god's nook: "I begged and offered my

[61] Courtyard

lap and said that the day my heir will come, that day I will hoist the first flag!
One can't turn back on such a promise, mother! That time this temple didn't even exist. And what did I know that such a black time will come, or else…"

Without saying anything I started walking behind kaka to the chamār vās. At the very center of the vās, under the limda tree, three-four old men were sitting drinking the hookah. One of them was Amthobha. Kaka spoke to him. Taking a long drag of the hookah and releasing smoke from his nostrils, he refused: "All these are matters of time, Kanubhai! Water doesn't flow backwards from the eaves to the beams.[62] Otherwise while building the temple my and your father's veins went soft[63], this don't you know? But once it's set in people's hearts, what's anyone to do?

"Still, bha. The temple is ours, how is it acceptable that they get away with hoisting the first flag?"

"If it's not acceptable, bhai, where do we go? As for you, you're here today, and tomorrow morning you'll return to the city. But we have to spend our entire life right here or no? Why should we deliberately create enmities?"

"Come, bhai! If you create enmities, then who'll serve you drink?" Kaka spoke up.

"Then why don't you drink too, rascal! Who's stopping you?" Amthobha stood up. His legs were staggering. Without saying anything, kaka took my hand and started walking away.

[62] Things do not get reversed so easily
[63] Your father and I worked very hard

Out of nowhere, that black night of Dussehra flashed in front of my eyes.

- On the night of Dussehra, the goddess's chariot used to be taken out in the village. The unwritten responsibility of cutting the wood for the chariot lay with both the quarters. By evening, the raw food was to be cut and thrown before the panchayat house.[64] The carpenter would come and carve out the chariot. Then, late evening, the chariot would start its rounds. And we would stare from afar. This had been going on for generations.

A majority of people from both the vās had gone to live in the cities for employment. The youth from our vās thought that we didn't need to pass on this drudgery to our next generation. It was time to bring it to an end! On this, both vās agreed. For the first time, the wood was left uncut. The chariot did not make its rounds. In the evening, the entire village congregated. The darbars were planning to cut down everyone. The kanbis were also restrained. But from that day, they stopped supplying food and water to both vās! Late at night, the really angry darbārs attacked the vās. Everyone shook like a leaf. Suddenly, the entire chamār vās appeared at our doorstep. Amthobha at the forefront! In everyone's hands were crossbars used to pull sheep and knives. On their heads, they'd worn kaansa taansla[65] and wrapped handkerchiefs around these. My father and Amthobha stealthily went ahead and the three-four people they could lay they hands on they bashed up such that –

As an opportunity, a buffalo had died at some kanbi's house. The courtyard stank. But what to

[64] The head committee of the village
[65] Bowls made of bell metal

do? They pulled through for three-four days but finally, with a leaf on their mouths, the darbārs had to come back to the vās.[66]

"Finally they couldn't help but come to their caste, the rascals! Sold their caste for a glass of liquor. And did you see what a fire was unleashed when I spoke a bit of truth" Kaka said in a bitter voice.

In the end, it may be so, but our caste is one and the same, kaka! It must be because of our deeds that these differences must've come up. Else haven't they said in that saying, that "those who meet at the [temple of] Rāmapīr are always the same?"

"You don't yet know this chamār jāt, bhai! They won't take a moment to betray you. We haven't just grown old that that we don't know not to make tanner friends or Muslim partners".

It's not like that, kaka. In the moment of need, it's our own caste that stands by us. Have you forgotten that Dussehra night?" I said it because I had started. Then I thought in my mind: "How long will you chew on a matter that's become obvious to the whole world? An outsider's gaze may think that we are all one, but only god knows our secrets! I thought these differences between [the lower] castes had thrived only in cities and so-called academics, but that these winds had touched my village in the interiors was something I had never even imagined. If things go on like this, then how will we break the ancient system dictated by the Manu

[66] So that the tanners would take away the dead buffalo

doctrine?[67] How will we make known to them our strong existence/ identity?
If we keep such a distance from us and our caste-brothers, then how can we even expect those others to welcome us?

I couldn't sleep all night. The moment my eyes closed I could see Ma's wretched face - the nine-yard flag - father - Amthobha - the Rampīr temple - that Dussehra night: everything glittered up. That wall would come and settle on my chest.

And the darbārs had also gone and taken an extreme viewpoint:

"We know this man stays outside and so may not know. But you've always lived in the village and yet forgotten?"
"Bavji! Oye, can't fart and want to operate a canon! We know you're poor. Just because we're not putting up a front so you'll climb onto our heads! Go, break what you can. But tomorrow, ours will be the first flag…"

I gnashed my teeth. My palms balled up into fists but…
- early dawn I hoisted the flag onto my shoulder and we left our vās. Me, Ma and kaka were in the front, behind us were seven-eight people from the vās. Just as we reached the temple with great difficulty, someone boomed from behind. It was Amthobha. In one hand, there was a heavyweight crossbar and in the other, a knife. Behind them, a group of twenty-twenty five

[67] An ancient Sanskrit text, the Manusmriti is one of the Dharmashastras of Hinduism. Among other topics, it covers strict rules and hierarchies to be obeyed by those in Hindu society. It outlines the roles of the four castes in the caste system, and is notoriously severe in its treatment of women and the lower castes.

people. There were even women. Amthobha came and stood right next to me:

"There, now come, hoist your flag in peace. Let me see, rascal, who dares to set foot in this place! It's our temple, how dare those rascals hoist theirs first…"

The night of Dussehra came rushing back to me. I look at kaka and said: "See, kaka? In the end, no matter what, our castes are the same, yes?" Then I looked at the flag on my shoulder. In the early rays of the sun, the many colors of the flag were melding into each other. Someone from the gathering behind chanted, "Bolo Rampīr ki..."

I shouted, "Jai!"[68] and pushing the flag further up my shoulder, I ran in the direction of the temple.

[68] "Rampīr ki jai" would mean "Victory to Rampīr"

# "Safe Distance"

Original Gujarati story by Mavji Maheshwari
Translated into English by Tanushree Vachharajani

Ravjibhai was standing, with his hand in his pocket, and looking around. There was, of course, the fatigue that had accumulated over so many days, and yet his mind was elated. As such he had already honored all the preparations a month ago. He'd finished purchasing clothes, rations, ornaments etc. All else remaining was now, slowly, slowly unraveling like the knot in a thread unravels. There, now only a few hours of worry were remaining. Everything was working out even better than he had anticipated. Although, regarding the kind of worry that had been eating at him a month ago he was completely light, like a flower now. As such the worry itself was not something one could verbally explain to anyone. And yet, after a decade's experience, his heart was reassuring him from inside that everything will reach the opposite bank of the river safely, and everything did.

After a few hours, after having given Aarti away, no more burden was going to remain on Ravjibhai. As such everything was over now. Except for the feast.

Ravjibhai's mind was in some happiness. Standing there, he was lost in his own thoughts…

Ten years ago, when it so happened that we were to move here, we'd had to debate so much. For one, this was not our village. Neither were there any caste-brothers around. To live in a completely strange society, and that too having purchased the house. It was a big question. Where do we go if some problem arises once we've bought the house? When I spoke to Kanta,

she'd also said, squirming -

— No, no. We don't want to move there. I won't be able to get along. I'm an illiterate villager. I can't mix with the genteel society women there.

— But after some persuasion we'd bought the place. Although I was also worried. New house, new place, new people. We'd manage with everyone, but what about that other thing? That's it, at that thought I would settle down into a cold sweat. I had but to leave in the morning and return in the evenings. The job, too, was twenty-five kilometers away. How would Kanta manage when I left her behind — at this thought I'd shudder. As such, who would be able to do anything? But it could happen that one lives among people, and feels as though one is living alone in wilderness. And whom can one share this pain with? While buying the flat, I'd made enquiries, but had found only disappointment. There was only one home with whom it was possible to freely mingle, yet we'd come here to stay. Things were not very social in the beginning. The question in our hearts almost came to our lips. If someone looked in our direction, we thought he must have definitely been thinking about us. But as time passed, all of these imagined fears proved hollow. There was some amazement — of course there would be! Nothing untoward had happened yet. After seeing what I hadn't been able to even imagine since I was a child, I started feeling that no, no, it's my own heart that was unsound. It's not like the entire world is a bad place! Thus, ten years passed. We didn't even realize it. Aarti, who's today going to her in-laws' place, was studying in the sixth standard then. Nobody's ever even asked her who she is [what her caste is]. She visits everyone freely, and I! What all I was imagining when I bought the house.

"Kaka, all these tables have to be arranged in the opposite row, correct?"

Ravjibhai's flow of thought was interrupted. His neighbor's eager young son was setting up everything rapidly. Ravjibhai looked upon his neighbor Vyasbhai's son Chintan with some satisfaction, who was working as though it was a celebration in his own house.

There were varied sounds in the background. Tables and chairs were being arranged. Little tots were dancing in rhythm with the music coming from the speakers. Women and girls, clad in jewelry and heavy, ornate clothing, were roaming here and there. The harsh clang of plates and bowls stood out over the rest of the sounds. Vyasbhai's Chintan was issuing instructions to other youths as he worked. A strange happiness started playing in Ravjibhai's heart. All his pain was put to rest now. He climbed into his own thoughts again…

When I moved here, it was Vyasbhai I met first. Caste-wise, Vyasbhai is a conservative Brahmin. Worships and everything, but never makes it out that there's a man from a different caste living next door. There are no cutting comments about caste-vaste in his heart. The members of his family are also simple and amiable. In part, it was Vyasbhai only who had quelled that inferiority complex in my heart. Arti and Vinod had mixed so well with their children that I'd started getting embarrassed by the qualms I had while buying the house. And yet, as Arti's occasion came closer, that same old fear had quietly crept into my heart. When we decided the wedding, I'd spoken to Kanta about this. Kanta herself had said,

"There's no need to worry. So what if all these people are not of our caste? They've never counted us as different. You see, they'll shoulder all our burdens. You go to work all day. I'm

here all day, and I know about everyone. Nobody's holding any grudge. Arti has grown up amongst them only. You see, they won't let us feel the want of our own caste members:

Still, that damn thought remained that it's one thing that everyone is together in daily life, that's different, and that such festive occasions need people to beautify them. It's on occasions like these that caste and community count, and what if we're left alone on an occasion like this? As such, there are only two familiar homes in the entire society. The city is also foreign. Even after stretching our numbers, how many will come? So many questions were overwhelming me, and as soon as Vyasbhai heard about it from somewhere he burst out at me,

- You, man! You're a wonder. You've been living next to us for years, wouldn't we understand? You're right, though. A man dies amongst his caste members and swims [survives] with their help. Still, one needs others on just such occasions. Just because we're not of your caste, you'll be left alone is it? You'll marry off your daughter and we, ostracizing you for not being of our caste, are not going to just sit and watch right? I understand what's in your heart. One's caste members help when one is in need. And yet, of all the sixteen houses in these two rows, one's happy occasion belongs to everyone. Leave the worrying to us. Everything will work out"

And everything did work out.

Ravjibhai honored the wedding promise without worrying. Because of Vyasbhai's face-to-face reassurance that particular worry was eliminated right at the start, and Vyasbhai accompanied

Ravjibhai everywhere, from purchasing rations to buying clothes and jewelry. As though it was an occasion in their own homes, others around also helped out from time to time. In the dandiya ras[69] on the eve of the wedding, Vyasbhai showered money on the dholi.[70] Seeing this, Ravjibhai's regret at not having a brother melted away. At that time, he remembered an occasion from a few years ago.

This one time, there was work regarding the society gutter line for which Vyasbhai had himself handled the work for both their houses. He'd paid the deposit himself. Ravjibhai didn't even know. He only realized when his wife mentioned it while eating at night. Despite Vyasbhai's such good nature, Vinod had spat out,

- Pappa, you may praise Vyasbhai a lot, yet he does keep a little distance from us (12).

Ravjibhai felt like while eating, he'd got a piece of stone in his mouthful.

- Don't just say whatever you want without thinking. What do you know? And when did you feel like this?

- Pappa, we know everything. When Kaka had come today evening to give the papers for the gutter business, then he didn't drink the water I gave him. He immediately said - No beta,[71] I've just had some.

- So if someone's just had some then obviously that's what they're going to say!

- But Pappa…

- Shut up. You should think and understand before you speak, understood?

[69] A traditional folk dance, often held on the eve of a wedding ceremony. It involves couples dancing in a circle with colorful sticks.

[70] Drummer

[71] Child

Vinod had become quiet thereafter, but even after all this time that issue had surfaced. Damn, is that even possible…!

And yet, as though his own daughter was getting married, Vyasbhai was raining money down. Seeing this, Ravjibhai thought,
What's that silly Vinodyo understand in all this!

When the groom's jān came,[72] even then Vyasbhai was omnipresent. He'd taken special leave from his job. When the jān came, he did all the running around. He's given the jān members lodging facilities, and it was he who asked the landlord to give extra rooms for them. To take the jān to the lodgings, help spread out the bedding, arranging for tea-coffee, all these responsibilities had also been shouldered by Vyasbhai. Vyasbhai never let Ravjibhai trouble himself with the idea that he lacked a brother.

And that was the reason why Ravjibhai was so thrilled today.

Chairs and tables were being arranged. The newly married couple had married a while ago. The members of the jān were lightheartedly and happily roaming about here and there. Invited guests, gazing around, were standing in groups of two-four, waiting for the table-chairs to be arranged. Ravjibhai thought, that's it, once the feast is over it'll be a relief. He took a look around him. In the people milling around him, his eyes searched for Vyasbhai. Ravjibhai called Chintan and asked for Vyasbhai. Adjusting the stem of his spectacles, Vyasbhai immediately came running.

[72] The wedding procession from the groom's side. Traditionally, the jān comes with great fanfare to the wedding venue, and if they are from out of town the bride's side makes arrangements for their lodgings.

- Tell me, what all work is left now?

- Vyasbhai, the responsibility of feeding everyone is on you. Keep an eye on the cook. Especially make sure no one gets missed out. I'm with my in-laws for a bit.

- So you won't be present here?

- Arrē bhāi![73] Me, or you, what difference does it make? As such, you've shouldered the entire celebration yourself. I'm handing you this last bit of bother; according to my caste rules I have to sit and talk over a whole lot of issues with my in-laws, that's how it is. I'll get some time now, later we won't be able to sit at peace.

- Okay, okay you go.

- Then I'm going. Vinod's here. A few of our other boys will also help serve food. Just you handle the rest.

- You go. I'm sitting here. I'll manage.

Vyasbhai handled it properly. The feast was over. Everyone looked at him with a sense of wonder. The onlookers thought how lucky Ravjibhai that he has a neighbor like Vyasbhai. Or else who helps so much at a time like this?

Vyasbhai handled everything right till the end. Ravjibhai couldn't contain his happiness. He felt sad for having given his daughter away, but was happy that he'd completed everything properly for the intercaste wedding. Draining out the exhaustion of many days, he gently sat on the sofa with a heavy sigh, and making a balance sheet on paper, he suddenly asked Vinod:

- Vinod, no one got missed out at the feast, right? Everyone came?

[73] Oh, brother!

As though he'd been waiting for just such a second, Vinod said in a cutting voice,

- Pappa, all your people came, but your dear Vyas kaka's family didn't eat!

- Hain! Ravjibhai shot upright from where he was lying down on the sofa.

- What are you saying? Didn't you invite them to sit for the feast, or what?

- Pappa, let it go. It makes me angry. You know he's a Brahman. They'll socialize with us in other ways, but in matters of food…Vinod angrily left the sentence incomplete,

All the happiness drained out of Ravjibhai. He looked out at Vyasbhai's house. The boundary wall separating both houses was gleaming with fresh quicklime. Ravjibhai stared at the boundary. With some shock, and some amazement.

# "Bāp Nū Bārmū"

Original Gujarati story by V.S. Parmar
Translated into English by Tanushree Vachharajani

Amrut did marry Rajni and bring her home, but the joy of the wedding turned into gloom. His father and his relatives' drunk, unbecoming behavior stole away all his happiness. So many had to even be lifted like children from the rickshaws and put into bed. Amrut was left lusterless at these shameful scenes. He sat with disappointment at the ritual to protect them from divorce in front of lord Ganesh.

All four sides, little girls were picking up fatana[74] sung by older women and singing them loudly. From the girls sitting behind Rajni, someone pinched her in the back. Amrut too felt the pain. Having completed their postgraduate studies, they resolved to light up their paths with ideals and values that they would embody with each other's help; and with this resolution they did join together with the wedding knot, but soon began to experience some bewilderment.

Unlucky Amrut immediately restarted his search for a job that he had left incomplete for the wedding. He had to fulfill all the responsibilities of the house. After being let go from the mill his father Purshottam had disposed of the severance pay as he liked, and had become completely idle. His closest relative was liquor. Having received a high rank and married, this hopeful couple had suddenly become surrounded by distress.

[74] Playful songs with obscene lyrics

Seeing Amrut come home somewhat on time, Rajni served him food. Seeing shiro[75], lentils, and rice in the plate, Amrut asked with an amazed yet loving gaze and a very gentle voice: "Arrē! Shiro today! And that too for no reason?" Rajni explained, "Today Jayantkumar and Pushpaben had come to ask after Bapuji, they just left having waited for you a while". Amrut clarified, "I'd been to Suhas Desai's, that's why I got delayed. Without asking any questions he handed me three instead of two thousand rupees. He's eve arranging a job for me". A man desperate to get away gets restless when his thoughts remain unrealized. This was the desperate situation Amrut and Rajni were experiencing.

Rajni, listen. If something is needling other castes about us, it's that we are B.Cs.[76] With a sigh, Amrut swallowed a mouthful of shiro. What kind of success could we possibly achieve in life? We haven't even been able to leave the house after the wedding. With father's terminal illness, and in that the doctor wants us to get the stomach tumor biopsied. Rather than this, if I'd taken a job instead of studying further, then at least we wouldn't be struggling to get two meals worth of rotla![77] Cutting off Amrut's sad speech, Rajni quipped, if you hadn't studied then how would Rajni have come into this home? Understood, Mr. Amrutlal?

Rajni never missed any opportunity to give courage to Amrut. She herself was an amrutkumbh,[78] an excellent proof of all womanhood. She had learnt the art of living through experience. The only thing neither had was money.

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[75] A dessert comprising flour, ghee (clarified butter) and sugar, often garnished with saffron. Amrut is surprised at the decadence – the dessert is served on festive occasions because it uses expensive ingredients like saffron, sugar and ghee.

[76] "Backward Castes": a collection of lower castes lumped together under government census classification for reservation purposes

[77] Thick flat pan cakes made of bajri (millet)

[78] A pitcher of divine nectar (Amrut)

Nature had made Amrut the father of one boy, but society still kept him unemployed. Amrut understood that passing with a first class in an M.Com. is simple;[79] in comparison lifting the burden of B.C and looking for a job is harder even than finding salvation.

"Rajni, I am of the firm belief that, if I was passing through a burning desert and some thirsty man asks me, arre! begs me for water and then in the city if I approached this same man for a job, he'd question me closely about everything[80]. Then how would he give any water? Man's definition of humanity is so hollow.

"My kaka was a doctor. He couldn't have his own practice. Today, in the city and everywhere we look, there are doctors who aren't really doctors, quacks who practice and travel in cars. Even though doctors are considered more modern than vaids,[81] there was a fear that this would happen. I still couldn't reduce the costs of the wedding. Couldn't prevent a lavish celebration. We have to stop some day, then why not today."

Rajni interrupted Amrut, saying, "In front of the large collective, your argument would fall short. There's an urgent need for common sense here. Rajni dropped another bomb here. "Here's what else: I have to give you some special news. It's going to be Pushpaben's good day."

Where Amrut was discussing his own expenses, Rajni forgot that this was like adding fuel to the fire.

[79] Master of Commerce

[80] As in, about his last name, caste, background etc. From there on, Amrut is assuming he would be unwilling to share water because of caste boundaries.

[81] A traditional doctor

Once again, Amrut's inner and outer selves started to struggle. He was lost in the fierce battle of his thoughts.

It must have been around ten at night, while he was still lost in his thoughts, when cries for help started booming from the next chawl.[82] Screams of terror, ripping through the cool silence of the night, fell on Amrut's ears and bounced back. Woven into a whirlpool of thoughts, he didn't hear. When another round of deathly terrifying screams started, shaking the hearts the sleeping awake, that's when Amrut's chain of thought broke.

He shot up and ran in the direction of the shouts of the dying and sounds of pain. The passageways of the chawl were narrow, and even there people were sleeping outside; over these people he tripped, recovered, ran, tortured, bumping headlong into people who were running for their lives, or running away with possessions, but he was too late.

The fire, who performed her taandav[83] of death had done so, and was now ashamed and receding. In the confusing and overwhelming, miserable state, he heard a shout, "Am…rut.." Things life was maintained on, select papers, plastic bags, old gunny bags - these had become the wood for the pyre. The corpses weren't fit for a shroud.

[82] Buildings in the city with multiple rooms holding one or more families in each room. The rooms share a balcony passing through outside, often also used as a sleeping space at night. There is a common water source and common bathrooms.

[83] The dance of death, traditionally performed by the god Shiva in Hindu mythology, one of whose roles was that of the destroyer

Amrut performed the last rites for Jeevi kaki. In those twelve days, what
Amrut experienced about the essential nature of people, left him completely broken. From this point, he started to shelve away any attempts at activism or societal awareness.

This man who possessed the capacity for noble thought and had been a dedicated and concerned person, was now badly hurt. It seemed meaningless to Amrut to have to cooperate with the larger collective of humanity at the present time.
His father's illness, kaki's untimely death, his own unemployment, their increasingly straitened finances, his purpose to fulfill his life's values, everything seemed to take a challenging form. His present circumstances stung and hurt him like a scorpion. The future, knitting its brows together, was scaring him. Although, though his unemployment was like a curse, Amrut was not one to give up so easily.

It is true that a lotus is born in sludge, but if the sludge itself drowns the lotus in itself, then the potential birth of the lotus is in danger.

Rajni had passed her M.Sc.[84] with first class. She was beautiful too. Rajni was divine. Her nature was gentle and cool soothing, yet there was no job in her destiny.

On the foundation of society arranged at the foot of the world, there were two more sacrifices yet left for Rajni and Amrut to make.
If you never get the chance to rise, the opportunity to burn bright at noon does not exist.

[84] Master of Science

One struggles to rise, suffers and then dies in dishonor.

With great difficulty, Rajni found a part-time job. This could barely eke out dry rotlas for two meals.

On this side, Amrut started to get entwined in organizing his sister's mamērū. His kaka Revandas advised him to organize a mamērū he could afford. After giving two-four pieces of advice, he felt his duty to be complete and left.

Amrut was lying at home thinking how to possibly finish this task, should he take a loan on the house? Then how would he pay the interest? He didn't want to beg any relations.

His mother Lakshmi entered the house and sat near Amrut. She proffered the few pieces of jewelry she still had left. "Bētā Amrut, take this jewelry". Seeing the jewelry in his mother's bare, unadorned hands, Amrut's heart trembled and he choked. He couldn't even hold the jewels properly. They slipped out of his hands.
His mother stroked his head and said, "Bētā I'll go to the workhouse everyday now, it'll be a help in the home. I'll also get some money from your mama".

Everyone was sitting around after dinner at night. Then, Rajni placed in her mother's hands the jewels she had got at her mamērū. A gloomy atmosphere, similar to the one in the afternoon, spread in the house.

Lakshmi started sobbing heavily. She said in a deeply saddened tone, “vahu, bētā, I’ve laid you bare, we’re not worthy of showing face at your parents’ house”.

Giving her mother-in-law courage, Rajni responded, “Ma, there’s no other way. This entire matter will stay within the house”.
Amrut gently said, “Ma, now you don’t have to go to mama. He has his own responsibilities”.

If society’s rites and rituals were decided keeping in mind the most ordinary of people, or if affordable rituals had been decided, then people would have celebrated enthusiastically.
What chance did Amrut and Rajni have of resisting times so harsh they would crush the chest of the bravest of warriors, when they were struggling to keep alive?

Where dire poverty has established a prosperous rule, there’s bound to be lamentation and ample jealousy in the lives of people; and the house was shaken down, the mamērū organized.

They called the neighbors and relatives to take a look.

The onlookers praised it, “good”. “Wah, bhai, wah!” People made their hands like weighing scales and weighed the jewels, others asked the price of the gold.

“Bhai, this chhodi[85] is lucky!” “Ohe bhai, she’s such a good girl, even all of this falls short!” “Such inflation, the mills are shut, there’s no jobs to be had, and to cross such times like this”

[85] Lass

“Brother, it’s difficult”. “Why, what’s so new in this? You have to do it one day or another, is there any escape?”

“Our elders have always been doing it”.

Everyone was publicly demonstrating their own experience, and their understanding of the essence of human nature. Just then, Revandas Kaka told Amrut, “Alya Amrut, set up the clothes for display”.

“Kaka, good you reminded me, here’s ten rupees”. “Why, lad? Take out fifty!” Lakshmi intervened in a hushed voice “Bapa, just keep this much, after you go they’ll get augmented there, won’t they?”

Revandas rolled his dice and prepared for trouble. “Is that so?” “Then go to it, mother and son”. Revandas stood up and started walking off. Dahyalal grabbed his hand and urged him to sit again. “Oh sit, sit, these are matters of your own home”. “No, Dahyabhai. Let them do what they want. What do I care? By my foot, what’ll happen will happen”.

Lakshmi gave up the matter. Amrut lost his temper, “kaka! I put you first when I did all this work. If you’re going to behave like this being the head of the house and talk of taking everyone a peg or two down, how does this behavior suit you? Being our kaka, instead of giving us courage you’re shouting at us? My father lent you fifteen hundred rupees. Have I asked for them back?”

“Is that so! You just wanted to say this right? Take the money. Amrutiya, what is the way in which you are taking it? I wanted to give them back, but now I won’t, go! Do what you can: Revandas revealed his true colors.

Cooling down, Amrut mumbled, “When did I demand it back? You were being obtuse about the money, so I had to bring it up.”

“Amratiya, just because you’re educated you’re being a smart ass, but watch out! I’m also wicked. You’ve taken my honor in public, you have!” Amrut restrained himself.

In a bitter mood, they did finish the celebration, but the event left a crack in their relationship with their kaka.

The days kept passing one by one. Without seeing if it was night or day, Amrut, trying to strengthen their financial situation had started to work to the bone. Rajni also took a second shift at a laboratory. Lakshmi started to look after their home.

Amrut and Lakshmi were sitting for lunch when Lakshmi said to him, “It’s your brother-in-law’s wedding next month. They’d come to invite you”. Hearing the news about a wedding, Amrut started to drown in worries once more.

A wedding, and with Rajni’s jewels pawned! Where were they? Rajni understood Amrut’s

worry. After the meal, she brought them silver jewels just like the ones she'd had. They looked as though made of real gold. One has to undertake such a false performance in society.

Amrut's tears anointed Rajni's skill. They entwined with each other.

They attended their brother-in-law's manglik[86] ritual. The mamērū was held. No sooner than the tray of jewels was passed on to Amrut, that the struggle to organize his own mamērū flashed before his eyes and he started getting pulled into the torrential current of his own thoughts. Having crossed how many hurdles must the mama have organized this mamērū and after so much struggle must he have appeared here at this moment now?

How many Lakshmis and Rajnis' jewels must have been absorbed into this?

As soon as Amrut went to accept the tray of jewels, the tray wobbled a bit and the display of jewels mixed together. He started feeling anxious. Amrut felt like he'd faint right there in front of the members of the assembly. Just then, someone started a song,

Ay…ay…pan…cho…ma…ha…raaj[87], pay a bit of attention, they've said in the proverb,

"He who works and stands by what he says, rather,
He who understands all, that's the true son of his father!"

[86] Auspicious
[87] "Oh, leader of the panch!"

Amrut woke up alert. The words fell on his ears. He laughed a bitter laugh. Everyone started praising. In that much time, from within the assembly, someone said, “Arrē bhāi, someone has yet to do his father’s bārmū!”

# "Swapna Samudra"

Original Gujarati story by Dr. Silas Pateliya
Translated into English by Tanushree Vachharajani

He'd come to the metropolis a year ago. He's been shaped by much experience today, and there's a spark of joy in his eye about having done some good work. Because of this, his enthusiasm is accumulating…even though he can't tell if the scenes he saw just a year ago, at this tiny courtyard, are the same; his inscrutable sensation is also creating a vigor-passion in his blood and giving birth to a shooting need to work. When he'd come a year ago, then because of the new place, the new people and the storm in his mind he hadn't been able to sleep all night.

When he'd woken up, he'd seen first that Kishanbhai had left. He'd said at night: "I'm going to leave early tomorrow. You stay at home. I'll return in the afternoon. Then we'll see about a job. We'll think about your studies as well". He'd come and stood in the balcony. He gazed at the bright light of the unfurling sunrays. He felt as though this was an island of light calling out to him. The words rising out of the light were Kishanbhai's, yet he felt that they were manifesting themselves in the depths of his own chest: Look Raghu, you are going to come with me to the city tomorrow. You've scored well in twelfth standard. You have to study further. I'll even get you a job in the city. I'll make some arrangements so that you can teach tuitions as well, if you get additional time. As of now, even if you do this much, wander around, and see-understand everything that's enough. It's pointless for you to lie here. You can't come under the control of this suffocating life, in fact you need to save the stream of your life from this suffocation". He was dumbfounded. The words were spreading some light and surrounding him. He stared at Kishanbhai for a long time. There was some huge mountain and rocks in front of him, and

crashing through the trees a large waterfall is streaming down - this is what it felt like. He'd remained mute. After a long time, he spoke up: "But Kishanbhai, what about this house, who's going to be there for mother, what about the mortgaged land, what about my father who indentured his labour and died, what about that indenture? Kaki, her little kids, and kaka who's struck with polio, who'll be their support then?"

Kishanbhai kept his hand on Raghu's shoulder. He saw the tears he was fighting off. He took his hand into his other hand. He felt the restlessness in his blood. He felt like Raghu at this moment wasn't Raghu but Kishan himself - it is me myself who is in this restlessness, this directionlessness, this baselessness and these sharp mountains of thousands of questions….slowly he felt like Raghu was in Kishan, and Kishan in Raghu and this entire quarter was contained in Raghu-Kishan. This entire neglected collective of humanity, sobbing in sadness, was in them. He had felt like this earlier also, but this time it had gone unprecedentedly deep. From Kishanbhai's hand, Raghu felt an unmatched warmth for the first time in his life. He felt a support from his hand. He said, in an uneven tearful voice: "Speak, Kishanbhai, speak, why won't you say anything?" He looked at Raghu. He said, "Countless Raghus, their mothers, fathers, brothers and loved ones are under some or the other burden. They're stumbling around without education. They've been burned trying to pay back their indentures. Ignorance, helplessness, poverty, conservative attitudes and the casteist and exploitative system that hammers them over the head - they are stuck in all of this. If such Raghus are not made to stand up at this point, then this suffering that has continued for ages will not end". He told Raghu, "Raghu, you're a bright student. If you don't study further and go off to labour in the fields then your life will be extinguished before you throw off your father's debt. From that money, you

won't even be able to provide for your mother and kaka-kaki-children. Your father wanted to make you a lawyer: that you fight the case for the property the zamindār has usurped, that you would fight exploitation - that's what he wished. I see in you the same concern that he had to fight for justice and equality. Let that come out. For that, study and prepare. Rescue our entire collective out of this muck, this sludge. See, I too lived in these quarters, I was, and am, one of you, yet I am different. I've taken so many like you into the city. They're all studying. They even come back here to work - you know this. This is our beginning. That many like you become educated, women too become educated, spread awareness. That awakening should spread right back here, through these people, this is what-what we are trying to do. Let's see what happens!" He stopped in the middle of his speech. Raghu's mother was approaching. She came closer. She said: "Kishaniya, lya, why've you clammed up suddenly? Jyo, speak, keep speaking, I'm liking listening to you. I have so many burning desires to see all of this…Without studying and becoming a balleshtar[88], good days are never going to come. I've heard in this life that Magan Chhana's Rayjee has become a master and is trying to start a school here - bhai, if I tell you the truth I really like this…Go, lya, Raghla, you go to the city…you study, we'll live, we're not going to drop dead. Leave off worrying about us and go…." With a smile in his eyes Kishanbhai studied the old woman. He saw the bright sun of the future rising in the old woman's eyes. At the sound of his mother's words, even Raghu's heart filled with light.

The next day he'd come to the metropolis with Kishanbhai. He was reminded today, a year later, of all these things that transpired that year. That first morning, a year ago, rose into his consciousness suddenly: A jute sheet, a bamboo mat, the metal taken from metal tins and the

[88] Rural Gujarati pronunciation of the English word "barrister."

cardboard walls, roofs made from date-palm leaves, paper-jute, grubby children inside, stinking drains…crows flying off, circling kites, men smiling bleakly and young women flowing away in their affectations and drudgery, unabashed girls…roads that rushed on in full speed, and noise…noise…noise…Against this he saw his own village with its crooked streets, up-and-down hovels, mud walls plastered with moisture and salt, the worn out jute mats, the heavy loads of wood leaning on them, extended yet uninhabited compounds, in that the rotting filth and potholes, old age that sits in neglect, and the terror that loomed in empty homes…the bleating of goats, the sounds of dogs somewhere, and somewhere the sounds of patients without medication, on their deathbeds. Painful groans, feet that trample the morning in their hurry to get to work, the stomachs that come running home and eat something dry-bland any which way, and again in the evening tired bodies that fall in a heap under the burden of sadness…bodies that are buried under the everyday exploitation of the zamindārs, under the burden of debt, under the rising helplessness, under alcohol gambling smoking and other addictions…he continued to gaze upon this. Kept looking and looking. He couldn't tell the two scenes apart.

…But today, after one year, he felt something different. He'd had many experiences during this time. Through Kishanbhai, he'd got admitted to an arts college. With his help, too, he'd got a part-time job at a press. He also conducted two tuitions, for an hour each. He'd settled in very quickly. After he'd got into the hostel, Kishanbhai came to meet him everyday. Later, too, he visited every two-four-five days. He'd go as well. Kishanbhai was a lawyer. He also ran a periodical called "Ākrōsh". So that the collective of Dalits, the pained, the exploited and those who experienced injustice could get justice, rights and plenty of opportunities in every way, he

ran an organization called "Awāj". He was involved with everyone from successful and well educated to young boys like Raghu. In conjunction with "Ākrōsh" and "Awāj", they organized camps, conferences, debate groups, and constructive programs and other activities for the slums and villages. Raghu was planted into this world right from the beginning. This work was as such very difficult, but with Kishanbhai's warmth it seemed green and beautiful. Kishanbhai called these the *pa-pa-paglio*[89] of the journey of protest and resistance. Kishanbhai would travel and meet the pained collective and Raghu also seamlessly blended into them. He'd return home as well, a few times. He'd meet ba, kaka-kaki, their children, and the rest of the neighborhood. He'd even saved a bit, financially. There was a possibility that they could rescue the mortgaged land as well. At the end of the year, he was successful in opening a home industry for the women of his own neighborhood. A sea of dreams was surging within him for the entire multitude. Here, for those who resided in the metropolis, he was slowly becoming successful in adult education, de-addiction campaigns and building small industries. At this moment he suddenly remembered a dream he'd had last night that had passed so suddenly. Far, far, very far some unknown region…deep jungle, behind the jungle a mountain surrounded by pitch black towering boulders, formidable ravines, sounds echoing within them…sounds…at times a flickering light as though from a lamp, a remembrance of days past, night falling rapidly…again ruins and in these birds of the night circling…silence…again flat land and on that fallen shining rocks…dappled sunlight and shade…in this entire atmosphere there was a constant voice that fell on his ear. It became clear suddenly. His invisible throat started making him uneasy. The voice wafted toward him like a faraway lamentation: "My pain hasn't found a language for eons - no one has understood these tears of mine - they have transformed into a

[89] Baby steps; also a game adults play with little children where the child stands on the leg of the adult and walks or jumps with them

mountain of rocks and remained here…my thoughts for justice, the outrageous acts that have been committed on me and my voice against them had been stifled - that are these ruins. Hurting, crushed, trampled and suffering inhuman treatment, the screams of all these people within my own scream have not been contained suddenly. They've been mingling with it from the beginning". Raghu fell silent. He was powerless, because the voice, embodied and standing before him had been Kishanbhai who suddenly turned into Raghu.

The path before Raghu was much clearer now. On this morning of the second day, he was still at the shore of this sea of dreams.

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